



JUNE 2018

RAISING READERS

Cultivating a Love of Reading through Adult-Focused Initiatives

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Introduction and Evaluation Overview

In 2018, the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) and the National Book Foundation (NBF) initiated a collaborative effort to bring Raising Readers to DYCD-funded program sites. Raising Readers is designed to ignite and strengthen adult participants' love of reading and, by modeling the habit of reading for pleasure, inspire young people to expand their enjoyment of books. As part of the DYCD-NBF Raising Readers collaboration, each participating program site identified two staff members who would participate as "trainees" and help organize and facilitate activities. Program staff, in coordination with site-level program directors, were responsible for recruiting adult participants as well as scheduling and advertising for Raising Readers activities at their respective sites, including two two-hour reading circles, a book shopping trip, and a city-wide event for families. Trainees also attended four professional development sessions between February and May 2018 designed to prepare them to co-facilitate reading circles with NBF teaching artists and learn strategies to engender a love of reading within the communities their programs serve.

DYCD contracted with Policy Studies Associates (PSA) to conduct an evaluation of the early implementation of Raising Readers across the 10 participating sites. The evaluation sought to answer the following research questions:

- What strategies do DYCD program directors use to identify program staff to participate in NBF training and lead Reading Circle activities at their sites? To what extent were sites successful in recruiting and retaining program staff?
- How do program staff describe their experiences in Raising Readers? In what ways, if any, do program staff describe changes in their own attitudes toward reading after participation? In what ways, if any, do program staff describe any early changes in how they approach literacy activities in other program activities?
- What strategies do sites use to identify adult participants¹ to participate in Reading Circle activities? What are the reading behaviors and experiences of participating adults? What factors facilitate or impede participant recruitment?
- What proportion of adult participants attend both Reading Circle activities? How do adults perceive program activities? To what extent do adults demonstrate early indications of changes in attitudes toward reading after participating in Reading Circle activities?

Evaluation methods. Information sources for the evaluation included attendance logs, adult participant surveys, a program director survey, and focus group with program site trainees.

¹ This report refers to Raising Readers participants as "adult participants," who include the "caregivers" (i.e., parents or guardians) of youth enrolled in DYCD programs and other adults who may interact with children.

- To get a sense of participation and attitudes toward reading, the PSA evaluation team asked each site to record attendance at each reading circle and administer a short survey to adult participants at the conclusion of each reading circle. Attendance records show that 89 participants across 10 sites participated in the reading circles. The majority of sites served between seven and thirteen adults; one site served fewer than five adults across the two reading circles. The adult participant survey asked participants about their attitudes toward reading, perceptions of the benefits of the reading circle, and suggestions for improvement. PSA received a total of 117 surveys across the 10 participating sites. Because it was not possible to accurately distinguish between surveys completed after the first and second reading circles for some sites, this report presents survey findings in the aggregate rather than attempt to assess potential changes in adults' attitudes and perceptions over time.
- PSA staff also administered an online survey to program directors about their roles and experiences supporting the implementation of Raising Readers at their sites. Program directors from eight of the 10 participating sites completed the survey.
- PSA conducted a focus group with program staff following the final Raising Readers training session. A total of nine staff members from eight programs participated in the focus group.

Evaluation Findings

This section describes findings from the evaluation and is organized by the research question topics: staff recruitment and retention, staff experiences, participant recruitment and retention, and participant experiences and perceived benefits. Both program directors and DYCD trainees generally described positive experiences in Raising Readers implementation and had few implementation challenges. Survey responses suggest that participants were satisfied with their experience and are interested in continuing the reading circles at their sites.

Identifying, Recruiting, and Retaining Staff

To recruit staff, program directors looked for staff who had an established interest in reading.

Program directors described a range of strategies to recruit program staff to participate in the implementation of Raising Readers at their sites. Five of the eight responding program directors explained that they selected staff members who had an established interest in reading. In addition to a love of reading, program directors prioritized staff who would be available to participate in all aspects of the Raising Readers program (i.e., all four professional development sessions, book shopping trip, and the city-wide event) as well as staff with a demonstrated commitment to working with families in their community. Responses to the program director and adult participant surveys can be found in this report's appendix.



During the focus group, program staff described their motivations for joining Raising Readers. In line with program directors' desire to recruit staff with an interest in reading, several program staff explained that they joined Raising Readers to help adults develop a love of reading that they can pass on to their children. One trainee, for example, said, "It was a way to give me insight on how I can get my parents to read more so that they can encourage their children to read." Similarly, a second staff member explained, "I read on my own, so I thought [Raising Readers] would be a good way to bring this to our site and involve parents and have them develop a love for reading."

For other staff, however, Raising Readers was an opportunity to develop their own love of reading. One staff member explained, "I was never that big of a reader. I wanted to meet other people who find enjoyment in reading and see if I could get anything from that."

Few program directors reported challenges related to recruiting and retaining program staff. When asked about challenges implementing Raising Readers at their program site, just one program director indicated that recruiting program staff was "somewhat challenging" and two program staff responded that keeping program staff engaged was "somewhat challenging."

Staff Experiences in Raising Readers

Program staff and program directors were, in general, very satisfied with the NBF professional development sessions. As part of the DYCD-NBF partnership, program staff trainees were expected to attend four professional development sessions. In addition, four of the eight responding program directors reported that they also attended at least one of the professional development sessions. Both program directors and program staff responded positively about the quality and utility of the professional development sessions. Of the program directors who attended the sessions, all four gave a rating of 4 or 5 (out of 5) when asked about the quality of the sessions. According to one program director, one of the benefits of the professional development session was being able to learn more about the NBF's commitment to literacy, its resources, and opportunities to share a love of reading with broad audiences.

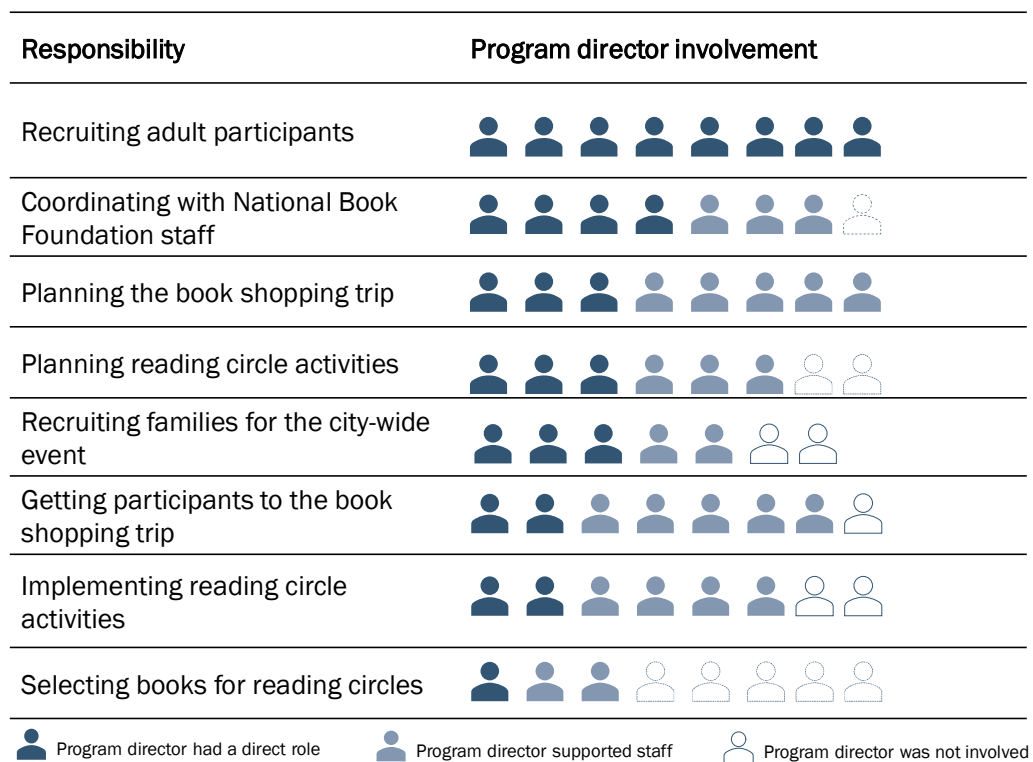


Both program directors and staff identified the materials used during the professional development sessions as a key factor in their assessment of the overall quality. Comments from both program directors and staff alike highlight the value of clearly presented expectations and guidance through documents for the implementation of the reading circles at participating program sites. Program staff, for example, appreciated that the printed materials clearly described how to prepare for the reading circles, including strategies for engaging adults through icebreaker activities and examples for guiding discussions about texts. One staff member said, "[Raising Readers staff] gave us guidelines to go by, which helped tremendously because I was like, 'Hey, how are going to go about doing this?' They walked us through it, which was great for us." Similarly, a program director praised the presentation of expectations for the reading circles and printed materials. The program director said, "The icebreakers were great, and the overview—including scope, expectations, and deliverables were clearly presented."

For program staff, a supportive program director was critical for the implementation of Raising Readers.

While program staff had the primary responsibility for activity logistics, recruiting participants, and supporting reading circles, implementing Raising Readers at each site required engagement from program directors. Program directors played direct or supporting roles in many aspects of implementing the program at participating sites (Exhibit 1). All program directors who completed a survey, for example, reported that they had a direct role in recruiting adult participants. Moreover, all but one program director indicated that they had a direct role or supporting role when coordinating with NBF staff.

Exhibit 1
Program directors' roles and responsibilities



Comments from program staff highlight the importance of a supportive program director for implementing Raising Readers activities. During the focus group, staff members stated that program directors helped secure space for the reading circles, recruit participants, advertise activities, and troubleshoot any issues that emerged over the course of the project. One staff member said, “Our site director was absolutely amazing. He made sure that during our sessions, we had the library [at the school that housed the DYCD site]. He made sure no one interrupted our meeting and that no other program was set for the library.” Another staff member described her program director’s efforts to make sure that the program would have access to the school building for the reading circles at a time when the host school would normally be closed.

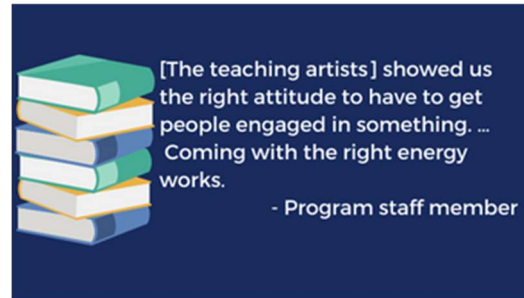
Although program staff primarily played a supporting role during the reading circles, many staff members expressed confidence in their ability to independently lead reading circles in the future.

By design, program staff were expected to co-facilitate the reading circles at their site with the NBF teaching artists. During the reading circles, staff stated that they not only provided support for the teaching artists but also participated in the discussions. One staff member described his role as “giving the first-hand perspective” on the books selected for each reading circle, which, at times, helped guide the conversation. He said, “We were the lead in the conversation after the teaching artists. That helped open the parents up to talking about some of their experiences or how they could relate to the story. It got the conversation going.” Program staff credited their training, the materials NBF provided, and the distribution of work during the reading circles—with NBF teaching artists primarily responsible for leading discussions—as contributors to the smooth implementation of the activities. One staff member, for example, said “[The NBF leaders] did an excellent job. They gave us the whole outline, what’s going to happen at each interval, when the food arrived—everything was happening right on time, so that was amazing.” Similarly, a second staff member said, “[The training] let me know what was going to go on. It was a step-by-step process, and it made things go a lot smoother.” Program staff members’ comments underscore the importance of both preparing staff and developing clear processes to implement the Raising Readers program.

Program staff who participated in the focus group stated that they appreciated their supporting roles during the reading circles because it provided them an opportunity to watch the NBF teaching artists model strategies to engage readers. Observing teaching artists model strategies contributed to program staff members’ confidence to lead similar activities on their own. One staff member, for example, said, “[Our teaching artist] was extremely enthusiastic and knowledgeable. She did her homework. That, for me, showed us how prepared you need to be to get a message across to someone who may be averse to reading.” Similarly, a second staff member explained that observing the teaching artist’s instructional style and engagement helped her feel confident in her ability to lead a reading circle in the future. She said, “I like the fact that she used probing questions. That was the biggest thing. She picked our brains to lead us in certain directions or bring us back when we got sidetracked.” According to program staff, the teaching artists provided good models for how to lead activities that they could apply to their own work at their sites.

Comments from program directors also suggest that the professional development sessions and interactions with teaching artists had a positive impact on staff members’ skills and capacities to lead activities. Three of the eight responding program directors noted that their staff developed stronger facilitation skills and independence, both in Raising Readers activities and in other activities staff led at the site. One program director said, “Staff are more energized and excited about the circles and applicable lessons they can apply to other groups.” Similarly, a second program director observed, “The program staff are more confident and assertive when leading other activities.” In sum, comments from both program directors and staff suggest promising developments in staff members’ ability to facilitate similar activities on their own.

Program directors and staff have begun to use strategies from Raising Readers in other programs at their site and expressed interest in continuing reading activities for adults and children. Program directors and staff discussed a number of ways that participating in Raising Readers has influenced programming at their sites. One program director, for example, reported that their site has begun to incorporate activities from Raising Readers training sessions into both program activities and internal staff meetings. According to program staff, the enthusiasm of the NBF teaching artists and the exposure to strategies to support reading had the biggest impact on their practice. One staff member said, “[The teaching artists] showed us the right attitude to have to get people engaged in something. ... Coming with the right energy works.” Similarly, two staff members cited Raising Readers’ program structure and resources as being important for their practice. For example, one staff member said, “[This program] gave me knowledge and insight on how to get my parents reading more and to get the children more involved in reading with the parents.”



Six of the eight survey directors indicated that they had plans to continue the reading circles and other directors indicated that their staff had begun to incorporate Raising Readers components into other activities. Two program directors, for example, noted that they are already incorporating elements of the reading circles into activities—for example, how to help readers make connections to books—and planning to start book clubs for parents during the summer months. Program staff also noted that they plan to incorporate reading activities into other program areas at their sites or implement book clubs.

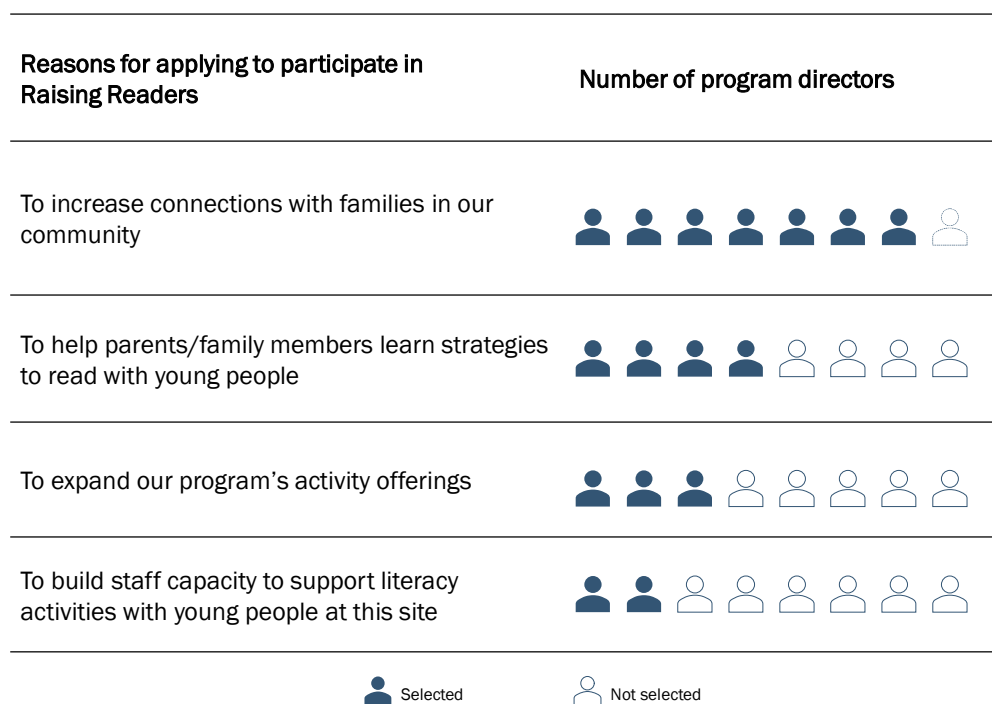
Resources—including funding for books, food, and other incentives—emerged as a potential barrier to continuing the reading circles. Program directors, for example, indicated that their sites could benefit from additional funding and book discounts or giveaways to support the reading circles. Some staff members have anticipated the need to think creatively about how to acquire resources to continue the reading circles. For example, rather than purchasing books, two program staff members discussed plans to work with local libraries to secure books for reading circles and book clubs at their sites.

Participant Recruitment and Engagement

Program director surveys and staff comments suggest that recruiting adult participants who had an established connection to the program site was a key strategy. When asked about their interest in bringing Raising Readers to their sites or participating as “trainees,” both program directors and program staff expressed an interest in engaging families and increasing adult participants’ interests in reading for pleasure. Among survey respondents, seven of the eight responding program directors identified “to increase connections with families in our community.” Program director responses also underscore program directors’ desire to encourage reading among youth participants. The second most-selected reason for applying to participate in Raising Readers—selected by four of the responding program directors—was to help parents and family members learn strategies to read with young people (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2

Program Directors' Reasons for Applying to Participate in Raising Readers



Note: Program directors could select up to two responses.

In line with program directors' goal to increase connections with families in their communities, strategies for recruiting adult participants emphasized recruiting families who had existing relationships with program staff. All responding program directors indicated that they recruited adults whose children participate in youth programs at the DYCD site.

Program staff described the benefits of recruiting adult participants with whom they had existing relationships, as this approach helped them not only recruit parents but encourage attendance at both reading circles. One staff member, for example, said, "I think the strongest strategy for me is talking to parents that I have a strong connection with. ... They know they're going to see me every single day, so they're not going to flake on me." Likewise, a second staff member said, "My first choice was to go to the parents that I have a friendship with. ... [The parents] were like, 'Okay, we'll come and we'll try [the reading circles] out. They never left.'" In contrast, one program director explained that not knowing all of the adult participants recruited for Raising Readers created challenges retaining adult participants between the first and second reading circle. The staff member explained, "Some of the parents were recruited by my program director. I had no connection with them, and they didn't show up. The parents that I recruited did show up because we have a connection."

While recruiting adult participants who had established connections to programs aided recruitment, their schedules emerged as the greatest barrier to retaining adult participants between the first and second

reading circles. Across all programs, 70 percent of participants participated in both the first and second reading circles. Retention rates, however, varied between programs and ranged from 42 percent of parents to 100 percent of parents. Four of the 10 programs had retention rates greater than 75 percent; three programs had retention rates between 66 and 72 percent of parents (Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3
Reading Circle Retention Rates, by Program

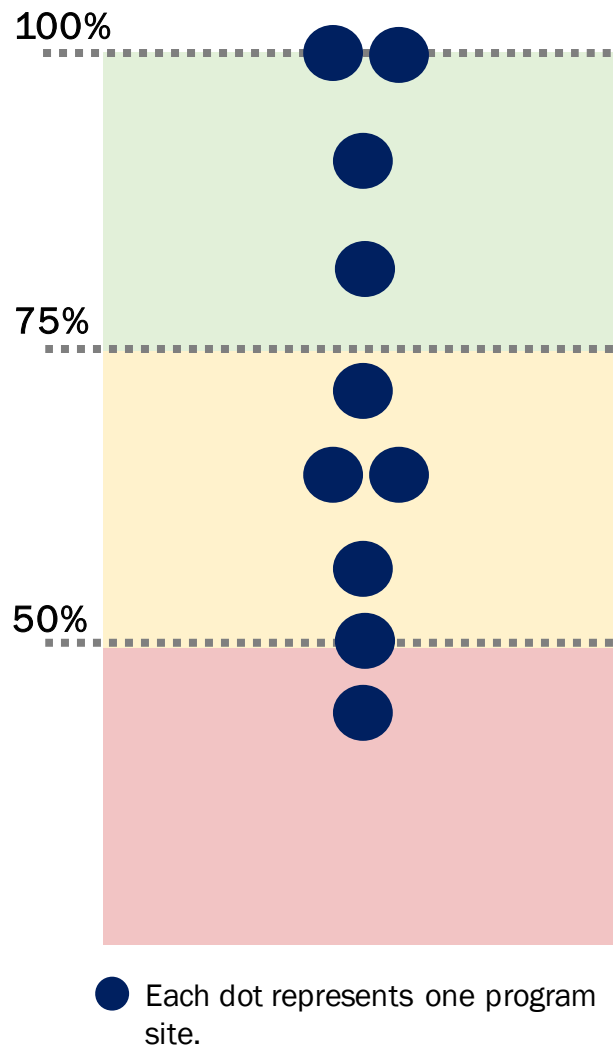


Exhibit reads: Two program sites retained 100 percent of parents between the first and second reading circle. Two program sites retained between 75 and 99 percent of parents between the first and second reading circle.

Program directors and staff members across sites generally agreed that the biggest challenge to participant retention was scheduling. Parents' work schedules and personal commitments sometimes meant that they could not attend one of the reading circles or other Raising Readers activities. To reduce potential barriers, some program staff worked with participants to schedule reading circles at times when they did not have to work, such as weekday mornings or on weekends. In contrast, some sites offered

reading circles on weekday evenings. One staff member also encouraged adults who had to care for children to enroll them in the site's youth programs so that the adult participants and their children could participate in activities at their program sites at the same time.

Participant Experiences and Perceived Benefits of Raising Readers

Adult participants held positive attitudes towards reading for pleasure. Overall, adult participants responded positively to survey items designed to understand their attitudes towards reading. Across the first and second reading circles, the majority of adult participants agreed or strongly agreed that it is important for their child to learn to enjoy reading. Ninety-three percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that reading is a relaxing and enjoyable activity, and 82 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed visiting bookstores or public libraries.

Participants responded positively to the reading circles and expressed interest in continuing the activity. The overwhelming majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the reading circles provided a space to talk about books with other adults (96 percent), helped them see reading as an enjoyable activity for themselves and their children (96 percent), and gave them ideas for how to model good reading habits for their children (93 percent). Eighty-seven percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the reading circles gave them ideas for reading-related activities to do with their children.

When asked for ideas for improvement, many respondents used the space to express satisfaction with the reading circle or share their interest in continuing the activity. Fourteen survey respondents across the first and second reading circles expressed an interest in having more reading circles and meeting more consistently. One participant, for example, wrote, "[The reading circle] is awesome, and I wish we can meet more consistently—every two weeks—to talk about the books and help us build the habit of reading."

When asked about their reading habits after participating in the reading circle, 76 percent of participants across the first and second reading circle thought that they would read for pleasure more than usual. All participants said that they would recommend the reading circles to other adults.

Both program directors and staff members described several benefits of Raising Readers for participants, including building stronger family connections to program sites, connections to other adults in the

PARTICIPANTS' VIEWS ON READING



The overwhelming majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that it is important for their child to learn to enjoy reading.

Ninety-three percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that reading is a relaxing and enjoyable activity.



Eighty-two percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoy visiting bookstores or libraries.

If given a choice, approximately two-thirds of participants would rather read a book than watch television.



More than three-fourths of participants said that they thought they would read more after participating in a reading circle.

community, and interacting with their children around books. Program directors and staff perceived a number of benefits of Raising Readers for participants. Program directors and staff, for example, observed that participants were excited about reading the books selected for reading circles and engaging in conversations about books. One program director said, “Some parents made text-to-self connections (i.e., connected the books to adult participants’ personal experiences) and shared with the group. One parent felt that, through personal sharing, she felt a bit more connected with the other parents.” Similarly, staff members described high levels of engagement during the reading circles and a willingness among participants to share their views of the book. Participants also share connections to other books they had read. One staff member, for example, explained, “A lot of our parents took down notes, and they were searching for other books—like recommendations from other parents.”

Some program directors observed more connections between participants and their children around books. They learned, for example, that Raising Readers participants were engaging with their children around books. One program director, for example, said that one participant and her daughter read parts of the reading circle book together and talked about it. Similarly, another program director observed that the youth whose parents participated in Raising Readers expressed an interest in what their parents were doing at the site. Finally, a third program director organized a trip to a movie theater as a “tie-in” activity to the reading Circles and encouraged parents to engage in a similar activity with their children. The director explained, “Parents are expressing a desire to continue the circles and incorporating their children. We are planning a trip to “Ready Player One” as a reward for parents and [we are] encouraging parents to do the same with their children (read the book before seeing the movie adaptation).”

Recommendations

Findings from this evaluation suggest that the DYCD-NBF partnership supported Raising Readers program had a positive launch at participating program sites. Although some sites experienced challenges related to retaining adult participants between the two reading circles, both participating program staff and parents were engaged in conversations about books, which appeared to have influenced their enjoyment of reading for pleasure. Some program directors and staff members have indicated that they plan to continue the reading circles—in some form—at their sites. We offer the following recommendations to build on the initial progress of Raising Readers implementation.

- **Program directors and program staff must work jointly to implement reading circles at their sites.** Comments from program staff highlight the importance of an engaged program director for the success of the Raising Readers program. Program directors, for example, helped staff secure space for the reading circle, materials needed for reading circles, and support participant recruitment and retention. However, the program director should be careful not to take control of implementation. Instead, program directors and staff should work together to plan, recruit for, and deliver reading activities at their respective sites.
- **Increase opportunities for program staff to lead aspects of the reading circles to build capacity.** Comments from program staff suggest that they were satisfied with their roles during reading circles and that they valued the opportunities to learn from teaching artists. To ensure that program staff are adequately prepared to continue reading circles on their own, staff need opportunities to apply what they have learned in professional development sessions. NBF

teaching artists, for example, may provide opportunities for program staff to lead parts of the book discussions or provide coaching to help staff learn strategies to engage parents or facilitate conversations about texts.

- **Think creatively about where to source materials, including books for reading circles.**

Program directors commonly listed funding and books as the supports needed to continue the reading circles at their sites. Where funds are limited, program directors and staff may consider alternatives to purchasing books for adults and children. Two sites, for example, planned to use established partnerships with local libraries to acquire books for reading activities. In addition to libraries, local book banks or used bookstores may also be options to get materials for reading circles and book clubs at sites.

APPENDIX

Program Director Survey Results

Exhibit 1
Reasons for Applying to Participate in Raising Readers
(N=8)

	Number of program directors
To increase connections with families in our community	7
To help parents/family members learn strategies to read with young people	4
To expand our program’s activity offerings	3
To build staff capacity to support literacy	2
To work with the National Book Foundation	0
To receive additional materials (e.g., books) to support activities at this site	0
Other	0

Note: Program directors could select up to two responses.

Exhibit 2
Program Director Roles
(N=8)

	Number of program directors		
	N/A: I was not involved	I supported program staff	I had a direct role
Recruiting adult participants	0	0	8
Coordinating with National Book Foundation staff	1	3	4
Planning the book shopping trip	0	5	3
Recruiting participants for the bookstore shopping trip	0	5	3
Planning reading circle activities	2	3	3
Recruiting families for the city-wide event	2	2	3
Getting participants to the bookstore shopping trip (e.g., coordinating travel)	1	5	2
Implementing reading circle activities	2	4	2
Selecting books for reading circles	5	2	1
Other	0	0	0

Exhibit 3
Program Director Participation in
Raising Readers Professional Development Sessions
(N=8)

	Number of program directors
Yes	4
No	4

Exhibit 4
**Program Director Ratings of Raising
 Readers Professional Development Sessions**
(N=4)

	Number of program directors
1 (Poor)	0
2	0
3 (Okay)	0
4	2
5 (Excellent)	2

Exhibit 5
Sources of Recruitment for Adult Participants
(N=8)

	Number of program directors
Recruiting caregivers whose children participate in youth programs	8
Word of mouth	4
Posting information in local community centers or organizations (e.g., NYCHA facilities; houses of worship)	2
Recruiting adults who participate in other programs (e.g., Adult Literacy, Fatherhood Initiative)	1
Other	1
Web-based advertising (e.g., social media, agency website)	0

Exhibit 6
Challenges to Implementing Raising Readers
(N=8)

	Number of program directors			
	Very challenging	Somewhat challenging	Not a challenge	N/A: I was not involved
Coordinating with National Book Foundation staff	0	0	8	0
Recruiting program staff	0	1	7	0
Scheduling reading circles	0	1	7	0
Keeping program staff engaged	0	2	6	0
Planning the bookstore shopping trip	0	0	6	2
Retaining participants	0	5	3	0
Encouraging attendance in reading circles	0	5	3	0
Planning and delivering reading circle activities	0	2	3	3
Recruiting families for the city-wide event	1	4	2	1
Recruiting participants	1	6	1	0
Other	0	0	0	0

Exhibit 7
Strategies for Implementing Reading Circles
(N=8)

	Number of program directors
Inviting book authors to meet with parents	8
Scheduling reading circles during the week	7
Working with bilingual staff and/or teaching artists to facilitate reading circles	4
Choosing books based on participants' interests	3
Inviting participants to lead parts of the reading circles	2
Other	2
Scheduling reading circles on weekend days	1

Exhibit 8
Program Director Reports on Using Strategies
from Raising Readers in Other Activities at Their Sites
(N=8)

	Number of program directors
Yes	6
No	2

Exhibit 9
Program Director Plans to Continue Reading Circles
(N=8)

	Number of program directors
Yes	6
Not sure	2
No	0

Adult Participant Survey Results

Exhibit 1
Adult Participants' Attitudes Towards Reading, in Percent
(N=115)

	Percent of adult participants				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
It is important for my child to learn to enjoy reading.	2%	0%	3%	18%	77%
Reading is a relaxing and enjoyable activity.	4	1	2	28	65
I enjoy visiting bookstores or the public library	2	2	14	38	44
Given a choice, I would rather read a book than watch TV.	3	9	23	47	18
I don't have the time to read books for entertainment	13	47	14	23	3

Exhibit 2
Adult Participants' Perceptions of Reading Circles, in Percent
(N=115)

	Percent of adult participants				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
Provided a space to talk about books with other adults.	2%	1%	2%	28%	67%
Gave me ideas for how to model good reading habits for my child	1	1	5	29	64
Helped me see reading as an enjoyable activity both for me and my child	1	0	3	34	62
Gave me ideas for reading-related activities to do with my child	1	3	9	37	50

Exhibit 3
Parents' Expectations for Pleasure Reading
in the Month After the Reading Circle
(N=107)

	Percent of adult participants
I will read more than usual	77%
I will read about the same	22
I will read less than usual	1

Exhibit 4
Adult Participants Who Would Recommend
the Reading Circles to Other Adults
(N= 108)

	Percent of adult participants
Yes	100%
No	0

Exhibit 5
Languages Spoken at Home by Adult Participants
(N= 108)

	Percent of adult participants
English	72%
Chinese	17
Spanish	8
Arabic	2
Other	1
French	0
Haitian Creole	0



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