



# LIBRARIES at the READY

*Public libraries ramp up programming to prepare young English language learners for school success.*

**Donna C. Celano  
and Susan B. Neuman**

**T**he Mission Branch of the San Francisco Public Library might not make a sightseer's top-10 list, but it's certainly a destination for local families. In this diverse neighborhood, home to a large number of immigrants, parents and their preschoolers flock to the spacious children's floor in evenings and on weekends. On a typical Saturday, as many as 100 families gather for the weekly Spanish-English family story time. Hip librarians, dressed in jeans and T-shirts, welcome adults and children alike, chatting in the families' native languages. Afterward, the families stay, playing together with blocks or doing a puzzle. The vibe is clear: Come, play, talk, read, hang out.

Although the atmosphere is casual and upbeat, the librarians are actually tackling a serious issue. Studies show that English language learners (ELLs), such as the children at this library, often start school lagging behind their classmates with little hope of catching up. In California, home to more than a million students who do not speak English as a primary language, ELLs enter kindergarten already trailing

their counterparts in assessments of school readiness (cited in Cannon, Jackowitz, & Karoly, 2012). In 3rd grade, 81 percent score below proficiency in English language arts; by the time they reach high school, almost 24 percent have dropped out (California Department of Education, 2013a, 2013b).

As the debate continues on how schools can best serve the needs of ELLs, many public libraries are stepping up efforts to ensure dual-language learners arrive at kindergarten on the same footing as their peers. Libraries have traditionally supported schools' efforts by providing story hours for preschool classes, as well as homework help and summer reading programs for older students. More recently, libraries have focused on their school-readiness programming. Although often overlooked as an educational resource, public libraries are in a unique position to help young children and their families. Located in nearly every community in the country, many operate five to seven days a week and offer evening and weekend hours. More important, their services are free.



© ANDERSON/FOSS/GETTY IMAGES

children collaborated on homework and teens mingled around high-tech video screens. A father snuggled with his 5-year-old son in a comfy chair, reading a book about trucks.

In a separate meeting room, literacy specialist Cresencia Huff conducted a workshop titled “We’re Going Places” with about a dozen parents. Nearby, their preschoolers played with a library aide. At one point, Huff opened a discussion about doing things that boost children’s readiness to read while families are traveling. She offered suggestions, including talking (using a word such as *destination* increases vocabulary) and singing (slowing down the words as you sing helps children understand). She handed out a stack of “silly questions to ask on car trips” as a take-away item, too. With each suggestion, Huff spoke first in English and then in Spanish. In both languages, her message was the same: “Conversation is the key; it’s all about interaction with your child.”

Huff also notes that what she is suggesting is something parents are probably doing at home anyway. Her job is to explain why it is important.

### **Overcoming Roadblocks to School Success**

We have found that Every Child Ready to Read addresses two of the major obstacles to ELLs’ school success. We offer these insights on the basis of a yearlong research study we have conducted at 10 locations through extensive interviews with librarians and observations of formal programming and informal interactions.

First, libraries’ emphasis on parent engagement addresses one long-standing roadblock: Many parents subscribe to the common myth that speaking to their children in a language other than English will confuse children and delay their learning of

Through a national parent education initiative called Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR), 4,000 libraries across the United States are focusing on the early learning that begins with the primary adults in a child’s life. The program not only is designed to make sure that all at-risk children arrive at school ready to learn, but it also is helping libraries emerge as a key resource for ELL preschoolers and their families.

### **Five Practices for Literacy Learning**

The underlying concept of Every Child Ready to Read is clear, and one that schools can relate to: Parents are a child’s first and best teacher. Librarians encourage parents to interact with

their children using five practices crucial to literacy development: talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing. Extensive research shows that these early parent-child interactions can greatly enhance a child’s vocabulary development, a key indicator of later success in school (Neuman & Roskos, 2007). Much of ECRR involves librarians modeling the five practices for parents during story times or other adult-child programs, as well as at parent workshops in day care centers, teen parent programs, or large community events.

For example, on a misty November evening in San Antonio, Texas, scores of families gathered in a gleaming new library. Attendees spoke a mixture of English and Spanish, as

English. Research actually shows the opposite—that depriving a child of learning in his or her native language jeopardizes the child’s linguistic and academic development (Espinosa, 2013).

In Chicago Public Library’s Roosevelt Branch, children’s librarian Jenna Nemeć-Loise encounters this resistance among many Chinese families. “They are very concerned about their children learning to read English, so much so that they don’t communicate in Mandarin,” she says. Nemeć-Loise stresses the importance of parents speaking to children in their native language.

Echoing the same effort, Carolyn Martinez, a librarian in Farmington, New Mexico, home to a large Hispanic and Navajo population, says, “We emphasize that literacy is literacy in any language and that parents should foster bilingualism.”

The initiative also addresses a second challenge: getting immigrant families to use the library. Our previous research indicates that low-income and immigrant families live in neighborhoods where they have little access to books, computers, and other information resources. Quite frequently, the local library is one of the few places parents can find a book to read to their children (Neuman & Celano, 2012). Immigrant families, however, often do not take advantage of these resources. A recent Pew Foundation study found that although Hispanics value library services as much as other groups, they are less likely to have used library services. About 80 percent of white and black Americans have used a library, compared to 72 percent of Hispanics. Among foreign-born Hispanic immigrants, only 60 percent report using a library in the United States (Brown & Lopez, 2015).

Librarians say many parents of ELLs

avoid library services for a variety of reasons. Some families, especially those who are in the country illegally, are suspicious that the library is a government agency. They are hesitant to offer an ID to take out a book, worried the library will turn them in.

In addition to the fear of deportation, other challenges exist. Some families worry about paying library fines. Some are intimidated by the education system or have little experience with preschool education. Martinez, the librarian in New Mexico, says confidence can be an issue. “They

do not feel adequate picking out books or know how to begin teaching their children.” Still, she says, the need is crucial for these families. “The parents haven’t had the educational opportunities themselves, but they definitely realize the importance of it. They want better for their children.”

### **Building Bridges**

Under Every Child Ready to Read, librarians aim to connect library services to ELL families’ culture. For example, a bilingual family entering an ECRR library may find posters, brochures, and other materials promoting the five literacy practices in both English and the family’s native language, as well as books in both languages. Bilingual staffers are often on hand to assist. Symbols of the families’ native culture, such as artwork, instruments, and costumes, might be on display.

Most of these libraries, however, go beyond what families see on the surface to help bridge cultural barriers. Many reach out to immigrant families by offering programming at convenient locations, for instance at community agencies, churches, or Head Start facilities. Others use gift cards or free transportation to entice families to attend library programs. Still others address the families’ challenges in joining the library. Many waive late fees. The library in Farmington, New Mexico, is developing different ways for people without proper identification to apply for a library card, such as by using consulate cards, passports, or frequent shopper cards as proof of address.

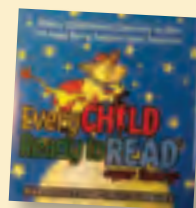
### **Changing Libraries, Changing Lives**

Our research shows Every Child Ready to Read is spawning substantial changes in library services, changes

### **In the Tool Kit**

Every Child Ready to Read @ Your Library (ECRR) is a parent education initiative sponsored by the Public Library Association and the American Association of Library Services to Children. The ECRR tool kit (available for \$200) provides youth librarians, early childhood specialists, and preschool teachers with resources to present workshops that are intended to prepare parents and caregivers for their crucial role as their child’s first teacher.

The workshops demonstrate how parents, grandparents, child-care providers, and teachers can use five simple research-based practices—talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing—to develop language and prereading skills in children from birth to age 5. For more information, visit [www.everychildreadytoread.org](http://www.everychildreadytoread.org).





that can mean tremendous benefits for ELLs and changes that might also be considered for the school library setting. For one, ECRR encourages librarians to increasingly shift their focus from the child to both the child and the family.

Second, the focus on talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing means children’s library spaces are becoming more active and, as some observers might say, noisier. Gone are the days when librarians “shushed” children. The preschool areas are being remodeled to include more play spaces; libraries are scheduling community events to provide opportunities for parents to engage in the five literacy practices with their children.

These changes, though, do not come without challenges. Not all librarians are as willing or prepared to engage with parents as they are with children. Funding issues prevent many libraries from expanding children’s areas or sending librarians to off-site trainings. Despite their best efforts, many libraries still struggle to attract immigrant bilingual families, particularly in suburban or rural areas where families cannot readily walk to local branches.

Although the results of a three-year national evaluation are pending, initial findings indicate Every Child Ready to Read is poised to make a significant impact on ELLs’ school readiness. In the meantime, librarians anecdotally report positive changes. Peg Pond, an outreach supervisor in Carroll County, Maryland, says Hispanic parents who have attended workshops seem more at ease with using library resources. As their children grow, parents return to tell the librarians of their children’s progress. “The parents talk about their children’s successes now,” Pond says. “They talk about how they always talk and read to their child in their native language. And they are proud.” <sup>24</sup>



© WSPHOTOS/ISTOCK

## Although often overlooked as an educational resource, public libraries are in a unique position to help young children and their families.

### References

- Brown, A., & Lopez, M. (2015). *Public libraries and Hispanics: Immigrant Hispanics use libraries less, but those who do appreciate them the most*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.
- California Department of Education. (2013a). *Class of 2012 cohort graduation and dropout rates by subgroup*. Retrieved from [www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr13/yr13rel42att.asp#tab2](http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr13/yr13rel42att.asp#tab2)
- California Department of Education. (2013b). *2013 STAR test results, English learner—California standards test scores*. Retrieved from <http://star.cde.ca.gov/star2013/ViewReport.aspx?ps=true&lstTestYear=2013&lstTestType=C&lstCounty=&lstDistrict=&lstSchool=&lstGroup=4&lstSubGroup=160>
- Cannon, J., Jackowitz, A., & Karoly, L. (2012). *Preschool and school readiness: Experiences of children with non-English-speaking parents*. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California. Retrieved from [www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R\\_512JCR.pdf](http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_512JCR.pdf)
- Espinosa, L. (2013). *PreK–3rd: Challenging common myths about dual language learners*. New York: Foundation for Child Development.
- Neuman, S. B., & Celano, D. (2012). *Giving our children a fighting chance: Poverty, literacy, and the development of information capital*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Neuman, S. B., & Roskos, K. (2007). *Nurturing knowledge*. New York: Scholastic.

---

**Donna C. Celano** (celano@lasalle.edu) is assistant professor of communication at La Salle University in Philadelphia.  
**Susan B. Neuman** (sbneuman@nyu.edu) is professor and chair of teaching and learning at New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

Copyright of Educational Leadership is the property of Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.