Libraries at the Table for Kindergarten Readiness

Experiences and Tools to Grow On

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"The training I received from PLYMC's Kindergarten Readiness Workshop didn't simply help me to understand the number of ways our libraries are striving to support school readiness, it enabled me to effectively communicate with and engage parents and caregivers as to how they can be active participants in this endeavor as well. The workshop group activities created a dialogue that allowed me to internalize what we learned from the assigned readings by coming up with and discussing the different ways learning domains can be implemented in practice."
—Marnie Alvarez, Readers' Services Librarian, Main Library

The growth articulated here is the result of the Public Library of Youngstown and Mahoning County's (PLYMC) Kindergarten Readiness Initiative. Mahoning County (OH) has a long history of supporting early literacy. After reviewing kindergarten readiness assessment results for our county, we realized we could strengthen our value in the community by articulating how we support all school readiness domains and look for ways to increase support to families who most need kindergarten readiness support.

PLYMC identified three components to our plan for improving kindergarten readiness in our community—boosting school readiness domains in storytimes and programs; creating kindergarten readiness stations with activities for parents and children to complete together in the library; circulating early learning backpacks with books and activities to support kindergarten readiness development at home.

The key to all of these is helping staff recognize how they already support kindergarten readiness, how intentionality can strengthen this support, and how they can become stronger advocates for the public library by articulating how we support kindergarten readiness. The same pillars that we learned about early literacy based in Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) and Supercharged Storytimes became the structure we applied to kindergarten readiness. These include knowledge of skills and practices, intentionality, interactivity, early literacy tips, and community of practice.

While the school readiness domains vary from state to state, have different structures, and have a variety of names including early learning guidelines or early learning standards, the content of the knowledge needed is similar. Ohio, like most states, bases their measures on the five domains of early learning, outlined by the US Department of Education:[1]

- Social and Emotional Development

- Approaches toward Learning

- Cognition and General Knowledge

- Language and Literacy

- Physical Well-Being and Motor Development

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Entering kindergarten with a strong foundation in all five domains of early learning positions a student for continued success. Studies have shown that a student who starts kindergarten without kindergarten readiness skills is more likely to struggle with the third-grade reading assessment and is less likely to graduate.[2] Ohio school districts administer the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) in the first few months of the school year. Results from 2017 show only 36.3 percent of Mahoning County students demonstrated the foundational skills and behaviors that prepare them for instruction based on kindergarten standards.

PLYMC, located in northeast Ohio, made the intentional choice to become a community resource in improving kindergarten readiness. As an informal learning center where all are welcomed, the library is positioned to fill this early learning gap and provide modeling and support to students and their parents so that students can arrive at kindergarten ready to learn. By targeting our resources on improving kindergarten readiness skills in our community, we can affect long-term benefits for the education of our children.

Our first step was to provide our youth librarians with the knowledge, skills, and tools to intentionally support parents in preparing their children for kindergarten. While many activities in the library support the early learning domains and kindergarten readiness, we weren't intentionally making the connection between the activity and kindergarten readiness.

With the support of an LSTA Grant through the State Library of Ohio, we offered three workshops reaching approximately ninety librarians from thirty library systems throughout the state. Saroj Ghoting led the workshop providing foundational knowledge in the five domains of early learning, as well as hands-on practice in communicating the connections between activities, early learning standards, and kindergarten readiness.

With much information to be covered, participants were asked to complete a series of assignments prior to the workshop. Readings included foundational knowledge on each learning domain from *STEP into Storytime: Using StoryTime Effective Practice to Strengthen the Development of Newborns to Five-Year-Olds* (ALA Editions, 2014) by Saroj Ghoting and Kathy Klatt, as well as the State of Ohio's Early Learning and Development Standards and Implementation Guides.[3]

Workshop participants were asked to think of and write down a book or activity for each of the early learning domains. By requiring this advance work, participants came to the workshop with a common understanding and knowledge of Ohio's five child development domains. This allowed the workshop to build on what was learned and provided participants more time to share ideas and to practice articulating that information and experience to parents, other staff, and community members. They became more comfortable saying early learning tips aimed at adults and elevator speeches aimed at community partners and families.

We developed the following tools for workshop participants. After the final workshop, these were shared via Ohio Ready to Read Task Force and through our library's website (www.libraryvisit.org/kids/resources-for-librarians).

- Graphic for the five domains of early learning (see figure 1). This visual depiction of the domains can be posted in the children's department to encourage and support discussion with caregivers.

- A crosswalk linking ECRR to the Language and Literacy domain of Ohio's Early Learning and Development Standards. This tool connects the familiar practices of ECRR to kindergarten readiness.

- Implementation guides for each of the early learning domains. Ohio offers guides with implementation strategies for teachers for each of the early learning standards. Using these as a basis, we, with the help of Ohio Ready to Read

Figure 1. Five Domains of Early Learning for Kindergarten Readiness

Task Force members, created guides with implementation strategies specifically targeted for storytime activities. These guides break down each kindergarten readiness domain into subcategories called strands and topics. For example, under the domain Social and Emotional Development, Strands include Self and Relationships. Topics under Relationships include Attachment, Interaction with Adults, and Peer Interactions. Within each topic, there is an age breakdown for infants, young toddlers, older toddlers, and preschoolers with strategies to support that strand and topic (see figure 2).

- Sample kindergarten readiness tips for parents/caregivers.

- Sample "elevator" speeches to articulate how we support kindergarten readiness.

All workshop participants also received a copy of *The Early Literacy Kit: A Handbook and Tip Cards* (ALA Editions, 2010) by Betsy Diamant-Cohen and Saroj Ghoting. This kit contains a handbook and 104 reusable tip cards with activities coordinated to the early learning domains.

These workshops allowed us to recognize what we are already doing and to find new ways to support kindergarten readiness. Sharing between libraries was especially helpful as we learned from each other how we are and can be supporting kindergarten readiness.

Ultimately, training will result in librarians using this knowledge to incorporate kindergarten readiness skills into storytimes and other services. A post-workshop survey will be sent to participants six months after the training to realize specific ways the skills are being integrated into library programs and services.

Storytimes and Programs

Although we are still training staff, we are already beginning to see some changes as a result of the kindergarten readiness training. For example, librarians have offered a Get Ready for Kindergarten program, which included a book and song and then stations with activities for parents and children to complete together, including water beads, Play-Doh, and

Figure 2. Sample Page from the Social and Emotional Development Implementation Guide

Ohio Early Learning and Development Standard (Birth to 5): Implementation Guide
Domain: Social and Emotional Development

Self / Topic	Age / Description	Strategies
Self *Awareness and Expression of Emotion*	Older Toddlers Show awareness of own emotion and use nonverbal and/or verbal ways to express complex emotions such as pride, embarrassment, shame and guilt	• Sing and say songs, chants, rhymes, poems and fingerplays. • Verbalize and use a broad range of pictures representing cultures, ethnicities, etc. to help children understand appropriate ways to express emotions. • Verbally recognize complex emotions and support children as they go through them, especially during transitions. • Offer opportunities for children to draw to express emotions. • Read and talk about children's books about feelings, but not limited to "books about feelings." • Talk about feelings of characters depicted in books and stories even if feelings are not noted in text. • Articulate to parents/caregivers the importance of these activities for social/emotional development and school readiness.
Self *Awareness and Expression of Emotion*	Pre-Kindergarten Recognize and identify emotions and the emotions of others Communicate a range of emotions in socially accepted ways	• Sing and say songs, chants, rhymes, poems and fingerplays. • Read books that communicate socially accepted ways to express emotions recognizing that there are cultural differences in what may be "acceptable" ways to express emotions. • Relate emotions of characters in books to children's experiences. • Offer opportunities for writing/drawing to express emotions. • Articulate to parents/caregivers the importance of these activities for social/emotional development and school readiness.
Self *Self-Concept*	Infants Begin to understand self as a separate person from others	• Place mirrors at infants' eye levels when they are on the floor. • Offer playtime where infants can see each other. • Provide nametags for infants in order to call them by name. • Model actions and facilitate interactions between parents/caregivers and infants to point to body parts, first adult's, then infant's. • Facilitate having infants touch adults' faces, hair, ears, and give them language as they explore. • Use songs, rhymes to focus on body parts and actions. • Articulate to parents/caregivers the importance of these activities for social/emotional development and school readiness.
Self *Self-Concept*	Young Toddlers Recognize self as a unique person with thoughts, feelings and distinct characteristics	• Model talking about own feelings and children's feelings; encourage parents/caregivers to talk about their feelings. • Provide mirror so children can see themselves and describe what they see. • Use photographs and books of photographs of faces, encouraging children to compare their own faces with those of others. • Allow children to have comfort objects when needed. • Encourage parents/caregivers to notice children's non-verbal actions, gestures, facial expressions and preferences, narrating what they observe. • Share books that offer opportunities to talk about feelings. • Provide opportunities for adults to talk with children to connect what is happening in book or story to the child's experiences; adult may be articulating the connections. • Offer craft/activity opportunities that use children's photographs, and to articulate distinct characteristics. • Articulate to parents/caregivers the importance of these activities for social/emotional development and school readiness.

rice sensory bins. They were better able to articulate how the activities support kindergarten readiness.

A familiar theme during workshop discussion was how to reach non-library users in our communities. Our mobile services librarian attended April's workshop and is able to talk about kindergarten readiness and present storytimes supporting kindergarten readiness in the community. Our branch librarians are more confident as they continue to reach out to community groups and schools to find out how we can best support kindergarten readiness needs.

Looking forward, we will discuss next steps and changes to programming, including changing our storytime handouts to reflect kindergarten readiness, not just language and literacy. We are also moving to a comprehensive plan—where all storytimes in a month feature the same domain of early learning (the same domain as stations).

Kindergarten Readiness Stations

"I think The Kindergarten Readiness Stations are terrific tools to have on display. The different activities provide the perfect platform in which to discuss our early literacy efforts in an informal manner, and in conjunction with the Library's Early Learning Backpacks, empower parents by giving them the tools to further strengthen their child's school readiness. As a result, I am a stronger and more competent advocate of our library's Kindergarten Readiness Initiative and can effectively implement and discuss these services with our patrons."—Marnie Alvarez, Readers' Services Librarian, Main Library

Because many families are not able to attend storytimes and other library programs, we added Kindergarten Readiness Stations, which provide activities to support kindergarten readiness any time a family visits any of our fifteen branches. The stations include easy and fun activities for a parent and child to enjoy together. They are rotated monthly. There are five "copies" of three different stations for each strand of an early learning domain. A station may focus on different topics within the strand. For example, the domain may be Social and Emotional Development. The strand may be Self, so all station activities will focus on Self. The activities may support different topics within the strand such as Awareness and Expression of Emotion, Self-Concept, Self-Regulation, or Sense of Competence. Signage at the station provides instructions as well as the connection to the early learning domain and kindergarten readiness (see figure 3).
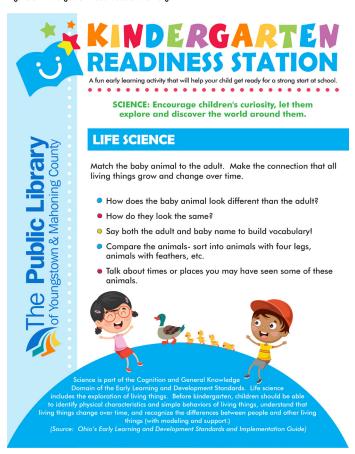
Ideas for activities to do at home to support the skill have been included on the signage as well. Going forward, the ideas for at home may be moved to a bookmark that the family can take with them—reducing the wordage on the sign and providing a physical reminder for parents. Our monthly newsletter includes an introduction to the stations and the targeted domain or strand.

Canfield Public Library Get Ready for Kindergarten Program (photos by Jeff Mamula).

Beginning in January 2020, early learning tips in storytimes will also support the domain targeted in the station, communicating a cohesive message to families. The stations are targeted to preschoolers. The coordinated early learning tips will be shared at all storytimes, including baby and toddlers, in developmentally appropriate ways. We may develop additional stations targeting parents and children ages

Figure 3. Kindergarten Readiness Station Sign

Canfield Public Library Get Ready for Kindergarten Program.

newborn to age three. Posters that have already been developed are included on our website at www.libraryvisit.org/kids /resources-for-librarians.

Early Learning Backpacks

In another effort to reach the families who do not or cannot attend library programs, we purchased sixty-two Sprout Early Learning Backpacks from the Early Childhood Resource Center (www.ecresourcecenter.org/WBA/Content/community /sprout-learning-backpacks), also supported by the LSTA grant through the State Library of Ohio. They include books and activities that were designed specifically to support Ohio Department of Education's Early Learning and Development Standards. There are thirty-one unique kits available in two age ranges: infants and toddlers (ages 0–2), and preschool/ early learners (ages 3–8). Each kit is aligned with a specific skill from the standards and includes an activity guide. Activity guides provide easy-to-follow instructions, along with tips for in-home connections and a variety of ideas to stimulate conversation that support targeted learning.

By circulating these backpacks, we are providing parents with the tools to continue to develop kindergarten readiness skills at home. Brochures are available at every branch and on our website so that families can easily request backpacks (www .libraryvisit.org/kids/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/07 /Early-Learning-Backpack-Handout-PDF-1.pdf). These backpacks circulate an average of once per month at our larger branches, with smaller branches at about half that rate, but growing. Results from surveys included in the backpacks show that 95 percent of respondents strongly agree or agree that the books and activities inside the backpacks should help teach their children the skills needed to succeed in school.

We continue to work together with staff to find ways to support kindergarten readiness in our communities. Our librarians are equipped to use storytimes and programs, the kindergarten readiness stations, and early learning backpacks as tools to share information on kindergarten readiness with families in our community. These resources become vehicles for building relationships that are at the center of learning. They combine to make us a more intentional and comprehensive resource in kindergarten readiness.

We are better able to articulate the value we bring as we share enjoyable activities in library programs. Workshops provided the opportunity to share information and ideas across library systems. Kindergarten readiness information and activities are now available both in the library and for families to check out and take home. Information about kindergarten readiness and links to the Ohio Department of Education website are included on our website for parents to access (www .libraryvisit.org/kids/kindergarten-readiness). As we boost our efforts and articulate our contributions, we help all in our communities to see how public libraries are here to help families as their children enter kindergarten ready to learn and to love learning. **&**

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