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READING IS A BLAST! INSIDE AN INNOVATIVE LITERACY COLLABORATION BETWEEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Dr. Maria T. Genest

Abstract

Public libraries have long supported the literacy goals of public schools in their communities by providing access to printed and electronic resources that enhance learning and teaching. This article describes an ongoing collaboration between the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's BLAST outreach program and the Pittsburgh Public Schools that has positively impacted thousands of students by increasing access to library resources while also emphasizing vocabulary, text-based discussion, and writing using both fiction and informational texts. This program can serve as a model for similar community partnerships that have the potential to enrich the literacy lives of students.

There has long been a close relationship between public libraries and public schools. Often it is based on the material resources that the public library is able to provide to teachers, with the latter borrowing bags of books every few weeks to supplement classroom libraries, complete author studies and support math, science or social studies units. In addition, teachers have often asked students to utilize the public library for assignments, with children's librarians assisting with homework and research reports. More recently, Internet access has become an important service that the library makes available to students, and this is especially critical in urban, high-poverty areas where technology may not be available in each child's home (Economic and Statistics Administration & National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2011).

Until recently, libraries within schools have often been the source of additional materials and support for classroom teachers. However, with funding for school libraries in decline, public libraries are increasingly providing critical literacy services to students and teachers in their communities (Celano & Neuman, 2001). In addition, recent educational policy initiatives call for Comprehensive Literacy Plans that emphasize the vital role of community partners in facilitating student learning (Pennsylvania Comprehensive Literacy Plan, 2012). This article describes one such partnership: a collaborative literacy project between the Pittsburgh Public Schools and Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, which aimed to enrich the language arts experiences of urban elementary school students.

An Innovative Partnership

Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (CLP) has been an influential institution in Western Pennsylvania since its inception in 1895. Early staff members included Frances Jenkins Olcott, a prominent children's librarian, who incorporated educational services to children as a primary goal of the library. The library has grown to include 19 locations in the Pittsburgh area, with staff creating baby, toddler, and preschool storytimes, as well as a plethora of other children's programs which are highly valued by the local community. This appreciation of the library's importance to the area was highlighted in 2011 when residents of the City of Pittsburgh voted overwhelmingly to provide dedicated funding to Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, a telling feat for this former steel-mill city in the middle of an economic recession.

For decades, CLP children's librarians regularly made visits to local public schools to complete book talks, which are brief, engaging book descriptions, and promote library resources. However, in 2002, a School Outreach program was

established, with staff hired and trained for that purpose. *Bringing Libraries And Schools Together*, or BLAST, was created to enable collaboration between library outreach specialists and literacy professionals in the Pittsburgh Public Schools in order to deliver high-quality literacy programs, books and materials to children in Pittsburgh (DeFilippo, 2010).

For the last decade, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's BLAST outreach team has implemented three major literacy outreach programs for students enrolled in grades K-5 in the Pittsburgh Public Schools. The primary goals are:

- Increase equitable access to the public library resources for children in the city of Pittsburgh, particularly in low-income neighborhoods
- Support the literacy instruction occurring in the Pittsburgh Public Schools
- Provide children with multiple exposures to high-quality fiction and informational text

In the early formation of BLAST, it was determined that certified elementary school teachers early in their careers would be ideal program designers and implementers of the BLAST literacy programs. With knowledge of classroom management, read-aloud techniques, and curriculum design, teachers who desired an opportunity for a unique and innovative application of their educational knowledge and skills would be comfortable working intensively with students and teachers in grades K-5. As employees of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, they would gain access to one of the best children's library collections in the country as well as a deeper understanding of the library's role in the community. This staffing choice has proven to be a very successful component in the ten years of the outreach program. The teachers, serving as outreach specialists on the BLAST team, gain confidence in their skills in the classroom and have opportunities to collaborate with professional children's librarians at CLP as well as public school district staff to provide coherently designed literacy programming for thousands of students in Pittsburgh. The BLAST staff members serve as critical liaisons between the literacy resources and community-education mission of the public library and local public school students. In fact, many BLAST staff members have gone on to pursue Master's of Library and Information Science (MLIS) degrees and become school librarians in the community.

BLAST programs are designed to complement the instructional practices and topics in the school district curriculum. In particular, BLAST programs often include interactive read-alouds, a critical feature of successful literacy classrooms.

Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey (2004) identified interactive read-aloud practices that were common among 25 expert teachers. These features included high-quality, appropriate texts that had been previewed and practiced by teachers, and read with fluency, animation and expression. In addition, teachers paused to identify difficult words and ask questions to prompt class discussion. BLAST utilizes these read-aloud techniques in its programs to support best practice literacy instruction in classrooms. BLAST has incorporated informational text into all of its programs, based on research that demonstrated the need for increased emphasis on nonfiction for younger students (Duke, 2000). All program sessions are designed to last for one 40-45 minute class period.

There are three key programs in BLAST: the Third Grade program, the Thematic program and the Summer program (See Table 3). Each program is described in detail below.

Third Grade Program

The program for third grade classrooms was created to support the literacy experiences of students in the lowest-performing schools in Pittsburgh. While the numbers of schools and students have varied over the years due to school closures and other district changes, in the 2010-2011 school year, BLAST presented 217 literacy programs to third grade students. The programs include both fiction and informational texts. When reading fiction and biographies, the emphasis is on high-quality interactive read-alouds with an emphasis on vocabulary and discussion. This design of the interactive read-aloud is based on Questioning the Author techniques (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan 1997) and Text-Talk (Beck & McKeown, 2001). Table 1 is an example of a third grade program.

Using knowledge of research-based vocabulary instruction (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002), the BLAST staff also selects two words for emphasis during the interactive read-aloud. The words are introduced and discussed with students using the text as the anchor for deriving meaning. These words are typed on cards, which are then given to classroom teachers to display for student reference throughout the year. Figure 1 is an example of a vocabulary card used for the biographical text, *Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai* (Nivola, 2008).

Table 1 <i>Example of a Third Grade program</i>
Text: Planting the Trees of Kenya by Wangari Maathai
Vocabulary words: 1. Inspiring 2. Exposed
Sample Discussion Questions: 1. What does it mean that “the earth was clothed in its dress of green”? 2. What does Wangari mean when she says, “When we see that we are part of the problem, we can become part of the solution”? 3. Why did Wangari give seeds to the soldiers?
Journal Response: 1. Wangari said, "When we see that we are part of the problem, we can become part of the solution." What are some small things you can do here at your school that can help the environment? 2. Wangari Maathai is a real person who accomplished a lot of amazing things. If you had a chance to meet her, what would you say? What questions would you ask?

exposed left or being without shelter or protection

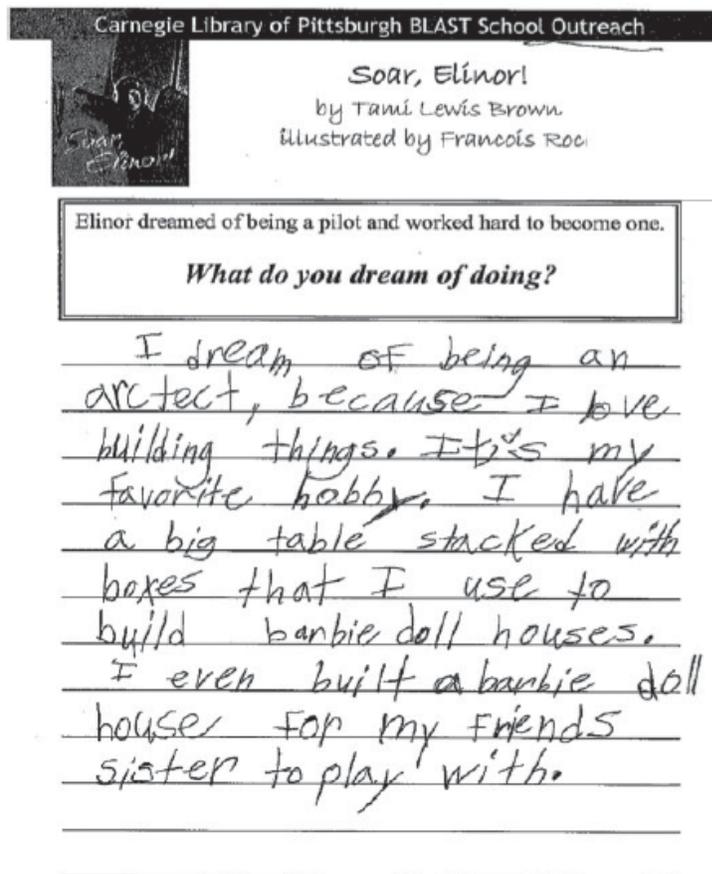
From the story:
*"When the soil is **exposed**, Wangari tells us, 'it is crying out for help, it is naked and needs to be clothed in its dress. That is the nature of the land. It needs color; it needs its cloth of green.'"*



Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh BLAST School Outreach 2011-2012

Figure 1. Example of vocabulary word card provided to third grade teachers

As a final task, third grade students are asked to write a response related to the read-aloud text. The inclusion of a writing activity was added in the early years of the program, upon consultation with the program's external evaluator, Dr. Rita M. Bean, currently Professor Emeritus of Reading at the University of Pittsburgh. Her expertise in evaluating effective literacy instruction led to this significant change to the program, which has continued to be part of its current design. Figure 2 is an example of a writing task given to third grade students.



Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh BLAST School Outreach

Soar, Elinor!
by Tami Lewis Brown
Illustrated by Francois Roci

Elinor dreamed of being a pilot and worked hard to become one.

What do you dream of doing?

I dream of being an architect, because I love building things. It's my favorite hobby. I have a big table stacked with boxes that I use to build barbie doll houses. I even built a barbie doll house for my friend's sister to play with.

Figure 2. Example of one student's written response to a picture book biography

Informational texts, primarily from the Time for Kids series and National Geographic Kids readers, are also used in the Third Grade program to demonstrate the features of a nonfiction text and initiate discussion around the content. BLAST staff members introduce the topic, (recent ones include butterflies, frogs and volcanoes), and guide them through pre-reading inquiry tasks, such as a KWL chart, to launch into the topic. BLAST provides a copy of the text for each student to use during the program, and then guides the class through the Table of Contents, to look for sections that may have answers to their initial inquiries. This is done to show students that nonfiction text can be read selectively to locate information. Students have time to read interesting sections with partners and are given a sticky note to write down a fact that they learned. Students share the notes and post them on the KWL chart, which is then displayed in the classroom.

One of the highlights of the Third Grade BLAST program is an end-of-the-year field trip to the neighborhood Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh location. Students either walk or take a bus (funded by BLAST) to the library to meet the local children's librarians at that location. Students participate in an interactive read-aloud on-site, are led on a tour of the public library by the professional children's librarian at that location, and create small books, which are then displayed in the library. The display serves not only as a celebration of literacy, but also as an incentive for students to bring their parents into the library and potentially become regular library users. This culminating activity provides students with a tangible connection to this invaluable resource in their neighborhoods. BLAST provides a link between school and home literacies by demonstrating that reading and writing are valued in many places in the community.

Thematic Program

BLAST staff members also design bimonthly thematic literacy programs for students in grades K-5 in all Pittsburgh Public Schools. In the 2010-2011 school year, BLAST implemented 347 thematic programs in local classrooms. The programs include an interactive read-aloud of one or two texts related to the curriculum content, booktalks that describe other texts on that topic, and a hands-on activity. Due to funding limitations, texts used in the thematic programs are not purchased for the classrooms. However, because most participating schools schedule these programs regularly, students benefit from multiple exposures to an interactive-read aloud, as well as to the many literacy resources that the public

library can offer. Table 2 provides examples of thematic programs for grades K-2 and 3-5.

Grades K-2	Grades 3-5
Theme: Imaginary Gardening	Theme: Urban Art
Texts: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>The Curious Garden</i> by Peter Brown 2. <i>The Imaginary Garden</i> by Andres Larson 3. <i>Looking Closely Inside the Garden</i> by Frank Serafini 4. <i>Rose's Garden</i> by Peter H. Reynolds 	Texts: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Magic Trash</i> by J.H. Shapiro 2. <i>Diego Rivera: His World and Ours</i> by Duncan Tonatiuh 3. <i>Sidewalk Canvas: Chalk Pavement Art at Your Feet</i> by Julie Kirk-Purcell 4. <i>Pavement Chalk Artist</i> by Julian Beaver
Hands-On Activity: Students will have the opportunity to design and create their own "imaginary garden" flower or plant to take home.	Hands-On Activity: Students will create chalk-art of their own after learning about famous artists that create murals and pavement art in everyday spaces.

Summer Program

Like many school districts, the Pittsburgh Public Schools operate summer school programs throughout the city of Pittsburgh. Students who enroll in these supplemental programs are often struggling readers in need of additional academic support in order to diminish learning loss over the summer months. BLAST continues its literacy outreach in those locations for four weeks in the summer. BLAST staff members offer one program each week for students in grades K-4 during the summer school session. They design 30-minute interactive read-alouds utilizing fiction and nonfiction selections that connect to Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's Summer Reading program theme. For Summer 2012, the theme is "Dream Big", which will emphasize books about nighttime, nocturnal animals, inventors, and other people who accomplished great things. The BLAST staff will deliver these literacy programs to 1,200 summer school students each week.

A particular highlight of the BLAST summer program is a book exchange with students. Each week, BLAST outreach specialists bring hundreds of new paperback books for students to "borrow" for the week. If they bring that book

back the next week, they get to choose another book. Since every student will get the opportunity to choose one book to keep and add to their home library at the end of the program, students who do not bring back their books are not penalized; the book becomes the one that they will keep as their own. Table 3 describes the features of the three BLAST programs.

Program	Participants	Frequency	Literacy Components
Third Grade	Third grade students in high-poverty city schools	Monthly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive read-aloud • Multicultural texts • Vocabulary emphasis • Open-ended questioning and discussion • Library visit
Thematic	Students in grades K-5 in any city school	Bi-monthly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive read-aloud on relevant curriculum topic • Hands-on activity that relates to theme
Summer	Students in PPS summer school sites	Weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive read-aloud • Book exchange and giveaway

The Growth of a Partnership

This highly successful partnership between the Pittsburgh Public Schools and Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh BLAST program has evolved greatly in the decade since it began in 2002. Initially, the BLAST program applied for and received significant grant funding from three philanthropic foundations in the city of Pittsburgh. However, over time and with the overwhelming success of the program, funding has shifted so that the primary cost of BLAST is included in the CLP operating budget with some additional assistance provided by the Pittsburgh Public Schools. The elementary schools pay a small fee out of their site-based budget each year for the BLAST program. This has only been possible because teachers, school district administrators and CLP executives have seen the value of the BLAST program and want it to continue and succeed. Dr. Barbara Rudiak, Assistant Superintendent for K-5 Pittsburgh Public Schools states, “When principals learned that they would need to pay for BLAST out of their school based budgets, they very willingly agreed to do so. In fact, more schools chose to be included. This validated for me the impact that BLAST had on our students

and teachers. Although school budgets continue to decrease, it is important to note there is no decrease in the number of schools who have asked to participate in the 2012-13 school year” (personal communication, June 25, 2012).

The positive impact that BLAST has had on students in Pittsburgh is quantifiable. As stated previously, in the early years of the program, Dr. Rita M. Bean of the University of Pittsburgh was invited to be an external evaluator for the third grade program, due to its particularly strong emphasis on vocabulary and comprehension. The rigorous evaluation and design improvements recommended by Dr. Bean also lent credibility to the BLAST program, because informal assessment results over the years consistently demonstrated that students enjoyed listening to and discussing the texts, learning new words, and tended to visit the library more frequently after participating in the BLAST third grade program (Bean & Curley, 2005; Bean & Curley, 2006; Bean & Genest, 2004; Genest & Bean, 2007; Bean, Curley, & Villella, 2003).

Another condition that has made BLAST a valued community program is the emphasis on alignment with the Pittsburgh Public School curriculum and Pennsylvania Academic Standards. The teachers hired as BLAST staff members have a familiarity with lesson design and best practices in literacy instruction, as well as classroom management, so that the program content and design complemented the goals of classroom teachers. This was only possible because of the willingness of school district administrators to provide BLAST with curriculum topics and materials that were utilized in classrooms.

While knowledge of school culture and classroom literacy instruction is an important aspect of the success of BLAST, it has been critical that the outreach specialists who implement BLAST have continuously participated in professional development in literacy instruction over the years. The initial stages of collaboration with the Pittsburgh Public Schools was enhanced by the invitation to jointly participate in district professional development on *Questioning the Author* (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan 1997) and *Text-Talk* (Beck & McKeown, 2001). This launched the program’s emphasis on vocabulary and whole class discussion around text. Since then, BLAST staff has attended many statewide and regional professional development conferences to remain current on best practices in literacy instruction in both school and library settings, including The Penn State Summer Literacy Institute, the PA Governor’s Institute for Educators, the Pennsylvania Library Association Annual Conference, and the local Allegheny County Intermediate Unit literacy workshops.

Teacher and Student Responses

Over the years, teachers who have participated in the BLAST program have been asked to complete surveys at the end of each year to articulate the factors that support the implementation of BLAST in their classrooms. Generally, teachers from the third grade program valued the following features:

- Questioning during the story
- Exposure to informational text
- Another teacher reiterating the strategies/style/modeled reading that already occurs in the classroom
- Making a connection with Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh
- Stressing strategies good readers use

In addition, participating teachers were interviewed to gain specific insights into their perspectives on the third grade program. They stated the following:

- o “[BLAST] enriched [student] vocabulary. They enjoyed their discussion about other cultures.”
- o “I love that you gave a book to the classroom. This allows further interaction with the book and encourages rereading. It inspires a love of reading as the BLAST books are among the most popular in our class today.”
- o “Overall organization of the program- I was in awe of the program since the first day. Kids listened. The way she read the story really blew my mind.”
- o “Informational text is often brushed aside by students. Therefore the exposure is critical.”
- o “BLAST linked every strategy and skill that PPS models for ‘good readers.’”

Teachers also have positive feedback about the thematic programs.

- o “The exposure the children have to a variety of books is wonderful! The students are very responsive to the ideas and activities that are presented.”
- o “The programs are well-organized and are presented in a very professional, yet fun manner.”

Teachers who participated in the summer program also gave input about the implementation of BLAST.

- o “It exposed the students to good reading material. I became more familiar with student literature and good authors.”
- o “The students were introduced to a variety of literature.”

- o “PA academic standards were identified with each visit. Students were motivated to read.”
- o “The library coming to the children was great!”

Students have also had opportunities to provide feedback on the BLAST program. Students who have participated in the third grade program stated the following:

- o “I like when you read us the best questions when you read us the stories. It makes me want to write my own stories. My mind is ready to answer your questions.”
- o “When you come, everyone gets real calm. You read interesting books-that’s all I read.”
- o “...when somebody reads to you, you can exchange thoughts that you have about the text or stories.”
- o “Learning new words are good for your education, and actually knowing what they mean is better than just saying words and not knowing what they mean.”

Innovation Through Collaboration

BLAST enriches the literacy experiences of thousands of students every year in Pittsburgh. It began because students needed additional support in literacy and school district officials and teachers were willing to allow well-trained, enthusiastic library staff, all certified elementary educators, into the classrooms. Many factors have contributed to its success. There are ongoing discussions with all participants on how to improve the program for both classroom teachers and students and the programs are continuously examined for design improvements and alignment with the ever-shifting language arts curriculum goals and standards. Formal evaluation enhanced the implementation of the program by providing evidence that students made significant gains in vocabulary and access to library services. Engagement in professional development sessions provides the latest literacy instructional knowledge for BLAST outreach specialists. These design features have been critical in demonstrating that everyone is on the same team and has the same goal: supporting the literacy learning of Pittsburgh students.

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