

**California Library Literacy Services
Community Conversations:
Findings**

**Cindy Mediavilla
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**cmediavi@ucla.edu
310/915-8588**

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Introduction

“There’s an element of literacy being a noble cause rather than an essential function of the library. Until that attitude shifts, we’re always going to be fighting these things that we’re talking about.”

~Southern California literacy coordinator

To help prepare for the creation of a California Library Literacy Services (CLLS) strategic plan, a consultant was asked to gather input from library literacy coordinators around the state. Modified questions from the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation’s “community conversation” practice were used to elicit the coordinators’:

Aspirations for the statewide library literacy community;

Concerns about California’s literacy profession;

Feelings about literacy issues; and

Perceived barriers to achieving desired progress.

The following seven literacy networks participated in the conversations: Bay Area Literacy Network (BALit), Central Valley Library Literacy Network (CVLLN), Inland Library System Literacy Services Committee (ILS), North Central Coast Library Literacy Network (NCCLLN), Northern California Literacy Coalition (NCLC), South Central Coast Literacy Providers (SCCLP), and Southern California Library Literacy Network (SCLLN). The Central San Joaquin Valley Literacy Coalition (CSJVLN) has recently been inactive and so did not participate in the process.

Conversations were conducted, by either consultant Cindy Mediavilla or state library programs consultant Beverly Schwartzberg, as part of regional literacy network meetings in November 2018 and January and February 2019. Notetakers recorded participants’ input at every meeting. Although the results of the conversations are described below, all responses remain anonymous to maintain participant confidentiality.

About This Report

A synopsis of input from each regional literacy network conversation is included below, followed by a brief discussion of overall themes. It is hoped that this input will provide valuable insight into the issues California literacy professionals would like to see addressed in the statewide strategic plan.

Regional Input

The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a nonpartisan, independent nonprofit group that teaches, coaches and inspires people and organizations to solve pressing problems and change how communities work together.¹ At the heart of the Harwood “practice” are community conversations that library staff conduct with specific target populations. Instead of eliciting *needs*, these highly structured conversations strive to identify participants’ *aspirations* about their communities—thus focusing on an asset-based form of community input. The library then uses this information to design services and help facilitate positive change in the community, which in this case was identified as the *professional library literacy community*.

Though the Harwood questions have become standardized over many years of practice, the conversations can be customized to particular topics, such as literacy. The literacy network groups were, in most cases, asked the following ten questions:

What kind of professional library literacy community do you want?

Given what we just said, what are the 2-3 most important issues or concerns when it comes to the library literacy community? *Decide which one issue is most important to be used through the remaining conversation.*

What concerns do you have about this issue? *Why?*

How does the issue we’re talking about affect you and others personally?

What do you think about these issues? How do you feel about what’s going on?

What kinds of things are keeping us from making the progress we want?

When you think about what we’ve talked about, what are the kinds of things that could be done that would make a difference?

Thinking back over the conversation, who do you trust to take action on the issues you’ve been talking about?

If we came back together in 6 months or a year, what might you see that would tell you things were starting to happen?

¹ <http://www.theharwoodinstitute.org/mission/>.

Now that we've talked about this issue a bit, what questions do you have about it?

Input from the seven conversations follows below.

Seven Conversation Synopses

Conversation #1

Participants expressed a desire for literacy services to be more integrated into their libraries. They also want their work to be acknowledged by library staff and directors. The program is “so compartmentalized,” one person explained, “like adult literacy is working by itself.”

“Most people think adult literacy is for people who don't speak English,” they said and suggested several strategies to educate library staff, as well as the public. These include: having a more exposed presence at California Library Association conferences; doing outreach to schools; sharing information with doctors; getting on library staff meeting agendas; being part of new library staff orientation; creating a library literacy video; and partnering with other literacy programs in the community. Respondents would also like to reduce the stigma attached to being illiterate. “It takes people a long time to contact adult literacy,” they observed.

In addition, participants noted the need for “a central hub of information,” where they can share ideas with colleagues. “If we had a spot to share information, that would help us reach more [people]. Each program has strengths and we can share [so as] not to reinvent the wheel.”

Conversation #2

Providing literacy services to English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners was a major topic for this group. Several coordinators feel their programs should be more inclusive—“our aspirations should reflect our changing and evolving demographics”—while others worry about programs that are already over-extended—“We have finite resources and if we start opening up our services our resources will get taken away from adult literacy and shift to ESL.” “I'd like to not worry about that piece of it and just worry about serving our communities,” another person confessed.

Their primary concern, however, is sustainability in organizations that don't appreciate or even comprehend what literacy services accomplish. “The library model is transaction-based,” one coordinator posited. “For us this doesn't translate. We don't speak the same language as management. They wonder if we are worth the investment.” Literacy workers long for their programs to be fully integrated into the library, rather than feeling “disconnected.” One respondent shared that, for the first time ever, literacy staff were invited to the library's “all-staff” meeting. “How do we integrate and become an equal player?” a coordinator asked.

Adequate staffing is another concern. “I can’t do it all,” one participant admitted. “How can we go about getting people that can do the stuff that I’m not expert at?” The need for more training was a recurring theme, especially since literacy programs tend to have such a high turnover rate. As one coordinator, who is nearing retirement, lamented, “How can I leave such a niche job? No one else knows how to do it. It took me 20 years to learn!” But attending workshops can be a challenge when travel is difficult. One person suggested creating a regionwide calendar of training opportunities that tutors from other libraries might want to attend.

Conversation #3

Statewide communication and shared information were this group’s main themes. “We need communication between the whole state,” one coordinator insisted. “Share tips and information.” “We have the Rosetta Stone,” another person said. “The more we can be aware of . . . the more options we can give our community.” Someone else suggested that the state library create a “continuity book” (or online resource) that lists “tips, tricks, and best practices” that literacy staff can refer to when they have operational questions. Another mentioned the importance of mentors: “Everyone should have a resource to turn to.” Yet another coordinator noted that: “We say to students, ‘Don’t be afraid to ask questions, we are a family.’ We should feel the same for the field.”

Though several people expressed appreciation for the recent statewide CLLS conference held in Sacramento, some wonder if literacy is really a state priority, citing how funding was drastically cut during the Great Recession. Acknowledging literacy program accomplishments at both the state and local levels would give literacy workers “a huge voice . . . and make more people aware of what we are doing and its importance.” Even more specifically, one coordinator recommended that the state library ask library directors to recognize adult literacy as a core service. “That would make a big difference,” the person said.

Conversation #4

This group started its conversation by contemplating the role of the library. Even though libraries are more than just books, they should be the first thing that comes to mind when “you need to learn how to read.” Furthermore, libraries are reliable and are “not going to disappear.” “Come and use our resources,” one participant exclaimed. But library staff shouldn’t be passive. “We need to find people where they work, play and integrate ourselves into the community,” a coordinator said. Literacy, in particular, is a “whole family affair.” “The parents who learn how to read can help their child learn how to read.” Literacy services have a ripple effect.

And yet, literacy staff often feel isolated from the library. “I should be included in library meetings,” one coordinator complained. Because of learner confidentiality, literacy services often “fly under the radar—we can’t broadcast what’s happening every day.” “How do we get people to respect and understand what we’re doing?” the group asked. Libraries and

literacy programs are complementary, sharing guided and personal learning, building relationships to help people learn something new, and working with people who choose to learn. "If literacy could be seen as complementary to what libraries do, more of our library colleagues would grasp the value of our program," one person posited.

The need for a central hub of literacy information was the last major theme, with folks specifically calling for best practices, sample tutor training templates, and local government resources.

Conversation #5

Staffing was the primary concern of this group: the need to train more tutors, the need for a "return on investment" (ROI) statement to demonstrate why literacy staffing is important, and the reality of literacy workers being responsible for "a thousand other jobs in the library." Everyone agreed that the staffing issue is getting worse not better. "There are times when there is literally no one in the office to talk to people or pickup phone calls," one coordinator explained. "If I go to a meeting, the library loses me for a whole day." The group feels literacy services should ideally be staffed every hour the library is open, especially because community members are often too ashamed to use the service. "Coming to the library takes an act of bravery," one person said. "It can be intimidating. We need to be aware of that."

Coordinators are also frustrated by the lack of time dedicated solely to working in literacy. "I am a supervisor and the literacy coordinator, and most of the time I am a supervisor," one respondent shared. "I want to make the case that this position should be full-time doing nothing else." A second person agreed: "When we are trained on other things we are called on to do those things. We are not spending enough time on literacy." Yet a third respondent concurred: "We need 'dedicated' staff, not those who are expected to work on other things, too. Staff dedicated to providing literacy services."

Most participants agreed that an ROI statement would validate the need for more staffing. "I want something I can present to the director and city manager about the importance of enough staffing," one coordinator said. "Talking points. How important literacy is. And how the investment of an additional staff member is valuable." Another cited the state librarian's claim that literacy programs are the single best use of taxpayer dollars. One person suggested that a state library representative come to the library's staff day and promote literacy.

Proposed solutions to the staffing shortage include: enhanced communication among the literacy networks; cross-trained library staff who can talk to potential learners when literacy staff are not available; more training opportunities to build skills; and paid library school interns to work in and learn about literacy.

Conversation #6

Funding and sustainability were the major themes here. Several people talked about the Great Recession and the devastating impact it had on literacy services. One coordinator shared that her program, which was dismantled, is once again operational, but not as robust as before. "It came back, but as a smaller program in a smaller place," she said. "You constantly have to justify your existence." Another explained that his program survived but hasn't grown in many years, even though "there are plenty of people who need this help." A third person worried that funding might disappear again in the future: "Having the line item in the state budget is great but it makes me nervous that it could be crossed out. How do I get comfortable?" Though they are grateful for outside funding, literacy coordinators want their libraries to provide fiscal support as well. "Money from the state has left us vulnerable," one person said. "Our library doesn't fund us because we have state funding."

Sustainability also requires that literacy programs be more fully integrated into their libraries. "Making literacy a priority is the best way to make sure we do sustain," one coordinator said. Another concurred: "We need to be fully integrated into the library and seen as an integral part of the library." Yet another agreed: "Literacy should be seen as equal to other library services. When I was told I was doing literacy, after being a librarian for so many years, it was almost like: 'what have you done wrong?'"

On the other hand, staff should not be so fully integrated that their library duties overtake responsibility to literacy. "There was a time when you had a literacy program coordinator, period," one person said. "And now there's a perception you can do literacy coordination, and this job, and this job. It's ridiculous." Another respondent observed that, "trying to do front desk work and literacy work at the same time is challenging." "Literacy is time intensive and administrators don't see that," someone else said. "You need to devote full time. You can't just do literacy and go and manage a branch."

Hand in hand with sustainability are professional standards, which were mentioned throughout the conversation. "I want the state library to mandate that you need a literacy coordinator who does nothing but literacy," one person admonished. "Some sort of professional standard to hold library directors/city councils accountable." Someone else even suggested accreditation of literacy staff.

Conversation #7

Strengthening professional literacy networks and strengthening the literacy profession through networks were the main concerns of this group. Suggested ways to accomplish these aspirations include: enhanced communication through some sort of online community, such as moodle; more face-to-face communication via regional meetings and CLLS conferences; establishing a calendar of literacy meetings; and creating a statewide online directory of literacy staff expertise ("Who can we go to with questions about certain specialties/expertise?"). "Take initiative in our own libraries and share what works and what doesn't," one coordinator offered. "Leadership comes from sharing successes and failures."

Related to this is the idea of having a statewide set of common goals created by literacy staff: “We can’t be a team unless we all know the rules of the game.” “It would be nice to have a consensus across the different regions, trying to achieve a particular goal, report back on what works and what doesn’t,” one person suggested. “Set goals for our programs together that we can all attain.” Someone also suggested a universal job description that covers all the coordinators’ duties. Another person wondered if literacy coordinators should be accredited.

The group also discussed the need to educate others about literacy: “People don’t see non-reading adults—they don’t see them.” Moreover, library staff and administrators have little knowledge and/or appreciation for literacy services. As one respondent mused, “It seems odd to me that there’s a struggle. Who would be a librarian and not be supportive of literacy?” Suggested solutions included asking the state library to create a video on literacy awareness and addressing literacy as a regular agenda item at regional system meetings.

Overall Themes and Conclusion

Two main themes were raised by all seven groups: (1) the need for literacy services to be acknowledged and more fully integrated into libraries' core services and (2) the value of networking and having access to a "central hub of literacy information." Other tangential topics raised by more than one group included: the need for more staffing, especially workers that are dedicated solely to providing literacy services; the need for literacy program standards/guidelines/goals, including the possibility of accreditation; and the stigma that often prevents people from using the service. All of these various issues relate to what some groups called "sustainability" or "continuity" of the literacy profession in California.

Literacy as a Core Service

The program coordinators are dismayed by the lack of recognition their services receive. They want literacy to be acknowledged and treated like any other core library service. They also want their services to be fully integrated into their libraries. The coordinators expressed frustration over administrators as well as library staff's lack of appreciation of their services. When literacy employees *are* part of the library's staff, they usually are responsible for multiple non-literacy tasks that draw them away from what the coordinators consider their primary function. Literacy coordinators want their workers to be dedicated solely to providing literacy services, so they can staff their programs every hour the library is open, especially because some community members might be embarrassed to ask for help.

Furthermore, the coordinators feel that having standards, guidelines, self-generated goals, and maybe even accreditation will help validate their good work. Some feel an ROI statement, showing the benefits of well-staffed literacy services, would go a long way towards justifying their budget demands. Others would like the state library to intercede and convince administrators, in particular, that literacy programs are important.

Enhanced Networking and Information Sharing

Since the Great Recession, when many literacy programs were drastically cut and even temporarily terminated, coordinators have looked to themselves to rebuild and sustain their programs. Realizing there is strength in numbers, they now want to create stronger ties with colleagues around the state through better networking and shared resources. Every group mentioned the need for some sort of online "central hub of information" where folks can learn from each other's failures as well as best practices.

Besides a centralized online database of all things literacy, the coordinators want to share meeting and workshop calendars, training tips and templates, and stories. They also want

to meet locally on a more regular basis and communicate across regions with other literacy providers statewide. They enjoyed the recent CLLS conference held in Sacramento, but want to see these gatherings offered more frequently.

Change Agents

As part of the conversation, groups were asked who they trust to act on the issues raised. Though the coordinators said they trust the state library to take action, they rely primarily on themselves and their constituents to promote literacy and effect change. “Libraries will listen to patrons more than staff,” one person said. Another respondent concurred: “We need to create champions. Learners need to be advocates to elected officials.”

Literacy staff themselves have the most responsibility, however. “You need mixed groups of coordinators addressing all the things that relate to sustainability . . . coming together to work on these things” one person insisted. Elsewhere, a participant said that “it would be so nice to . . . set goals for our programs together that we can all attain.” Another person acknowledged the California literacy program’s strength in numbers. “We are part of this greater CLLS movement,” she enthused. “That makes us less vulnerable. Showing that we are part of a statewide effort is important.”

Conclusion

California’s literacy coordinators are passionate about their services and desperately want to improve the lives of many more people around the state. To do this, they need more resources and greater acknowledgement of the good work they do. They also want their programs to be recognized as a core library service. In other words,

California’s literacy coordinators want to sustain literacy services by becoming more fully integrated into libraries and by creating enhanced communication opportunities with colleagues. But they’re concerned that a lack of resources and understanding by library staff and administrators are in the way of achieving those aspirations. As the coordinators talk about those concerns, they talk specifically about the lack of support, both financially and professionally, they receive for their work. They believe we need to focus on strengthening literacy services and if the state library and library administrators played a part in those actions the literacy community would be more likely to trust the effort and step forward themselves.