

Summer Institute 2007

Libraries And Literacy: Making It Work

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**Libraries and Literacy are natural partners!** Who would disagree? The Brooklyn Public Library Literacy Program budget for **FY 08 is about 1.8 million dollars**, this IS combination of NYC Tax Levy, NY State Education Dept funds, Federal funds and private donations.

Up until 2002, the Literacy Program was more or less funded through **dedicated MAC funds (anti-poverty)** from NYC. In 2002, NYCALI-a very powerful literacy group consisting of the three library systems in NYC, the City University, the Dept. of Education and Community Based Organizations which had been **setting policies, creating city wide staff development and serving as Literacy Central for NYC** was **essentially** dissolved and we are still waiting for the new configuration. As a result

of the city's effort and voice being diminished, the State Education Dept stepped in. While the NYC Mayor "got" libraries and the role we play in the literacy continuum, State Ed has had a difficult adjustment.

When the US Dept. of Education **audited NYS**, they were found to be out of compliance and as a result a great many Draconian measures took place. **New Accountabilities, the NRS, "out of compliance", report cards, corrective action**-all these terms flew around. We, in libraries, said, **but what has this to do with us? Volunteer tutors** are our instructional force for the most part, we run year round, we run **flexible, innovative programs** that are very connected to our community, we value the privacy of our students. The years of **fending off intervention** in our library business, our programs were definitely over. And

the days of data collection, accountabilities, stanines, purchasing standardized tests were here.

The Library Literacy Program staff **put considerable time** and effort into finding solutions to the challenges. After all, **if we could teach adults to read couldn't we prevail?**

Standardized testing and reporting became our true concerns. Queens, NY and Brooklyn staff met to discuss a joint approach.

**Communicating the change** in the program to students became our immediate concern. We always believed in the joy of literacy, the joy of learning and reading and now we were going to be subjecting the students to standardized tests. We obtained a grant to write a guide to the Learning Centers and hired a poet to write it. **“Welcome to the**

**Learning Center” page 35 says “The city, state and federal government give money to the program. They want to know if their money is being well spent. In return for giving money, the government asks us to give you tests...We also have other ways of looking at your work, like portfolios with samples of your writing and lists of the books you have read. All of these things help us and help you to where you are, to find your level.**

And that was only the beginning. Almost everything we did had to change, not for the most part the instructional methods, we still used project based learning in small groups. But now we have data entry clerks in each and every Learning Center and one full-time person for ESOL/Pre GED data. We created a new position, the

Learning Assessment and Goals Counselor- this person's full time job is to engage students in conversations about goals and advancing and completing the IEEPP, a sample of which I have included with your materials.

In each annual report our numbers really looked bad. The NRS wanted a student to jump two grade levels in one year, the majority of our students were at the very entry level of literacy, and with work and family commitments, health challenges and just the struggle of survival, progress is slow. But we committed ourselves to success because failure was not an option. **What were the results of all this work?**, on the very first New York State Report Card, both Queens and Brooklyn libraries resulted in the very lowest quartile. Our programs were deemed unsatisfactory in performance. Yet when the city monitor came to look at

the programs, visit the centers, talk with tutors and students and when the records were examined, we were rated **HIGHLY EFFECTIVE**. Talk about learning to live with ambiguity!

In response to this challenge we changed the way we do business. Of course we kept addressing the students' needs. We continued to be a project-based, writing and reading program, we brought in special presenters, we concentrated on health literacy, computer basics, creating a Pre GED curriculum, partnering with other organizations but we needed to get our house in order to comply with the FEDS.

### **Accountability**

**The way we looked at our jobs changed.** The three direct public service staff, site supervisors, literacy advisors and clerical staff lines worked **together to create a new**

**accountability system.** Each staff member would be accountable for making sure that the Library program complied with all the regulations and remained funded. In your packet of materials, I have included the three accountability charts. This was not easy in a Union environment and probably would have been impossible in a field other than literacy. Our staff have always been deeply committed to the students, they knew that lives depended on our program's availability. They rose to the occasion without one grievance!

### **Internal Monitoring**

Next step was **monitoring**, the State and City were already collecting data three times a year. We needed to collect it monthly so we could catch any issues. This also gave the local administrative staff an opportunity to review areas of

concern. We created the Monthly Report form that is due on the 15<sup>th</sup> of each month. The clerical staff prepares it and the Site Supervisor submits it.

Since we needed someone to keep all the new rules straight and wanted to get a global view of both the regulatory and real side of these changes and the impacts on learners' lives and our program, we created a new position, **the Learner Assessment and Goals Counselor**. The person needed to be flexible because essentially we were not sure where this was going. **We created the Individual Education and Employment Preparation Plan form and their first** assignment was to work with the PRE GED students to counsel them. It had been piloted with literacy students with a part time project person-a former employee so we

had some degree of confidence in its accessibility and appropriateness.

### **Three Decades of Discovery**

With all these changes, these efforts the library literacy model still falls in the bottom when measured against other programs with full time teachers, more hours, higher level learners. What keeps us afloat?

### **ADVOCACY**

The students and tutors are great advocates. They speak movingly, they write hundreds of letters when asked, and once a year they get on a bus to Albany to speak to legislators about the importance of the library program in their lives.

Our students and tutors are forming a New Friends Of Literacy Group. This is BPL's first program themed Friends group-as you know friends' groups are usually tied to a specific branch. Our former Friends of Literacy group raised about 35,000 for us, not as successful as Queens, but Successful never the less.

The CoAL-NYC educators and community based organizations have formed a new Coalition for Adult Literacy-they have stepped in to fill the NYCALI vacuum. They have lobbied politicians, held rallies, had legislation introduced and kept a constant pressure on. Advocacy by all parties has resulted in an increase of nearly **8 million** dollars statewide.

## **Other Literacy Projects at BPL**

Brooklyn Public Library has been known for services to children and early literacy. We had one of the first libraries in the US dedicated **only to service to children**. Pre school programs abound and a few years ago (2002) with the help of an **anonymous gift of 1 million dollars** we started our award winning early literacy program-**Brooklyn Reads to Babies**. There is a folder in the rear that details this very important program.

A major annual literacy initiative-Summer Reading now has a full blown adult component. Book discussions, book reviews, reading clubs are in every branch. The Learning Centers take part in this effort. This year's theme is

Uncover the World. Literacy Staff selected specific titles that correlate with this theme.

Currently, we are looking at **Adolescent Literacy**-there is a very high drop out rate in the states. These young people **are not well served** in adult literacy programs. The impetus for the creation of our Pre GED program was a response to the large number of young people without literacy skills and concerned parents calling and coming in. And the lack of appropriate referrals for our students.

**Where do you turn for help when no one else will help you? THE LIBRARY, of course.** We are currently one of the largest PRE GED providers in the City and perhaps the State.

In the annual report for 1955-56 a mention of the “Reading Improvement Program” talks about our predecessor at BPL. Originally the goals were to increase speed, comprehension and appreciation of the written word. By 1965, the Reading Improvement Program reported a “large number of remedial readers that were aided in their efforts to improve their economic level by upgrading their ability to read”.

**The Brooklyn Public Library Literacy Program is very dependent on the perceptions of the Executive Director,** we have had directors who embraced the program, a recent director met with the Literacy Program Staff and told them they would all be reassigned to the branches-only

intervention from the Mayor's Office of Adult Literacy saved that day. The \$800,000 from the City are dedicated funds, spend it on adult literacy or lose it-currently the BPL is providing about \$300,000 from operating funds to support staffing, a new Central Learning Center has been built and we are very hopeful for the immediate future of the program. But is it a core library service? This depends upon whom you speak with- the presentation I distributed today includes a recent power point presentation for the Executive Management Team, **after thirty years many still** had no clue about what we do (granted there were a lot of finance people there).

Yet, as I said **the present looks very bright.** The Library just refreshed all of the Literacy Computer Labs-with Macintosh computers-that was a three year effort-we

believe that Macintosh are better suited to literacy learning and we had to prove it! We did.

Four of the five learning centers are new or newly renovated in the past five years. Advocacy is growing.

There is a new Friends of Literacy group forming, as we speak. Our new Executive Director, Dionne Mack-Harvin is a 34 year old woman who is very committed to our program.

**How can you have a two million dollar budget and feel like an underdog?** The Literacy Program and the Library have been living together for thirty years. I am looking for marriage and a commitment. Library Literacy is about the joy of reading and the power of information to transform

lives, our participants are not defined by that which they cannot do but by the potential that exists in each of us.

As NYC commits to its libraries in a historic new baseline budget and six day service, I am forever hopeful that BPL's commitment to the literacy needs of all of Brooklyn's residents will flourish and grow.