Emily Plagman from PLA’s Project Outcome talks about why it’s important to measure library outcomes.
For years, libraries have gauged success through their patrons’ stories. And the core metric has been how often they came back for more. But, as you know, times have changed, and so have libraries. Intuition, anecdotes, and attendance counts are no longer enough.

To demonstrate their value in the community, libraries need more DATA & EVIDENCE.
Of course, measuring outcomes doesn’t mean you stop doing other types of evaluation. There are many data pieces that help demonstrate your library’s value.

- Needs assessments help answer - What Does Our Community Need?
- Patron satisfaction surveys help answer - What Should We Do Better?
- Outputs help answer - How Much Did We Do?

Adding outcome data to your evaluation will help you answer the key question - What *good* did we do?
What is an Outcome?

Specific benefit from a library program/service

Can be quantitative or qualitative

Expressed as changes that individuals perceive

Answers the question:

So what do we mean by outcomes? PLA defines outcomes as a specific benefit a patron receives from a library program or service. They can be quantitative or qualitative and are expressed as change that individuals perceive in themselves.
Measuring the Good You Do

Learning what changes/effects/impacts your programs are having in/on...

✓ Knowledge
✓ Skills
✓ Attitudes
✓ Opinions
✓ Behaviors
✓ Actions
✓ Status

An outcome is a way to determine the extent to which a program achieved its intended results. By measuring outcomes, you’re learning what changes/effects/or impacts your programs are having.

• So did the program positively impact the lives of the patrons?

• Did it make a difference?

• How are the lives of the patrons better as result?
Supercharged Storytime outcomes that capture how much caregivers are learning new techniques to help their children learn is great data to use to meet for library advocacy goals:

- A key outcome of learning gained by patrons can be used to tell your library story to your board or friends group…”90% of participants that responded to the library survey said they learned something they can share with their children.”

- You know that the library could expand its reach or strengthen community-level literacy goals through partnerships or with new funding streams. Measuring outcomes gives you data to help reinforce your message to stakeholders about how important Supercharged Storytimes are to the attendees.
Many libraries have made effective use of the data gathered with Project Outcome tools.
Program Improvements

Douglas County Libraries

• Singing Storytime Survey Activity
• Results: Pitch was too low
• Fix: Raise the pitch
• Cost: $0

Douglas County Libraries learned from surveying patrons of their Singing Storytime that the songs were sung in a pitch that was too low for the children. Simple no-cost fix – they raised the pitch.

Using outcomes to improve programming means more patrons reporting satisfaction and appreciation of library programs.
The Tulsa City-County Library used Project Outcome surveys to make programming decisions. They measured their Storytime programs across several branches. Only one of the branches had designated playtime & toys for after Storytime.

To share their results, the library created an infographic that highlighted trends in the open ended comments.

The results showed that patrons liked and referenced the post-Storytime toys & playtime almost as much as the program itself. **As a result** - The library was able to use its Friends of the Library group to fund toys for the other branches so they could provide the same post-Storytime activities.
 Communicating Results

- Shared Summary Reports with Friends of the Library
- Added patron comments in Library Board reports
- Included patron comments in thank you notes to business donors

The Atlanta-Fulton Public Library widely shared their summer reading survey results with their Friends group, Library Board, and to the businesses that donated summer reading prizes. They shared photos of the kids thanking the businesses, which the businesses really valued and shared via social media. Because of this, the library anticipates doubling their local business prize donations next summer. One parent’s comment even made it into the Library Foundation Newsletter, which goes out to library donors.
You can find more examples like this under our From the Field resources on the Project outcome website, which include case studies, our speaker wall of fame, and on-demand webinars.
Benefits of Project Outcome Data

- Capturing snapshot data and real-time results
- Open-ended comments are a goldmine
- Data visualizations and ready-to-use reports provide strong advocacy tools

The Project Outcome tools help libraries quickly and easily capture snapshot data. This is not a tool for rigorous data collection and random sampling in your library. You’re targeting your users and finding out what they’re gaining and what else they need from the library to help support them in their learning.

The short, simple design of the surveys helps the library save time, while also increasing your response rate from patrons. The open-ended questions of the surveys are a GOLDMINE for libraries. This is where they’re gaining the most insight into their community’s wants and needs.
Benefits of Project Outcome Data

- Standardization of outcome measures
  - Across time & locations
  - Variety of programs
  - Aggregate national & state comparisons

The key benefit of using Project outcome for your evaluation, is that you’re using standardized outcome measures across time, multiple branches, and a variety of programs. So while your programs and audiences may be unique, by standardizing the outcomes, you’re able to talk about your impact across the board.

Which then allows your results to be aggregated with state and national datasets, for comparison sake, but also to talk about impact at a national level.