A librarian shares how Denver public schools and libraries are continuing to meet students’ educational needs during the pandemic

BY SUZANNE TONINI

For many children, summer is not an idyllic time of swimming pools, sleepaway camps, and long hours spent outdoors. Instead, their world instantly shrinks when the final school bell rings. For educators, “summer slide” is the learning loss many students experience during summer vacation. This loss can cumulatively result in differences of two to three years in reading and math skills by the end of fifth grade. Not surprisingly, students who are furthest from educational equity are affected the most when school is not in session: children with special needs, English-language learners, children who do not have reliable internet access or devices at home, and children of parents who work outside the home and cannot afford high-quality childcare. School districts are just beginning to learn the impact of extended school closures and remote learning on marginalized communities, but one thing is certain: there is a great danger that the equity gap will exponentially widen.

Public Library is an example of the power of libraries to bridge equity gaps and prevent learning loss during school closures. These strategies can serve as a model for schools and districts across the nation as they continue to plan how to serve students remotely, not only during the challenging circumstances of the coronavirus, but also during future summers when school is not in session.

Supporting families’ basic needs

Elementary school teachers are especially familiar with the behavioral changes that escalate as school vacations draw near, most intensely expressed by students who are fearful, angry, and/or scared of the transition ahead: the abrupt loss of their school family, the absence of breakfast and lunch provided by the school, and days spent mostly indoors. Similar to the global community’s experience with stay-at-home orders during the pandemic, these students’ lives suddenly shift into isolation as their parents work outside the home to provide for their family, and children stay inside because they cannot safely play outdoors. The Covid-19 crisis offers a snapshot of the summers that marginalized populations experience every year.

At the onset of school closure on March 16, Denver Public Schools superintendent Susana Cordova and the DPS School Board immediately shifted their focus to supporting their most vulnerable families. “That meant thinking about what the basic needs like food and support for families who are losing their jobs and connections to things like energy assistance and food pantries,” Cordova said in a recent Denver Post article. “But also, then, how could we create an environment where both the social emotional and academic needs of students could continue to be supported.” In addition to daily meal pickup sites, the district worked with internet providers to offer free and low-cost service and distributed thousands of Chromebooks and hot spots. These quick and decisive leadership actions rooted in equity laid a foundation for school leaders, teachers, and library staff to build upon during the weeks of remote learning instruction.

Building community

Within days of the school closure, DPS library staff piloted outreach efforts to reconnect with students and families. DPS
Library Services launched a social media initiative to communicate daily with the community via Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Posts include information about digital resources to support remote learning and online literacy opportunities such as community events including the Denver Zoo’s virtual field trips and the Denver Public Library’s Maker Challenge.

At East High School, librarians Jonathan Almon and Roberta Marks joined the outreach team to make individual phone calls to families. Almon and Marks elicit parent feedback on remote learning, listen to challenges families are facing, and connect them with the school staff who can best support their needs. “It’s been a truly powerful experience,” Almon says. “We witness appreciation and a desire to connect from the families we’re able to reach. Whether it’s technology issues, mental health support, access to our food pantry, or just someone to talk to, it makes sense that librarians are the ones connecting families to the appropriate resources. The outreach program has been a wonderful way to connect with the larger community.”

Cheltenham Elementary librarian Nick Bleckley created the YouTube channel Mr. B and Friends Read Aloud so that his students could once again enjoy this important part of their school-life routine. The response from families was immediate; Bleckley’s videos received more than 350 views within the first two weeks, and more than 670 views during the months of April and May. “The unique and joyful candor of Mr. B’s read alouds draws my kids in instantly,” says Cheltenham educator Mike Cammilleri. “It’s hard to remember that they are watching YouTube instead of sitting on Grandpa’s lap reading stories together.”

Fostering social connection for tweens and teens

Libraries are often a safe haven for vulnerable tweens and teens—particularly children who have experienced trauma, those with special needs, and those who are socially isolated. In response to school closures, many DPS library staff have created social-emotional supports through virtual programming. For example, middle school librarian Victoria Bailey leads virtual book clubs that meet three times a week. Students listen to Bailey read aloud, and they also engage in peer discussions and participate in book-related activities such as emailing authors, recording a video reading to their pet, and making origami bookmarks.

Dawn Lewallen at Skinner Middle School launched “Hangouts with Sven,” weekly virtual meetings named after the Skinner Library mascot. Each week, Lewallen plans a new theme and activity such as poetry sharing, novel-based scavenger hunts, and chatting about books that students are currently reading. “The kids are having a blast,” Lewallen says, and both students and parents have requested that the virtual meetings continue throughout the summer. “My hope is we can not only keep those currently participating but also grow in numbers, offering our students opportunities that may otherwise be lost over the summer months.” Even after Covid-19 is no longer a concern, Lewallen plans to continue virtual meetings as part of her librarian role because they are inclusive of students who typically have transportation concerns and/or care for younger siblings at home and cannot participate often in after-school activities.

Denver Public Library has also created
virtual opportunities for young patrons to meaningfully connect with peers. DPL staff host popular role-playing games for older children, including Dungeons & Dragons, a game that has been recognized by both the autism and gifted learners’ communities for its potential to develop social, intellectual, and cooperative skills. In addition, DPL is partnering with StoryCenter to host intergenerational storytelling webinars. Trained in trauma-informed methods, StoryCenter staff create a supportive framework for participants to share how the pandemic is affecting their lives.

Learning loss during extended school closures is not limited to academics; children’s social skills regress with fewer opportunities to spend time with peers. These are just a few examples of library programming that engage youth across the city, providing them with opportunities to explore common interests with peers during a time in their lives when social connection is of premium importance to their brain development. Post-Covid-19, these same library programs have the potential to fill a much-needed gap in how to serve the social-emotional needs of vulnerable youth during summer school closures.

A rise in digital checkouts
Caroline Hughes, former director of DPS Educational Technology and Library Services, built the foundation for a digital library collection to serve the needs of a large urban school district. The DPS Sora collection of e-books and audiobooks currently offers more than 30,000 titles, including more than 2,000 #OwnVoices titles and thousands of books in languages other than English.

The week prior to the March school closure, current ETLS director Lisa Lund led the work to plan and provide digital tools training for 3,260 teachers, coaches, and school leaders, including training on the Sora ebook and audiobook platform. The impact was instant: e-book circulation increased from 34,000 checkouts in February to more than 51,000 checkouts in April.

To further increase students’ access to books, in late March, Denver Public Schools and Denver Public Library launched the Sora Public Library Connect program, which provides all DPS students with access to the public library e-book collection using their student credentials as their library card. Denver Public Schools also opened access to the digital library collection to DPS charter schools during the school closure, to ensure all students have access to high-quality books at this time.

Two important milestones have now been reached: DPS Library Services manages a robust and diverse digital library collection, and staff and students understand how to access that collection. During summer 2020, possible school closures next school year, and future summers, the Sora digital library will continue to be a critical equity service for youth who live in book deserts, students with special needs who benefit from listening to text read aloud, and English-language learners who are developing literacy in both their first and second languages.

Programming to promote literacy and learning
Access to a high-quality library collection is not enough, however. Students need librarians who support students’ literacy growth, and cultivate a school-wide culture
of choosing to read because of all the ways it enriches our lives. This role is more important than ever during school closures, when in the absence of classroom learning and library programming, many students lose motivation to pick up a book.

DPS library staffers are quickly adopting new practices to support students’ literacy and learning remotely. DPS library technical systems manager Len Bryan coordinated the effort to assemble Take-and-Make science kits for distribution at DPS meal sites. At the Take-and-Make giveaway on May 20, more than 200 paper helicopter kits were distributed in under an hour to families in northeast Denver.

West campus librarian Nichole Garrard hosted a remote haiku challenge during the month of April, created “Five Minute Read Aloud” recordings of culturally responsive texts to share on her website, and developed an online process for providing students with personalized book recommendation lists.

Andrea Rothstein at Isabella Bird Community School created a Google Classroom to share read aloud recordings for different age groups, YouTube experiences with favorite authors (including Lunch Doodles with Mo Willems and the Everywhere Book Festival), screen-free craft ideas, and weekly challenges such as building a reading fort.

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Montbello campus librarian Julia Torres organized virtual visits with picture book author Minh Lê to three classes of more than 100 students. Students listened to videos of Lê reading aloud his books Lift and Drawn Together, both illustrated by Dan Santat (Little, Brown), then Torres facilitated a virtual visit with each class to give students an opportunity to meet the author and ask him questions about his life and work.

The Denver Public Library staff is also finding creative ways to support Denver students’ literacy development and love of reading in this new remote environment. Librarians host live storytimes online in English and Spanish, create recordings of read-alouds for children of all ages for their YouTube channel, distribute books at meal pickup sites, and make virtual classroom visits. DPL reimagined its Summer of Adventure program and created a new online approach to engage all age groups—from birth to preschool, kids, teens, and adults. Summer of Adventure coordinator Yanira Duarte says, “This situation has helped us come together with various organizations and work groups and think about how we can cross-promote and deliver youth services.”

The road ahead

Still, there is much work to be done. School staff must seek out the silent students, the ones who do not log into their remote classes, whose lives have layers of complexity and hardship that create learning obstacles. Recently recognized by Library Journal as a 2020 Mover & Shaker, DPS library services specialist Janet Damon is engaged in equity work every day. A self-described “literacy activist,” Damon leads initiatives across the city that focus on those who she says “are most excluded from power, resources, and access.” For example, last summer, Damon’s foundation Afro & Books partnered with Black Child Development Institute and Project Proud Fatherhood to host an early literacy boot camp for African-American boys and girls. Damon also led a wellness course for African-American girls at Martin Luther King Jr. Early College, which included book sharing, mindfulness and self-care practices, and mentorships. During the Covid-19 school closure, Damon partnered with BCDI to sponsor an online book fair for the Park Hill Pirates youth sports league and the Conscious Curls Teen Book Club. Students self-selected titles from diverse collections and the books were mailed directly to their homes. These examples of equity-targeted outreach are a model for how libraries can lead the whole-child approach to literacy learning.

Community leaders have difficult decisions ahead. The inevitable budget cuts by the state, city, and school districts will affect the nation’s students in ways that cannot yet be measured. School and public libraries like those in Denver are piloting creative, impactful programming in response to the coronavirus, and the result is a new approach to serving the city’s most vulnerable youth during extended school closures. Now it is up to leaders and voters to support the future of libraries, to ensure librarians can continue to do what librarians have always done: evolve to meet community needs.

Suzanne Tonini is the collection development supervisor for Denver Public Schools, supporting library programs around the city. She is a librarian with 20 years of experience serving ECE–12 students in Virginia and Colorado.