

# Leading Family Engagement in Early Learning: The Role of State Library Administrative Agencies

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## From the Authors

The Global Family Research Project is committed to promoting an ecology of learning in which the home, school, and community interact to amplify learning opportunities for children and families. Based on the research showing the contribution of family engagement to children’s cognitive and social-emotional development, we focus on the policies and practices that guide families to support their children’s learning.

In 2013, Maryland’s use of its funds for the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge Grant caught our attention. It involved supporting the public library as a key institution to help close the opportunity gap between children from low-income homes and their peers. We began to examine how libraries across the country are transforming their services to engage families in children’s learning, from early childhood and through the school years.

Through a partnership with the Public Library Association and support from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, we documented the work of libraries and convened library leaders to share their insights. From work that began in 2015 we learned that libraries are reaching out to families and making efforts to get through to the underserved, and also offering a wide range of services to promote adult literacy, job training, and access to community services. They are reinforcing family efforts to promote learning, encouraging peer relationships, and building community through their programs.

We were struck by the extent of local innovations, and in a second round of documentation, explored a new set of questions:

- What is the role of the state library in promoting innovative family-engagement practices among local libraries?
- How does the state library support the scale and sustainability of innovative practices?
- How are state libraries connected with broader statewide education initiatives?

This policy brief is the result of our investigation. Our purpose is to share with state libraries what we have learned from four states about leadership to strengthen family engagement in public libraries. We envision this document to be a springboard for discussing innovation and change strategies. Together with recommendations, we provide guiding questions so that state libraries can take action to create and improve family-focused pathways to learning, both within their own institutions and also across other state agencies that serve children and families. State library leaders can also share this policy brief to help them make the case for statewide partnerships that address critical issues in education and family well-being.

Library leaders are in a position to catalyze change. We hope that the brief serves as a call to action for state libraries to elevate family engagement in library practice.

# Executive Summary

Family engagement is a shared responsibility among families, educators, and communities to support children’s learning and development. For families, it is about the knowledge, attitudes, values, and behaviors that enable children to be motivated, enthusiastic, and successful learners. For libraries, this means having respectful partnerships with families and providing information, guidance, and opportunities for families to be active in their children’s learning and development as well as their own lifelong learning.

Implementing family engagement is about creating pathways for families to learn together, for example through early literacy activities, STEM and Maker Spaces, summer reading programs, and youth-generated community engagement and digital literacy projects. Rather than designing family engagement as a separate program it can be purposefully integrated into the rich offerings of libraries. To do this effectively means having ambitious but attainable goals and avoiding superficial practice.

This policy brief highlights the ways four states—California, Colorado, Georgia, and Maryland—integrated family engagement in early literacy and learning programs. It focuses on the change strategies to innovate, scale, and sustain family engagement.

## Public libraries are significant contributors to early learning.

- **Public libraries fill the gap in providing two-generation early learning experiences.** They engage family members in everyday opportunities to promote young children’s literacy, math, and social skills, which allow these co-learning experiences to extend into the home—through talking, reading, singing, making, and playing.
- **Public libraries can potentially level the playing field for disadvantaged children.** Librarians and other library staff members help families from lower-income homes find information for their children, access the Internet, and use digital resources to support learning.
- **Public libraries are critical resources for families, who learn alongside their children.** They offer opportunities to meet the learning needs of children and adults and redesign services to become community hubs for families with young children.

## State Library Administrative Agencies (SLAAs) transform family engagement in early education.

They can do this by:

- **Creating a bold vision for the emergence of new ideas and practices.** State library leaders evolved a new vision of early learning in which parents and caregivers are teaching and learning together with young children. They addressed important issues such as equitable access to library use among underserved families and developing authentic partnerships with families.
- **Entering into statewide partnerships.** State library leaders positioned themselves as major education stakeholders by addressing statewide early learning issues such as school readiness; closing opportunity gaps in early learning; and improving the quality of family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care.
- **Funding and empowering local library innovation.** State library leaders provided opportunities for libraries to tinker with new ideas and sought to balance the allocation of funds across a diversity of libraries in order to ensure equitable geographic and socioeconomic representation.
- **Providing professional learning opportunities.** State library leaders used professional learning to ignite enthusiasm and build the competencies needed to develop authentic partnerships with families. Because changing practice is a long-term process, state library leaders offered continuing capacity-building opportunities.
- **Taking advantage of multiple funding sources.** State library leaders have adroitly used public-private partnerships to pilot, scale, and sustain innovations, and, importantly, the principles and intent that underlie them. Participating in statewide partnerships and governors' initiatives in early learning allowed state libraries to broaden their visibility and sustain their family engagement efforts. They also established partnerships with philanthropies to improve outreach and services for underserved families with young children.

## SLAAs can expand their influence to advance family engagement as a priority for libraries.

The findings suggest the following recommendations:

- **Use leadership to champion family engagement.** By actively entering into statewide partnerships, SLAAs bring to the table the library assets—being a trusted community institution, offering free resources and programs, and providing expertise in literacy and learning—that can make a difference in promoting family engagement across child-serving agencies.
- **Bridge national, state, and local library efforts in family engagement.** State library agencies function as intermediaries whose intimate knowledge of local libraries and their promising family engagement practices can be shared statewide—within libraries and among other state agencies.
- **Focus on a system of professional learning to scale and sustain promising and innovative practices.** As organizers of and participants in conferences and meetings, SLAAs make it possible to bring librarians, faculty in information science departments, and other state agencies together. This convening can move toward creating a clear vision about family engagement, discussing tough questions, and shaping meaningful learning experiences that will transform family engagement practices.
- **Explore multiple funding resources.** State library agencies are well positioned to make the case that their assets and reach can contribute to addressing pressing education and equity issues. Family engagement is integral to early learning initiatives and extends even beyond to the school age years. Vital funding from the Library Services Technology Act (LSTA) from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) support this work, and such funding should be sustained and increased. Several philanthropic foundations, as well as state and federal grants, including through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the National Science Foundation, support family engagement.

# State Library Administrative Agencies: Leading Family Engagement in Early Learning

State Library Administrative Agencies (SLAAs) are evolving a new vision of early learning. They are taking leadership in a two-generation approach, in which parents and caregivers guide and learn together with children but also gain new knowledge and skills as lifelong learners. The state agencies serve as the main arm of information to support the work of the state legislature and state employees. They support statewide initiatives and services, including the work of public, academic, research, school, and special libraries in their state.

## **Public libraries fill the gap in providing two-generation early learning experiences.**

Although the educational and economic benefits of early childhood education are well known, the infrastructure for ensuring that all young children gain access to high quality learning experiences in the home and community is largely inadequate. Many young children—especially infants and toddlers—are not in center-based early childhood programs, but instead spend their days with parents, relatives, neighbors, and babysitters. These informal settings often fail to provide children with the experiences and resources they need to thrive in school, and many providers are not well equipped to give parents tips or ideas on how to support children’s learning in the home and community.<sup>1, 2</sup>

In 2014, as many as 70 million children attended library programs.<sup>3</sup> Children’s programs are among the most popular library offerings, accounting for almost 70 percent of all library program attendance.<sup>4</sup> Libraries offer children early literacy programs and engage family members in everyday opportunities to promote young children’s literacy, math, and social skills. Family co-learning experiences at the library—through reading, singing, making, playing—are often extended in the home. This is important because family engagement in cognitively enriching activities, especially among those children and families often affected by racial and economic discrimination, contributes to reducing the gaps in school readiness.<sup>5</sup>

## **Public libraries can potentially level the playing field for disadvantaged children.**

Research shows that due largely to economic constraints, families from low-income households are significantly less able to complement in-school learning with quality out-of-school-time learning opportunities, which has a negative impact on children’s learning and development.<sup>6</sup> The library can shield children from these effects. National data sets from the United States show that compared to families from upper-income homes, parents from lower-income households say the library helps them find information for their children, allows free access to the Internet, and provides quiet study spaces, broader selections of e-books, and more interactive learning.<sup>7</sup> Still, there is much work to be done to overcome lingering disparities in library usage associated with families’ income and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>8</sup>

### **Public libraries are critical resources for families, who learn alongside their children.**

Family engagement is part of the broader efforts of public libraries to turn outward and engage communities to expand their knowledge through library collections, programs, and services. Because families create a home environment that can maximize learning, families—and not just children—are integrated into library program activities. Beyond being an “add-on” to early literacy programs, families become a central focus in co-learning activities, reflected in the programs being identified as “family learning” and “family literacy.” Family members are co-learners with their children and lifelong learners as they participate in a variety of library services. Two specific programs, Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) and Family Place Libraries, have been widely adopted and are transforming their services from repositories of books to community centers of learning for young children and families.<sup>9, 10</sup>



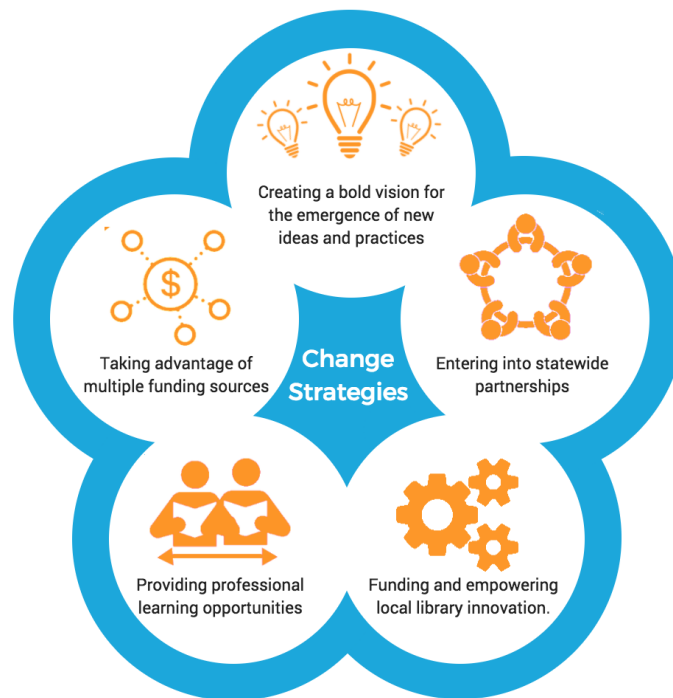
# State Library Administrative Agencies transform family engagement in early education.

Family engagement is a shared responsibility among families, educators, and communities to support children’s learning and development. For families, it is about the knowledge, attitudes, values, and behaviors that enable children to be motivated, enthusiastic, and successful learners. For libraries, this means having respectful partnerships with families and providing information, guidance, and opportunities for families to be active in their children’s learning and development as well as their own lifelong learning.

Implementing family engagement is about creating pathways for families to learn together, for example through early literacy activities, STEM and Maker Spaces, summer reading programs, youth-generated community engagement and digital literacy projects. Rather than designing family engagement as a separate program it can be purposefully integrated into the rich offerings of libraries. To do this effectively means having ambitious but attainable goals and avoiding superficial practice.

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## The Change Strategies of State Library Administrative Agencies



### State library agencies created a bold vision for the emergence of new ideas and practices.

State library leaders developed a broad direction for change and specific strategies to guide local libraries. The Georgia Public Library Service (GPLS), for example, was especially committed to connecting with and serving families that might not typically take young children to the library or have other settings in which to engage in family-focused literacy activities.

The PRIME TIME Family Reading program, originally launched by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities in 1991, has been the primary vehicle for GPLS for creating these intergenerational learning opportunities. PRIME TIME is a six-week open reading and discussion series for families that responds to local interests in culturally relevant ways. The program has been shown to increase library use and make reading an important part of how families interact with each other. Initially, about eight to 12 PRIME TIME programs were operating in local libraries throughout the state each year. But since 2017, the number has grown statewide to 18.

The vision of equitable access to library programs and services has energized state library leaders to use gaps in a state's early childhood policies and programs to enter into public-private partnerships for new initiatives. A 2013 report on school readiness in Colorado showed that more than 142,000 children under age 6 in the state spend some time in unlicensed care and that an additional 160,000 are with a parent at home during these years.<sup>11</sup> The report showed that FFN caregivers desired more training and support in understanding brain development, important growth milestones for young children, and how to promote learning and literacy. A joint philanthropic and state library agency initiative in Colorado, Growing Readers Together, focused on the use of library expertise to expand its family literacy services to unreached community members, the FFN providers.

In California, state library leaders envisioned an authentic partnership between libraries and families. They relied on research to identify the Brazelton Touchpoints as the model to help librarians transform their early learning services to focus on the family rather than solely on the child. The model guides librarians to create more family-friendly spaces and to understand what it means to support and empower parents in their children's development.

“Recognizing parents and caregivers as essential and welcomed partners in our library services for young children is at the very heart of the Early Learning with Families initiative, shifting our thinking from asking children and their parents to join our system of service to finding ways in which we can join with families to support them. By forming supportive partnerships with parents that focus on their parental strengths, we can more effectively provide meaningful services for their children—ensuring that our impact extends well beyond our library walls.”

—[California State Library](#)

### State library agencies entered into statewide partnerships.

State library leaders worked to ensure that family engagement innovations go beyond just a one-time random event and become integrated into library operations. They positioned themselves to address relevant early learning issues such as school readiness; closing opportunity gaps in early learning; and improving the quality of family, friend, and neighbor care. By being part of statewide collaboratives that include education, health, and social services, the state agencies secured diverse public and philanthropic funds, and piloted innovative approaches to family engagement, especially among those who traditionally do not visit libraries.

In 1998, the Maryland Association of Public Library Administrators (MAPLA), an alliance of public, regional, and state administrators, joined the state's Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC), which coordinates and aligns the activities among early childhood care and education programs. By having a seat at the table, state and local library leaders had many opportunities to raise the visibility of public libraries and to become part of influential committees and coalitions. The state library participated in federal grant opportunities and continues to benefit from training and resources provided through the state department of education and early childhood coalitions.

“The big win for public libraries was the fact that for the first time, libraries were written into a major federal grant applied for by the State Department of Education Early Learning Division.”

—Dorothy Stoltz, Carroll County Public Library, Maryland

### State library agencies funded and empowered local library innovation.

State library leaders provided opportunities for libraries to tinker with new ideas and reinvent family engagement practices in order to meet the unique characteristics of local communities. They sought to balance the allocation of funds across a diversity of libraries in order to ensure equitable geographic and socioeconomic representation, while also adhering to standards of quality.

In Maryland, the state library agency is part of an early childhood collaborative that operates from a common family-engagement framework. The Maryland State Library provides the framework and offers small grants to libraries but implementation evolves locally. Some libraries might spend grant funds to make sure books and materials are available for families who speak languages other than English, and others might focus on reaching families who live a long way from a library branch.

Purposeful peer learning builds capacity to replicate innovative practices. The Georgia Public Library Service convenes library leaders three times a year and provides support virtually through email listservs and a continuing education platform. When local library leaders share what they are doing with their colleagues, best practices and innovative approaches to reaching families spread.

“Our best advocates for doing and expanding these other programs is another director standing up and saying how great it was for them ... When they hear their fellow director saying that ... then they want to ask about it. It’s about relationships and being a trusted ally for the libraries out there.”

—Elaine Black, Georgia Public Library Service

### **State library agencies provided professional learning opportunities.**

Because changing practice is a long-term process, and few librarians are formally trained in early childhood and family engagement, state library leaders offered continuing support. Beyond a one-time workshop, they used in-person and online meetings and conferences and relied on a network of champions in early childhood to promote new ideas and practices for partnering with families.

“Nowhere in library school are librarians given specific training in child development. They have no training in family engagement.”

—Suzanne Flint, California State Library

State library leaders used professional learning to ignite the enthusiasm and build the competencies needed to develop authentic partnerships with families. For example, California confronted a challenge in changing the mindsets of library staff about families. The Touchpoints model was a good fit for its vision to adopt a strength-based approach and shift from “teaching” to “co-learning.” The framework provided an extended opportunity for gaining new knowledge and dispositions through three days of “on-the-ground” training, six months of “reflective practice calls,” and three waves of surveys to track library staffs’ changing perspectives on working with families. More than 300 library staff members across 34 library systems have participated in the Touchpoints model since 2014. Demand for the training is so high that there is now a waiting list. This is a positive sign, as libraries must want and seek out the training if new practices and programs are to be integrated meaningfully into their work.

Colorado State Library’s professional learning goal is to make local libraries champions of library development by building staff capacity to serve their communities with literacy and learning. The library approaches coaching and consultation from an appreciative inquiry perspective: asking questions; giving constructive feedback; affirming strengths; and building on passions, interests, and successes.

“We want library staff to grow, to succeed, and we are their biggest fans in a world where they may not feel they have many fans. This is our job.”

—Sharon Morris, Colorado State Library

### State library agencies took advantage of multiple funding sources.

State leaders have adroitly used public-private partnerships to pilot, scale, and sustain innovations, and, importantly, the principles and intent that underlie them. Colorado took up the challenge from the Temple Hoyne Buell Foundation to address the need to train FFN providers. Maryland developed a toolkit for its Family Engagement Framework with the support of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. California invested federal funds coursed through the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to support the Touchpoints training. California is now expanding its family-centered practices to FFN caregivers through a grant from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

Participating in statewide partnerships and governors' initiatives in early learning allowed state libraries to broaden their visibility and sustain their family engagement efforts. The Georgia Public Library Service partners with the Get Georgia Reading Campaign, the Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy, and Bright from the Start, the state's early-childhood education department. The strong partnerships that GPLS has developed with these and other state agencies help to identify new funding opportunities for its family literacy programs.

"You don't know whether you're going to have the money tomorrow, or next year ... It's the partnerships that you create that are sustainable."

—Carrie Sanders, Maryland State Library

The state agencies also built library capacity to leverage local assets. Public libraries are supported by local revenues and contributions from community-based library associations. State leaders in Colorado, for example, encourage local partnerships and help local libraries think through what the core elements of a program are that can be sustained with local funding.

## State Library Administrative Agencies Are Ready to Expand Their Influence

State library agencies are influential and their voice matters in making family engagement a priority within libraries and in statewide educational initiatives. We offer the following recommendations to begin a conversation among state library leaders to promote family engagement more effectively and in meaningful ways within their institutions: with training and professional learning efforts; with philanthropic institutions; and among other state agencies that serve children, youth, and families.

### **Use the leadership and influence of state library agencies to champion family engagement.**

The assets of public libraries—trust with communities, free resources and programs, and expertise in literacy and learning—position state leaders as valuable partners in education. By actively entering into statewide partnerships, these leaders bring to the table the vision as well as the field expertise that together can make a difference in elevating family engagement across child-serving agencies.

These partnerships can be broadened as well to focus on cross-state sharing of ideas and policy supports that effectively engage families as partners in addressing the big issues of our time—school readiness, more equitable access to high quality early care and education, and closing opportunity and achievement gaps. State leaders can work with the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) to create a platform for innovating, scaling, and sustaining family engagement in early learning.

Furthermore, state libraries can build on the foundation of family engagement in early learning to provide opportunities for families across all the school years. Although family engagement tends to drop off after elementary school, research shows that it continues to be important in the middle and high school years, too. A 2018 U. S. Department of Education statistical brief indicates that families are the main influence on high school students' thinking about education following high school and their future careers.<sup>12</sup> Educational policy initiatives in STEM/STEAM, social and emotional learning, and college and career preparation open new possibilities for states to encourage libraries to expand their services for and with families.

#### **Questions to consider are:**

- What are the mechanisms by which state library agencies can raise their visibility in influencing statewide early learning goals and make family engagement an essential strategy to achieve those goals?
- What is the best knowledge available to make a compelling case that libraries are key institutions in statewide early learning initiatives?
- What are the constraints to cross-agency communication, coordination, and collaboration, and what will it take to develop and try out breakthrough strategies?

### **Bridge national-state-local library efforts in family engagement.**

State library agencies connect different levels of a library system. They function as intermediaries whose intimate knowledge of local libraries and their promising family engagement practices can be shared statewide—within libraries and among other state agencies. State libraries have unique auspices and positions within the state government (for example, existing within a department of education, as an independent state agency, etc.) and link and connect different offices and initiatives.

Furthermore, they bridge national and local levels through the use of Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funds to support state library programs and services. In this intermediary role, state library leaders can share with local libraries new initiatives from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and other federal agencies whose work relates to the mission of public libraries. They can also act as a conduit to inform federal agencies and national organizations about the contributions of public libraries to promote family engagement.

#### **Questions to consider are:**

- How can state library agencies expand their bridging role to spread and sustain family engagement?
- Who are the emerging leaders whom state agencies can develop and assist in spreading and scaling family engagement in early learning?
- What are the successes and failures in engaging families in early learning and how can they be used to improve and innovate the next level of family engagement in public libraries?

### **Focus on a system of professional learning to scale and sustain family engagement.**

State library leaders are in a position to catalyze a systemic approach to professional learning that begins with student training and continues through career development. As organizers of and participants in conferences and meetings, these leaders make it possible to bring librarians, faculty in information science departments, and other state agencies together. This convening can move toward creating a clear vision about family engagement, discussing tough questions and shaping meaningful learning experiences that will transform their family engagement practices. State leaders can sponsor conversations that clarify how the library and information science field defines and envisions families, and how families utilize libraries and the challenges they face. These dialogues can point to evidence-informed solutions to promote family engagement and best practices for professional learning and library education in this domain. They can also include a “second conversation”—a more difficult conversation that involves suspending constrained beliefs about what can and cannot be done—and instead contemplates broad and bold changes that might yield big returns.<sup>13</sup>

### Questions to consider are:

- What is the role of the library staff in early learning and what is their value in an ecology of learning that includes early-childhood teachers, home visitors, and informal caregivers?
- What will it take for state library agencies to effectively “cross-pollinate” from other fields to enrich the professional learning of library staff?
- How can partnerships with higher education and faculty at schools of information and library sciences support a systemic pathway to professional learning that begins with the preparation of new librarians for family engagement?

### Explore multiple funding resources.

There is a growing national interest in the role of public libraries as educational institutions and their value in integrating family engagement in early childhood initiatives. State library agencies are well positioned to make the case that their assets and reach can contribute to addressing pressing education and equity issues. At the federal and state levels, family engagement is integral to early childhood initiatives and extends even beyond to the school-age years. Several philanthropic foundations are also committed to family engagement.

### Questions to consider are:

- How do state library agencies demonstrate to funders that their funds for early learning initiatives have been spent wisely?
- How are influence and value demonstrated across the evolution of an initiative—from start-up to maturity and to possible reinvention?
- What types of supports exist to promote evaluation and assessment of family engagement initiatives at the local level?



# The Cases

## California: Developing Strengths-Based Partnerships with Families



While traditional children’s programming in libraries, including story times, dates back to the 1800s and tended to focus on children as the primary audience, today’s programs look vastly different.<sup>14</sup> In part this is because research on early childhood development has spawned a variety of empirically tested models and best practices that are influencing libraries.

### California transformed the library approach to working with families: from informing to empowering.

Simply inviting families with young children into the library doesn’t create a welcoming atmosphere if librarians aren’t prepared to work with diverse families and have a solid understanding of how young children learn. That’s why the California State Library’s approach to innovation has been to invest federal LSTA funds in professional learning opportunities to help librarians gain research-based knowledge and skills for working with families of young children.

Suzanne Flint, library programs consultant for the California State Library, can remember the days when children who were too young to read weren’t necessarily welcome in a library. But as part of the state library’s Early Learning with Families (ELF) initiative, those days are over. Through ELF, libraries have transformed their collections and spaces to encourage exploration and creative play. Moreover, ELF promotes a new approach to children’s services: engage parents and caregivers to boost early learning.

With a background in child development, Flint continuously follows research on topics such as the importance of learning through play and advises librarians on shifts in the field and how to prepare for the future. She thinks that prior to the implementation of ELF, library staff often created programming for young children and parents out of a sense of informing or correcting parental behaviors, not because they really understood early childhood development, the power of parent-child interactions, or the importance of supporting parental mastery.

## California adopted and replicated a professional development model to promote strengths-based partnerships with families.

One of the first steps to scaling more responsive family engagement practices throughout the state was to ask librarians to self-assess their own work. They used a Likert scale to answer survey questions, such as whether their branch had changing tables in the restrooms, places to park strollers, and areas where adults can sit and read with children. Each year Flint would ask librarians what they felt they needed, and by the fifth or sixth year, she says, they were asking for professional development.



To help librarians create more child- and family-friendly environments, Flint created a partnership with the Brazelton Touchpoints Center, which provides research-based professional development on working with young children and their families. “Nowhere in library school are librarians given specific training in child development,” Flint says. “They have no training in family engagement.”

Flint’s team worked with the Brazelton Center to adapt the Touchpoints model to better suit librarians’ needs. An initial pilot involving 24 librarians from eight systems began in 2014–15. From the pilot, 21 participants received further training from the center so they could teach the curriculum. Now, more than 300 library staff across 34 library systems have participated in the model, which includes three days of “on-the-ground” training, six months of “reflective practice calls,” and three waves of surveys through which library staffs’ changing perspectives on working with families were tracked. Flint’s team also created a Touchpoints in Libraries listserv, and there are currently more than 290 subscribers, with a weekly question posted and moderated by the current library Touchpoints training facilitators.

“It’s pretty phenomenal, and we have librarians basically saying things like, ‘I was very judgmental of parents. Matter of fact, I spent most of my time trying to avoid having to deal with them. I was there for the kids.’” Now, she adds, librarians don’t try to rush in and advise parents or caregivers every time a child has a tantrum. The goal, she says, is not for library staff to become child development experts but to understand and appreciate “just how incredibly complicated” parenting can be and to look for opportunities to support parental mastery. Such an understanding enables library staff to make decisions that are appropriate to specific circumstances.



Demand for the training is so high that there is now a waiting list. While library systems had to apply for the training, Flint strategically chose from among the applications to make sure those located in different geographic areas and serving different populations were represented. Another deciding factor was identifying library staff who sought the training as opposed to those who were assigned the training. Post-training surveys indicate that the majority of library staff found it useful.

### **California pooled funding from federal, state, local, and philanthropic sources to promote family engagement in early learning.**

In planning for the ongoing sustainability of the professional learning, Flint prepares a yearly grant proposal to the state librarian to fund it. Given the depth of the paradigm shifts involved, continuous support is necessary until such time that library staff have been able to effectively embed this kind of ongoing family engagement into their services.

However, because the California State Library does not see its role as overseeing curriculum, Flint is exploring the possibility of a third-party organization becoming responsible for this, in partnership with the Brazelton Touchpoints Center. This would provide additional, sustainable funding via tuition for the program as well as some oversight of the curriculum, she says. In addition to having services to young children and their families included as a goal in the state library's five-year plan for federal funding, Flint has also recently been awarded funding from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation to pilot outreach to family, friend, and neighbor caregivers, with intent to scale.

“Clearly, the goal with any ... initiative is to essentially figure out something, test it, and learn from it so that then it can become replicable statewide,” Flint says.

Overall, more than 130 of the state's 181 library systems have participated in ELF professional development in some way, whether through Touchpoints training or participating in conversations and activities on other new projects, like the School Readiness Toolkit that will launch in March 2018 and highlights the research and library best practices related to helping young children and their families prepare for formal school settings.

Regional ELF meetings, held periodically in the northern, central, and southern parts of the state, are an important part of continuing the momentum around family engagement, Flint says. Networking opportunities at California Library Association conferences allow librarians to share practices and learn from each other. In addition, Flint sees the state's 58 First 5 county-level agencies, which administer funding for programs serving children from birth through age 5, as important partners and sources of support.

“I think we have to be committed to this for the long term,” Flint says. “It's not just about story time; I mean, we are literally changing peoples' lives every day.”

## Colorado: Library Services for Underserved Groups of Caregivers

Libraries are important gathering places for families with young children who are either not old enough for formal preschool programs or spend part of their days with babysitters, relatives, or family friends. Libraries are also increasing efforts to reach populations who might not traditionally visit their local library. Those two strengths are the essence of Growing Readers Together, the Colorado State Library's effort to equip family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) providers with greater knowledge on how to support young children's literacy development.



### Colorado created an initiative to fill a gap in the training needs of family, friend, and neighbor providers.

A 2013 report on school readiness in Colorado showed that more than 142,000 children under age 6 in the state spend some time in unlicensed care and that an additional 160,000 are with a parent at home during these years.<sup>15</sup> The report showed that FFN caregivers desired more training and support in understanding brain development, important growth milestones for young children, and how to promote learning and literacy.

At about the same time as the report was published, the Temple Hoyne Buell Foundation approached the state library about designing an innovative program specifically for this population. This was a new call to action, challenging libraries to go beyond their comfort zone and actively seek FFN caregivers in their communities. Joyce Johnson, who leads Growing Readers Together for the state library, took up the challenge and embarked on an innovative use of library expertise to help FFN providers better serve young children.

Growing Readers Together has four primary goals:

- Increase FFN providers' ability to engage in early literacy activities.
- Increase local librarians' ability to provide high-quality early literacy programs that meet the needs of FFN providers.

- Increase young children’s exposure to early literacy materials either through their visits to the library or in the providers’ homes.
- Develop and sustain a state-level infrastructure that would continue to address the needs of this population.

In 2017, the Colorado State Library awarded 13 grants of \$8,700 each to 14 libraries of varying sizes and geographic locations—including one bookmobile. Local libraries used the funds in a variety of ways, such as adding materials, creating more baby friendly spaces in libraries, and even opening opportunities for providers to meet and connect with each other. The libraries tailored their outreach and materials to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking providers or of migrant/transitory populations.<sup>16</sup> Grantee libraries had to use a portion of the funds—20 percent—to develop or purchase learning kits to give to the providers so they could continue activities with the children at home. They also were required to dedicate a staff person to the project.

### **Colorado’s public libraries reached informal caregivers who had not previously availed themselves of library services.**

One goal of the initiative was to scale the reach of library early learning services to the broadest range of FFN caregivers possible. To identify and reach FFN caregivers, librarians went to places and events that FFN already frequent, such as health clinics, farmers’ markets, and grocery stores. Others focused on community partnerships, home visits, using the bookmobile, and spreading the word through popular events such as the summer reading program. Still others learned to identify FFN who were not the “usual suspects,” such as grandfathers and other individuals with caregiver responsibilities, including older siblings and students who are at home while they participate in online education programs. In order to understand the successes and challenges of serving FFN, the Colorado State Library commissioned an independent evaluation. A key finding was that libraries did expand their outreach: “The bottom line was that they reached people who care for children who they had not had contact with before.” (p.13)<sup>17</sup>

The evaluation of Growing Readers Together points to the value of reaching out to FFN providers.<sup>18</sup> The FFN providers report the benefits of their participation in terms of gaining the knowledge and confidence to help children in their care learn, especially through Every Child Ready to Read practices (talk, read, write, sing, play), and becoming more aware of library programs and services.

### **Colorado’s early success depended on strong state management and a network of local champions.**

The program’s success has been dependent on certain characteristics among state library staff members. Sharon Morris, the director of library development for the state library, says she looks for those who have a “commitment to this larger impact we need to have with families and to making sure all families feel welcome in the library.” Strong project-management skills, emotional intelligence, and the ability to foster an exchange between local librarians so that they feel they are contributing and learning from each other are also critical skills, she says. She described such individuals as “a shining light to guide others ... but not in a way that overshadows the talent that is happening at the local level.”

The Colorado State Library has to depend on local leaders to make the initiative successful and libraries do experience turnover, especially in rural areas. But Morris notes that having a “passionate group of early-childhood librarians”—an organization called Colorado Libraries for Early Literacy—has contributed to adapting the program to meet the needs of the local communities.



With the foundation recently renewing funding for the program, Growing Readers Together now involves 15 libraries, 10 of which are continuing for the second year and five that have just joined. The state library also uses some of its federal LSTA funds to support the growth of the program.

### **Colorado encouraged public libraries to seek local funding to sustain the initiative.**

As they plan for the future of Growing Readers Together, Johnson and Morris are gradually encouraging local libraries to pick up more of the responsibility for funding the program, and most have responded positively. The grants gave local library leaders opportunities to focus on outreach, partnerships, fresh collections, and reconfigured spaces. “The hope is that they will reallocate staff and resources for some of these projects because they see the impact that they’re having,” Johnson says.

Another strategy for sustaining the program is to focus on aspects of the work that libraries can implement or continue with minimal cost, such as understanding the important role that FFN providers play in young children’s literacy development and forming partnerships with other organizations that serve families, such as home visiting programs. Connections with local early-childhood councils could also lead to ways to reach families that are on waiting lists for licensed care and might be looking for activities for children, Morris suggests.

### **Colorado used the lessons from previous initiatives to promote sustainable goals.**

The state library office considered its previous successes to engage families that traditionally do not come to the library as prototypes to inform the design of future initiatives. Morris says “play and fun are really important components to family engagement,” so it’s important to look for ways to add games when interacting with parents and caregivers. The state office also learned about the challenges families face and issued a recommendation that all libraries across the state stop charging all fines and fees on children’s materials. Studies show that late or lost library books can discourage families and other providers from using the library. “Removing barriers is one way to increase family engagement with the library,” Johnson says.

“I think sometimes we get tunnel vision around ‘how do we sustain exactly what we’re doing?’” Morris says, “and I think we’re trying to move to ‘how do we sustain the intent?’”

## Georgia: State Partnerships Support Underserved Families with Young Children

Library leaders sometimes talk about competing for “a seat at the table” when it comes to initiatives in their states related to young children’s learning and preparation for school. That’s not the case in Georgia, because the Georgia Public Library Service (GPLS) has been at the table all along. Whenever officials from the health department, the education department, or other agencies are gathered to discuss young children’s literacy, “they say, ‘and the public library is doing ...’ and they look right at me when they say it,” explains Wendy Cornelisen, assistant state librarian. “I don’t think we’d get that level of intention if there hadn’t been that person from the library in the room when these discussions were happening.”



### Georgia’s state library focused on underserved families with young children.

GPLS has been especially committed to connecting with and serving families that might not typically take their children to the library or have other settings in which to engage in family-focused literacy activities. The PRIME TIME Family Reading program, originally launched by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities in 1991, has been the primary vehicle of GPLS for creating these intergenerational learning opportunities. PRIME TIME is a six-week open reading and discussion series for families that responds to local interests in culturally relevant ways. The program has been shown to increase library use and make reading an important part of how families interact with each other. In each site, a storyteller and a local historian or scholar co-facilitate the program and lead the participants in reflecting on and discussing the themes in the story. Initially, about eight to 12 PRIME TIME programs were operating in local libraries throughout the state each year. But this year, the number has grown statewide to 18.

Elaine Black, the director of youth services for GPLS, says that because the program is designed to adapt to local interests and characteristics, the state library provides funds in each site for a community organizer, whose role is critical to reaching families with the greatest needs. These organizers work with Title I coordinators in local elementary schools to make connections with families. “Finding a community partner who is trusted in that community is invaluable,” Black says. “It’s not you making cold calls and making neighborhood calls but being there and partnering with the other local organizations and people at the local level.”

Increasing opportunities for families to participate in STEAM learning—STEM with art—is another way to engage families with young children, especially those that might not be enrolled in any early learning program. For the past three years, GPLS has used federal funds to states to award mini-grants to libraries for STEAM-related programs. Fifty-one library systems received the grants in 2016–17 and have used the funds, for example, to create backpacks with STEAM-focused materials,



such as a telescope, that families can check out from their library and enjoy at home. Other library branches have hosted scientists to lead families in simple experiments. Some have updated their science collections and DVDs to encourage more at-home science learning or bought Lego Connect or robotics kits and planned programs related to the materials, which attract fathers and young boys. “It opened a whole level of possibilities,” Cornelisen says. “It provides hands-on learning and reaches folks who wouldn’t necessarily come to the library.”

### **State agency partnerships increased opportunities to bring library services to underserved families.**

GPLS, a division of the state’s university system, has been able to successfully increase and spread these opportunities more widely for families in part because of its history of developing relationships with top-level officials in other state agencies.

These include the Get Georgia Reading Campaign, the Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy, and Bright from the Start, the state’s early-childhood education department. Through these relationships, the staff who work with or are associated with those organizations are always reminded that public libraries “are places for family engagement and school readiness,” Cornelisen says.

Some of these partners work with their local libraries to further continue the learning for families. For example, a parent can check out a DVD on animals and then receive a pass to visit Zoo Atlanta for free. “We’ve really built these opportunities for families to save money and go do things together,” Cornelisen says. In another example, libraries across the state received passes for free admission for up to six family members to the Michael C. Carlos Museum in Atlanta, which has collections of art from Egypt, Greece, Rome, Asia, and other locations, as well as works of art from the Renaissance to the present.

GPLS also extends its reach by coordinating with the Georgia Family Connection, a network of 3,000 local- and state-level partners working on behalf of families with young children in all 159 counties. In south-central Georgia, for example, the Lee County Library is among the partners involved in Literate Lee, which focuses on preparing 3-year-olds from low-income families to succeed in pre-K and elementary school. Lee County Family Connection was one of seven Family Connection “collaboratives” to receive funding in early 2018 through the state’s Early Language and Literacy Mini-Grant program. Each local Family Connection works with childcare organizations, health departments, school districts and other local agencies. “Their work runs under everything,” Black says.





As part of a new partnership, GPLS is also planning to reach another population of isolated families—those with an incarcerated parent. While details of the program are still being finalized, Black says they are looking at existing programs in other states and cities to determine what works best for Georgia. She expects to begin with three pilot sites. “We would like to do something in real time where reading is happening from the offender in the prison and the families are at the public library,” she says. GPLS also has a strong local model to follow. The Marshes of Glynn Libraries, in the coastal town of Brunswick, received a 2016 Exceptional Service Award from the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies for holding Every Child Ready to Read workshops for incarcerated parents at the local jail. The association cited the program as an example that other libraries across the country could replicate.

The strong partnerships that GPLS has developed with other state agencies also help to continue and build on successful family engagement efforts. When funding expires from one grant, for example, there are more connections through which to identify new funding opportunities to help sustain programs.

### **The state library encouraged local leaders to champion programs and services for young children and families.**

GPLS convenes library leaders three times a year and provides support virtually through email listservs and a continuing education platform. But it’s when local library leaders share what they are doing with their colleagues, Black says, that best practices and innovative approaches to reaching families spread.

“Our best advocates for doing and expanding these other programs is another director standing up and saying how great it was for them,” Black says. “When they hear their fellow director saying that ... then they want to ask about it. It’s about relationships and being a trusted ally for the libraries out there.”

## Maryland: Libraries Are Key Players in Cross-Agency Statewide Initiatives

Librarians serving families with young children sometimes refer to Maryland as “library heaven,” in part because libraries have long been well represented in early childhood education policy at the state and local levels and have benefited from leading edge initiatives. The Maryland State Library, as well as the state association of public libraries, has proved to be a powerful and collaborative driver to achieve the state’s school readiness goals, especially among underserved children.<sup>19</sup>

### Maryland’s library system benefited from inclusion in a statewide early-childhood policy council.

What stands out in Maryland is the state’s commitment to seating libraries as an important and critical voice at the table of these discussions. In 1998, the Maryland Association of Public Library Administrators, an alliance of public, regional, and state administrators, joined the state’s Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC), which coordinates and aligns the activities among early childhood care and education programs.

By having a seat at the table, so to speak, state librarians and library leaders had ongoing “opportunities to say, ‘Have you thought about the library?’ or ‘How could the library fit in?’” says Dorothy Stoltz, a member of the ECAC and director for community engagement for the Carroll County Public Library. This involvement led to library representatives contributing to the proposal for the 2010 federal Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge grant “The big win for public libraries was the fact that for the first time, libraries were written into a major federal grant applied for by the State Department of Education Early Learning Division,” says Stoltz.

Maryland used its federal Early Learning Challenge grant to form a Family Engagement Coalition consisting of early childhood and family support providers from a wide range of agencies across the state with the goal of creating deeper and more responsive partnerships with families. The coalition provides an infrastructure for family engagement throughout the state and creates a network of leadership that mutually reinforces messaging around the importance of intergenerational approaches to learning. Linda Zang, from the Department of Education’s Early Childhood Development Division, explains that the coalition’s role is to “make sure that all providers are able to work with all kinds of families.”<sup>20</sup>



### Maryland's statewide family engagement framework provided libraries a guide for action.

As one of its signature achievements, the Family Engagement Coalition created the Early Childhood Family Engagement Framework, which highlights the importance of family engagement in early learning programs, establishes goals, and offers strategies and resources for the wide variety of agencies and programs in the state serving families with young children.<sup>21</sup> The framework was an important milestone in Maryland's family engagement work as it provides a common language whereby child-serving agencies and community groups can connect, align, and reinvent their practices, in effect, promoting family engagement in an ecology of learning that includes early childhood programs, preschools, schools, libraries, and health agencies.



The framework goes beyond the role of service providers to engage families in early learning to include their promotion of families as adult learners, members of community networks, and advocates for the well-being of children, families, and communities. For public libraries, this has meant a significant shift in becoming more outward-facing and community-oriented—to reach out to community partners in order to better serve the informational and learning needs of young children and their families. Kathleen Reif, retired director of the St. Mary's County Library System, says, "Librarians can't expect to see children

every day. However, we can reach the adult or adults who are in a child's life every single day. Once we realize that, our role becomes to provide adults with resources and knowledge they need to maximize their daily interactions with children."<sup>22</sup>

Carrie Sanders, youth services coordinator for the Maryland State Library, recognizes how Maryland's geographical diversity impacts the services libraries offer to families. "We really try to provide the framework and let it evolve in the different systems," Sanders says. "We know they know their needs best." For example, she says, some libraries might spend grant funds provided by the state to make sure books and materials are available for families who speak languages other than English, and others might focus on reaching families who live a long way from a library branch.

### Maryland was proactive in seeking philanthropic support to expand family engagement in libraries and other early childhood programs.

With additional funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the coalition, currently co-chaired by Stoltz, has further scaled its family engagement in public libraries by working closely on resource development with the Early Childhood Development Division of the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). The department has led the work to develop a toolkit to help programs implement the framework with the families they serve.<sup>23</sup> The toolkit includes activities and resources aligned to specific goals in the framework. In 2017, the kits were distributed and training offered by the MSDE to local early childhood advisory councils as well as to library branches across the state, again showing how libraries are viewed as key partners with other organizations implementing family engagement efforts.

**Maryland’s state library partnerships are a key strategy to sustain family engagement.**

With Stoltz representing libraries as co-chair of the Family Engagement Coalition, and Sanders of the Maryland State Library a member of the Early Childhood Advisory Council, libraries will continue to influence and benefit from systems initiatives. Furthermore, the Maryland State Library’s relationship with other agencies creates opportunities to sustain its family engagement efforts. For example, it was able to collaborate with MSDE to secure funds from the latter’s Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) to support family engagement activities with small grants of about \$1,000 to *all* local library systems. In the first year of the two-year grant, for example, the Anne Arundel County Public Library gave away over 500 books in connection with the school district’s summer meal program to increase early literacy materials in low-income homes. And the Charles County Public Library used some of the funds to purchase board books and coding toys and focused on modeling Every Child Ready to Read early literacy and learning practices for parents and caregivers.



Smaller grants, such as those from the CCDBG, are a useful way for libraries to plan for sustainability, Sanders explains. “You don’t know whether you’re going to have the money tomorrow, or next year,” she says. “You become really good at doing a lot with a little. The smaller amounts help us remain really creative in what to do with it.” That includes forming meaningful partnerships with other organizations in the community connected with families of young children. “It’s the partnerships that you create that are sustainable,” she says.

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## Photo Credits

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## Global Family Research Project

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