

Connecting Families to Libraries with Early Literacy Text Messaging

The Ypsilanti District Library (YDL) is seeking a National Leadership Grant of \$242,650 to scale an early literacy text messaging service to serve Michigan and Indiana and create a model for libraries to implement this service nationwide. YDL will partner with the [Library of Michigan \(LoM\)](#) to expand to serve all Michigan residents and libraries and with the [Midwest Collaborative for Library Services \(MCLS\)](#) to expand service to Indiana and develop a consortial model for nationwide expansion. [HighScope Educational Research Foundation \(HighScope\)](#) will assist with evaluation and integration into Head Start curriculum. The [Association for Library Service to Children \(ALSC\)](#) also supports the program, which is integrated with their [Every Child Ready to Read 2.0 \(ECRR\)](#) programming used by 6,000 libraries across the United States.

The text messaging service, called [TALK: Text and Learn for Kindergarten](#), is aimed at empowering parents with simple activities to help them prepare their young children for future school success. Support from IMLS will allow us to create a scalable model for individual and state libraries, enabling them to replicate this service using the foundations we have built in the process of developing this tool for learning and engagement.

National Need: The research is clear: building pre-literacy, math, science, and social-emotional skills before age 5 [prepares young children to be successful in school and in life](#). Parents, through their daily interactions, are their children's first and best teachers. TALK was developed based on successful models and research which shows that bite-sized messages delivered by text message are effective at changing parents' behavior, resulting in children receiving more literacy-building interactions at a young age. Those interactions have in turn been shown to improve school readiness [and reduce the achievement gap](#). TALK was initially modeled after a service at The Brooklyn Public Library which sent a weekly literacy-building activity to parents. Staff also reviewed Ready4K, a service based in Berkeley, California, which produced [strong evidence of increased parental involvement](#), and Bright By Text, originally developed by the Colorado Department of Education.

While both Ready4K and Bright By Text have recently expanded their availability throughout the U.S., TALK has unique elements that make it well-suited to use by libraries. Unlike other services, TALK content is closely tuned to a child's developmental stage from birth onward and the content aligns with ECRR guidelines. During the next phase, we will have all content translated into Spanish, a much-needed and frequently requested addition. TALK will also be developed as a library marketing tool, enabling libraries to promote library services to users in their area and offering publicity materials and training to help libraries engage their communities around early literacy.

Project Design: TALK launched a three-year pilot program in 2017 with LSTA funding, which currently reaches 1,100 children across Washtenaw County in Michigan. TALK delivers text messages with activity suggestions based on ECRR, emphasizing how parents can "Talk, Sing, Read, Write and Play" with children from birth to age 6. Parents and caregivers receive two messages per week for their child, plus 2-3 messages per month from their local library with information about library events and other free nearby activities for young children. Activities are designed to increase positive interactions between parent and child, and increase the number of words spoken each day in the home. They are easy, use common household items, and can be incorporated into everyday routines such as doing laundry, eating a meal, or grocery shopping. Activities are tailored closely to be developmentally appropriate to the child's age in order to maximize learning and skill building.

TALK messages were developed by youth librarians at five Washtenaw County libraries, which included both urban and rural locations serving diverse populations. Curriculum development experts at HighScope, an Ypsilanti based organization whose curriculum is used in Head Start programs nationwide, reviewed content for developmental appropriateness and helped align it to recommended learning outcomes. A diverse group of parents reviewed the content for cultural appropriateness and relevance to their lives, and an adult literacy organization evaluated messages to ensure they would be accessible to both adults with low literacy skills and English Language Learners. The service was aggressively evaluated and modified throughout the three-year development period, with parents completing short quarterly surveys, phone interviews, and focus groups. Parents expressed increased confidence that the daily interactions were helping their children learn. Library events promoted through the service produced a marked improvement in attendance.

As it enters the scaling phase, TALK will be able to serve users very inexpensively—less than \$2 per child, per year. In year one, TALK will expand to become available to users across Michigan. Users will be asked for a zip code and

will be asked to select a nearby “home library.” All Michigan users will receive TALK activities, and if their home library opts into the program, they’ll also get up to 3 messages per month from their library. Participating libraries will have an account to manage their messages and be trained in best practices for promoting local events and library services through the service. Training will be offered through the Library of Michigan, and will include best practices for building community partnerships around TALK and a toolkit of resources including customizable promotional materials and templates for reporting the program’s local successes to the community.

Upon receiving IMLS funding, we will launch the development of a software program on the Twilio platform that will allow users to sign up via website or text message and enable participating libraries to send local content to nearby users. We will also develop a promotional toolkit, best practices, and professional development around implementing the service, and work with the Library of Michigan to share those tools with all 395 Michigan libraries. Working with HighScope, we will align the program to the latest early literacy research and evaluate its efficacy as an early learning tool. In year three, we will test the statewide model in Indiana with the help of MCLS in preparation for reaching a national audience, so any library can build a coalition of early learning partners in their community and positively impact school readiness and student outcomes with the help of TALK.

In marketing TALK, we learned the messages are compelling educational pieces on their own—which spurred an outreach campaign that won a 2018 John Cotton Dana award. Publicity followed the Talking is Teaching model, placing “in situ” activity suggestions throughout the community. For example, a suggestion to talk about about what you see out the window was advertised [inside city buses](#), a nursery rhyme was placed [near changing tables in local businesses](#), and an “I Spy” activity was posted in [pediatrician waiting rooms](#). Businesses, schools, and pediatricians were enthusiastic about sharing these materials, positioning themselves as early literacy partners and the library as a community literacy leader. [Promotional materials](#) and [sample community reports](#) are already complete and ready to share with other libraries. By sharing TALK with their communities, libraries will have a new way to reach families while sharing a valuable early literacy service that the entire community can rally around.

Diversity Plan: TALK was initially designed with the intention of reaching underserved parents. The five libraries that launched the program included a diverse urban community where many families live in poverty as well as several small rural libraries whose users span the income spectrum. The pilot was successful at reaching low-income and minority parents, who are often underrepresented at the library. 18.5% of current users are African American, compared to 12% of the Washtenaw County population, and 40% of users have an annual household income of less than \$40,000, while the county’s median household income is \$65,618.

TALK’s success at reaching underserved populations was due in part to the outreach techniques YDL developed during the pilot phase, which centered on building strong partnerships with other community organizations who work with underserved parents. In Washtenaw County, partners included the Sheriff’s Office, the Great Start Collaborative, Early On, Head Start, pediatricians, and schools which displayed flyers and shared the program directly with parents. Staff also promoted TALK at the Women Infants and Children nutrition office, food distribution centers, and the Farmers’ Markets in Ypsilanti. Scaling the TALK program will include developing trainings and webinars so that other libraries can learn best practices for building similar relationships in their own communities. New partnerships with the Library of Michigan will also allow for statewide publicity such as advertising in Secretary of State offices, and HighScope’s involvement will help foster new ties to Head Start.

National Impact: After testing and perfecting the rollout of TALK in Michigan and Indiana, a toolkit for libraries and implementation model for state libraries will be available to share with a national audience. MCLS will help develop a consortial model that would allow libraries to adopt the service nationwide. As the project scales, we will expand our relationships with the Great Start Collaborative, WIC, and Head Start. These national collaborations will become part of the final scalable model that can be shared with state libraries. By the end of the grant period, TALK will be ready to release to state libraries or local libraries nationwide, and will be a fully-developed tool to build early literacy while fostering lifelong partnerships between libraries, families, and local communities.

Budget: Full-time project lead (\$50,000 salary plus \$23,000 benefits), MCLS partner fee (\$20,000), Twilio messaging software development (\$50,000), text message service fees (\$59,650), Spanish translation (\$10,000), Updating and sharing publicity materials (\$10,000), Evaluation (\$20,000). Cost share is not quantified but includes administrative costs shared by YDL and staff support from the Library of Michigan.