Pima County Public Library, Arizona
ConnectED Experience

This is the full Q&A with Holly Schaffer, Community Relations Manager, from Pima County Public Library referenced in the article Library Access for All Students: Stories from Five ConnectED Libraries.

1. Can you briefly describe the nature and scope of your program and how you established the partnership and program in your community?

In 2013, shortly after President Obama announced the ConnectEd initiative and the White House Library Challenge, Pima County Public Library (PCPL) staff identified target goals that would help meet the President's challenge to level the playing field for disadvantaged students lacking traditional access to libraries.

Our goals were simple: connect kids to STEM programming; assist them in obtaining library cards; and provide access to computers and Wi-Fi. By helping to connect Pima County youth to these technological and educational resources, PCPL would also be helping them build the 21st century skills integral to their future success.

By September 2014, Program Coordinator Michelle Simon, was working with Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) to increase student library card holders, to break down barriers and meet the kids at their level, and show them all that a library card can make possible.

We worked with previously established contacts in TUSD to secure the superintendent's approval to move forward with the project. Recognizing, though, the importance of the hierarchy within the vast network of administrators, teachers and support staff at each school (more than 90 in TUSD!), we made a concentrated effort to engage with school employees at every level. By eliminating miscommunication—or no communication at all—we created advocates at all levels, thus ensuring the success of the program.

Between August 2015 and May 2016, more than 32,000 library cards were distributed to TUSD K-8 schools. As a result of that effort, more than 5,000 children are new library card holders.

2. Where were points of push back (internally? schools? parents?) and how did you overcome them?

Any push back we received was minimal. In fact, push back doesn't quite capture it. Any resistance we experienced was more indicative of a lack of understanding or concern about balancing the project alongside an already-demanding task list than it was a negative response to the project itself.

We found that the best way to get past that resistance was through clear and constant communication with partners at all levels. By allowing teachers to ask questions and support staff to clarify logistics, we created a space in which everyone understood the task, its importance and the role they played. Perhaps most importantly, though, we made it a high priority to provide education about PCPL to our TUSD partners so that they could feel confident in their knowledge of the services and tools we offer, making them stronger proponents of the library system they were being asked to promote throughout the process.

3. Was there immediate interest with the schools you worked with or did that take some nurturing?

Absolutely. The interest was enthusiastic and immediate. We identified partners we knew would be invested from the beginning. The people we worked with at TUSD are as invested in the success of our community's children as we are and their willingness and commitment played a key role in the program's success.

4. Were there many surprises as you planned and executed the initiative, good or bad?

One thing to recognize is how important it is to provide internal education as well as external. Yes, partners need to be informed players in the process, but so do library staff members. If you're asking system wide staff to support a program, it's imperative that you make them feel part of the process and a valued contributor to the library's larger goals. Although this can seem a daunting task in larger systems, it is important for colleagues to feel valued and informed. They will be more likely to offer assistance, to help promote, to troubleshoot, to identify new contacts and so on if they feel engaged with and committed to the project.

5. What was the response to the cards? Have you had increased usage/visits?

The response has been amazing! In addition to the increase in cardholders, we've seen great growth in cardholders accessing electronic resources due to continued program outreach.

Since January 2016, we've coordinated Library Card Days at 8 local high schools. As part of these days, we made presentations to individual classes about the electronic resources, Learning Express Library and Brainfuse. Since these sessions were offered, we've received notification from the Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records that our Learning Express Library usage is through the roof!

We also gave presentations at 13 Sunnyside Unified School District (SUSD) elementary schools focused on Tumblebooks. In four months alone, SUSD recorded 16,000 uses of Tumblebooks and PCPL's TB usage saw an unprecedented increase of 271% over 2015 usage numbers.

Since the purpose of ConnectEd is not to get kids into physical library buildings (a bonus, but not the focus), we have not tracked visits to library locations. From the beginning, our goal was to reach out to disadvantaged children to give them the tools needed to access resources from *outside* the library. The students we've been working with are ones with barriers getting into the library, be it lack of transportation, money, or permanent housing. By engaging with them at school and with the help of

committed educators, we are showing them that great things are possible when you have—and use—a library card, even if it's not in the traditionally-held way.

6. Has this program led to any other school partnerships or programs?

This year, we'll be continuing our work with TUSD and expanding our partnership with SUSD. In addition, we've been contacted by the Pima County School Superintendent's Office about ways to build the initiative across the more than 18 school districts county-wide.

7. If you had to do it all over again, what would you do differently?

The only thing we'd do differently is to enlist the help of multiple library staff members up front to assist processing the thousands of card applications we received! It's not something one—or even a few—staff members can handle alone.

8. Any advice for libraries thinking about doing something like this? Any resources you would point them to?

At Pima County Public Library, we believe in the power of educating, inspiring and connecting people to build an extraordinary community. Doing so is about so much more than offering traditional library programming and services. To truly be successful, we are constantly identifying, using, reevaluating and refining innovative techniques designed to reach those who are most in need of the services we provide.

Our advice for libraries thinking about doing something like we've done? Try it—it's absolutely worth your time and effort! We've even put together a list of tips to help you along the way:

1) Pilot at one school or one school district.
   Don't try to take on too much to start. Begin by working where you've already established professional connections and where the administrators understand and support your library's vision and values.

2) Communicate, communicate, communicate.
   Don't allow the fact that you have buy-in from top administrators to slow you down. Make sure you are in constant communication with school staff at every level in the hierarchy (administrators, teachers, and support staff). By providing regular updates as well as educational tools, including training sessions about the library and its electronic resources, you have the power to get people excited who may otherwise be left out of the communication loop.

3) Create a library advocate within each school site.
   If done properly, this person(s) can help train and teach others about resources available to them. They can also serve an invaluable role spreading enthusiasm for the project.

4) Blanket the district with library card applications.
   The more you put out there, the more you'll get back. Make it easy for schools to return applications for processing and to receive cards for distribution.

5) Remove *all* artificial barriers.
   Give teachers the authority to fill out applications rather than parents. Don't allow traditional policy to negatively impact the project and discourage kids. Disadvantaged students face numerous barriers – from lack of transportation to impermanent housing – so understanding why may not know their address and recognizing the importance of working around that barrier is of the utmost importance.

6) After piloting the program at one school (or district), evaluate your process, identify flaws and areas to improve, refine, and keep going!