

Transcript of Video Podcast Interview
Maryland SRCL Team – “The 50 Book Initiative”

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Interviewer: Jobi Lawrence, SRCL and CLSD TA Liaison

Participants:

Kathleen Maher-Baker: Maryland Department of Education

Jodi Smith: Washington County Public Schools

Jobi: Welcome and thank you for being with us today. I'm Jobi Lawrence with the SRCL of CLSD Technical Assistance Team. And in this podcast, I'll be joined by Kathleen Maher-Baker from the Maryland Department of Education and Jodi Smith, from Washington County Public Schools. We're going to be discussing family engagement. And before we get started, I wanted to remind everyone that this presentation contains examples and resources, materials that are provided for the user's convenience. The inclusion of any material is not intended to reflect its importance, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed or products or services. These materials may contain the views and recommendations of the presenters as well as any hypertext links, contact addresses and websites to information created and maintained by other public and private organizations. The opinions expressed in any of these materials do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the US Department of Education. The US Department of Education does not come or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness or completeness of any outside information included in these materials. And then mentions of specific programs or products. And these examples are designed to provide clear understanding, and they're not meant as endorsements. Now let's jump in and get started.

Jobi: Kathleen and Jodi, I'm going to turn the mic over to you. Could you please start by introducing yourselves and explaining your role?

Kathleen: Hi, I'm Kathleen Maher-Baker I'm the ELA specialist with the Maryland State Department of Education.

Jodi: And I'm Jodi Smith. I am the Secondary Literacy Achievement Coordinator for Washington County Public Schools. In my role, I work closely with our middle school and high school intervention teachers and also with classroom teachers when they have striving readers.

Kathleen: But you're also supporting your Pre-K program here today.

Jodi: I am. The initiative we're going to talk about is actually about Pre-K. Our supervisor who would have been the perfect person to talk about this, took a job in another county. So I'm going to share a little bit about her work during the last two years.

Kathleen: And it's important too, because the grant is birth to grade 12. And I think Jodi and I both agree that with the grant, you have to have an understanding of what's happening in all levels. So it isn't just about, in my case, and in Jodi's case, about secondary, but it's about where

are those students and how do they get to us. And with the grant, we want to make sure that we have that clear understanding of birth to grade 12 so that we can treat the entire student.

Jobi: Excellent, thank you. So Kathleen, would you provide a brief overview of the SRCL Project?

Kathleen: So, we have applied for the SRCL Grants, we were awarded \$45 million. We encouraged districts to participate, all the districts in Maryland to participate and encourage them to find projects that worked for the population of students from birth through grade 12 as the grant states, and so we were excited to read about a lot of different things that different districts were working on. In Maryland, we have 24 districts, and of the 24 districts, we encouraged all to apply. And all of the districts applied and all the districts were awarded funds.

Jobi: Super, thank you so much. I understand that you're here today to talk to us about family engagement and more specifically about the 50 books project. So Kathleen, do you want to describe one of the strategies or approaches that's proven effective in the SRCL implementation for us from the state's perspective?

Kathleen: Surely. In Maryland, we are locally controlled. So each district decides what they're doing as long as it's aligned to the Maryland County Career Ready Assessment. And in this case, as long as it was aligned to what we had described in the grant. As a result, we have been able at the state level to see a variety of strategies and projects that districts want to implement using their SRCL funds. And the 50 book project was one that came across our desks. I was, although secondary, I was very intrigued by the approach and what Washington County was going to do in order to have the data behind their project which is the 50 book project. And so we've been watching it closely, and that's why we're here today to talk about how successful it has been in Washington County

Jobi: Fabulous, thanks so much. So Jodi, do you want to tell us more about what this looks like on the ground?

Jodi: Sure. So when we first got our SRCL funds, we decided that one of the initiatives that we wanted to take on was to provide books for some of our youngest readers. We have many homes that kids are coming to us without many books in them. And so what we decided to do was to provide 50, a box of 50 books for all students who register for Pre-K in our county. So for example, in the first year, we had 950 students who signed up for Pre-K. We bought books for those students and teachers took them out and delivered them. And in the second year, that increased to 1,150 books, boxes of books. So it's been very exciting. We purchased a variety of genres, a variety of topics. And each student receives a box, some of the teachers put bows on them and tie them up and put their names on them. A lot of instances, they go right out to the house and deliver that box and make a, you know, make a personal connection with a family and a student, even before school starts. This year, it's a little challenging, obviously, in our current epidemic, pandemic here, but we still had a lot of our schools that went out and delivered, hand delivered those boxes of books to students.

Jobi: Excellent, so how long have you been implementing the 50 books initiative?

Jodi: This is our, this will be our third year, this is the beginning of our third year.

Jobi: Super. So what are the critical components or aspects of the 50 books project?

Jodi: So I think number one, we have to build that culture of reading within, not only our teachers, because our teachers have that love of reading, but we are to teach our teachers and our parents especially how to build that love of reading and that excitement for reading within their students. I think that one of the biggest things was getting teachers to understand that it wasn't necessarily about handing one book out every week. It was about providing this big box of books that those kids could get so excited about and just watching the pictures of kids' faces and they just lit up and they couldn't decide what to read first. So I think building that excitement and then building that relationship with parents is crucial too. We have to get parents to understand that they need to be reading with their kids too, not just sending their kids to school, to be read to or to get books.

Jobi: Super and Kathleen is there anything you'd like to add?

Kathleen: I think when we talk about a project like this, we are looking at other benefits as well. And one that parents see the books, books are now in the home, there are other siblings in the house, they get to see the books. And these are all important aspects in getting students to read and become lifelong readers. And there are such a variety of ways that teachers can use the books, when we talk about student choice, you know, bring in a book that you like from your box. And so there are a lot of different pieces that make this approach such a viable learning experience. It's not just this is how it's going to be done but there are a variety of things that can be done that make this strategy even more beneficial because there are so many ways, entry points for students, for parents, for teachers.

Jobi: Excellent thank you so much.

Jodi: I was thinking, can I add one other thing Jobi?

Jobi: Of course.

Jodi: When I was listening to Kathleen speak, I was also thinking, one of the things that some of our teachers have said that this year, having that box of books at home will be even more helpful because we have, we are doing 100% virtual school in our county. It will be so much more impactful for kids to have a book in front of them, when the teacher might be utilizing it on their zoom or the teacher might have read it and then the kids can go and look for that book in their box. You know when they're in the classroom, teachers have large classroom libraries that kids can go and grab different books. But now at least teachers know that those kids have 50, at least 50 books that they can read during this time that we're using virtual instruction.

Jodi: Absolutely, thank you so much for sharing. What challenges did you encounter along the way and what did you learn from them?

Jodi: I think some of the, I mean, obviously, finding the grant funds, I mean, this is something that our supervisor was talking about for, you know, the last year or two, but the SRCL grant was definitely a huge help in providing this. But I think one of the biggest challenges, besides actually getting those books in hands is getting our parents on board too, to make sure that they're reading out loud to their kids, they're talking about the texts, they're doing all of these types of things that as teachers we know are good instruction, but as a parent, that may not be second nature to them. And I feel like that's probably one of the biggest challenges is teaching parents how to use those books and interact with those books and their children.

Jodi: Thank you, how's the strategy approach changed over time? I know you're in your third year of implementation.

Jodi: I think this year was our biggest, we've seen our biggest change. And I think it's, like I said earlier, I think it's been very beneficial for this year especially because we know those kids are going to have books in their hands. But the addition this year was that when some of our teachers went out and deliver their boxes to students, they also took what they called a learning bag, which was literally like a little reusable tote bag. And it had all kinds of things in it that those kiddos will be able to use at home for virtual instruction. So manipulatives, letter cards, their iPads, things like that, that will help make school a little bit easier from home because not every home has, you know, manipulatives or not every home has letter cards that they can use. So, and the other thing that we did this year that I think was really impactful, is teachers put together a list of tips and tricks, so to speak, of things that parents can do when they're reading a book. For example, when you're doing a read aloud, you can do this or you can do this. Or, you know, here's some ways that you can talk to your students about books, those types of things. So those have been the two biggest changes we've added, so to speak, in the past year.

Jodi: Excellent, thank you so much for sharing. So how do you know this strategy is working, its approach, the 50 books initiative is working?

Jodi: Well, when we look at specific data, we looked at our kindergarten, yeah, kindergarten readiness assessment I can say that fast three times. In the year prior to instituting the initiative, we sat at a 37% readiness. Last year, in our second year we moved, we already had grown to a 44%. And we're hoping that this year we even see more growth from that. But on top of that, I think that what a lot of our teachers and parents have said is that they feel like that opportunity to meet prior to school starting, the opportunity to chat, to have those one on one conversations, to put a name with a face, it breaks down some of those barriers that you may have when you don't get a chance to actually meet those teachers. And I think this year, that's even more important. As you know, a lot of schools probably are not going to have those open houses and you know, there's back to school nights and things like that, or they might be virtual, and so, you know, by a teacher going to a home, even if she's only there for three or

four minutes and standing on the front porch with a mask on. It's still a chance for them to meet.

Jobi: Absolutely. That's great, thank you so much. Did you want to add anything to that Kathleen?

Kathleen: Well, I just wanted to talk about the fact that in the strategy, and Jodi, they have the data from their KRA the kindergarten readiness assessment, which is one piece, but also, it's the idea that there are books in the house now. And in some cases, these might be the first time that books have been in the house. And there are other children in the home, either older or younger and they're exposed to these books as well. Even older children, and we want to say much older children could maybe be reading to their younger siblings or encouraged to read themselves because they see their younger brother and sister reading and they want to read as well. And so we have a lot of benefits to this project that exceed the KRA scores that we may or may not know exactly where we're going to see those benefits. But we know that those things happen. And the other thing is that this, you know, lays the groundwork for, if we did this in Pre-K and Jodi had mentioned previously that the kindergarten teachers said, well, not everybody goes to a Washington Public School Pre-K, can we give them out in kindergarten? And then maybe there's someone who's thinking, maybe we should try this in middle school, or maybe we should try this in high school. Because you now are starting a pattern of reading, reading for choice, reading a gift because that's what these books are, and moving through, so that, who's being touched by this project? Not just the Pre-K student, but we could see potentially literacy gains in other areas as well.

Jobi: Fabulous, that's a great perspective. If another grantee wanted to implement something like this, what would they need to do, Jodi?

Jodi: Well, I think first and foremost, obviously, you'll have to find a vendor that's going to be willing to work with you, and help you, and supply books for you. But I think the most important part is building that excitement and that enthusiasm within your teachers and your administrators and the community at large. One of the things that we did in our first year of implementation, and we continued it is, you know, we took pictures and we flooded social media and, you know, our newspaper came and did a story on the books, and even went to a house and took pictures with one of the kids with all of their books. So I think you need to do those things but, and then also like you have those other things that are the smaller part but are really important, things like figuring out how you're going to distribute books and who will go and those types of things, how will you measure the effectiveness? But I think those first two pieces are really important is, you know, finding that vendor that's going to be willing to work with you and help you and then building that excitement. Because once we build the excitement then they were just raring to go.

Jobi: Absolutely, that's fabulous. Thank you so much. So, if you were to leave our listeners with one piece of advice about implementing the 50 books project, what would that piece of advice be? Kathleen, we'll start with you.

Kathleen: I would say, I think sometimes Washington County has 26 elementary schools so that's a nice size. There are though districts that we know have many more than 26, and they think oh, no, we could never do something like this. And I think the key here is not to look at why we couldn't do that but how would we implement this? And this to me would be a perfect project to look first at perhaps a school or an area, that you start with a smaller group, and you build that project with those students. I think also, this is so important because not only are you helping preschoolers to get their footing with literacy, but you're also engaging the family in a way that is very different. It's not, there's not an assessment driven with the text. It's not that they have to go and stand in line to pick up books. But instead, you're meeting parents, you're encouraging parents, you're working as a team with parents. And then as Jodi had just said, you need to find a vendor. And this is the place where you reach out slowly, but to reach out then to community members and to see how they support you. And when you have that kind of support first for the student, then with the parents and then with the community, you're going to definitely see the benefits here. And I would say don't be afraid to do it, start small and then have it build, as Jodi said, build the excitement. If it starts in one school, then it spreads to another school, and another school and so on. And I think that's, that's key. Don't just say this can't work, because you can make it work.

Jodi: Good advice. Thank you so much. So Jodi, what would you add in terms of a piece of advice?

Jodi: Well, I would definitely agree with everything that Kathleen said there. But I think one of the other pieces of important advice is we all know what the data says about getting books in the hands of kids and little kids reading. And so I think what I would say is that we need to spend the time and the money but invest in some have our young readers and get them reading because then what we produce is those readers that are going to be better readers in the intermediate grades and middle school and high school. And we hopefully break that cycle of struggling readers.

Jodi: That's great advice. Thank you so much, and what a great perspective. I just want to thank everyone for being here with us today and giving us a look inside the 50 book initiative. We really appreciate your time and expertise. Thank you.