



GROWING READERS TOGETHER SOUTHWEST COLORADO

EVALUATION & OUTCOME REPORT
DECEMBER 2021



Growing Readers Together (GRT) is a program of the Colorado State Library under the Colorado Department of Education. GRT partners with public library systems across the state of Colorado to engage Family, Friend, & Neighbor (FFN) childcare providers through enhanced focus on early literacy. Thanks to generous support from the Buell Foundation, GRT provides grant funding to local libraries to improve and increase early literacy programming.

The GRT program leverages the Colorado Public Libraries Early Literacy Framework to support grantees in development of early literacy services, while also giving local libraries the flexibility to use funds to best meet local community needs.

The framework speaks to the evolving understanding of early learning in libraries in Colorado and the important role public libraries in the state play in community-engaged early education efforts. The framework is an important aspect of the GRT program because it offers a common vision that ensures alignment across the state over time to address the fundamentally important area of early childhood literacy. Importantly, the framework supports the notion that early literacy is not “just” letters and reading. Research supports that school readiness is multifaceted and not limited to early reading and mathematics skills, but rather includes a wide range of components including executive function skills, curiosity, language, socioemotional well-being, motor skills, and health.¹

The overall outcome goals of the GRT program are:

- Friends, Family, and Neighbor child care providers (FFN caregivers) in Colorado will have the skills, confidence and resources to engage the children in their care with early literacy materials and activities daily.
- Public library staff in Colorado will have strategies to connect FFN caregivers in their area with early literacy services.
- CSL will develop state-level infrastructure for early literacy support to FFN caregivers and the children in their care.
- Children under six throughout the state will be

exposed to language and literacy-rich experiences in informal childcare settings and at the library.

This report highlights how a cluster of five libraries in the southwest corner of Colorado used GRT funding and program support to improve and expand early literacy programming. The five participating libraries were: Pine River Library in Bayfield, Ignacio Community Library, Mancos Public Library, Cortez Public Library, and the Ruby M. Sisson Public Library in Pagosa Springs. Key informant interviews were conducted with staff from each library to inform this report. Staff interviewed were involved with early literacy programming at their respective library and were involved with managing GRT grant funds and programming. Kate Brunner, Regional Library Specialist, and Heather Hawk, Executive Director of the Early Childhood Council of La Plata County were also interviewed, making a total of seven key informant interviews conducted. All interviews took place during the summer of 2021 (June-September).

The Importance of Early Literacy

The importance of early literacy for young children cannot be overestimated. Research shows that children who start behind stay behind, and early gaps in understanding, especially those in literacy and math, tend to be sustained or widened over time.² The term “school readiness” is often used to assess early literacy skills among young children, and research supports including children’s cognitive abilities, social and emotional development, and ability to conduct oneself accordingly in a classroom setting. Of note is how Head Start defines school readiness: “children possess the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success in school and for later learning and life.”³ There are myriad definitions of school readiness, but

¹ https://bayareadiscoverymuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/SchoolReadinessLitReview_Issuu.pdf

² <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1016152.pdf>

³ <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/head-start-approach-school-readiness-overview#:~:text=The%20Head%20start%20Approach%20to,essential%20ingredients%20of%20school%20readiness>

most important is to have an expansive definition of early literacy and early literacy programming to effectively increase school readiness among children. A helpful framework for thinking about what early literacy programming should entail and what school readiness looks like is the evidence-based Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, which includes five domains:

Approaches to learning

- Executive function
- Curiosity, interest, and motivation

Cognition

- Scientific reasoning
- Math knowledge and skills

Language and literacy

- Language development
- Literacy

Social and emotional development

- Prosocial behaviors
- Self-regulation

Motor development and health

- Gross and fine motor development
- Sleep, nutrition, and toxic stress

The Importance of Friend, Family, & Neighbor (FFN) Caregivers

Data show that it is important to have a “mixed delivery system,” in ensuring all of Colorado’s children have access to high quality care.⁴ A mixed delivery system is one that provides supportive, high-quality early childhood care and education wherever children are cared for, including licensed family and center-based child care programs, public schools, informal family/friend/neighbor (FFN) care and other community-based organizations. The definition of mixed-delivery consistently includes informal care environments and community-based educational spaces like libraries, but the air time or emphasis on the role these informal pieces of the system play varies dramatically. GRT specifically emphasizes FFN caregivers and the important role

they play in building early literacy skills among Colorado’s children.

In truth, more than 4 million three to four-year-olds in the U.S. are not enrolled in formal preschool.⁵ In 2013, about 142,000 children younger than 6 years old took part in some type of unlicensed child care, with an additional 160,000 kids receiving care from a stay-at-home parent. In Southwest Colorado specifically, FFN caregivers are especially important because there is a lack of capacity for early childhood formal licensed care. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was already a shortage of formal, licensed childcare options, as well as a shortage in the local early childhood education workforce, according to Heather Hawke, Executive Director of the Early Childhood Council of La Plata County. When the pandemic hit, the impact of closing down public education and public preschools put a real strain on the private care sector—most childcare providers didn’t close for long amounts of time like the schools did. Many licensed childcare centers and home providers tried to stay open throughout the pandemic, and served a lot of the essential workforce. At the same time, families were fearful, so some families took their kids out of care, and teachers (after the first year) really started to feel the fatigue of everything that came with offering childcare during a pandemic. There was an early childhood education workforce exodus in March of 2021, a year after the pandemic began.



⁴ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5679be9605f8e24bd8be467a/t/6079ccf58b44a403c94bc3cc/1618595066684/FINAL+-+ECLC+Areas+of+Opportunity+2021+Report.pdf>

⁵ <https://usafacts.org/articles/more-than-4-million-34-year-olds-are-not-enrolled-in-preschool/>

In summary, FFN and other informal caregivers are essential to improving early literacy in Southwest Colorado, especially in the wake of COVID-19. In the region, all kinds of people are providing informal care. Children who are not exposed to quality early childhood programming of some kind are less likely to be prepared for kindergarten. A large number of children aren't ready when the time comes, and it correlates to children who have not been exposed to any formal programming for early literacy skills building. In Southwest Colorado, the lower hanging fruit is to build capacity for caregivers and parents to provide more formal programming than to get all kids enrolled in formal licensed care, and GRT does just that through partnering with local libraries to provide high-quality programming and to target FFN caregivers.

FFN caregivers are already doing a great job and filling important gaps in licensed childcare facilities in Southwest Colorado, and they're often looking for support and packaged content to help them provide high-quality early literacy programming to the children they care for. Local libraries are well-positioned to serve FFN caregivers, and GRT funds have helped motivate and equip them to do so. Now, providing high-quality early literacy programming and engaging and targeting a wide range of caregivers, including FFN caregivers, has become part of these libraries' ongoing processes and informs how they provide services and package early literacy materials.

The Importance of Local Libraries

Local libraries have a long history in the U.S. and play an important role in the community, especially in small, rural communities. Despite what you may hear about the decline of the local library, two thirds of Americans report high or medium engagement with their library.⁶ This report shares details from libraries who received GRT funding in the following Southwest Colorado towns: Bayfield, Pagosa Springs, Mancos, Cortez, and Ignacio—all of which are located in rural counties and have a total population under 9,000. Research has demonstrated that libraries help build healthy communities,⁷ and in each of these towns, the library is an important community hub—one of not-a-lot of physical spaces for anyone and everyone to be. The five participating local libraries fill important gaps in services and collaborate with other service providers to deliver early literacy programming and meet the needs of the community.

⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/03/13/summary-of-findings-4/>

⁷ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2017/03/30/how-public-libraries-help-build-healthy-communities/>



Mancos Public Library Outdoor Early Literacy Play Space

Libraries are welcoming and foster a sense of neutrality and trust—90 percent of adults think of public libraries as “welcoming and friendly places.”⁷⁷ These inherent characteristics make libraries an ideal vehicle through which to reach FFN and other caregivers to increase high-quality early literacy programming for children. GRT funding has increased the capacity of each of the participating libraries in Southwest Colorado to provide early literacy programming and enabled them to expand programming to better meet community needs and reach and engage FFN caregivers.

GRT Funding in Southwest Colorado

The following sections of this report highlight specific ways each of the five participating libraries in Southwest Colorado has leveraged GRT funding, as well as common themes that emerged from key informant interviews that demonstrate how the libraries across the region are aligned in their approaches to early literacy and use of GRT funds. Overall, it’s clear that GRT funds have expanded the capacity of the participating libraries to effectively meet the needs of their community with regard to early literacy programming. What follows is a deep dive into the impact that GRT has had in southwest Colorado.

GRT funding and FFN caregivers

Although library staff interviewed shared that they have historically worked with a variety of caregivers (i.e. babysitters, grandparents), the GRT program and its emphasis on FFN caregivers helped them to more specifically consider how early literacy programming catered not only to parents, but to a wide variety of caregivers in a position to increase early literacy skills among children. In turn, GRT has (a) encouraged library staff to ensure programming is broad enough for anyone working with kids to leverage, and (b) expanded the way they do program recruitment and outreach to target a wider range of caregivers.

In general early literacy programming itself is not developed solely for parents, and there were not major shifts in programming needed in order to target FFN caregivers. However, key informant interviews with library staff shed light on a nuanced change in program delivery as a result of GRT funding: because library staff are more aware of FFN caregivers, they often

check to ensure that their programming is inclusive. Examples of this include not assuming that program participants are parents during program delivery (both in-person and virtually), using examples of FFN caregivers during program delivery (e.g. mentioning how a babysitter could leverage an early literacy kit), and simply acknowledging that anyone caring for a child likely wants to do what’s best for them and can benefit from knowing how to engage kiddos to increase literacy skills.

In terms of program recruitment and outreach, the GRT program encouraged library staff to think critically about who is taking care of our community’s children, collectively, and raised awareness about the important contribution FFN caregivers provide. Library staff are always trying to determine the best way to reach those coming into the library, and also to get others in the door. Each library does a lot of informal recruitment—connecting with folks who are already in the library—by simply walking up to them, or by placing grab-and-go literacy kits front and center in the physical library space. Again, as a result of GRT funding and raised awareness about FFN caregivers, programming is not explicitly marketed to “parents,” and library staff make a point to engage anyone and everyone visiting the library with children.

“There are a lot of babysitters that come in, lots of grandparents who help take care of the kids on certain days and will bring the kids in during that time. We want to engage them with the programming and skills-building we have to offer!” - Summer Sanford, Pine River Library in Bayfield

Most libraries also do intentional outreach, including use of social media, earned media in local newspapers/radio stations, newsletters, flyers, and announcements on the library website. Although libraries have had some success with social media and traditional media promotion, they admit that word of mouth usually works best. Leveraging partnerships with other community organizations who work with parents and FFN caregivers to disseminate program information is paramount. Traditional and non-traditional community partnerships help enable regional libraries to connect with, engage, and recruit FFN caregivers and families to participate in early literacy programming.



Updated library space in Cortez

Overview of early literacy programming and how GRT funds were used

There were four main themes that emerged from the cluster of five libraries when discussing early literacy programming and how GRT grant funds were used:

1. Libraries place an emphasis on building capacity of parents and FFN caregivers to interact with children in ways that increase kindergarten readiness and early literacy skills

While each library has a storytime that takes place at the library and is led by library staff, they also all implement programming designed for parents and FFN caregivers to lead themselves, and provide training for adults on how to effectively leverage the resources they provide to work with kids. Much of this training is available in-person or virtually, and often libraries have purchased evidence-based programming to train FFN caregivers and parents (e.g. [Lena Parenting Program](#), [MotherRead](#), [Vroom](#)). This is important because it extends the impact of the library programming outside of the library walls. Parents and FFN caregivers can take what they learn at the library and work with children at home on their own time. This includes not only guiding adults on how they can interact with children to increase early literacy, but also involves raising awareness about the expansive nature of early literacy—the idea that it is more than simply reading, writing, and letters.

“We place a big emphasis on helping caregivers understand how their children learn and empowering them to take what we have at the library and understand that they are doing this stuff all of the time anyway—they don’t need a lot of extra things to interact with their children and we can guide them on how to be more intentional during interactions with the kids.” - Josie Snow, Ruby M. Sisson Library in Pagosa Springs.

2. Expansive early literacy programming that encapsulates more than simply reading with kids

Each library contact emphasized that early literacy skills are more than simply reading the words on a page, and this is reflected in the early literacy programming. Early literacy is also fine motor skills (e.g. holding a pencil), imaginative play, engaging kids in dialogue, singing, doing arts and crafts, science projects, STEM projects, etc. Libraries provide materials for art projects, music, puppets and imaginative play, tips for reading *with* a child and

not just to them, guidance on how to engage in meaningful conversation with children to increase emotional literacy, and more.

“Don’t assume that people know what we know—people think early literacy is just reading, and it’s not!” - Marsha Vining, Ignacio Library

3. Creating programming that is accessible to parents and FFN caregivers on their own time—eliminating the barrier of having to be physically present in the library on a given day and time

Although each library does host programming on-site (e.g. weekly storytime), many make a concerted effort to create programming that is not locked in to a specific place and time. This includes virtual programming (online classes and training, podcasts, resources posted online), but also grab-and-go early literacy kits that people can take home, and programming delivered on the radio for those who do not have internet access at home. Many also leverage library space outside of the physical building, allowing for participation outside of traditional library hours. For example, one library hosts an outdoor story walk, displaying different pages of a picture book that are spread out along a walking path that goes around the library outside and including a craft folks can pick up at the end to take home. Another library created an outdoor early literacy classroom, maximizing an area next to the river to create a physical space that is accessible to the community all the time.

4. The work is community-driven and collaborative: each library has strong ties and partnerships with other community organizations/entities

Each of these libraries is generally under-resourced and located in a small, rural, community. Working with community partners allows them to make efforts go further and extend their reach. Almost every library in the region works closely with the local school district and local preschools/headstarts, donating books, hosting storytime at the schools, and/or offering grab-and-go early literacy kits on-site. Many also work with local pediatrician’s offices, and some host storytime at the local farmer’s market, on the local radio station,

and in partnership with other local nonprofits that serve children and families.

Strong consideration of local community need

The early literacy programming in each of the libraries in the region is very community-driven—library staff make a concerted effort to take into consideration the needs and conditions in the local community when putting their programming together. This last school year has been so disruptive with COVID-19, libraries have made an effort to ensure programming is doable, easy to implement, and something caregivers will actually use. Library staff heard from residents that FFN caregivers and families like to have access to resources and materials they can implement with their children on their own time, as well as on-site at the library. Programming at each library is a mix of grab-and-go/virtual resources and in-person programming. Being outside in nature and taking advantage of the environment of the region—the mountains, and trail access (hiking, running, biking), river rafting, hunting, fishing, etc.—is a big part of the regional culture. One library is actively partnering with San Juan Mountain Institute to implement joint programming that merges learning about environmental conservation with early literacy.

As mentioned above, there is a lack of capacity for formal, licensed early childhood care in Southwest Colorado—and a local need for early literacy programming through non-traditional educational settings, like the library. This was the case even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The population of children ages 0-2 is just over 1,000⁸, while the licensed capacity for children in that age range is only 193 slots⁹. Additionally, data show that 65% of households with children under 6 have all parents working. The lack of capacity for formal licensed care is due in part to a shortage of qualified early child care workforce, which is a result of a combination of low wages and high cost of living, as well as employee burnout.

Data show that 29% of the population of La Plata County have high housing costs, which is defined as paying 30% or more of income for housing, and is higher than the national rate of 23.8%. In Archuleta County and Montezuma County 27% and 24% have

⁸ [KIDS COUNT & Data | Colorado Children's Campaign \(coloradokids.org\)](https://www.coloradokids.org/)

⁹ [Colorado Information Marketplace | Colorado Information Marketplace | data.colorado.gov](https://data.colorado.gov/)

high housing costs, respectively¹⁰. Early literacy programming at the library is all the more needed in Southwest Colorado post-pandemic. Perhaps as a result of the pandemic and increased opportunity to work remotely, a number of communities in the region have had a huge increase in young families. There were already long waitlists for preschools and early childcare facilities, and lists are even longer today as some facilities have closed their doors and/or limited number of students.

“We are inundated with little people!” - Erin Bohm, Mancos Library

There are not a lot of public institutions with facilities in the region—each of the five libraries acknowledges that their facility is a hub for the community and often fills gaps in services, including access to computers and the internet. Percentage of the population with a computer at home and internet access is 76% in La Plata County, 65% in Montezuma County, and 77% in Archuleta County, all below the national rate of 80%¹¹. One library’s virtual discovery time is recorded and left on their website—people can access them online whenever they have internet access (even while at the library), and at a time that works for them. Some libraries even have notary services and faxing, and small businesses come often to leverage resources. At one library, County Commissioners have weekly office hours, which was something the library created and pushed for. The library also serves as a reliable place for intergenerational exchange, something that isn’t really happening in many other community spaces.

“It’s important to have a curated, safe space that organizes visitation into positive, literacy-based activities and points people into positive acceptance that they are there, rather than trying to kick them out of this space.” - Julie Hartline, Mancos Library

Across the region, FFN caregivers and families come from a variety of racial, ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds. Consistently getting community feedback and providing culturally appropriate programming is of utmost importance, and libraries were encouraged to do so when planning how to spend GRT funds. Each of the five participating libraries understands that for low-income families, the library is often

one of few places to access educational resources, internet, and to just spend time. All of the regional libraries acknowledge that there are people who don’t have a lot of money and that the library is there to serve them. Participation in the GRT program further illuminated the need to cater to those caring for children who do not have extra funds to purchase books and educational materials. The pandemic brought about an opportunity for the Cortez library to eliminate fines for people under the age of 18, something they’d wanted to do for a while, and they are working on eliminating fines completely. Getting rid of fines for children helps FFN caregivers and families by eliminating the fear of incurring a fine due to overdue books that kids check out.

“The library is a space for everyone and it’s our job to have resources for a wide range of people.” - Josie Snow, Ruby M. Sisson Library in Pagosa Springs

Additionally, one community’s schools have been on the state’s improvement list, so they’ve had a strong focus on school readiness, knowing that there are a lot of low-income families in their community (roughly 80% free and reduced price lunch) who often don’t have the resources, skills, or confidence to interact with kids to increase kindergarten readiness. Many libraries mentioned that when choosing curriculum, books, puppets, and even imagery for murals on the wall, they do a “check” with local Native American tribal members for culturally appropriate imagery and programming. In one case, a library didn’t include owls in a wall mural because the Ute tribe sees the owl as a bad omen.

A focus on community partnership and engagement

As stated above, partner collaboration allows these rural libraries to make efforts go further, maximize funds, and extend program reach, and this is not lost on library staff—the extent to which libraries in the region are engaging community partners is unprecedented. The early literacy programming in each of the libraries in the region is collaborative; many have strong traditional and non-traditional partners with whom they work regularly to deliver programming. Although it can be difficult to reach FFN caregivers and families of young children who could benefit from library pro-

¹⁰ <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>

¹¹ <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>

gramming, partnering with other organizations and entities who serve that same target population is one way to extend their reach.

Almost all libraries partner consistently with the local school district, preschools, and pediatricians offices. Partnerships with local schools and preschools were always mentioned, but, “Being in the library is different from being in the school—not everything has to be a lesson to be a ‘teachable moment’. The library doesn’t have to be ‘lesson driven’—libraries have more flexibility in terms of the programming they can offer, which is an asset.” - Josie Snow, Pagosa Library. Importantly, libraries in the region have many non-traditional partners with whom they engage to promote and implement early literacy programming. Key community partners include: environmental conservation groups (e.g. San Juan Mountains Association), nonprofits that serve children and families (e.g. Family Center), local farmers

markets, youth alliance groups, local Native American Tribes (e.g. Southern Ute), local community centers (e.g. ElHi) and BOCES. Furthermore, one library makes a point to have at least one staff member on different community boards and advisory councils at all of the schools to stay connected to what’s happening in the community.

“In a small rural area, you cannot underestimate community connections. Generally, with a children's library, people are willing and ready to help. Don’t hesitate to ask! Look for community support.” - Julie Hartline, Mancos Library

“Lots of people have done a lot of different jobs [in a small, rural community], so there is naturally more community connection because people just know each other.” - Erin Bohm, Mancos Library



Detail of the mural in Cortez

SUMMARY OF GRT IN SOUTHWEST COLORADO & IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

Overall, GRT funding in five libraries in Southwest Colorado has increased knowledge about the expansive nature of effective early literacy programming and aligned work across the region, raised awareness about the importance of FFN caregivers, and built the capacity of libraries to effectively outreach FFN caregivers and families to implement inclusive early literacy programming that meets local needs. Library staff intentionally examine and consider community conditions and gaps in services when designing and implementing early literacy programming. Community engagement and partnerships were consistently leveraged by GRT grantees in the region, as were the libraries' physical spaces (indoors and outdoors), which are especially invaluable in smaller, rural communities that have fewer shared spaces in general.

During key informant interviews, each library was asked about key takeaways from their GRT work and early literacy programming, with an eye towards replicability in other local libraries. Based on the work of these five libraries in Southwest Colorado, public libraries in other regions of the state who are interested in expanding early literacy programming to FFN caregivers in their community should consider how to create and maintain non-traditional community partnerships to reach and recruit FFN caregivers and families to participate in programming, as well through which to deliver programming to “meet people where they are”. Virtual and in-person programming is important, especially in light of the pandemic, but not everyone has internet and/or computer access. Creating programming that builds the capacity and confidence of adults to engage children in early literacy skills-building activities on their own time—in the library, outdoors, and at home—is imperative. The impact of continual community engagement and consideration of community needs, and how the library can leverage resources to fill gaps in community services, cannot be underestimated. The more supportive to the community the local library is, the more effectively it will be able to reach and engage with FFN caregivers and families to deliver high-quality early literacy programming, and in turn, increase school readiness among Colorado’s children.

