

In the fall of 2019, the Fletcher Free Library's Early Literacy Outreach Program (ELOP) was running with 11 volunteers, reaching 13 home childcares, and two community organizations. The program served between 80-100 children, parents, and providers each week, and held about 45 outreach visits per month.

The Burlington School District Program, Parent University, was included served by ELOP, an organization that supports New American families navigating the Burlington school system and provides childcare so parents can attend classes. ELOP coordinator the coordinator visited the program twice weekly, bringing ELOP curriculum to engage children in early literacy activities. The coordinator connected other library staff with Parent University, and attended Parent University's annual session planning meeting in February, developing a plan to build on the partnership between the Fletcher Free Library (FFL) and Parent University. ELOP visits throughout the spring session were scheduled, as well as new ELOP classes to support parents reading with their children at home and using the library.

In November, ELOP conducted a survey of providers and parents/families to obtain quantitative data to supplement the anecdotal stories collected throughout the year.

Of the providers surveyed:

- 80% Strongly Agreed and 20% Agreed that ELOP helped to prepare the children in their program to enter a classroom.
- 75% Strongly Agreed and 25% Agreed that ELOP has helped improved the alphabetic and numeric literacy of the children in their program.
- 80% Strongly Agreed and 20% Agreed that ELOP has had a positive impact on the children in their program.

Of the parents/families surveyed:

- 85% Strongly Agreed and 15% Agreed that ELOP has had a positive impact on their child(ren).
- 75% Strongly Agreed and 25% Agreed that their child(ren) talks about the ELOP volunteer who visits their child care at home.
- 50% Strongly Agreed and 30% Agreed that ELOP has improved their knowledge of Library resources and services. 20% were Neutral.

The data from this survey helped inform the plans for ELOP, which included strengthening and expanding the existing outreach program, and connecting with parents and families. At the end of November, a Winter Story Time event was held at the Library. The goal of this event was to connect with parents and families, and bring ELOP participants into the Library. The event was held on December 14th, with 25 attendees including children, parents, and providers. The coordinator led a Story Time, and talked with parents and providers about the program. Parents had very positive feedback, and it was wonderful to see parents singing along to favorite ELOP songs with their children. Free books were given

to attendees, and children participated in a winter craft activity. This event was planned to occur twice annually.

ELOP continued to struggle to connect with local laundromat owners about the possibility of conducting Laundromat Story Times throughout Burlington and creating book nooks. In early 2020, we began to plan a launch of a spring wave of Laundromat Story Times in early April, however due to the pandemic, this effort was put on hold.

In early 2020 another round of volunteer recruitment began, in order to expand ELOP to reach more providers in Burlington. In January, The coordinator attended a Neighborhood Planning Assembly meeting to speak with community members and inform potential volunteers about the program. One provider participating in ELOP is the coordinator for a group called the Starting Points Network, which are regional groups for child-care providers to share experiences, and plan annual trainings. The coordinator attended a meeting of the Burlington Starting Points Network, hearing directly from providers what their experiences and struggles are. The main struggles expressed by providers are the requirements of the Vermont Quality Rating System, STARS. Many providers stressed the burden of attending trainings, establishing procedures, and completing paperwork. Positioning ELOP to support providers in these struggles became a key goal. Prior to the pandemic, one quarter of home child cares had closed in Vermont since 2015 exacerbating the shortage of child care in the state¹. One ELOP volunteer has become a registered substitute for her provider, and this example might be beneficial for many providers, allowing time for the provider to attend trainings or simply complete paperwork without having to close their childcare.

On February 10th, 2020 a meeting of ELOP volunteers was held to celebrate their one-year anniversary with the program. Six volunteers attended, and discussed successes and challenges of ELOP. All the volunteers felt they were interested in providing more supplies to create and lead activities to accompany their Story Times. Plans were developed to create an ELOP Art Supply lending station so volunteers could bring art supplies with them to their providers. Unfortunately, this was put on hold due to the pandemic.

Another goal of ELOP was to work with the Vermont Department of Libraries to establish an informational document about the program, to illustrate how the program could be adapted and used in other communities. The position of Youth Services consultant was vacant for most of 2019 and early 2020, and we have not been able to work with VTDoL. ELOP still hopes to create a working document to share with Libraries across Vermont.

As things changed rapidly beginning in March of 2020 due to the pandemic, ELOP began to take steps to adapt to the new normal. Before child cares closed, volunteer visits were suspended and the coordinator communicated with all volunteers and providers. With the closure of the library and child cares, making Story Time videos was the best way to quickly adapt and continue to connect and engage providers, parents, and children in early literacy activities. ELOP began creating videos in early April

¹ According to a 2019 report prepared by the Vermont Legislative Joint Fiscal Office.

following the ELOP curriculum and using materials from the ELOP literacy kit bags. The videos were shortened Story Times, focusing on active movement songs, simple engaging books, and fingerplays. The FFL YouTube Channel, Fletcher Free Library² houses these videos, along with others created by FFL Youth Staff during this time.

There are nine ELOP videos on the FFL YouTube channel. Providers valued the videos, and sent the following feedback, “I absolutely LOVED your videos! And I will share them. Thank you so much! You’re a wonderful early educator!” and, “THANK YOU SO MUCH!!! The kids will LOVE seeing you and these videos. You are amazing!”

During this time, one volunteer began connecting via Zoom with her provider once a week to read books with the children at home. The provider had set up a regular Zoom with her families to connect during this time, and had invited the volunteer to continue reading with them. This inspired a transition to the next phase of ELOP, hoping to encourage direct connection with children and families at home.

One ELOP provider remained open during throughout the crisis because she serves children of essential workers. The coordinator began leading a weekly Zoom Story Time with this provider in mid-May, with children tuning in from home as well as the child care. ELOP is focused on maintaining the contact we have made with child-care providers and continuing to work with them in whatever capacity we can throughout this time.

During the summer, ELOP continued to evolve based on changing COVID-19 restrictions. Child cares in Vermont were permitted to reopen on June 1st, but visitors were not allowed at child cares. The coordinator continued virtual Story Times with providers and volunteers throughout the summer. ELOP began summer book deliveries, including ELOP kit bags, bringing books to five ELOP providers and the children they care for.

ELOP partnered with the Library’s Summer Challenge Program (SCP) with a focus on outreach. This included visiting meal and book distribution sites to distribute books and activities to the community. The goal of the SPC is to keep kids reading, learning, and exploring throughout the school vacation, which aligned with ELOP’s goal to improve kindergarten readiness in Burlington. The coordinator visited one meal site weekly, in an area where two ELOP providers live. The coordinator was able to connect with these providers as well as other community members each week.

As things change in Burlington and Vermont, ELOP will continue to adapt to serving our community. With the difficult transition to virtual at-home learning, it is more important than ever to engage early learners, and help to support rich home and child-care environments. The coordinator continues to lead virtual Story Time with one ELOP provider, one volunteer is also conducting virtual Story Time. In addition, in early September two providers gave permission for the coordinator to begin socially distanced in-person visits, leading outside Story Time for 12 children per week. ELOP is committed to improving kindergarten readiness, and will remain flexible in the coming months.

² <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIL6OGy6flzMFAnWMy18xcw>