Storytime Shakeups (on the cheap)

Oakland Public Library received a $50,000 grant from the Packard Foundation to transform storytime. Grant money is great -- but you might not need as much as you'd think. Many of the most impactful changes are FREE, or you may spend money incrementally to accomplish goals. What follows is changes we would recommend a library implement, with most important items at the top. A longer breakdown follows after the tables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>We spent... (per site)</th>
<th>On what/How Far did it go?</th>
<th>You could spend...</th>
<th>On what/How far can it go?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>$6,240</td>
<td>52 weeks, hot catered food for 55 people</td>
<td>$300 - $2000 (or more)</td>
<td>Just coffee for 52 weeks for adults: $300. Adding animal crackers &amp; carrot sticks for all 55 participants: $2000.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outreach</td>
<td>$200</td>
<td>7500 postcards 300 posters to cover two branches/ neighborhoods &amp; year-long outreach</td>
<td>FREE</td>
<td>Just an investment in staff time &amp; publicity materials design, with updated branding and language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program changes</td>
<td>FREE</td>
<td>Longer program time, bilingual songs &amp; books</td>
<td>FREE</td>
<td>Longer program time, bilingual songs &amp; books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental upgrades</td>
<td>$7,500</td>
<td>Small renovations, furniture, toys for one branch</td>
<td>FREE</td>
<td>Reconfigure available resources and/or solicit donations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nametags</td>
<td>$150</td>
<td>52 weeks, laminated name tag with ribbon &amp; stickers for all kids</td>
<td>FREE</td>
<td>Use available office supplies, and a stamp or initials instead of stickers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentives</td>
<td>$8,100 (books) $1,040 (raffles)</td>
<td>3-book set for average 15 participants per month (12 months); raffle prize (52 weeks)</td>
<td>FREE - $755</td>
<td>Use donations or other low-cost incentives; $755 covers one month of raffles and book sets for 15 participants to jumpstart attendance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Action Priority Matrix
(Adapted from Mind Tools: https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTF_95.htm)

What changes can you make now that are low effort, high impact?
What would you need to cut to make room for a storyline revolution?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quick Wins</th>
<th>Major Projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Already doing</td>
<td>Already doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to try</td>
<td>Want to try</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fill-Ins</th>
<th>Thankless Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Already doing</td>
<td>Already doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to try</td>
<td>Want to try (none, hopefully, right?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Food
Oakland spent around $120 per week per location. This got us hot food delivered by a local restaurant to feed around 55 people, plus coffee, tea, and disposable plates/silverware/etc. You could do it for a lot less if you don't use a caterer but instead get the groceries yourself and/or set up a rotating potluck from participants.

Why?
- Creates community
- Reduces worry about bringing food for caregivers and children
- Demonstrates healthy food choices
- Honors ethnic communities
- Builds relationships with local businesses
- Yummy food = happy people

Outreach
Re-think outreach -- word of mouth is a powerful tool. We walked our neighborhoods with Radioflyer wagons, outreach postcards, and give-away books. We placed posters in places where families spent time – laundromats, health offices, corner stores. We put extra effort into making our outreach materials attractive, legible for low-literacy adults, and bilingual. We removed the word "storytime," and placed more focus on play, caregiver networking, and relaxing fun. We paid to get them printed at a copy shop on a tight turn-around, but you can probably get the same result in-house.

Why?
- We took for granted that people in the neighborhood knew about the library's storytimes, but most of the people we talked to didn’t know -- and almost 60% of attendees reported that they had never attended a library program before Play Cafe. Seeing our faces out and about made the difference for our first attendees -- who then spread the word within their networks

Program changes
You can make some changes to the program to make it more attractive to toddlers' caregivers for free make the program longer by including playtime and include bilingual elements.

Why?
- For some caregivers, getting a toddler ready to leave the house is an ordeal. Making the program longer makes it more worth the effort to get out the door
- Playtime is a time for the caregiver to relax. With everyone watching all the kids, they have an opportunity to chat with other caregivers and participate in the community, rather than needing to be laser focused and quiet during storytime
- Including bilingual elements, even if you’re not bilingual, shows respect for caregivers who are not native English speakers and builds community among both adults and kids
- Providing written lyrics and translations of all songs and fingerplays is helpful for caregivers to practice at home.
- Having staff stay in the room with families the whole time (rather than just doing storytime, getting out toys, and retreating to the desk or office) helped us get to know the kids and adults in an intimate way that gave us feedback about the program and made the participants feel part of the library community

Nametags
We spent a little extra to get ribbon and stickers, but you can probably make them for even cheaper using office supplies. Each month, we use a different sticker, and on every fourth visit, the child gets a bonus incentive (books, in our case – please see “incentives” later).
Why?
- Put this in the “easy win” category
- Kids love the ritual of getting it and turning it in
- Helps you and other adults learn kids’ names
- Getting a sticker (or stamp) is an incentive for kids
- Marking the nametag each time helps you gather info about your users (age, repeat attendance, etc.)

**Environmental Upgrades**
We spent money in several ways to make the Play Cafe experience enjoyable and relaxing. We invested in comfortable seating for adults, a small play structure for the backyard, toddler gates to close off the room, and lots of toys for playtime. Even if you don’t have a budget, you can take a critical look at your storytime space to see if it meets the needs of your target audience. Can you block off the space using existing resources? Bring chairs over from the adult area? Solicit toy donations from the community?

Why?
- A closed-off space means kids can’t “escape” and adults can relax a little
- Comfortable seating for adults means storytime is accessible for older patrons (or anyone with limited mobility) who are caregivers for toddlers
- Librarians know the importance of play, and building in substantial playtime with attractive toys (even if they’re simple -- one of the most popular is just access to the felt board and shapes to place) is a big part of the appeal for attendees
- Having out quiet fidget toys during storytime makes the program more accessible for children with sensory issues and reinforces the idea that kids don’t have to be sitting still for learning to be taking place
- Adults who feel comfortable and know Play Cafe is as much for them as it is for their kids will be more likely to come back. “I woke up today and felt too tired to come. Then I realized I was too tired NOT to come.”
  -- Play Cafe grandma

**Incentives**
Each week, we raffled off a toy (around $20), and every four weeks that a child attended, they got a set of three books to keep -- the same ones we’d been modeling all month during storytime. We think that having these incentives was integral to getting an initial audience, but we found (based on attendees’ feedback) that they wouldn’t be necessary to sustain the program. You could save money by soliciting donations or spending less for raffle prizes, choosing less expensive prize books, and by eliminating these incentives once the core group has gotten hooked on storytime. We tried this “one-month pilot” incentive program at other Oakland branches in 2017 with no significant drop-off after the loss of incentives.

Why?
- Getting books to keep reduces barriers for families reluctant to check out books for fear they will get lost or damaged and who can’t afford replacements
- Toddlers love repetition -- getting books they’ve already been exposed to during storytime increases their interest in reading at home
- Caregivers feel more confident reading books they’ve seen modeled before
- The raffle contributes to getting people to take a chance on coming to Play Cafe the first time, the prize books encourage repeat visits

**Questions? Reach out!**

Mary Dubbs  
Hennepin County Library | North Regional Branch  
612.543.8453  
mdubbs@hclib.org