
Smart Start:

One Public Library's Experience

by Hannah Owen

In August of 1998, I attended the annual membership meeting of the Catawba County Partnership for Children (Smart Start).¹ The outgoing director of the board for this program reflected on the Partnership's accomplishments over the past four years. She pointed to many areas in which Smart Start has improved the quality of children's lives in this county. She particularly mentioned the library's Smart Start project, a cooperative venture of the Hickory Public and the Catawba County Public Library. Our "Books to Go" outreach service was well received by local childcare centers. We all had the warm feeling that you get when you feel you have done a good job and have been recognized for it.

Recently on a youth services survey, I named Smart Start as North Carolina's greatest strength in providing library service to youth. Smart Start has helped our local libraries meet the changing needs of North Carolina children and families by funding new library programs that would not exist otherwise. Smart Start has produced other, less tangible benefits, including the networking of those who provide services to young children. Four years ago, however, I certainly felt not the least bit of warmth toward that unknown and frustrating organization called Smart Start!

Catawba County was awarded funding in year two of the state's Smart Start initiative. In 1994, putting together any type of grant had been a seemingly unattainable goal. The library and other potential grantees suffered through mountains of paperwork; meetings at 7:00 a.m., noon, and 5:00

p.m., an ever-changing cast of local characters and changing application procedures; and blatant personal agendas, hidden agendas, sometimes no discernible agendas at all. For several of us, it became a joke to find out when and where meetings were being held. Some of us were positive that there were other meetings to which we were not invited where presumably the really important issues were being decided. Surely, someone somewhere had a better handle on the situation. A low point was reached when one fellow meeting junkie turned to me and asked, "What are YOU doing here? What does the PUBLIC LIBRARY have to do with little kids?" If this person, an educated parent of two small children, did not know that any random children's librarian sees more little children than any other person in any county, it was obvious that we had more problems to resolve than the issue of a Smart Start grant.

In 1998, we have a highly regarded and visible array of children's services funded by Smart Start. All of our programs are working very well. Every service we conceived and implemented is still going strong. How did we reach this point after such a disastrous beginning?

One big obstacle to success was the

shaky beginning of our local Smart Start office. The first executive director died tragically. Then the next director left quickly in a cloud of general ill will. It was difficult to get information, and often no one even answered the phone. Our local office is now very organized, helpful, and staffed by people who know their way around the non-profit business: not an oxymoron. Now you can find plenty of information including the history, services, and phone numbers from the state Smart Start Web site.² Also, in October 1997, Andrew Pates and Steve Sumerford published a manual outlining the history, current projects, and resources for implementing Smart Start library programs.³ While obviously out-of-date the minute it was published, this manual is still a valuable document and would be immensely helpful to individuals just beginning to put together a grant.

Our early difficulties were exacerbated by the fact that Catawba County is blessed with not only three public school systems, but also two public library systems with separate budgets, governing bodies, directors, and agendas as well. After many attempts to produce a single grant that would satisfy every component of the two systems,

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we decided to ask for separate funding. After presenting our separate, very disparate proposals, however, state officials told us we had to work together to produce one grant, regardless of politics or anyone's agenda. This required many more meetings, of course.

Throughout this process, the county system was without a youth services librarian for a year, and the city system had three different directors in a four-year period. Working with other children's librarians has always been a pleasure, and this would prove to be true when the county finally hired one. At the beginning, however, I was thrust into grant writing with no knowledge of the budget or political process or even the operations of the county youth services department, and the county director at the time was standing right beside me with no knowledge of children's services.

My library was also in the middle of automating in a 50-year-old building with two-foot thick solid brick walls. It was hard to think what life could be like with some cash when you were wearing earplugs and plaster dust was falling in your hair. Along the way we also enjoyed The Great Asbestos Scare. We came to work one day in the middle of our summer reading program and found the children's department totally sealed off. During this week-long period, not only were all of our important papers unavailable, but we anticipated that quite possibly our entire children's collection might be declared toxic. Thankfully, testing revealed no asbestos problem and life at the library and the wall-drilling went on.

Dealing with two finance depart-

ments was especially tricky. There were many false starts. Coming right down to the wire (the grant deadline), the City of Hickory agreed to be the fiscal agent for the project.

The North Carolina Department of Human Resources now mandates that the public library is to be represented on every local Smart Start partnership board. The library directors who lobbied to make this happen deserve much credit. In 1994 there was no official recognition of the library's importance to young children and families.⁴ In fact, several groups in my area proposed funding projects that duplicated services that libraries already had or could much more easily house. After all, we are already here — neighborhood-based and open 70 hours a week. We as librarians all know how wonderful libraries are and that even the most underfunded library can be a preschooler's door to learning. We have apparently failed in a big way, however, to broadcast this to many people outside the library. In our defense, often we are so busy serving the people who come in the door, we have no opportunity to figure out how to serve those who are not using the library.

There were, in fact, many benefits from this whole awful experience. We got to know our community very well; we got to know the other agencies that serve young children well; and we had the opportunity to tell everyone about the library. We particularly got to know our day care providers and consequently changed the way we met their needs.

We learned about our community by attending those official meetings

and every other gathering in the world that had anything to do with children: the day care association, the half-day association, and the home day care association. We participated in any and all events that had to do with small children: local community college training, any kind of child care provider training, family day events, and back to school days.

Along the way we learned that Catawba County is a relatively wealthy county, but that the wealth is the result of our state of full employment and two wage earners in a family. While no one seems to be able to produce the exact numbers, we often are pointed to as a county with one of the highest percentage of working mothers in the nation.⁵ As we got to know our day care providers (all those meetings), we became aware of several significant factors: the large number of small children in full-time day care,⁶ the huge barriers to quality day care, and the growing diversity of the families that all public institutions are trying to serve. It was clear from surveys that child care centers were greatly in need of books, storytimes, basic training in using books, and a way of getting these services to them during the regular work day.⁷ It was apparent that both libraries were serving the centers that came into the libraries fairly well. The county already had a book-baggers program, and the city had pre-assembled crates of books on various popular themes to loan. Both libraries had very well attended in-house storytimes. In fact, if you stood in the middle of any library, you would think we were doing a good job. After all, storytimes were packed



Smart Start coordinator, Debbie Oldenbury, at Valley Hills Mall with display.

with groups from day cares, and children's circulation was increasing yearly.

It was also clear that many centers that had no transportation would benefit greatly if we could figure out a way to deliver books and storytimes to them. Many teachers did not think of using the library as a resource or did not want to take the time after work to get books. Even if they did, neither library had enough quality picture books to serve all the centers in the area.

In order to produce an outreach program that would be acceptable to both libraries and the local Smart Start board, and would still meet the needs of children, I made many frantic phone calls to Marion Lytle in Rowan County, Peggy Carter in Caldwell County, and Erwin Byrd in Asheville-Buncombe. I am very grateful for their patient and practical suggestions. I like to think of what we came up with as the Ford model of outreach, not an expensive bookmobile or resource center, but something that works and yet would not give our conservative board members fiscal hives.

With our first grants, we assembled themed crates of books and bought two Ford Astro vans to transport books and storytimes to centers and day care homes. The milk crates contain 20-25 books, a puppet, a teacher resource book, a sheet of fingerplays and songs, and a musical tape. It took a year of intense physical and mental toil to assemble these crates. Those of you who still work under similar circumstances can imagine buying, sorting, cataloging, and distributing \$60,000 worth of picture books. The books first had to be carried up a flight of stairs to an un-airconditioned second floor of an old house that served as the children's work area. Because we were told quite adamantly that that we could not pay salaries with Smart Start money, we did not hire anyone to help implement our program. So, who carried the books up the stairs? Did we even have enough book carts? The Hickory child-

ren's staff hauled the books and materials up those stairs and piled the books in heaps (orderly heaps) on the floor because, no, we did not have enough book carts.

By 1996, however, we received approval and the money to hire three part-time storytellers. By the fall of 1997 we received money to hire a coordinator of the program because it had become impossible to run the program in two different library systems without someone to oversee it. The required quarterly report alone was enough to turn your hair gray. The coordinator was one of the original storytellers and has done an excellent job of both seeing the big picture and attending to the minutiae of our programs.

Clearly, one of our tasks was to make preschool teachers aware of what was already available in each library. We

embarked upon a systematic marketing campaign of library services. We started a regular library newspaper column, regular news releases, surveys, handouts, brochures, radio announcements, and TV spots. We responded quickly when a teacher voiced a need that we knew we could fill. We called people and offered them services they didn't know they could get. While we still find people who say, "I didn't know the library had (fill in the blank) storytime, boardbooks, teacher resources, baby storytimes," there is no doubt that the visibility of our libraries has improved.

Our outreach storytelling and book delivery program, "Books to Go," currently serves 79 facilities with a total of 3,780 children. We participate in well-regarded training for child-care workers in conjunction with the Children's Resource Center, another contractor. We

have been able to solve a constant complaint of children's departments: not enough copies of the most in-demand titles. Our staff shelves have grown to include frequently used storytime titles, puppets, big books, and bells and whistles like storytime aprons, mitts, and musical tapes. All of our bright and shiny programs that we are so proud of may seem old-hat to many of you, but for those of us who have operated in a cash-starved situation for many years, it was a bonanza.

Likewise, books and videos have enriched our Parent-Teacher Resource shelves. We have bought many titles especially for child care providers. We run a "Books for Babies" program at our two local hos-

pitals that gives every newborn a book and as well as information about resources at the public library. Another popular service is our "Books to Stay" project. We buy quality picture books and musical tapes for each child care center to keep. While no child care center could hope to own the rich diversity of titles any children's library owns, there are certain titles that every child should hear again and again. We



Smart Start Storytellers, Janet Sanders (top) and Karen Gehagen (bottom), prepare for another presentation.



currently are buying a collection of holiday titles for all the participating centers.

We also purchased computers exclusively for the use of preschool children. Each library in the county has a computer with a large screen, little chairs and tables, and developmentally appropriate software. In 1994, none of our libraries had any computers for the use of any child. While we are now awash with computers at Hickory Public Library's two new buildings (35 computers with preschool games and links to appropriate Web sites), those first computers were a much-needed introduction to quality software for many families. The publicity associated with those purchases drew many new customers to our children's departments.

Our latest project is "English Coming and Going." We recognize the growing diversity of our communities and want to help very young children and their families learn English, become part of our communities, and yet respect their cultural backgrounds. Our two main libraries have multicultural centers with children's books and tapes in ten languages. Both systems also have kits to loan with bilingual books, audiotapes, and electronic phonics games designed to help the whole family learn English.

Do we have any major problems now? Of course, we still have the problem of meeting the needs of two separate library systems. There is some griping and sniping with the City of Hickory who are doing the accounting, but in general it has proved to be a satisfactory arrangement. The latest traumatic problem was the Hickory Public Library's move to a much anticipated new state-of-the-art facility where there was no planning for several new functions including — guess what — the Smart Start program. There was nothing wrong that a few meetings couldn't

solve, however.

The biggest ongoing difficulty has been evaluating outcomes. The state of North Carolina is very much interested in showing ever-increasing numbers, particularly "unduplicated" numbers. One state official actually suggested that we collect and record social security numbers from each child in every storytime to determine if a child was receiving more than one service. Although we can survey childcare centers to find out if they are satisfied with our services, how do you measure the impact of services on a particular child?⁸ Also, we now have many people wanting our services, and our storytellers are stretched to their limits. We have some decisions to make. Another problem we have is finding and keeping part-time storytellers. Burnout is obviously a factor.

The best outcome for us is the increased use of the library by a variety of families. There is no doubt that the visibility of the libraries has increased. There has been increased networking with all of those who serve children. We think we are doing a good job of serving the large number of children who are in childcare in our county by connecting them with books and stories. We think we are doing a good job of training and providing resources to our childcare workers and other persons serving children. Has Smart Start been an asset to the library? Yes: I hope no one ever has the occasion again to ask, "What does the *public library* have to do with little kids?"

References

¹ The annual Board of Directors Meeting of the Catawba County Partnership for Children was held on August 17, 1998, at the Mosteller Estate. Outgoing President and former County Commissioner Gretchen Peed presided.

² The Web site of the North Carolina

Partnership for Children is <<http://www.smartstart-nc.org>>.

³ Andrew Pates and Steve Sumerford, *Smart Start In Our Libraries. A Reference Manual Based On The Experiences of Public Libraries In North Carolina's Smart Start Initiative* (Greensboro, NC: Greensboro Public Library, 1997).

⁴ The original authorizing legislation for the Smart Start initiative can be found on the state Smart Start Web site. There is no mention of library officials. No one at the state Smart Start office could find either the date or the actual legislation that required library directors to be on the local board.

⁵ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nationally 69.2% of women with children under the age of six are in the workforce. No one seems to be able to produce this figure for either North Carolina or Catawba County. However, the Census Bureau does report that 47.4% of the total Catawba County workforce is female. According to Marta Koesling, Director of the Children's Resource Center, the Bureau does report that as of 1990 the figures for working single mothers is 63% in the U.S., 66.8% in the state, and 76.6% in Catawba County.

⁶ In 1998, according to the Children's Resource Center, there were 8,529 children ages 0-4 in Catawba County and 3,095 were in licensed full-day centers. This does not include day-care homes or unlicensed care.

⁷ Regular, early reading to children is one of the most important activities to prepare young children for school according to the National Education Goals Panel in *Special Early Childhood Report 1997* (Washington, DC, 1997).

⁸ On a survey mailed July 1, 1998, 100% of the childcare centers who responded were "very satisfied" with the Books to Go program and wanted it to continue.

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