



Child Reading Literacy and the Role of Public Libraries

Primary Data Collection Report

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Executive Summary

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) commissioned a Child Reading Literacy study in 2023 to better understand the ecosystem of support for children’s engagement in reading with a focus, though not exclusively, on the role of public libraries. Engagement in reading is a multidimensional construct that includes aspects such as early literacy skill development and elements of the home literacy environment for young children (age 0 to 5) and aspects of reading ability, reading for pleasure, and motivation to read for early elementary age children. Findings from this study can help IMLS focus and improve its grant-making by revealing the types of activities that may support professional development, investments, and partnerships around children’s engagement in reading. In 2024, Mathematica conducted a secondary research review (Lugo-Gil et al., 2026). Building on that review, from March 2025 to March 2026, Mathematica conducted interviews with library system leaders, interviews with children’s library staff, and focus groups with library system leaders and community partners to understand their experiences engaging children ages 0 to 12 in reading.

This report summarizes findings from the primary data collection activities about themes related to public libraries’ efforts to support children’s engagement in reading. Findings are organized around four study research questions concerning (1) public library practices, (2) children and family engagement with library resources, (3) digital resources, and (4) libraries’ roles in literacy¹ ecosystems. Also, considerations for future evidence building are discussed. Throughout this report, the study team uses the term “caregiver” to encompass parents, grandparents, and other family members involved in a child’s life.

Key findings from the primary data collection are as follows:

**What activities and outreach do public libraries see as best practices to engage children in reading?
How do public libraries invest in staff and infrastructure to improve the implementation of these practices?**

- Libraries described eight practices and investments regarding the activities and outreach they offer to engage children in reading:
 1. Provide developmentally appropriate reading programs
 2. Provide programming that reflects children’s interests, identities, languages, and learning needs
 3. Increase access to books beyond the library building and support home reading habits
 4. Treat caregivers as essential partners in children’s reading development
 5. Conduct outreach and community-based engagement
 6. Balance systemwide priorities with community needs at libraries
 7. Provide library staff with peer-learning opportunities and training on program delivery
 8. Invest in an interactive child-centered physical space

¹ While several other forms of literacy exist, such as financial and digital, the term “literacy” in this report refers exclusively to reading literacy.

How do children engage with public library resources supporting their engagement in reading (individually and together with their families)?

- Children engaged with public library resources in different ways across developmental stages, with caregivers playing a particularly important role for younger children.
- For infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children, engagement often occurred through interactive story times, songs, movement activities, play, and caregiver-child participation.
- Library staff described story time as a reading activity for children and a way to model early literacy-building practices for caregivers.
- Elementary-age children engaged more independently through summer reading programs, book clubs, reading challenges, tutoring, Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) activities with reading engagement components, and opportunities for social interaction around books and reading.
- Libraries also described children and families engaging with toys, puzzles, interactive play spaces, and informal activities that help make libraries welcoming spaces where children are surrounded by books and reading-related materials.
- Libraries frequently described outreach activities (for example, bookmobiles and school partnerships) as an important way to engage children and caregivers who may face barriers accessing library programming at physical library locations.

How has children's engagement in reading changed over time with the introduction of digital and online resources in public libraries?

- Libraries provide digital and online resources such as eBooks, audiobooks, read-aloud books, tablets with educational games, and online learning resources.
- Library staff generally viewed physical books as more effective than digital materials for fostering children's engagement in reading, particularly for younger children.
- At the same time, library staff described digital resources as valuable supplemental tools that increase accessibility for children with learning differences, multilingual families, and caregivers with limited time.
- Library staff also emphasized the role digital resources serve in supporting independent learning and research activities for older elementary-age children.

Where is a library's best fit as a contributor in the literacy ecosystem, and in what ways do they contribute to the overall health of the system?

- Community partners consistently described libraries as important connectors within broader literacy ecosystems.
- Libraries collaborated with schools, museums, early childhood organizations, nonprofits, businesses, and other community organizations to provide literacy-related activities, increase access to books, and raise awareness of available resources.

- Libraries extended access to reading engagement supports beyond library buildings through activities such as outreach events, bookmobiles, school partnerships, and community-based programming.
- Community partners emphasized that successful collaboration depends on strong relationships, consistent communication, and dedicated staffing capacity for outreach and partnership coordination.
- Focus group participants also described challenges related to staffing limitations, turnover, resource constraints, and competing organizational priorities that can make sustaining partnerships difficult over time.

Implications for future research

Findings suggest several opportunities for future evidence-building.

- Researchers could consider future evidence-building efforts such as:
 - Examining caregivers' perspectives on the use of public library resources, what barriers they experience in accessing resources, and their perceptions of how libraries support children's engagement in reading in the home environment
 - Survey research investigating how factors such as library size, staffing structures, rurality, neighborhood characteristics, or library-level resources shape participation in children's reading-related programming and use of library resources
 - Exploring how children and caregivers use digital resources, how these resources support different forms of engagement, and how attitudes toward digital resources vary across communities and children's age groups
 - Examining how libraries coordinate in local literacy ecosystems and how partnerships influence access to reading-related resources and activities across communities
- Future research related to children's library programming may benefit from including implementation-focused components that document how programs, such as story time and summer reading, are delivered across settings, how local adaptations influence participation and engagement, and how libraries overcome common barriers.

Introduction

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) has long supported efforts² to understand how public libraries can contribute to children’s literacy³ and reading engagement. This Child Reading Literacy study, commissioned by IMLS in 2023, builds on that interest by examining how public libraries and their partners support early literacy skills, reading for pleasure, and positive attitudes toward books and reading. This study employs a multimethod approach of secondary research review and primary data collection to help IMLS and interested communities better understand the ecosystem of support for children’s engagement in reading—focusing on, though not exclusively, the role of libraries—and relevant outcomes, such as enabling children across the country to engage in reading. In the near term, the findings from this study can help IMLS focus and improve its grant making by revealing the types of activities that may support professional development, investments, and partnerships around children’s engagement in reading. Ultimately, IMLS may use these findings to refine announcements for grant opportunities or inform future evaluation activities. The secondary research review finished in June 2024 (Lugo-Gil et al., 2026). The current report focuses on findings from the primary data collection. Mathematica will draft and IMLS will release public products in late 2026 that synthesize findings and implications across secondary and primary data collections.

The primary data collection builds on the secondary data review by capturing on-the-ground perspectives about children’s engagement in reading, best practices for encouraging engagement in reading, and the role of libraries in a broader ecosystem through three sources of information: (1) interviews with library system leaders, (2) interviews with children’s librarian staff⁴, and (3) focus groups with library systems leads and community partners. Findings can help form hypotheses about implementation of and investments in public library practices and contribute to the knowledge base in the field and inform IMLS’s thinking about supporting research or future surveys of library staff, other literacy organizations, and families.

First, this report describes the research questions and the methods used to gather and examine the data. Next, it presents findings by research question. The report concludes with some potential implications for IMLS.

The study team reports findings that were specific to library system leaders or library staff interviewees when themes were specific to one interview group. Otherwise, findings are reported across all interviews and systems. Research question 5 is the only question with focus group findings.

² These early efforts include partnership with the [Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#) in 2013 and support of the Celano & Neuman (2013) study of the [Every Child Ready to Read](#) program.

³ While several other forms of literacy exist, such as financial and digital, the term “literacy” in this report refers exclusively to reading literacy.

⁴ Throughout this report, the study team refers to all children’s library staff recruited for these interviews as “library staff.”

Box 1. Key terms in the report

Children’s engagement in reading: This term encompasses children’s interest in or love of reading, which can include work to support early literacy skills, reading for pleasure, and positive attitudes toward books and reading. Some questions in interviews asked specifically about children’s literacy, which is more narrowly focused on reading ability. In this report, the study team uses the term “engagement in reading,” unless respondents specifically noted a focus on literacy.

Caregiver: This term encompasses parents, grandparents, and other family members involved in a child’s life.

Literacy ecosystem: This term describes the network of people, organizations, resources, and environments that collectively support children’s reading development and engagement over time. It includes caregivers, schools, libraries, early childhood providers, community organizations, health providers, and others working together to promote literacy, provide access to reading opportunities and materials, and create conditions that foster a lifelong engagement with reading.

Public library systems: This term describes the administrative entity responsible for providing public library services through a main library and, in many cases, additional service outlets such as branch libraries, bookmobiles, or other service locations.

Public libraries or libraries: This term encompasses a main library or service outlets of main libraries and branches within sampled library systems.

This study included only public library systems. ▲

Research questions

This primary data collection report focuses on four of the seven study research questions (Box 2) aimed at learning about public libraries’ roles in supporting childhood engagement in reading. The secondary data review addressed the research questions that primary data collection did not.

Box 2. Full list of study research questions (starred questions are the focus of this report)

- **Research Question 1 (Definitions and outcomes of reading engagement).** How is engagement in reading defined at different developmental ages? What are measurable outcomes of engaged reading in the public library context?
- ***Research Question 2 (Public library activities and investments to engage children in reading).** What activities and outreach do public libraries see as best practices to engage children in reading? How do public libraries invest in staff and infrastructure to improve the implementation of these practices?
- ***Research Question 3 (How children engage with public library resources).** How do children engage with public library resources supporting their engagement in reading (individually and together with their families)?
- ***Research Question 4 (Digital and online resources in public libraries).** How has children’s engagement in reading changed over time with the introduction of digital and online resources in public libraries?
- ***Research Question 5 (Public libraries in the literacy ecosystem).** Where is a library’s best fit as a contributor in the literacy ecosystem, and in what ways do they contribute to the overall health of the system?
- **Research Question 6 (Patterns of engagement by community characteristics and public library infrastructure).** Are there different patterns of children’s engagement in reading through public libraries by public library infrastructure or community characteristics?
- **Research Question 7 (Considerations for future effectiveness studies).** What are considerations for future studies examining the effectiveness of ways public libraries engage children in reading? ▲

These research questions specify a focus on *public* libraries' support of children's engagement in reading. The focus of this research is on public libraries because IMLS's leaders identified public library systems as a key audience for receiving this information and focusing investments on workforce professional development, and programs and services on children's literacy as an area of need. Public library systems (with outlets via main libraries, branches, bookmobiles, and books by mail) represent the intersection of services with caregivers, community organizations, and school systems, which are central topics in the research questions. In understanding an ecosystem, public libraries' awareness of and interactions with school systems and other entities (such as hospitals and childcare providers) can provide targeted, useful information for that library system.

Exhibit 1 summarizes key and contributing data sources for each research question. Key data sources are expected to contribute substantial evidence to answer the question, and the study team asked the questions directly of participants. Contributory data sources may provide evidence to answer the question.

Exhibit 1. Research questions on children's literacy and data sources to address

Research questions	Secondary data collection			Primary data collection		
	Literature review	Landscape research	Administrative data analysis	Interviews with library system leader	Interviews with children's library staff	Focus groups of library systems leaders and community partners
1. Definitions and outcomes of reading engagement ^a	•	•	•			
2. Public library activities and investments to engage children in reading	•	•	•	•	•	
3. How children engage with public library resources	•	•	•	•	•	
4. Digital and online resources in public libraries ^b	•	•	•		○	
5. Public libraries in the literacy ecosystem	•	•	•			•
6. Patterns of engagement by community characteristics and public library infrastructure ^c	•	•		○	○	
7. Considerations for future effectiveness studies ^c	○		•	○	○	

Note: • = key data source; ○ = contributing data source.

^a Research question 1 was not meant to be part of the primary data collection effort, so this report does not include any findings on the question.

^b Primary data collection contributes to this research questions by presenting findings on library staff's thoughts about digital and online resources in public libraries.

^c Primary data collection was meant to contribute to this research question, but data from interviews did not result in findings that directly lend support to this question. Therefore, this report does not include any findings for this question.

To address each research question, the study team collected and analyzed data from three primary data sources: (1) interviews with library system leaders, (2) interviews with children's library staff, and (3) focus groups with library system leaders and community partners.

Data and Methods

The study team collected qualitative data from nine public library systems. Data included nine library system leader interviews, 18 library staff interviews, and focus groups or shorter partner interviews with community partners in each recruited system. The study used purposive sampling⁵ and thematic analysis to identify patterns across respondent types and systems.

This section provides an overview of protocol development, the approach for sampling public library systems, recruitment, data collection methods and analysis, and the limitations.

Protocol development

The study team developed the interview and focus group protocols based on key topics derived from the research questions and informed by key insights from the secondary data review. A public library subject matter expert and IMLS staff then reviewed the draft protocols to ensure alignment with their research priorities and the study team revised the protocols based on their feedback (Appendices A to C). The study received Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approval in September 2024 and institutional review board (IRB) approval in February 2025. IRB approval was renewed in February 2026.

Sampling

The study used a purposive sample of public library systems and selected respondents from among library leaders, library staff, and school system or community entities in these systems. The team established an initial set of eligible public library systems based on those listed in the IMLS grant records reviewed for the extant research review for conducting work related to child literacy and recommendations from IMLS staff. Next, the team used the Public Library Survey (PLS) public data file to further prioritize eligible systems based on the following:

- **Physical locations:** Confirmed each system had at least one central or branch library
- **Child literacy indicators:** Prioritized library systems with higher levels of activity related to children's reading engagement, measured using annual counts of synchronous children's programs⁶ and circulation of children's materials⁷ (these indicators were used to increase the likelihood of recruiting systems with established children's services and programming)
 - Excluded systems that had fewer than two full-time equivalent librarians on staff
 - Excluded systems that reported zero for synchronous programming for ages 0 to 5 or ages 6 to 11

⁵ Purposive selection (as opposed to random selection) refers to a process of deliberately choosing research participants based on characteristics that are most relevant to the research questions. In this case, the study team purposively selected participants to achieve a sample with a breadth of library system characteristics.

⁶ The Public Library Survey (PLS) defines synchronous children's programming counts as the annual number of live, planned library programs conducted for children, including programs held in person or virtually at a specific date and time.

⁷ The PLS defines children's circulation size as the annual number of checkouts (including renewals) of children's materials, including books and other library materials intended for children to all library users.

- **System characteristics:** Prioritized a balance of urbanicity representation across systems (city, suburb, rural/town as defined by National Center for Education Statistics locale) and system sizes (single vs multi-outlet).

The study team's goal was to recruit nine systems. Out of the nine systems in the initial sample, four systems did not agree to participate, and the team worked with IMLS to identify replacements. Nine systems were successfully recruited and included in the study. Four systems were in cities, two were in suburbs, and three were in rural or town locations. Four systems had a single physical outlet, and five systems had multiple outlets. Systems were located across the four U.S. Census Bureau regions: Northeast, Midwest, South, and West. Systems varied in the population size of service area, number of librarians, children's circulation, and programs (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2. System characteristics of child literacy study public library sample

System characteristic	Median (min-max)
Population size of service area	82,930 (2,810–703,950)
Number of full-time equivalent librarians	11 (2–87)
Children's circulation	55,922 (5,680–1,536,780)
Synchronous programming ages 0 to 5	198 (16–3,710)
Synchronous programming ages 6 to 11	106 (40–870)

Source: 2022 Public Library Survey public data file.

Recruitment

Recruitment began with library systems in February 2025. After IMLS staff sent an advance email to the system contact, the study team began recruitment with an invitation to participate in a screening call to assess interest and feasibility of a system's ability to participate in all study activities.

Once a library system agreed to participate, the study team worked with the designated system contact, often the library director or assistant director, to identify the appropriate participants for the system leader interview and library staff interviews. For system lead interviews, the study team was interested in staff who were decision makers for budgeting and programming on engagement in reading for children ages birth to 12. In almost all cases, the system contact was also the designated participant for the library system leader interview. For library staff interviews, the study team worked with the system lead to identify staff who could answer questions about what their library does to support children's engagement in reading, through programming, outreach, and supports they receive. This was often staff working at outlets of main libraries and branches in a system; however, in some cases, the suggested staff worked across public libraries. The team contacted the identified staff by email, introduced the study, and invited them to participate in an interview. Depending on the size of the system, the team recruited one to three library staff participants per system for interviews.

The study team used the recruitment call and email follow-up to gather community partner contact information for focus groups. Guidelines included that the partners should be individuals from outside organizations who coordinate with the library system on supporting children's engagement in reading. By coordination, this could include formal and informal partnerships, collaborations, or coalitions. The study team contacted the identified partners via the emails shared by the system lead, introduced the study,

and invited them to join the library system's focus group. System leaders suggested up to five contacts in their community who they coordinate with on children's engagement in reading.

Interviews and focus groups

The study team conducted nine library system leader interviews and 18 children's library staff interviews from March 2025 to March 2026. In two systems, the system leader interviews included two participants. All interviews were 60 minutes long and conducted via teleconference. The study team attempted to conduct focus groups in all systems. However, due to recruitment challenges and difficulty finding common times for all participants, the study team conducted 30-minute interviews with select partners in three systems instead of for one focus group. The study team was able to collect data from at least one community partner in each recruited system.

Participants of the library system leader interviews consisted of directors (six), assistant directors (two), or managers of youth services (two) who have roles overseeing the operations, staff, and budgets of the system or their divisions. System leaders had served in their roles ranging from two months to 13 years, and many had even longer tenures within their library systems in other roles.

Library staff interview participants consisted of eight youth services or children's librarians. Their responsibilities were predominantly overseeing children's programming, outreach, and collections. One participant was a librarian, whose responsibilities included children and all adult programming and services. The remaining participants were branch managers or supervised youth service staff, and one participant oversaw a system-wide outreach program related to children's literacy. Staff tenure in their roles ranged from two years to 44 years (the average was 12 years).

Community partners varied primarily across three categories: school districts, community-based organizations, and early childhood organizations. Their work related to literacy focused on providing education resources to families and children to increase literature enjoyment and activities in the community. More details on the specific organizations included in the focus groups are set forth in the key findings for research question 5 under "Public library's role and contributions in the literacy ecosystem."

Analysis

The study team employed a thematic approach to analyze qualitative data from interviews and focus groups. The team used deductive and inductive coding strategies to code the data.

First, the team aligned initial deductive codes with the study's research questions and predefined them. Codes aligned to topics reflected in sections of the protocol, and the team pulled subcodes to further understand a topic. Each subcode had a definition and variation guidance for coders. A spreadsheet template with codes and subcodes served to assign responses that were categorized by interview or focus group text and then assigned to greater codes and further detailed subcodes. Each code and subcode was reviewed and checked for completeness. After the reviews, the study team compiled all deductive codes into spreadsheets for all respondents.

Second, study team members reviewed the coded data to identify themes and categories that emerged organically from each completed deductive code and subcode. Themes were separated by respondent type and rationalized by quantitative and qualitative data evidence extracted from the deductive codes.

Limitations

Although findings are based on interviews and focus groups with a variety of public libraries, the findings do not represent all public libraries. Rather, these findings are meant to help IMLS, researchers, and practitioners gain insight and develop hypotheses about how some public libraries support childhood engagement in reading. IMLS or other researchers may want to further investigate these findings through additional research.

Library-reported practices to engage children in reading

Public library systems engage children in reading through a combination of age-responsive programming, caregiver engagement, access to appealing and relevant materials, and outreach that brings library services into the community. Across interviews, system leadership and library staff emphasized that successful activities are not one-size-fits-all; they are adapted to children's developmental stages, family needs, community context, and local access barriers. This section provides examples of practices and activities that system leaders and library staff reported successfully engaged children in reading. It concludes with how libraries gauge the success of these efforts and the challenges they face in systematically measuring outcomes. The eight reported practices are included in Box 3 and described in detail below.



The ultimate goal is to provide children and caregivers the opportunity to interact with books and music, in a developmentally appropriate way, to model for parents and caregivers best practices with respect to reading and sharing books with young children.

Library staff

Box 3. Library-reported practices to engage children in reading

- Provide developmentally appropriate reading programs
- Provide programming that reflects children's interests, identities, languages, and learning needs
- Increase access to books beyond the library building and support home reading habits
- Treat caregivers as essential partners in children's reading development
- Conduct outreach and community-based engagement
- Balance systemwide priorities with community needs at libraries
- Provide library staff with peer-learning opportunities and training on program delivery
- Invest in an interactive child-centered physical space ▲

Provide developmentally appropriate reading programs. Libraries described developmental tailoring as central to engagement: programs for younger children emphasized caregiver-child interaction and early exposure to books, and programs for elementary-age children emphasized motivation, skill development, independence, and social interaction around reading. Library staff reported that effective reading engagement programs are intentionally designed with children's development stages in mind.

- Library staff said children ages 0 to 2 benefited most from early literacy programs that involve families. These included story time programs with songs, rhymes, and play as well as programs such as 1,000 Books Before Kindergarten, which encourages caregivers to read 1,000 books with their children before kindergarten entry to foster early literacy development. Examples of programs include baby story time, which uses fingerplays and songs to engage infants and toddlers, and Babies and Books



With the preschool story time...we do songs, fingerpaint, we do something with magnets where we have colors, whatever we're trying to work on that week.... They're learning to share or take turns, but they're learning their colors or numbers or how to do a match.... The participation for the preschoolers to get them out of their shell is a big thing.

Library staff

and Musical Movement, which use books, music, sing-alongs, and movement to engage children.

- For preschool-age children (ages 3 to 5), libraries offered programming that expands on early enjoyment of books and supports kindergarten readiness, such as preschool story time. One library staff member explained that preschool story time for ages 3 to 5 includes introducing letters, numbers, colors, rhyming, vocabulary, and listening because these skills are important for children entering kindergarten.
- For elementary age children (ages 6 to 12), libraries emphasized summer reading, book clubs, and reading-for-pleasure activities that build motivation and regular reading habits. Summer reading was one of the most common examples, and library staff reported it was often described as one of the highest-engagement programs for elementary-age children. One library offered a book club for children ages 9 to 12 in which they read books and get to keep them, including juvenile fiction and graphic novels.
- Libraries also tailored take-home materials and incentives by age. For example, one summer reading program offered different art kits for babies, preschoolers, elementary-age children, teens, and adults, with activities tailored to their level.

Provide programming that reflects children’s interests, languages, and learning needs. Libraries emphasized the importance of including activities that align with children’s current interests, incorporating multilingual and culturally relevant materials, and adapting programs so children with disabilities or sensory needs could participate. Several library staff described intentionally selecting popular graphic novels, bilingual books, and culturally relevant books for programs to engage children. For example:

- One library hosts events with reading components related to current pop culture trends, such as Pokémon, Minecraft, or Dog Man.
- A few libraries offer story time in Spanish to create a space in which children could hear and use Spanish in the library. These programs provide a place for Latino families to meet others with similar experiences and learn about other library-offered services.
- Some libraries offer sensory playgroups, using alternative and augmentative communication boards, and creating sensory-friendly spaces. One staff described a sensory playgroup that incorporated Augmentative and Alternative Communication boards designed to make the library more accessible to children with disabilities. The boards display illustrations or photos to help children express themselves by pointing to images on the board to communicate.

Increase access to books outside of the library and support home reading habits.

Several leaders and staff described book giveaways as a strategy to encourage book ownership and increase knowledge about the library. For example, one library system gives away books at seasonal events, such as Halloween or Easter, and hosts a book giveaway day, in which children can choose five complimentary books to keep permanently, along with other small items (for example, pencils and erasers), to promote reading. Several libraries partner with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, helping families sign up for the program to receive free books through the mail, and others offer their own free books by mail programs.



We mail the books directly to hundreds of children every year and being able to see them come into the library and participate has been key. We don't have statistics on it but anecdotally hearing [the children' received the books in the mail] and it made them want to come into one of our branches.

Library system leader

Libraries also offered structured early literacy programs that support home reading habits. Multiple library staff mentioned 1,000 Books Before Kindergarten, which encourages caregivers to read regularly with their children before they enter school. In one system, families who sign up are awarded a free book and continue to receive child-friendly prizes, such as stickers, when they meet goals. One system hosts workshops in English and Spanish for caregivers on children's early literacy skills development, exploring aspects of literacy such as the power of play, home as a learning zone, and writing. Other programs pair book access with take-home literacy supports. In one program, library staff visit preschool and kindergarten classrooms monthly, provide children with free books to keep, and send home early literacy activities that families can do together.

Treat caregivers as essential partners in children's reading development. Library leaders and staff emphasized the central role of caregivers in children's engagement in reading, especially for infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children. Library staff use programming to model strategies caregivers can use at home, such as interactive read-alouds, talking about books, singing, building routines, and making reading enjoyable.

Programs for infants and toddlers typically include caregiver components, and many explicitly include education for caregivers. For example, in baby story time, one library staff described using "parent patter," intentional comments, prompts or scripts directed to caregivers to explain why songs, fingerplays, and other activities support child literacy skill development. "Parent patter" might include prompts like "When you sing with your child, you're helping them hear the smaller sounds in words," or "Pointing to pictures while reading helps build vocabulary." The respondent noted that the program is not only for babies but also for caregivers because it models practices they can use at home and helps families build community connections at the library. Similarly, one system described pairing baby yoga and other parenting programs with related books and materials



I spend a lot of time doing community building. [It] is extremely important to literacy because it is the only way that we get to those conversations. I think that we don't get to those conversations with parents if we haven't built a connection and a feeling of community and so that when [the parents] have a problem, [they] realize the librarian exists and can go and talk to them.

Library staff

for families to check out afterward, so the reading engagement connection continues beyond the scheduled program time.

To better reach caregivers, several libraries offered evening “story hours” for working families. Specific to these story hours, staff aim to keep books short and interactive and provided snacks.

Conduct outreach and community-based engagement.

Libraries aimed to increase children’s reading engagement through outreach activities in the surrounding community by meeting families where they are in the community. Libraries described outreach as an access strategy, not just program promotion. By bringing services into schools, daycares, parks, and other community settings, libraries sought to reduce barriers related to transportation, caregivers’ schedules, language, familiarity with library services, and library card registration. Outreach is one way libraries help navigate the barriers that their community members face in accessing resources to support children’s engagement in reading.



All the school-age kids have access to the whole collection at the public library, and every child has access to a library card. ...We librarians go to the schools and promote services, such as open hour with a table where we tell parents about the library and we tell them about our programs, we promote getting library cards with a QR code, they can just sign up online.

Library staff

Outreach strategies are intended to meet families in locations beyond the library, especially those who face barriers to access. Barriers cited in most interviews included caregiver work schedules, access to transportation, language spoken at home, school calendars, library hours, and library card registration policies. Examples of outreach strategies include:

- Almost all library staff shared that outreach through schools, daycares, and early childcare centers was a key strategy to reach children and their families in the community. Outreach activities with schools included attending back-to-school nights, bringing library programming to classrooms, and sending home library card application forms with students.
- Beyond schools and daycares, libraries also strategized outreach in places children and families already spend time such as parks, camps, and community events. One system created a small library from a shipping container and partnered with a community organization to locate the library near the community organization’s building. The space is stocked with early literacy books and resources and used for outdoor story times once or twice a week. Bookmobiles were mentioned as a common strategy for library staff to engage with people in the community. One library mentioned that its bookmobile goes to a charter school without a library, lower-income housing communities, and parks.

Libraries capitalized on outreach activities to raise awareness about the library programming they offer for children and caregivers through informal conversations about programming, or by including pamphlets on offerings in other take-home materials shared at events. Outreach to raise awareness was similar to but separate from general promotional efforts that libraries conduct through social media, newsletters, and announcements on their websites.

Library systems use targeted outreach approaches to engage populations with low library engagement, including Spanish-speaking families, low-income communities, and families with prior limited

engagement with the library. One library system partnered with a Latino-based organization to present information about library resources to caregivers and conduct library tours with families to increase their familiarity with the facility. Another public library reviewed child library card ownership by neighborhood and focused outreach in the census tracts with the lowest rates of card ownership, including holding a summer reading kickoff and visiting a farmers' market in those areas.

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...[We partner with a group to first meet] the parents at a school where they learn the ins and outs of the school district. Then we are one of the resources: we do a presentation [and then invite them] to the library and... do a tour of the library. That brings in those parents that are afraid of coming to the library because they don't know how it works. Anyone can come to the library. So, we can relieve the pressure for the parents...

Library staff

Balance systemwide priorities with library-level

adaptation. Multi-library systems balance systemwide

priorities with local flexibility at the library level. Some activities, such as summer reading or story time, are implemented across the system so that children have access to similar core opportunities. At the same time, system leaders and library staff emphasized that libraries adapt programming, outreach, schedules, and collections based on the population in each neighborhood, staff capacity, library size, community relationships, and local demand. In one system, the library system leader shared an example of how one library serves more working families than other locations and accommodates those families by offering more evening programming.

Although not all library systems gathered information in the same way, they all spoke about data collection efforts to better understand their community's needs for children's engagement in reading. Library system leaders decided which activities and services to offer using community input gathered by fielding surveys and conducting listening sessions and focus groups. Some library leaders used strategic plans, board committees, staff observations, patron requests, surveys, and library-level knowledge to guide system-wide decisions.

At the library level, staff used informal, community-responsive decision making to decide what programs to offer and when to schedule them. For example, one staff member described using a small survey when starting new programs to assess community interest and needs. The same respondent said that their library started a baby program after noticing that many library users were families with babies and toddlers, and the library adjusted its programming in response to a parent's request for afternoon programs.

Multi-outlet systems also adapt collections by library. One library system leader explained that their collection development staff consider the languages spoken in library neighborhoods, noting that one library received additional funding to expend its collection of for children's books in Haitian Creole in response to a growing population of Haitian Creole-speaking families in that community.

Provide library staff with peer-learning opportunities and training on program delivery. Library staff increase their understanding of early literacy through peer sharing, mentoring, and observing other staff. In addition, they spoke about being encouraged by library leaders to attend local and state conferences

and to pursue relevant professional development. One library staff member shared that the most valuable learning comes from speaking to co-workers about their processes, particularly for problem-solving in specific story time groups. In another system, a library staff manager observes children's programs and then provides coaching to staff on ways to increase engagement with larger feedback sessions for all staff to encourage peer learning. Library system leaders also spoke about the importance of training staff on delivering programs effectively, such as training on story time delivery, strategies for

engaging children, and managing group dynamics. In practice, one library staff member described systemwide use of Supercharged Storytime (Campana et al., 2016), noting that children's library staff complete early literacy training focused on best practices for story time, which strengthens the staff's implementation of early literacy into all their programs.



We paid for mileage, for meals, time. She...along with the other librarian learned a lot about which books to use and how to tie them together. They were able to network with other librarians in the same youth librarian world. They've been sharing ideas amongst themselves. My librarians have reviewed the past year of activities and provided which were successful for the state who is providing an appendix to the main manual. It was a very successful workshop. In turn, they are more comfortable with the books and can better reach the students.

Library system leader

Invest in interactive child-centered physical space. Physical space can influence programming and participants' experience. Library systems invested in spaces that support play, movement, and caregiver-child interaction, recognizing the importance of these activities in fostering children's engagement with reading. Investments in spaces covered the child-centered features and the sensory-friendly spaces. For child-centered spaces, libraries invested in magnet boards, Lego tables, toys, seating that allowed caregivers and children to sit together, and other interior design elements focused on children. In particular, three different library systems highlighted the following: including a new sensory room with a viewing window into story time so children with sensory needs can participate in a way that works for them; collaborating with a community group that works with children with autism in the development of the library's new sensory room; and including a quiet room for children with sensory needs in each newly renovated library across the system.

Library leaders and staff shared how room size, layout, and building conditions can limit attendance and activity types that the library is able to offer. Staff from one system mentioned that a larger or redesigned children's area would better support play and engagement, while another system shared that its program space is limited to fewer than 50 people because of fire codes. That said, all systems spoke about how funding constrains these investments.

Public library staff defined success in activities broadly but measured it through informal or easily captured indicators.

System leads and staff viewed program success as child engagement in activities, caregiver involvement in early literacy skill development, and positive attitudes toward reading, but they typically did not measure these outcomes systematically. Instead, libraries often relied on easier-to-capture metrics such as program attendance, circulation statistics, and informal feedback after programming. For example, one staff

member explained that program success was mostly based on attendance and informal feedback, adding that if people continue to attend programs, staff interpret that as evidence that the program meets a need. A few libraries shared that their programs and practices are rooted in evidence from the broader literacy field, so that while they may not measure reading engagement outcomes related to their programs, they feel confident that their practices lead to these outcomes.

Some libraries described more structured approaches to measuring success. Library leaders and staff shared the following examples:

- Conducting an annual survey of caregivers who attend story time at the library and designating a specific program day as a survey day for caregivers. The respondent noted, however, that it can be difficult to get caregivers to complete surveys during story time because of their responsibilities and limited time available.
- Using participant surveys through the Public Library Association's Project Outcome (American Library Association, 2025) to track the outcomes of their current or past youth programs. Project Outcome is a free toolkit that helps libraries measure and demonstrate the impact of programs and services through standardized patron surveys and outcome-based evaluation tools.
- Surveying teachers and caregivers who participate in a free-book giveaway program to gather data on perceptions of children's reading improvement after the program.
- Using a summer reading tracking app to gather qualitative data on what youth learned over the summer and what parts of the books they liked the best, in addition to quantitative data on the number of books read and children who participated.

A few other systems also discussed attempts at collecting program data through participant surveys but indicated that these efforts often depended on staff availability and capacity and were hard to sustain. These examples suggest that libraries are interested in measuring outcomes beyond attendance, but consistent measurement remains challenging. In addition, two systems shared they did not think it was their role to collect outcome data and believed libraries should be focused on access metrics, such as library card use (for example, registration and borrowing) by demographic group.

How children and families engage with public library resources to support engagement in reading

Libraries reported that children's engagement with library resources shifted by developmental stage. For infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children, engagement was typically caregiver-mediated and embedded in interactive activities such as story time, songs, movement, and play. For elementary-age children, engagement became more independent and was often supported through the child's choice of books, social interaction, challenges, book clubs, summer reading, and activity-based programs that incorporated reading.

Children can begin their engagement with public library resources as babies attending library programming with their caregivers and families. These programs help build a foundation for a love of reading and embed principles of early literacy skill development. Interviewees discussed conducting library programs such as story time and 1,000 Books Before Kindergarten specifically for young children (ages 0 to 5) and their families. One library staff member emphasized the importance of early years programming because a large number of children in the community do not attend preschool and their families rely on library programming for early learning.

Library staff described story time as helping achieve multiple goals related to reading engagement. Through story time, children build positive associations with books, caregivers observe early literacy practices, families form relationships with staff and one another, and libraries introduce families to other reading-related resources.

Story time supports early positive associations with books and reading by allowing children space to interact, socialize, dance, and move their bodies while sharing a story together.

Children's engagement in story time is driven by active participation. Library staff embed early literacy skill development in story time through talking, singing, reading, and playing. Staff structure programs to maximize engagement, through smaller groups, fast pacing, and clear expectations. Three librarians mentioned using dialogic reading, where the children are encouraged to tell the story, answer questions, and engage with the content of the book. Dialogic reading helps build language and comprehension skills (Pilinger & Vardy, 2022). Caregivers are engaged by sitting with their child throughout the program. One library system uses a slide presentation so caregivers can follow along with the story and songs, and another mentioned having the program leader call on children to encourage their caregivers' participation in the program.

Library staff described how the story time program often evolves between babies (ages 0 to 2) to preschool age (ages 3 to 5). For the older age group, some libraries described adding more elements of kindergarten readiness in their programs. For example, they added more structured classroom management techniques about expectations on behavior or craft elements that involve using scissors to develop children's fine motor control and hand-eye coordination needed for writing—a key component of literacy. The focus of these programs is young children and their caregivers, but one librarian welcomes



Story time is an important foundation for children's feelings about books and literature, their attitudes toward reading, their idea of themselves as a reader, their connection to a community of readers...it is this awesome intersection of what our community wants and what we can provide.

Library staff

all ages, and she often sees older children attending with their families and engaging with the stories and activities. Older children find enjoyment in the stories, learn about other library programs, and have opportunities to check out books.

Library staff report they often extend story time programming by offering sessions in community settings; these sessions reach children who face barriers attending programs at the physical library location. Common locations include early learning centers, daycares, and parks. In these community programs, libraries still work with caregivers and families so they support their children's engagement in reading by sending early literacy resources and library marketing materials home with children after the programming. One comprehensive program that brings story time into preschools and kindergarten classes provides children with a free book each month. The book contains a letter to caregivers about early literacy activities to extend early literacy activities into the home, in addition to sharing information about upcoming library programming.

Families of young children engage with caregiver- and family-specific programs.

Library staff spoke about how these programs aim to teach caregivers about children's early literacy skills development and ways to effectively support children's engagement in reading at home. Library staff model early literacy teaching practices in programs such as story time, but they also offer caregiver-specific programs such as



Parents need to feel encouraged, [our librarians] are working on that, helping parents see progress. [Our] librarians encourage [children] too, with high fives, stickers, letting the kids know we are proud, making both parents and kids know they are on the right track.

Library system leader

workshops that help caregivers develop children's early literacy skills. The teaching practices are often rooted in Every Child Ready to Read, an early literacy initiative widely used in public libraries (Neuman et al., 2017). Families of young children also form relationships with library staff and other families that support continued attendance throughout their child's development. A unique program highlighted by one library was an informal program in which library staff provided advice to caregivers on ways to engage their children in reading and provided a list of books based on the child's interest and what is currently popular. Library staff reported that caregivers can gain confidence in supporting their children's reading engagement outside of the library. Another librarian shared how staff encourage caregivers to stay after a program is held to build connections with other families, which in turn encourages repeat visits to the library and more exposure to content that supports children's engagement in reading.

Elementary-age children engage with library resources more independently. Popular programs discussed in interviews included:

- Summer reading
- Book clubs
- Field trips to the library
- Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) programs with literacy components
- Makerspaces
- Tutoring
- Shared reading

Makerspaces are collaborative learning spaces in libraries that include physical and digital objects and technology (Velasquez, 2015). Programs that elementary age children attend touch on several aspects of engagement in reading, such as developing confidence in reading ability, increasing reading for pleasure, and motivation to read. For example, two library systems host a program in which elementary-age children can read to therapy dogs. In another system, the library partnered with the school nutrition office to offer a meal during the summer reading program. During the meal, children paired off to read together, thus

strengthening their reading skills. The aims of both programs are to build confidence in older children's reading ability in a comfortable setting. Programs such as a silent book club, in which youth read a book of their choosing and socialize and have a snack with peers; or a battle of the books tournament, which engages children through a friendly trivia competition about books, encourage children's pleasure reading and motivation to read. A few library systems provided unique activity-based programs that incorporate children's literacy with STEAM activities. One librarian shared that STEAM programming engages children more than reading-only programs. Another library discussed how having a makerspace encourages youth to come to the library and provides more opportunities for them to engage with literacy specific resources. In addition, several public library systems described programs specifically designed to connect homeschool families with elementary-age children to public library resources (Box 4).

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[The book club for older elementary children includes a] variety of juvenile fiction and juvenile graphic novels to try to hit the bases for the kids who don't like to read long form. [The librarian] also encourages them to read the book as best they can, but it's never like a punishment of like, "oh, you didn't read the books so you can't participate in the discussion." She just says read as much as you feel like you can. And the kids really respond well to that and over time they tend to read more.

Library staff

Box 4. Spotlight on activities for homeschool families

- One library that regularly works with homeschool families in the area offered a Science, Technology, Reading, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STREAM) program, which included the extra R, the reading component. This program was designed specifically with homeschool families' needs in mind, adding reading resources to other STEAM activities.
- Another library delivers story time once a month held offsite for a homeschool group. Also, the library offers a homeschool catered program called "Homeschool Hangout," in which the library conducts outreach to homeschool families via Facebook groups and invites them to monthly craft lesson activities. The library experiences much interaction (socializing, borrowing books) from the homeschool families in the library during the week of Homeschool Hangout due to the social media outreach and focused engagement.
- A different library sends newsletters to homeschool caregivers to invite them to activities designed for homeschool families. The library has a staff member who is in charge of outreach with the homeschool community.▲

Relevant reading materials are important at all ages, but library staff across systems stressed how they aim to help elementary-age children find books that align with their interests to increase their pleasure reading. Although still important, caregiver and family support is not as central for the engagement of elementary-age children. Staff shared that they see caregivers providing transportation to/from the library for programming and assisting their children in filling out summer reading logs.

Across age groups, children engage independently with digital resources. Children check out audiobooks to listen to on their own. Children use computers in the library to play educational games or check out tablets preloaded with games that support literacy skill development. Several library staff also discussed stocking talking books that read aloud to children. More findings related to digital resources are shared in the next section, “Librarians’ views on children’s use of digital and online resources in public libraries.”

Families engage with puzzles and toys. Although puzzles and toys available at the library or for check-out may not always be directly focused on children’s engagement in reading, library staff see these learning materials as key to making the library a welcoming place that people continue to return to. For example, one library described hosting family game night, which allows the entire family to engage in an activity in an environment that supports reading. Staff can use this time to introduce other library programming and suggest books based on their child’s interest.



Our program is built on literacy and learning through play. We have the stage where kids come play with puppets and an interactive wall. We [also] have a Lego table, a train table, climbing wall, and soon we will have an interactive wall. [These play elements are] important and this is what brings them in.

Library staff

Librarians' views on children's use of digital and online resources in public libraries

Primary data collection did not answer how children's engagement in reading has changed over time with the introduction of digital resources. Instead, it contributed contextual information about how library staff perceive and use digital resources to support children's engagement in reading. Library staff generally did not describe digital resources as replacing print materials for children. Instead, they framed digital resources as supplemental tools that may be especially useful for accessibility, convenience, multilingual families, children with learning differences, and older elementary-age children who are engaging in independent learning or research.

Libraries provided digital and online resources to support children's engagement in reading.

Resources included eBooks, audiobooks, tablets preloaded with educational games, talking or read-aloud books, and online resources such as encyclopedias. Although some library systems described making investments to expand digital offerings, others noted that these investments were less of a priority for the children's collection, where they find less demand in their community for these materials. For example, several staff experienced pushbacks from caregivers regarding digital resources in children's library spaces, as caregivers believe children already experience substantial screen exposure. In addition to resources like eBooks and online resources for children's use, one library invested in an online learning platform for caregivers of young children and early childhood educators to learn about early literacy and child development (see Box 5).

Box 5. Innovative investment in online learning platform

The goal of the online learning platform is for caregivers and teachers to learn how early literacy skills develop and about ways to support development in preschool-age children. The platform uses podcast-style conversations among caregivers, educators, and pediatricians that share an overview of what the research reveals about child development at a particular age. The platform pairs these conversations with videos of evidence-based practices that caregivers and teachers can use with their children. The library system partnered with a local university in developing the platform. ▲

Library staff had a strong preference for providing physical books for children, with an acceptance of digital resources as supplemental. Many staff perceived print materials as more effective for fostering engagement in reading, based on observing how children engage with books in the library and staff beliefs about how children build a love of reading. This belief was especially strong as it pertains to young children, for whom a few library staff members mentioned the importance of manipulating books and understanding how to use them to establish a strong foundation for later engagement in reading. Staff were hesitant to introduce more digital resources in children's areas because they were concerned that digital media can be distracting or overly prevalent in children's lives. Other staff, however, acknowledged a complementary

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A book for younger children, the physical copy has better results than digital...[children] like putting something in their hands. It feels real, obtainable, and you can always refer to it. That being said, I love books and options where there is an audio and visual representation. For instance, I love a digital learning app...they enhance each other.

Library Staff

role for digital resources, particularly as children enter elementary school. For example, as children begin research projects in elementary school, one library staff member discussed helping them learn about topics in online encyclopedias. She helped them find books as well, but the digital resources offered a chance to teach them how to search a database to learn about a topic online. Another library staff member discussed encouraging reading in any form, and, if older children prefer eBooks or audio books, she wants to make those available and support their choices.

Digital resources were valued by library staff primarily for accessibility and reach, not as a replacement for print resources.

Staff consistently highlighted digital resources as effective for expanding access to materials that engage children in reading, especially for children with learning differences, families with limited time, or families with language needs other than English. One library staff member said that families listen to audio books in the car with their children to build in reading time into their busy schedules. Another popular part of library collections includes print books with an audio element that reads aloud to children. In some cases, these books can help children with Spanish-speaking caregivers increase their exposure to English. Alternatively, libraries with Spanish-language read-aloud books expand access to resources for children who speak Spanish or for caregivers who want their children to learn a new language. Another librarian shared that elementary school students in the public school system must conduct a research project every year, and she relies on digital resources to supplement the physical reference materials because of the high demand during project periods.

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...as you turn the pages, the audio reads out to you. [The audio] is helpful for busy parents or for parents who do not speak English. If a parent and a child are reading, they can learn at the same time from the audio. [They can listen in both English and Spanish and] then the parent is learning and the child is learning [both] English and Spanish at the same time. [For busy parents, these books help] while the mom is cooking, [the child] can be busy listening to the book and looking at the pages. I think that [these read aloud books are] by far the most popular item we have right now.

Library staff

Public libraries' role and contributions in the literacy ecosystem

The following findings are informed by focus group discussions with community partners. Focus groups included representation from the following types of organizations:

- Public schools and librarians (3) and parent–teacher organizations (1)
- Local museums (2)
- Headstart (2)
- Other community organizations, such as Rotary Clubs, Chambers of Commerce, United Way, YMCA and other nonprofits serving children and families (6)

Participants had varying roles related to children's engagement in reading in the community, but common across all participating organizations was collaboration or support for public library programming. Public library leaders attended three of the groups listed above.

Community partners described libraries as key connectors in a healthy literacy ecosystem, including roles coordinating with partners to deliver programs and promote reading, secure funding for reading programs, and integrate reading with community support. Libraries frequently collaborate with schools, health organizations, community groups, senior centers, and local institutions to co-deliver reading activities and events (for example, summer reading, community events, intergenerational programs). In addition, focus group participants spoke about libraries extending access beyond their buildings through key community partnerships to reduce access barriers to literacy resources. These include bookmobiles to schools without librarians, free book distribution events, and food-bank partnerships tied to library use. Libraries relied on and engaged partners, such as schools and businesses, to cross-promote programs and increase community awareness and participation. Finally, focus group participants discussed how libraries engaged foundations and local partners to secure funding, provide free books, and integrate reading activities with broader community supports (for example, food drives and financial literacy programming). Box 6 highlights a few examples shared in focus groups of how libraries work as a connector in the literacy ecosystem.

Box 6. Public library role as a community connector for reading engagement

- **A public library hosts story walks in collaboration with the parks and recreation department and a local senior center.** Families bring their children and read the story as they walk through the park and the residents of the senior center interact with the story and the families.
- **A public library partnership with the Rotary Club** for a story time and free books for all kindergarteners. The Rotary Club purchased the books for the students and provided volunteers to deliver them to each school. The library recommended the book that was age-appropriate, coordinated with local schools, and scheduled the time for the Rotary Club to deliver and read the book.
- **A public library collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce.** The Chamber of Commerce raises awareness of library programs and services and the importance of the library's role in early literacy through its connections to the business community.
- **A public library and museum partnership.** The public library supports a local museum's summer programming by providing books aligned with the summer programming theme. Conversely, the museum provides collection materials to the library to support story time programming, such as providing a taxidermy squirrel for a story time featuring a book about squirrels. ▲

Other key actors in the literacy ecosystem include schools, nonprofits, foundations, and family members.

Focus group participants recognized that the literacy ecosystem was quite expansive. Focus group participants stated that schools anchor many reading engagement activities, partnering with nonprofits, foundations, and volunteers to provide books, reading programs, and literacy-related events for students. Nonprofits, universities, and foundations frequently supply resources such as books, funding, mentors, volunteers, and incentives that enable children's reading activities. Community organizations supported engagement in reading through incentives, sponsorships, and program funding, often driving participation through rewards or events. One community organization partnered with a local university for reading challenge incentives. As a result, the organization was able to extend the challenge to more schools than their resources would otherwise allow. Another organization partnered with a foundation for a book-sharing program in laundromats. The local organization provided the books that were available for free in laundromats. Finally, focus group participants recognized that parents, grandparents, and older children (peer reading) play an active role in supporting reading engagement, thus highlighting the importance of the home and informal learning environment.

Successful partnerships between libraries and other parts of the ecosystem required intentional relationship building, consistent communication, and shared commitment to children's literacy.

Two systems shared the importance of having a dedicated staff member who works to coordinate community outreach and maintaining partnerships because of the demands placed on other library staff to deliver programming and maintain collections. Similarly, another system discussed how its public school has a dedicated coordinator for their school libraries, allowing more coordination among schools, public libraries, and other community organizations. Strong relationships and clear communication allowed these partners to learn from, adapt, and improve shared programming. For example, a school-based library card drive became more successful when the school moved the event from fall to spring, during a month when the school had more time to host the event. Annual conferences and one-off community events offered opportunities for community partners to share successes from children's reading activities, learn from one another, and build stronger relationships based on a shared commitment to increasing literacy in their communities.

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...having a librarian [with] time in her schedule in addition to direct time with the students to do that coordinating piece is huge to [the public library's] collaboration with the schools...because everyone is so busy and responsible for so many things... [the public schools have a] history of hiring school librarians who appreciate the role of the public library, and we're so lucky to be able to work with them because they're with young people in the community who can't get to the library for a variety of reasons. So our collaboration with them allows us to reach young people aren't coming to the library on their own.

Library system leader

Challenges coordinating across the literacy ecosystem included resource and time constraints, staff turnover, and competing demands and priorities. Partners in one focus group shared that their public library and community organizations found it expensive to hire interpreters for languages that are newer in the community. Although partners agreed they would like to support families who may be new to the country or community with language barriers, they had difficulty reaching them. Several groups shared how high staff turnover in community organizations has challenged ongoing collaboration and resource sharing. The challenge often occurred when staff worked closely with another organization, laying the foundation for a collaboration, only to have their main point of contact leave, which resulted in needing to start over. In addition, schools often face many competing demands relating to staff availability and limited classroom time outside of core requirements, which makes partnering with outside organizations difficult.

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...[The public library] also have a lot of turnover. [Other organizations in the group might agree that this causes] a lot of rebuilding and capacity making. And so, having [an] organizational head is really key. And in this safe space, [I wonder], is it the schools or is it the library? Cause I don't know what the right answer is and...I'm still learning all the dynamics and the community organizations and the way there are these layers of history here.

Library system leader

Conclusion and implications

Findings from the primary data collection phase of the study suggest that public libraries are community-responsive institutions that support children's engagement in reading through programming, outreach, collections, and partnerships, with a focus on family engagement. Library staff shared how their day-to-day work touches on the many aspects of children's engagement in reading, such as early literacy skill development, reading for pleasure, and positive attitudes toward books. The findings point to opportunities for future evidence-building related to caregiver experiences, program implementation, digital engagement, and differences across library and community contexts.

Future research could examine caregivers' perspectives on use of public library resources, what barriers they experience in accessing resources, and their perceptions of how libraries support children's engagement in reading in the home environment. A major finding across interviews was the fundamental role caregivers play in supporting children's engagement in reading, particularly for infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children. Library staff described early literacy programs as being offered not only for children but also for caregivers, through modeling reading behaviors, explaining early literacy skill development, and encouraging literacy activities that families can continue at home. Although respondents extensively discussed the role of caregivers in their children's engagement in reading, this study did not collect data directly from caregivers or families.

Future research related to children's library programming may benefit from including implementation-focused components that document how programs, such as story time and summer reading, are delivered across settings, how local adaptations influence participation and engagement, and how libraries overcome common barriers. The study highlighted the variation in how public library systems with more than one outlet or branch implement programming across libraries. Even when systems shared common goals or program models, respondents described needing to adapt activities based on neighborhood requirements, branch size, staffing capacity, partnerships, physical space, and local demand.

Future survey research could more directly investigate how factors such as library size, staffing structures, rurality, neighborhood characteristics, or library-level resources shape participation in children's reading-related programming and use of library resources. Primary data collection provided more limited evidence for certain original research questions. For example, although respondents frequently discussed factors that may shape participation in library programming—such as transportation barriers, language spoken at home, caregiver work schedules, and community demographics—the primary data collection was not designed to directly examine patterns of children's engagement in reading by library infrastructure or community characteristics.

Future research could further explore how children and caregivers use digital resources, how these resources support different forms of engagement, and how attitudes toward digital resources vary across communities and children's age groups. Although interviews collected information about digital and online resources offered at public libraries, the findings reflected staff's perceptions rather than evidence about how children's engagement in reading has changed over time because of digital offerings.

Library staff often viewed digital materials as useful supplemental resources, particularly for accessibility and convenience, but expressed preferences for physical books, especially for younger children.

Future research could further examine how libraries coordinate within local literacy ecosystems and how partnerships influence access to reading-related resources and activities across communities.

As noted above, the findings reinforced the important role public libraries play in broader community efforts to support children's engagement in reading. Libraries collaborate with many other organizations such as schools, nonprofits, museums, early childhood organizations, and other local groups. In the future, researchers could conduct case studies across systems using surveys and network analyses to create visual maps of how organizations collaborate, thereby building on the focus groups' findings.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide for Discussions with Library Systems Leaders

Introductions and purpose of study (3 min)

Hello, my name is [NAME] and my colleague [NAME] is also joining us to take notes of our conversation. Thank you so much for meeting with us today. As we explained on the introduction call, we are part of an independent research team at Mathematica conducting a study in collaboration with the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to inform their research study around children's reading literacy. The purpose of our discussion today is to learn about your library system's strategic planning, activities, outreach, and investments to support children's engagement in reading.

Your responses today will have no bearing on future grantmaking decisions IMLS might make about your specific library system. So, we encourage you to be as candid as you like. We will be covering a lot of ground today and expect this discussion to take 60 minutes.

Are there any questions before we begin? [WAIT FOR QUESTIONS]

Great. Finally, we will be taking notes as we go, but we would like to record this interview so that we can refer to it to make sure that our notes are accurate. The recording is for our internal use only, and after we are sure that we have good notes, we will delete the recording.

Are you OK with us recording the interview? [IF PARTICIPANTS AGREE, NOTETAKER WILL HIT RECORD.]

[BEGIN RECORDING]

Great. Thank you for agreeing to record this. OR, That is OK, we will take notes only.

Privacy and confidentiality (3 min)

Before we begin, I want to share how we plan to use the information you provide the study team. The information you provide will be reported to IMLS in aggregate/group form only. No personally identifiable individual information from our notes will be shared or reported. We may use quotes to illustrate findings, but if we do, we will not report any information that will allow a quote to be identified with you.

There are no right or wrong answers to our questions. If you do not know the answers to any questions or do not wish to answer, you can choose to skip a question or follow-up later if you prefer.

By voluntarily agreeing to participate in this study, you are agreeing to answer these questions with responses that are true for you.

- Do you understand the purpose of our conversation today?
- Are you okay if we use quotes from this interview to illustrate findings? The quotes will not report any information that will allow the quote to be identified with you.
- Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

Questions for Library Systems Leader(s)

[THESE QUESTIONS ARE SEMI-STRUCTURED AND TAILORED TO THE RESPONDENT AND THE FLOW OF THE INTERVIEW. NOT ALL QUESTIONS WILL BE ASKED OF ALL RESPONDENTS.]

Respondent Background [5 minutes]

1. What is your job title?
2. Please describe your responsibilities in this position.
3. How long have you been in this position? What about in the [LIBRARY SYSTEM]?

Strategic Planning, Activities, Partners and Outreach [25 minutes]

Now we would like to hear about how [LIBRARY SYSTEM NAME] supports children's engagement in reading. For example, we are interested in work to support early literacy skills, reading for pleasure, and positive attitudes toward books and reading.

Library system priorities for context [10 minutes]

Let's begin with understanding your library's priorities related to children's reading literacy and reading engagement. When we say children, we mean between birth and age 12. When we say library or library system here, we are referring to the administrative entity with at least a main library (and potentially one or more branch libraries) that provide direct services to the public.

4. What would you say are [LIBRARY SYSTEM]'s main priorities when it comes to building up children's engagement in reading or advancing children's reading literacy?
 - a. For example, what strategic goals or policies are in place?
 - b. How do these priorities get set?
 - i. PROBE AS NEEDED: Who is involved in decision-making?
 - c. How do you measure progress towards these priorities?
5. Are there specific groups of people or types of families in the service area that your library is trying to reach? [FOLLOW-UP AS NEEDED ON WHICH AND WHY.]
 - a. In what ways do you engage with these families? (e.g., programming, marketing and communications, through partnerships, etc.)

Activities [8 minutes]

Now let's shift more into the specific activities around library programming (such as summer reading programs or story times) or services (such as collection development or providing materials outside the library in other locations) that are designed to build children's engagement in reading.

6. What do you see as the key or most important activities that your system provides to **patrons** (children/families/caregivers) that encourage children's engagement in reading? Can you describe them briefly? (NOTE TO INTERVIEWER: AIM TO FOCUS ON 1-2 KEY ACTIVITIES/RESOURCES FOR FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS)
 - a. Why are these activities key?
 - b. Who decides which activities libraries in your system will participate in?

- i. PROBE: What, if any, community factors are considered when you are determining which activities to prioritize?
 - c. [IF MULTI-OUTLET SYSTEM: How do the activities/services vary by branch?
 - i. PROBE AS NEEDED BASED ON UNDERSTANDING OF STRUCTURE FROM RECRUITMENT SCREENER (IF IT DOESN'T ALIGN: Previously we learned that outlets activities/services [follow a central plan/is developed on its own/may modify a central plan]. How has that approach developed across outlets?]
- 7. What do you see as the key or most important activities that your system provides to **library staff** that encourage children's engagement in reading? (IF NEEDED: PROBE ON MATERIALS USED FOR THE PROGRAMMING, ACCESS TO COLLECTIONS, CURRICULUMS)
 - a. Why are these activities key?
 - b. Who decides which activities libraries in your system will participate in?
 - i. PROBE AS NEEDED BASED ON "WHO" TO UNDERSTAND IF THEY ARE IN ADMINISTRATION OR CENTRAL LIBRARY, OR AN OUTLET.
 - ii. PROBE: What, if any, community factors are considered when you are determining which activities/resources to prioritize?
- 8. How do you measure the success of these activities? Can you give examples of metrics you use? (for example, attendance, interactions during the program, evaluation by participants)? PROBE FURTHER IF NECESSARY.

Partners [2 minutes]

- 9. Who do you consider to be your most important community contacts around programming and services for children's engagement in reading? This could include public school systems, Head Start, community organizations, or local businesses as a few examples.
 - a. How are these contacts involved in activities?
 - b. Do they typically approach you about the program, or did you approach them?

Challenges [2 minutes]

- 10. What challenges have your system experienced in conducting current or adding future activities with patrons, library staff or partners?

Outreach [5 minutes]

Next, we want to hear about the type of outreach activities in the community [LIBRARY SYSTEM] conducts related to children's engagement in reading.

- 11. What kinds of outreach activities does your library system have for children and their caregivers to promote engagement in reading?
 - a. [IF MULTI-OUTLET SYSTEM: How do the outreach activities vary by branch?
 - i. PROBE AS NEEDED BASED ON UNDERSTANDING OF STRUCTURE FROM RECRUITMENT SCREENER (IF IT DOESN'T ALIGN: Previously we learned that outlets activities/services [follow a central plan/is developed on its own/may modify a central plan]. How has that approach develop across outlets?)]
 - b. What are some examples of goals related to conducting this kind of outreach?

- c. Who are outreach activities aimed to reach? (For example, is outreach mostly directed to caregivers, what outreach is specific for children, children of different ages?)
- 12. How does your system identify goals and approaches for outreach?
 - a. Who makes decisions about which goals to select and prioritize?
 - i. PROBE AS NEEDED BASED ON “WHO” TO UNDERSTAND IF THEY ARE IN ADMINISTRATION OR CENTRAL LIBRARY, OR AN OUTLET.
 - b. Please describe any goals or guidance to reach different types of patrons within the service area (for example, caregivers speaking a language other than English).

Staff, Collections, Infrastructure and Operations (Study question 2) [20 minutes]

Next, we are interested in the investments in staff and infrastructure [LIBRARY SYSTEM] makes to support children’s engagement in reading.

Investments in staff [10 minutes]

- 13. Let’s start with investments in library staff who are in the main library branches that develop and/or implement reading literacy programming or services and work with children and their caregivers. These investments could include training as part of staff education or professional development, increasing FTEs, increasing staff pay. What types of investments, if any, is your system currently making around staffing to support children’s reading literacy?
 - a. What, if any, community factors are considered when making decisions on these types of staffing investments? Probe as needed: By community factors we mean things like neighborhood-level, economic or cultural differences.
- 14. What types of professional development or continuing education do you require for your staff working in children’s reading literacy programming? What other types of opportunities may be encouraged or promoted?
 - a. PROBE FOR PARTICULAR TYPES AS NEEDED RELATED TO training around early literacy or reading literacy skills, child development, community needs assessments, outreach, community engagement, cultural competency, measuring the effectiveness of activities, particularly with children and their caregivers.
 - b. What, if any, community factors are considered when making decisions related to making staff investments?
- 15. Across these staffing investments, can you share an example of an investment that achieved a direct or indirect goal related to children’s engagement in reading?
 - a. What led your system to implement this investment?
 - b. How did this investment contribute to increasing children’s engagement in reading?
- 16. What types of barriers did you face as you implement these kinds of investments?

Investments in infrastructure and operations [10 minutes]

Now we are interested in the types of investments [LIBRARY SYSTEM] is making in your infrastructure to support children’s engagement in reading.

17. What types of investments are made related to services (such as collection development or online subscriptions), library spaces (such as the physical building design and layout), and library operations?
 - a. PROBE FOR PARTICULAR TYPES AS NEEDED RELATED TO types of services, other types of outlets such as bookmobiles, where the libraries are located, and when the libraries are open.
 - b. What, if any, community factors do you consider when making these investments? Probe as needed: By community factors we mean things like neighborhood-level, economic or cultural differences.
18. Across these types of infrastructure and operational investments, can you share an example of an investment that achieved a direct or indirect goal related to children's engagement in reading?
 - a. What led your system to implement this investment?
 - b. How did this investment contribute to increasing children's engagement in reading?
19. What barriers did you face as you implemented these kinds of investments?

Overall investment priorities

20. What, if any, priorities would your library system like to see in the future for investments related to staffing and/or infrastructure to support children's engagement in reading?

Concluding [3 minutes]

Those are all of the questions we have for you.

Before we wrap up, is there anything else you would like to add, or any questions you have for me?

Thank you! We expect that IMLS will release a public report in 2026 and we will email you a link to the report once it is released. Thank you again for speaking with me today.

[IF LEADER HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED FOR FOCUS GROUPS: We will be following up soon to schedule a focus group with other organizations in the service area that your library system has been identified as working on children's literacy.]

Project Contact Information

DROP IN CHAT: If you have further questions about this project, you may contact the task lead, at XXX.

Appendix B

Interview Guide for Discussions with Library Staff

Introduction (3 minutes)

Hello, my name is [NAME] and my colleague [NAME] is also joining us to take notes of our conversation. Thank you so much for meeting with us today. As we explained in our email, we are part of an independent research team at Mathematica conducting a study in collaboration with the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to inform their research study around the children's reading literacy. The purpose of our discussion today is to learn about your library's activities (that is, programming and services) to support children's engagement in reading to include outreach or marketing you may do and training or supports staff receive.

Your responses today will have no bearing on future grantmaking decisions IMLS might make about your specific library. So, we encourage you to be as candid as you like. We will be covering a lot of ground today and expect this discussion to take 60 minutes.

Are there any questions before we begin? [WAIT FOR QUESTIONS]

Great. Finally, we will be taking notes as we go, but we would like to record this interview so that we can refer to it to make sure that our notes are accurate. The recording is for our internal use only, and after we are sure that we have good notes, we will delete the recording.

Are you OK with us recording the interview? [IF PARTICIPANTS AGREE, NOTETAKER WILL HIT RECORD.]

[BEGIN RECORDING]

Great. Thank you for agreeing to record this. OR, That is OK, we will take notes only.

Privacy and confidentiality (3 min)

Before we begin, I want to share how we plan to use the information you provide the study team. The information you provide will be reported to IMLS in aggregate/group form only. No personally identifiable individual information from our notes will be shared or reported. We may use quotes to illustrate findings, but if we do, we will not report any information that will allow a quote to be identified with you.

There are no right or wrong answers to our questions. If you do not know the answers to any questions or do not wish to answer, you can choose to skip a question or follow-up later if you prefer.

By voluntarily agreeing to participate in this study, you are agreeing to answer these questions with responses that are true for you.

- Do you understand the purpose of our conversation today?
- Are you okay if we use quotes from this interview to illustrate findings? The quotes will not report any information that will allow the quote to be identified with you.
- Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

Questions for Library Staff (50 minutes)

[THESE QUESTIONS ARE SEMI-STRUCTURED AND TAILORED TO THE RESPONDENT AND THE FLOW OF THE INTERVIEW. NOT ALL QUESTIONS WILL BE ASKED OF ALL RESPONDENTS.]

Respondent Background [5 minutes]

1. What is your job title?
2. What is your role in services to children at your library?
 - a. PROBE: Do you specialize with a specific age group?
3. How long have you been in this position?

Activities and Outreach & Marketing (Study questions 2, 3, and 4) [35 minutes]

Activities [20 minutes]

Let's start by discussing the specific activities around library programming (such as summer reading programs or story times) or services (such as collections, online subscriptions) that encourage children's engagement in reading. When we say reading engagement, we are interested in programming and services to increase children's interest or love of reading, which can include work to support early literacy skills, reading for pleasure, and positive attitudes towards books and reading. We are also interested in learning your perspective on how children and caregivers engage with programming and services.

4. What are some examples of programs your library offers that encourages children's engagement in reading? When we say children here, we are thinking any age between birth and age 12. Among all the activities, please highlight those you see as most effective and why.
 - a. How is it determined which activities to offer and the way to implement them (timing, approach)?
 - b. What community factors does your library consider when delivering these programs? Probe as needed: By community factors we mean things like neighborhood-level, economic or cultural differences.
 - c. What do you think helps or limits different types of population groups from participating in programming? [For example, what languages do you offer programs in, if you need to change how materials and space is set up for children with disabilities]

We are interested in hearing about how you offer these programs in more detail, but since we have limited time, we would like to focus on the 1 or 2 programs/activities that you are doing that you think is/are the most impactful.

5. Can you tell me about one or two programs you think are the most impactful for increasing children's engagement in reading? I am interested in the goals of the program, who it aims to serve, what you consider best practices for operating the program, partnerships, and why you think it is the most impactful.

INTERVIEWER: USE FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS BELOW ONLY AS NEEDED, SOME OF THIS MAY BE GATHERED PRIOR TO THE CALL. ASK ON UP TO TWO PROGRAMS, PENDING TIME.

- a. What age group(s) is the program geared for? For example, infants/toddlers (under 3), preschoolers, early elementary school, and older elementary school (ages 9–12 years)?
 - b. Where is the activity offered? For example, in the physical library building, outside the library via a bookmobile, school, or other community location, or virtually?
 - c. What, if any, community partners/collaborators are involved in this program? This could include public schools, Head Start, community organizations, or local businesses as a few examples. Did they approach you about the program, or did you approach them?
 - d. Does the program include caregivers or have components primarily directed to caregivers?
 - e. Focusing on children and caregivers, who in the community is this program popular with? What other groups, if any, do you hope to encourage participate in this program?
 - f. What features of the programming appear most engaging for children? For caregivers (if applicable)?
 - i. FOLLOW-UP AS NEEDED: What ways do children and caregivers engage with these activities? How are caregivers included in this program (for example, encouraged to participate in an arts and craft session during story time, repeat the library staff modeling using a book or asking questions), and what activities do children and caregivers express they enjoy the most?
6. Now shifting back to thinking about reading literacy programming in general, do you have specific metrics to measure progress to program goals, or to understand if your programs are working (for example, attendance, interactions during the program, evaluation by participants)? PROBE FURTHER IF NECESSARY.
 - a. How is the data collected? What does effectiveness mean to you?
 - b. IF THEY DON'T HAVE SPECIFIC METRICS: Can you share a little about why you don't have specific metrics?
7. Across all programming, in what ways, if any, have you noticed children and caregivers' engagement in programming changing over the past several years?

Services [10 minutes]

Now let's talk about services to support children's engagement in reading.

We'd like to learn more about services – both physical and virtual - that appears to be effective in supporting children's engagement in reading. By physical services we mean making available print books, games, puppets, puzzles, etc. By virtual services we mean eBooks, audiobooks, computer-based literacy programming, prerecorded story times, and websites with literacy activities.

8. What services do you see as most effective to support reading engagement with children and their caregivers?
 - a. Does it differ by age? [For example, infants/toddlers, preschoolers, early elementary, or older elementary children (9–12 years).]
 - b. How do children and their caregivers interact with these services?
9. Do you think digital or print materials are more effective or equally effective in promoting reading engagement? Please provide an example.
 - a. PROBE AS NEEDED FOR WHY SEE AS EFFECTIVE.

10. How does the use of physical or virtual materials vary by age group?
11. Have you observed certain services or materials used more by particular types of groups of families, children and or their caregivers?
12. How has the offering and use of services changed over time?
 - a. PROBE SPECIFICALLY ON VIRTUAL SERVICES HERE, IF NOT ALREADY DISCUSSED, ON HOW USE HAS CHANGED OVER TIME RELATIVE TO PHYSICAL SERVICES AND HOW READING ENGAGEMENT WITH THEM MAY HAVE CHANGED OVER TIME.
13. What future goals do you have to add new activities or expand existing ones (programming or services) that would support, all or in part, children's reading engagement?

Outreach & Marketing [6 minutes]

Next, we want to hear about the type of outreach and marketing [LIBRARY] conducts related to children's engagement in reading.

14. What type of outreach does your library do to reach patrons beyond the library's space? (Provide examples as needed: back to school nights with teachers, outreach to daycares) [SQ2]
15. How do you raise awareness in the community about the library's programs and services available to children and their caregivers to support engagement in reading?
 - a. Where in the community does that marketing happen?
16. Are there other organizations you work with on promoting this kind of work that we haven't discussed already?
17. What types of efforts do you do to bring in new families, children and/or their caregivers?
 - a. Please describe any efforts to reach different types of patrons within the service area (for example, families speaking a language other than English).

Thanks for discussing the different activities, services and outreach you do around children's reading literacy.

18. Before we move on, what do you consider best practices or helpful strategies for increasing children's engagement in reading through the public library?

Staff supports (Study question 2) [10 minutes]

Now we have questions about the type of supports (such as staff training) that would help you in implementing activities to related to children's engagement in reading.

19. What type of training in children's or reading literacy services have you had prior to coming to this position?
20. How does the [LIBRARY OR LIBRARY SYSTEM] provide training and support for staff conducting activities or outreach for activities related to children's engagement in reading? Training could be conducted by library staff or other organizations, required or optional.
 - a. PROBE IF NEEDED: Training could be in-person or virtual. Do you receive training through workshops, visiting other libraries, conferences, or community of learners?
 - b. What other training and support would you find helpful to better support efforts to support children's engagement in reading?

21. Aside from training, are there other supports that would improve implementation of the library's children's reading literacy program?
 - a. PROBE ON THE FOLLOWING IF NOT DISCUSSED: investments in space and layout of activities, materials for programming and marketing, collection development for physical or virtual services (for example, type of books, toys)

Concluding [3 minutes]

Those are all of the questions we have for you.

Before we wrap up, is there anything else you would like to add, or any questions you have for me?

Thank you! We expect that IMLS will release a public report in 2026 and we will email you a link to the report once it is released. Thank you again for speaking with me today.

Project Contact Information

DROP IN CHAT: If you have further questions about this project, you may contact the task lead at XXX.

Appendix C

Focus Group Guide for Discussions with library systems leaders and other entities

Introduction (3 minutes)

Hello, my name is [NAME] and my colleague [NAME] is also joining us. Thank you so much for meeting with us today. As we mentioned in our email, we are with Mathematica, an independent research organization. As we mentioned in our email invite, we are conducting a study in collaboration with The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to inform their research study around children's reading literacy.

The purpose of our discussion today is to discuss the work you do as part of the literacy ecosystem for children and their caregivers in the [LIBRARY SYSTEM SERVICE AREA] community. Your input is important to the success of this research to learn about how your organizations may coordinate currently and ways the public library may support or collaborate in efforts to increase children's engagement in reading. Your responses will help inform findings around IMLS' research questions related to this topic. We will be covering a lot of ground today and expect this discussion to take 60 minutes.

Are there any questions before we begin? [WAIT FOR QUESTIONS]

Great. Finally, we will be taking notes as we go, but we would like to record this focus group so that we can refer to it to make sure that our notes are accurate. The recording is for our internal use only, and after we are sure that we have good notes, we will delete the recording.

Are you OK with us recording the focus group?

[ALL PARTICIPANTS MUST VERBALLY AGREE OR ASSENT BEFORE RECORDING BEGINS. IF ALL PARTICIPANTS AGREE, BEGIN RECORDING] Great. Thank you for agreeing to record this.

[IF AT LEAST ONE PARTICIPANT DECLINES] That is OK. I will ask questions and we will take notes without recording.

[BEGIN RECORDING]

Privacy and confidentiality (3 min)

Before we begin, I want to share how we plan to use the information you provide the study team. The information you provide will be reported to IMLS in aggregate/group form only. No personally identifiable individual information from our notes will be shared or reported. We may use quotes to illustrate findings, but if we do, we will not report any information that will allow a quote to be identified with you. However, this is a focus group, and we cannot guarantee complete anonymity. We ask that what is said here stays here and that you do not share anything said by another focus group member outside of this space.

There are no right or wrong answers to our questions. If you do not know the answers to any questions or do not wish to answer, you can choose to skip a question or follow-up later if you prefer.

By voluntarily agreeing to participate in this study, you are agreeing to answer these questions with responses that are true for you.

- Do you understand the purpose of our conversation today?
- Are you okay if we use quotes from this interview to illustrate findings? The quotes will not report any information that will allow the quote to be identified with you.

Throughout this conversation, we welcome you to share as much or as little as you like and to utilize the chat function if you are not comfortable sharing out loud. We also welcome and encourage you to build on one another's viewpoints during the discussion.

Focus group questions

[THESE QUESTIONS ARE SEMI-STRUCTURED AND TAILORED TO THE FLOW OF THE DISCUSSION. NOT ALL QUESTIONS WILL BE ASKED OF ALL PARTICIPANTS.]

Participants' Introductions and Backgrounds [8 mins]

1. First off, let's make a quick round of introductions. Please share your organization and your position in the organization and how long you have been in that role.
2. For the next question, we want you all to use the chat feature. You will add your answer to the chat, but please wait to hit enter until I ask you all to do it at the same time. Please share in the chat the primary goal of your organization when it comes to children's engagement in reading or children's reading literacy.

Literacy ecosystem (Study question 5) [40 minutes]

For this next question, are going to discuss what we are referring to as the literacy ecosystem. The literacy ecosystem consists of all the elements in a community that shape reading literacy outcomes for children. Children and their caregivers play a very significant part of the literacy ecosystem, but children are also shaped by formal and informal learning environments. In the poll we are going to do we are interested in hearing about these other elements/organizations that shape the ecosystem in this area.

Local ecosystem elements [5 minutes]

3. SLIDO POLL: Can you share who you see as the players in the reading literacy ecosystem in this community? (WE WILL SHOW A MARK ALL THAT APPLY LIST WITH AND OTHER CATEGORY, THE MODERATOR WILL COMMENT AFTER INITIAL RESULTS COME IN WHAT THEY ARE SEEING.)

Library and organization coordination [15 minutes]

Now let's discuss how, if at all, you coordinate with organizations beyond your own around children's engagement in reading. By coordination, we are thinking about formal and informal partnerships, collaborations, or coalitions.

4. Are you currently coordinating on projects, or have you coordinated on any projects in the past? For example, this coordination can include delivering programming together, sharing resources (such as books), providing space, or access to participants, and/or raising awareness

of each other's work. It can be with organizations not represented in the group today. Please share out loud, or in the chat.

Probe/customize on any examples already raised about project/programs/activities they are working on together. PROBE AS NECESSARY TO GET INFORMATION ON A-E:

- a. What contributions do your organizations make to reading literacy projects?
- b. What roles do each of your organizations serve?
- c. How do you determine the projects goals and can you share examples of what they are?
- d. What have been achievements from this project?
- e. What lessons have been learned from this work?

Probe as time permits:

- f. Who initiated the project?
- g. How do you determine if you have met your goals?
- h. What is the frequency of this project? For example, one-time events, annual, ongoing throughout the year?
- i. How do policies and funding influence this coordination?
- j. How do you gain support from other entities to help promote or support the project?
5. What is working well with coordination across organizations?
6. What challenges exist in working across organizations?

Sharing and expanding work [20 minutes]

7. Are there other organizations you'd like to include in your collaborations around children's engagement in reading? How would this organization fit in? What have been challenges with collaboration? This could be other local organizations or entities, or partners/initiatives at the local, state, or national level.
8. Are there any resources other entities in the reading literacy ecosystem have that you think would be beneficial to utilize for your organizations work?
9. How are you sharing learnings from your work on what you find effective? This could be about achieving the goals or implementation such as reaching and recruiting families, children or their caregivers to the programs.
 - a. How do policies and funding impact how you all share learnings?

Conclusions (3 min)

Those are all the questions we have for you.

Before we wrap up, is there anything else you would like to add, or any questions you have for us?

Thank you! We expect that IMLS will release a public report in 2026 and we will email you a link to the report once it is released. Thank you again for speaking with me today.

Thank you again for your time!

Project Contact Information

DROP IN CHAT: If you have further questions about this project, you may contact the task lead at XXX.

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