

Simmons Middle School: A Small Library with Big Ambition

IMLS: Accelerating Promising Practices for Small Libraries

Narrative

Project Justification

What need, problem, challenge, or opportunity will your project address, and how was it identified?

The library at Simmons Middle School in East Aurora School District 131 (EASD131) in Aurora, Illinois, is a dated, poorly utilized space. The library's configuration is more suited to elementary school children in a mid-twentieth century learning environment than adolescent middle school students in 2019. The unwelcoming, impractical setting serves to conceal rather than enhance the library's resources, and it discourages teachers and students from valuing those resources. Like the space itself, teachers' mindsets toward the library also seem to be stuck in a bygone era in which students look up books, find them on the shelves, check out, and leave. Most parents in Simmons' impoverished community have no education beyond high school and so have a limited understanding of the true value of a robustly functioning library. Students, lacking a push from parents at home or modeling from teachers at school, do not know how to make the most of their library's resources and, as a result, use the library in a perfunctory way. The IMLS Accelerating Promising Practices for Small Libraries grant provides our project, *Simmons Middle School: A Small Library with Big Ambition*, with the opportunity to transform the physical library space as well as teachers' and students' attitudes to create a true Learning Commons/Learning Lab -- a hub for interest-driven, self-directed, inquiry-based learning in which the library staff function as partners to classroom teachers and build links with parents.

These problems have been identified primarily by tracking student and teacher behavior along with library circulation data. The school librarian has recorded that only 16 of Simmons Middle School's 57 regular classroom teachers use the library in a typical year. Of these 16 teachers, most are language arts teachers who bring students solely to check out books. Only about one teacher per month uses the library as a teaching resource to inspire students' curiosity and help them learn how to use library resources for research. Following their teachers' example, students under-utilize the library as well. Only about 10 of Simmons' roughly 1,000 students, or 1%, independently visit the library daily. Circulation statistics, unsurprisingly, are fairly dismal as well. For the 2018-19 school year so far, the library has averaged a monthly circulation of only 1.91 items per student. This is a slight improvement over last year, during which students only checked out 1.73 items per month.

What best practice or prior IMLS funded work will inform your approach?

In the broad view our plan for *Simmons Middle School: A Small Library with Big Ambition*, is informed by the IMLS report, *Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums: Transformative Spaces for Teens*. Our project seeks to redesign our library space and reform constituents' thinking about the use of our library. We are inspired by the concept and design principles of Connected

Learning, described in *Learning Labs* as “learning that is interest-driven, socially relevant, and aimed at expanding educational or economic opportunity.” By creating a library space that shares some of the common features of Learning Labs and Learning Commons, we hope our library space will become a place in which our students, “are at the center of their learning – following their passions, collaborating with peers, going beyond the role of consumers to become active creators and producers.” (Urban Libraries Council and Association of Science-Technology Centers, 2014) (Sinclair, 2007) We hope to use modified versions of the three strategies recommended in the IMLS report for creating a Learning Lab, including teen engagement, the use of mentors, and rethinking the physical space to achieve our overarching outcome of increased use of the library.

How would you qualify your library as small and/or rural?

The Simmons Middle School library is a small school library. The library serves approximately 1,000 students and includes only two full-time staff members -- one librarian and an assistant -- and no part-time staff or volunteers. The library operates on a shoestring budget. On average, the Simmons library receives \$10.52 per student annually in combined school district and state funds for library operations. (Staff salaries and benefits are considered part of the school’s overall operating budget.) Over the past four years, the library’s budget has ranged from \$10,463 to \$10,983. This amount must cover new book purchases; periodical subscriptions; cataloging costs; and repairs for library materials. There is no budget for furniture and fixtures whatsoever. The Simmons Middle School library has no other sources of revenue, and the school district is unable to offer additional funding. EASD131 is a severely under-funded school district. According to the Illinois Report Card, for the 17-18 school year, the district had only 51% of the financial capacity necessary to meet the state's adequacy target, the minimum amount required to provide a high-quality education according to Illinois' Evidence-Based Funding law. As a component of total revenue, the district's local revenue, typically the largest funding source for schools in Illinois, was a staggering \$196,887,810 short of the target for the 2017-18. This massive shortage is a reflection of the low property values and subsequently low property tax revenue to fund our schools and school programs, including school libraries.

As a result of these low funding levels, the Simmons library has a relatively small collection for the number of students it serves. Currently, there are 12,412 items in the Simmons Middle School Library collection. Industry recommendations indicate that to serve a middle school with nearly 1,000 students proficiently, the library should have at least 3,500 more items in its collection. The Simmons library is also restricted in the range of services it currently provides. The library operates only during regular school hours with some limited summer operation, and only offers check-in/check-out services and scheduled full class visit times.

Who will benefit from your project? How have you engaged them in your planning?

The entire Simmons Middle School community will benefit from *A Small Library with Big Ambition*, including library staff, teachers, students, school administrators, and parents. We have engaged most of these constituents in our early stage planning, and we plan to engage them more fully once the project has the funding to proceed. Library staff at the school and district level were deeply involved in planning the overall project as members of the project team that met weekly to develop the plan. The project team also met with school administrators to receive feedback and secure their support for our plan. Teachers, students,

and parents were engaged less formally, through conversations with library and district-level staff and analysis of library usage data. The project team will more fully engage these constituent groups in final planning after the announcement of the grant award.

Simmons Middle School: A Small Library with Big Ambition addresses the goal of APP to “strengthen the ability of small ... libraries ... to serve their communities” by transforming library space with new furniture and space configuration, supporting library staff with robust professional development, involving the school community through input from students, parents, and teachers, and changing teachers’ approach to library use through increased communication and training. *A Small Library with Big Ambition* addresses the agency-level goal to Build Capacity primarily through professional development. This professional development is expected to increase the librarian’s leadership capacity and improve teachers’ understanding of the effective use of libraries. The librarian will be empowered to guide teachers in collaborative processes and to help teachers adjust their instructional styles to align with best practices, including the mentor role of the IMLS Learning Lab model. By making it possible to change how the space is used, alterations to the Simmons Middle School library will also help Build Capacity. Importantly, *A Small Library with Big Ambition*, is aligned with Illinois School Library Standards, including PI.L.1, PI.L.2, PI.L.5, LE.L.4, L.L.2, and L.L.3, as outlined in supporting document 1.

Project Work Plan

What specific activities will you carry out?

Several activities will take place simultaneously to launch the project immediately upon notice of the grant award. The project team will develop survey instruments to collect data from students, teachers, and administrators regarding their use and perceptions of the library. Surveys will be administered beginning in November 2019 and will be repeated at the beginning and end of each school year of the project. In the first two months of the project, the team will conduct focus groups with students and teachers regarding the redesign of the library space and the reimagined library service model. These focus groups will help the entire school feel a sense of ownership in the project while helping to guide the library design. Based on focus group feedback, the library’s schedule will be adjusted, including adding up to two additional hours of operating time per week.

Simultaneously, the project team will initiate membership in library professional organizations and, with help from these organizations, identify appropriate professional development (PD) offerings and a consultant(s) who can provide PD for the school’s library staff, project team, and teachers. By the end of October 2019, the project director will book a consultant(s) to deliver PD to Simmons’ teachers once each semester throughout the project. She will participate in at least one library PD event to expand her leadership capacity by the end of 2019, and she will arrange visits to area libraries that operate using the Learning Commons or Learning Lab models. Possible locations include the Harold Washington Library in Chicago and Hinsdale South High School library. By November 2019, the library space design will be finalized, and new furniture will be ordered. The space will be fully reconfigured by January 2020. Project staff will attend the national American Library Association (ALA) conference in June each year.

The librarian will meet with teachers in the context of content-area professional learning communities (PLCs) beginning in November 2019 and continuing every other month through

the duration of the project. Regular participation in PLC meetings will allow the librarian to glean the information needed to develop teacher's PD sessions, curate the library's collection, and make adjustments to the library's services and delivery model to better suit the instructional needs of Simmons' teachers. Beginning in December 2019, the librarian will develop PD sessions for teachers, using insights from the visits to Learning Commons/Learning Lab-designed libraries, professional association recommendations, and feedback from teacher PLCs. These teacher PD sessions will be held beginning in Spring 2020. This cycle will be repeated once each semester in the second year of the project, with the librarian developing and delivering a total of three professional development sessions for teachers. To engage parents, the librarian will develop and deliver a parent informational session once each semester, inviting Aurora Public Library (APL) librarians to contribute as guest speakers.

Who will plan, implement, and manage your project? Will partners be engaged and, if so, for what purpose?

Simmons Middle School: A Small Library with Big Ambition will be planned, implemented, and managed by a small project team consisting of the school's librarian and project director, Jeri Murphy, the district's Technology Facilitator, Julie Linden, and the district's Grants Coordinator, Dr. Margo Schmitt. The team will meet quarterly to plan the next steps of the project, review progress, and make improvements based on data and stakeholder feedback. We will engage our local public library, APL, as a partner to help develop and conduct instructional events for parents. We will also seek out partners not yet identified to provide consulting services, including providing professional development for library staff and teachers. Possible partners include YOUmedia Chicago/Chicago Public Library and the Illinois Math and Science Academy.

What time, financial, personnel, and other resources will you need to carry out the activities?

The most critical resources needed to carry out *A Small Library with Big Ambition* are funding for the space renovation and professional development, time to conduct PD and change attitudes towards the library, and the dedicated project team, particularly the visionary Simmons Middle School librarian and administrative supporters, including the district Technology Facilitator and Assistant Principal of Simmons. The physical space must be reconfigured for the library to function effectively as a Learning Commons/Learning Lab and to disturb teachers' and students' familiarity with the library, setting the stage for new experiences and expectations. With no district budget for furniture, grant funds are required to make this transformation. Grant funds are necessary for ongoing, targeted professional development for the library staff and teachers as well. The two years of this project will provide an ideal timeframe for shifting constituents' mindsets toward the library while collecting data to demonstrate the impact of the new library model. A strong project team is already in place, and administrative support has been secured to allow the *Simmons Middle School: A Small Library with Big Ambition* project to complete the necessary activities and achieve success.

What are the risks to the project and how will you mitigate them?

We foresee three major risks to the success of this project. (1) Teachers may be reluctant to change their practices and accept a new model for library usage. (2) Students may abuse the increased flexibility of the reconfigured library. (3) There may be as yet unknown physical limitations to change of the library space. The first two risks will be mitigated by conducting focus groups to solicit input from both students and teachers regarding the physical and

conceptual transformation of the library. These risks will also be mitigated by soliciting strong support from building- and district-level administrators before major project activities begin. Both teachers and students will respond more favorably to change if building administrators fully understand and support the project. To further mitigate the risk of low teacher-buy-in, the project team will conduct an outreach campaign through PLC visits to help teachers understand the benefits this project will have for teaching and learning. Risks related to student behavior will be further mitigated by including classroom management techniques in teachers' professional development and by communicating clear expectations for students' library behavior to students, teachers, and parents. The risk of unknown physical limitations will be mitigated by including district Buildings and Grounds staff in space planning and by maintaining flexibility with vendors to allow for design changes, if necessary.

How will you measure your progress and evaluate your project performance goals?

We will measure our progress in several ways. The project director will track the progress of the project's activities against the schedule of completion and the budget plan to ensure that activities will be carried out on time and on budget. If changes are necessary, these will be communicated to the project team and IMLS promptly, and adjustments will be made to either the schedule, the budget, or both. Progress against performance goals will be measured by monitoring library circulation statistics, tracking student's use of the library as individuals or as whole-class groups through sign-in sheets and the library calendar. Changes in teachers' and students' attitudes toward the library will be measured using surveys.

Project Outcomes

What are the intended results and outputs of your project? How do they address the need articulated in your Project Justification?

The primary intended result of our project is increased use of the library and its resources by both students and teachers as measured by survey data and usage statistics. Intended outputs include a reconfigured library space with new, more functional furniture; a new, fully flexible schedule for library use during the school day; implementation of extended library hours; and professional development lessons that can be re-used in subsequent years. The library's new space configuration and scheduling address the need for a welcoming library that meets 21st-century expectations. Reusable PD lessons address the need to have a positive impact on teachers' attitudes toward using the library.

How do you define success for your project?

The most important indicator of success for *A Small Library with Big Ambition*, is a change in school climate regarding the library, reflected in increased library usage and improved attitudes toward the library among teachers and administrators. We also want to see an increase in students' interest in using the library to seek information, conduct independent research, and progress through the HOMAGO stages of engagement, as defined by Mizuko and referenced in *Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums*. We will recognize this success through increased library circulation and usage statistics along with survey data reflecting changes in perception among students, teachers, and administrators.

What is your plan for collecting and reporting data on your performance goals and outcomes?

The project director will compile statistics on library circulation and library usage at the beginning of the project, based on the previous school year's data. The project team will develop surveys that include IMLS Build Capacity Performance Measure Statements to administer to students, teachers, and administrators in the first quarter of the project. Surveys will be administered to these groups by the end of 2019 and repeated at the end of each project year, at the beginning of the second year, and before and after teachers' PD events. Circulation statistics are automatically tallied by the library's software system. We expect circulation to increase by at least one item per student per month. Attendance at PD events and individual student usage of the library will be tracked using sign-in sheets. The library's calendar will be used to track library use by whole classrooms. We expect individual student use to increase by at least 15% each year. We expect the number of teachers who use the library for their classes to increase by 50% each year. Based on a 2018-19 baseline of 16 teachers per year, we expect 24 teachers to use the library in year one of the project and 36 teachers in year two. The project director will document outreach and feedback with teacher PLCs by recording minutes of these bi-monthly meetings.

The project team will meet quarterly to review data, assess progress toward project goals, and make adjustments to the project plan based on the data and feedback from constituents. The project director will compile and submit narrative reports as required by IMLS. The Grants Coordinator will compile and submit fiscal reports. Additional reports will be submitted to internal stakeholders at least annually.

How will you sustain the benefits of your project beyond the funding period?

The benefits of *Simmons Middle School: A Small Library with Big Ambition* will be naturally sustained beyond the funding period. The new furniture and reconfigured space will remain in the building for years to come. Simmons' library and teaching staff will retain the knowledge and skills they gain through the projects' extensive professional development, allowing the library's implementation changes to persist. Professional development materials developed through this project will be maintained and re-used to educate new teachers. Partnerships developed through this project will be maintained to the extent possible. In particular, the school will maintain a relationship with the Aurora Public Library to continue an exchange of ideas and information across many school years. Some aspects of the project, such as increased library hours, will need continued funding to sustain. The project team will use data collected through this project to petition school administration to direct additional funds, possibly including appropriate entitlement funds, to continue offering extended library hours and to maintain membership in key library associations, such as ALA. Most importantly, this project will create a permanent change in the school climate regarding the library, as teachers', students', and administrators' perception of the library will be forever transformed.

Activity	Year 1											
	Sept. 2019	Oct. 2019	Nov. 2019	Dec. 2019	Jan. 2020	Feb. 2020	Mar. 2020	Apr. 2020	May 2020	June 2020	July 2020	Aug. 2020
Convene project team	█			█			█			█		
Conduct focus groups with students and teachers	█	█										
Finalize plan, order furniture, and reconfigure the library			█	█	█							
Librarian meets with teacher PLCs			█		█		█		█			
Join library professional organizations	█											█
Librarian identifies and participates in PD and library visits.	█	█	█	█						█	█	█
Librarian/project director develops PD for teachers				█	█	█						█
Librarian delivers PD to teachers							█	█	█			
Library operating hours adjusted		█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█			█
Library staff develop instructional events for parents			█	█			█	█				
Library staff deliver instructional events for parents					█	█			█			
Identify and contract with Learning Commons/Learning Lab consultant	█	█										
Teachers participate in Learning Commons/Learning Lab consultant training			█	█		█	█			█	█	
Develop surveys for students, teachers, and school administrators	█	█	█									
Administer survey to teacher PLCs and school administrators			█	█					█			█
Compile library usage data	█			█					█			
Analyze data and conduct continuous quality improvement			█	█		█			█			█
Join community of practice and participate in activities as directed by IMLS	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
Participate in evaluation activities as directed by IMLS third-party evaluator	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█

Activity	Year 2											
	Sept. 2020	Oct. 2020	Nov. 2020	Dec. 2020	Jan. 2021	Feb. 2021	Mar. 2021	Apr. 2021	May 2021	June 2021	July 2021	Aug. 2021
Convene project team	■			■			■			■		■
Conduct focus groups with students and teachers												
Finalize plan, order furniture, and reconfigure the library												
Librarian meets with teacher PLCs	■		■		■		■		■			
Join library professional organizations												
Librarian identifies and participates in PD and library visits.										■		
Librarian/project director develops PD for teachers	■	■			■	■						
Librarian delivers PD to teachers			■				■	■				
Library operating hours adjusted	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■			
Library staff develop instructional events for parents			■	■			■	■				
Library staff deliver instructional events for parents					■	■			■			
Identify and contract with Learning Commons/Learning Lab consultant												
Teachers participate in Learning Commons/Learning Lab consultant training		■	■			■	■			■	■	
Develop surveys for students, teachers, and school administrators												
Administer survey to teacher PLCs and school administrators	■							■	■			
Compile library usage data				■					■			
Analyze data and conduct continuous quality improvement			■			■				■	■	
Join community of practice and participate in activities as directed by IMLS	■											
Participate in evaluation activities as directed by IMLS third-party evaluator	■											