A Book Club for a Nation, Built Chapter by Chapter

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FINAL REPORT

THE BIG READ

January 2007–July 2008

"There are more readers out there than many people would believe."

Overview

This report summarizes the findings from a nineteen-month study of The Big Read, an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts, in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and Arts Midwest, designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. Piloted in early 2006 and launched nationwide later that year, The Big Read brings communities together to read, discuss, and celebrate great literature. Libraries, museums, colleges and universities, municipalities, science and literary centers, arts and humanities councils, health and service agencies—all have received Big Read grants and joined forces with schools, businesses, and other local organizations to host community-wide reading events.

At the heart of these events is one novel, chosen from a growing list of books that began with some of the most enduring classics of modern American fiction—*Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan—and expanded to include more genres and more diversity, with titles such as Rudolf Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, Dashiell Hammet's *The Maltese Falcon*, and Ursula LeGuin's *The Wizard of Earthsea*.[1]

To date, over 500 communities in every state in the union, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have received grants totaling over

[1] Recent partnerships with Russia, Egypt, and Mexico, have added titles from world literature, and, a partnership with The Poetry Foundation, the poems of Longfellow and Jeffers. See http://www.neabigread.org/ for a complete list of Big Read titles.

five million dollars, making The Big Read the largest federal literature program since the WPA.[2] The study summarized here covered the program's first year and gathered data from some 300 of those communities. It was designed with two goals in mind. The first was to learn more about how communities hold a Big Read: what books they choose, what partners they enlist, what resources they use, and what promotional and programming strategies work best to attract audiences. This part of the study, which provided data to help improve and sustain the program, also looked at the factors that differentiate one Big Read from another and at those that characterize successful Big Reads.

The study was also designed to gauge the program's success in addressing the issue that brought it about in the first place: In 2004, the NEA published a landmark report entitled *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, which documented declines in literary reading among all age groups, all ethnic groups, and all education levels.[3] In announcing The Big Read, NEA Chairman Dana Gioia said that it aimed "to address this issue directly, by providing citizens with the opportunity to read and discuss a single book within their communities."[4]

Gioia also likened The Big Read to a "national book club, with a chapter in every community," invoking another trend, in this case a positive one—the growing popularity of book clubs and community reading programs. A number of the communities selected to take part in The Big Read pilot had followed the lead of Seattle librarian Nancy Pearl, who in 1998 had launched "If All of Seattle Read the Same Book." So had of the communities who rallied to the NEA's call for proposals when The Big Read went national. The number of proposals submitted and the interest generated led the NEA, which had intended to award 50 grants in each of the first two six-month funding cycles, to double their numbers and award 72 grants in Phase 1, Cycle 1 and 117 in Phase 1, Cycle 2. They followed with another 128 awards in Phase 2, Cycle 1.[5]

Each cycle brought not only more grants to more communities but also increased efforts to reach a broader audience. When preliminary findings from this study showed that Big Read participants tended to be older, avid readers, and that females were attending events in higher numbers than males, program planners encouraged new grantees to design promotion and programming to attract teens, especially teenage boys, young adults, lapsed or reluctant readers, those new to literature, and those new to the English language. This meant inviting not just English teachers but also art, history, literacy, and theater faculties to incorporate The Big Read in their classrooms, and seeking out venues where teens congregate. Changes in the program were also reflected in the kinds of organizations applying for grants and joining as partners. The most

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[2] A complete list of grantees is available at http://www.neabigread.org/.

[3] The National Endowment for the Arts, *Reading at Risk: A Study of Literary Reading in America*, Research Report #46, 2004. Available at http://www.nea.gov/pub/ReadingAtRisk.pdf.

[4] From the "Preface" to the Reader's Guides accompanying each Big Read novel. Other information and quotes about The Big Read come from a series of NEA press releases, available at: http://www.neabigread.org/pressreleases.php.

[5] At this writing, another 208 Big Read grants have been awarded.

frequent grantees across all cycles were libraries—not surprisingly, since, as Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Director Radice noted, they are "places where communities come together to learn…where all kinds of community organizations—schools, museums, media, business—can come together. And libraries have librarians—trained, committed people who know their communities, know about learning, and have the ability to bring partners to the table."[6] But as the program moved forward, service organizations, a scout troop, a science center, and even a medical center joined the museums, art and writing centers, colleges, cities, and tribal governments taking part in The Big Read.

During site visits and interviews with grantees and partners representing these organizations, and with many libraries, the study team often heard The Big Read compared to the WPA. Parsing those comments, as a prelude to more scientific measures and discussions of impact that follow in this report, points to The Big Read's success in its broad goal of bringing communities together to enjoy books, and suggests that the program has more in common with the WPA than zeroes on the end of the federal dollars. The comparison reflects how The Big Read makes communities feel. They are, in the words of one grantee, "part of something happening across the nation," and something widely recognized as good for the nation. Many grantees see the program as a model of how federal resources generate local support, build capacity, and give programs credence, bounce, and status. Grantees with previous federal or NEA grants, or libraries and museums familiar with IMLS's role in disbursing federal funds, applaud the new partnerships formed for The Big Read, as do those who benefited from Boeing's support of The Big Read on military bases, the Paul Allen Foundation's support for sites in the Pacific Northwest, or those who took advantage of the Kellogg Foundation's offer of matching grants to those who applied with their local community foundations.

Grantees also applaud the hands-on attention they received from Arts Midwest, one of six non-profit regional arts organizations that serve communities in multi-state areas, and the administrative agency for The Big Read. Arts Midwest is responsible for offering guidance to grantees on day-to-day implementation decisions and making sure they receive the NEA-produced promotional materials, including television and radio public service announcements, Reader's Guides, Teacher's Guides, and the Audio CDs for each book with commentary from renowned literary figures, actors, and educators. These resources, say grantees, add immeasurably to the dollars themselves, enabling them to go far beyond what they had successfully done in previous community reading programs—to do "what we normally do on a larger scale," and "what we do best, only better."

Alternating with pride in a national initiative and positive reception of federal sponsorship is a distinctly hometown pride. The Big Read makes communities feel good to be communities. Like

[6] Anne-Imelda M. Radice, Remarks for The Big Read launch. See http://www.imls.gov/news/speeches/050906.shtm.

the WPA, The Big Read is a grassroots effort every bit as much as it is a national effort. This populist feel is evident in ways grantees have added local branding to the NEA imprint. It also comes through in public events where food, music, and free books have become a widely used promotional strategy, along with the simple but effective approach of reaching people where they gather—at laundromats, beauty parlors, basketball games, supermarkets, and doctors' offices—or as they travel—on buses, trains, and tractors. The mark and value of community togetherness is apparent, too, in local programming. The books on The Big Read list are acknowledged classics with universal themes, but even as communities touch on those themes, they also make them local. In events based on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, an Odawa Indian tribe in Michigan compared the tribal ties between elders and children to those between Atticus, Jem, and Scout; inmates at an Illinois prison talked about representation by an attorney like Atticus. *Fahrenheit 451* prompted a public discussion of censorship in time of war, with panel members from the ACLU and the armed services; *A Farewell to Arms* inspired a discussion of war, healing, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Using *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and details of Zora Neale Hurston's anthropological work, storytellers and actors in San Diego, California, and Lafayette, Louisiana, tapped local folk tales, and a North Carolina professor discussed "the power of the porch."[7]

These events and discussions, say grantees, define who communities are and elevate the local dialogue about books. They also suggest that The Big Read's impact may reside in what it made possible and what it inspired citizens to consider, as much as in what communities or what citizens did during a single month.

Overview of the Evaluation

In late 2006, the NEA, IMLS, and Arts Midwest contracted with Rockman et al, an independent research firm with offices in Bloomington, IN, and San Francisco, CA, to conduct the national evaluation of The Big Read. As noted above, the goals of the evaluation were two-fold: 1) to provide data on implementation—on partnerships, promotion, programming, participation—that could help improve the program as it moved forward, and 2) to assess the program's impact on reading habits and its success in expanding the audience of those who read for pleasure and take part in activities related to literature.

The evaluation team discovered early on that what makes The Big Read a successful blend of grassroots and national efforts makes evaluating it a challenge. A Big Read implementation could look very different from site to site, and one of our biggest challenges was developing instruments and measures that were general enough to capture information across sites and allow us to

[7] Trudier Harris, *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan (*Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

aggregate data, but at the same time specific enough to capture the richness and variety of implementations and talk about improvement and effectiveness in a meaningful way.

Another challenge was gathering sufficient data on key elements and gauging the representativeness of those data. Except in the case of book discussions and in-school events, Big Read audiences are not always captive audiences who can be asked to complete surveys: they are often gathered for open-air festivals or kick-off and closing events, seated in darkened auditoriums to listen to plays or view films, or simply going about, or taking a break from, daily routines as they listen to radio readings.

Asking participants about reading habits also edged into sensitive areas, and it was likely that non- or reluctant readers, or non-native speakers, might be less likely than avid readers to complete surveys and provide demographic data. Rockman deferred to grantees and partners hosting events to distribute feedback forms and steer participants to online surveys, and talked with grantees during site visits about who was attending events and who was completing forms. These conversations, grantees' accounts in final report narratives of their success in reaching audiences, their estimates of attendees in the tabular data, and their responses to our grantee online survey—all helped us understand The Big Read audience. Likewise, our participant responses, from event feedback and post cards and the online survey, provided valuable data on demographics and levels of participation. However, the task of saying with confidence which and how many citizens took part in The Big Read was not an exact science. It involved successive comparisons of data sets to determine how representative of the overall participant population each set was and best estimates of a profile of participation.

To address these challenges, Rockman used a mixed-methods design with both quantitative and qualitative components. We collected data from grantees and participants, both during and after The Big Read, for the program's first three cycles, with some limitations. Data collection did not begin in earnest until the Office of Management and Budget granted approval for the study in April 2007, which limited responses from sites in the first cycle that held their Big Reads prior to that date. We also had to end third-cycle data collection in mid-August 2008, even though some sites had not yet returned participant surveys or completed final reports to Arts Midwest.

We also conducted case studies in all three cycles, those for the third cycle focusing on teens and young adults. Instruments were made available in paper an online, and in English and Spanish, as appropriate. Data collection activities were introduced to grantees at orientation sessions and during a teleconference sponsored by Arts Midwest, who also supported evaluation efforts by serving as a liaison to grantees and by providing proposals, final report narratives and financial reports, and other tabular data for our review. Guiding the study was a set of research questions reflecting the dual focus on implementation and impact:

- Who are The Big Read grantees, and how do they bring communities together?
- What partnerships are most productive, and do certain combinations of partnerships and programming lead to higher levels of participation? How do schools, teachers, students, military bases, and other community organizations take part?
- Who participates in The Big Read, and how do they hear about it? How does participation vary by age, ethnicity, gender, reading habits and preferences, community, or event type? What activities and events most successfully draw diverse audiences?
- Which NEA-produced Big Read resources proved the most helpful for organizers and participants? How do communities combine these resources with local promotion?
- What impact does The Big Read have on how organizations serve communities and build coalitions and partnerships? Has The Big Read cultivated bonds that can be leveraged for future initiatives?
- What impact does The Big Read have on participants? How effective is the program in changing attitudes and behaviors related to literary reading, including those of teens and young adults?
- To what extent or in what ways does The Big Read expand participation in arts and cultural activities related to literature?

Instruments used to gather feedback from Big Read grantees and participants included:

Event feedback cards and postcards. Grantees in the first two cycles (Phase 1) received 500 event feedback cards and 250 pre-paid post cards designed to gather background and demographic data on participants and tell us whom The Big Read was reaching. Grantees distributed event feedback cards at gatherings and circulated post cards in a variety of ways, slipping them into the pages of a Big Read book; leaving them at libraries, bookstores, museums, or cafes; or handing them out at Big Read events. Both types of cards were used to recruit participants for an online follow-up survey.

The participant survey. Accessible through The Big Read national Web site or from hyperlinks on grantees' local Big Read Web sites, the participant survey was the primary tool for learning how participants interacted with The Big Read. This survey also included a set of items taken from the Study of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA), the basis for the *Reading at Risk* report. In the third cycle (Phase 2), the survey was available on paper as well as online.

The participant follow-up survey. This survey helped further track changes in reading attitudes and habits. It was administered online or by telephone two to three months after participants completed their Big Read, to those who provided contact information on cards or on the participant survey. This survey also included the SPPA items.

The grantee online survey. Grantees were invited to complete a survey near the end of their programs. The survey included items about programming, promotion, the use and effectiveness of The Big Read materials, the capacity-building outcomes for their organizations, and the effect of The Big Read on target audiences.

Case studies. Rockman conducted 36 case studies with volunteer sites or those selected in collaboration with Big Read partners, based on book choice, site demographics, institution type, and geographic region. Rockman interviewed 13 sites by phone and made 23 site visits, observing Big Read events and conducting interviews with community organizations and partners and focus groups with selected participants. Follow-up interviews with case-study grantees, conducted by phone two to three months after their Big Reads, allowed evaluators to collect further data about longer-term changes in patronage and circulation and literature-related events and partnerships.

Proposals, final narrative reports and spreadsheets. In addition to reading a sample of proposals, Rockman reviewed other qualitative and quantitative data submitted to Arts Midwest as part of grant requirements. Rockman analyzed quantitative data submitted through eGrants to Arts Midwest to extract tabular information such as population size, number of events, partners, and in-kind contributions. In each cycle, we also reviewed a sample of grantees' final narrative reports, using qualitative analysis software to analyze over half of the narratives submitted during the second cycle. These data were used to triangulate other data sources and serve as indicators of effective implementation.

Table 1 below shows the numbers of sites, by cycle, included in data collection and instrument distribution.

Table 1. Instrument Distribution and Data Collection

	Event and Postcards	Participant Survey	Participant Follow-up Survey	Grantee Survey	Case Studies	Arts Midwest Tabular Data	Arts Midwest Qualitative Data
Phase 1, Cycle 1	All sites	All sites (online)	All sites (online, by phone)	All sites (online)	14	All sites	Available Sample
Phase 1, Cycle 2	All sites	All sites (online)	All sites (online, by phone)	All sites (online)	9	All sites	Sample (n=67)
Phase 2, Cycle 1	X	All sites (online and on paper)	All sites (online, by phone)	All sites (online)	13	Available Sample	Sample (n=13, case study sites only)

Data Analysis. Rockman ran basic descriptives and frequencies for all survey data sets and examined correlations or relationships between variables where appropriate, looking, for example, to see if partnership variables were related to outcomes such as event attendance or success in attracting audiences. We also tabulated data in the Arts Midwest data sets. We

conducted two comparative analyses: for grantees who held two Big Reads (typically in the first and third cycles), we compared responses across data sets; for the SPPA items, we compared demographics and reading rates from the original study to those calculated for The Big Read study. For our qualitative data, including responses to open-ended questions and interview and focus group notes, we created a set of codes based on recurring themes that emerged in successive reviews. To handle the extensive set of final report narratives, we coded narratives by theme and used In-Vivo qualitative software for the analysis.

To link all these data sets, we assigned a unique five-digit code (based on codes Arts Midwest assigns to each grantee when they submit proposals) to each grantee site. This allowed us to link participant online survey responses and event feedback card and post card responses to sites. This uniform coding system, along with codes taken from or applied to the Arts Midwest tabular data (e.g., codes for institution type or population size) allowed us to analyze data across sets and archive these large and multiple data sets in such a way that the NEA could perform additional queries. The Methodology section of the full report provides further information on strategies, samples and response rates, and analyses.

Throughout the study, Rockman consulted regularly with the NEA's Office of Research and Analysis about these challenges and strategies to meet them. The staff assisted with our initial submission to the Office of Management and Budget[8] and discussed ways to collect reliable data consistent across local implementations and cycles, and then gauge the representativeness of our sample and generalizability of our findings. The Office of Research and Analysis was also very helpful in working with us to reconfigure data collection instruments and strategies to reflect the evolution and needs of the program, as in the case of the second phase of The Big Read, when we turned our focus to the program's impact on teens and young adults. The Office of Research and Analysis also invited the feedback of the NEA's Big Read team.

Rockman also worked closely with Arts Midwest, relying on their Big Read team for copies of grantees' proposals and final narrative reports and extensive tabular data from all three cycles, on such key elements of implementation as numbers of partners, events, attendees, and in-kind contributions, which, as described above, allowed us to link data sets and findings.

IMLS also provided valuable feedback on instruments and strategies, and especially in helping us understand the roles libraries and museums play in The Big Read. Their direction in a companion study of a distribution of The Big Red Audio Guides to public libraries across the country gave us additional insights into how libraries participate.

[8] OMB Control No. 3135-0121, expiration date 7/31/08.

Summary of Findings

The title of this report refers to The Big Read as a national book club with local chapters, calling attention to the interplay between federal sponsorship and local implementation. Reference to book clubs also hints, perhaps a little less obviously, to the fact that The Big Read was designed to get people reading *and* talking about books, making what is often a private activity also a public, shared experience. We believe The Big Read's impact is most apparent in these two areas. The funding, prestige, excitement, and resources that came with being part of The Big Read helped grantees enlist partners—over 10,000 nationwide in the first year and a half—who provided endorsements, promotion, programming, venues, in-kind support, and new audiences.

Their collective efforts not only resulted in over 16,000 events and book discussions that attracted over a million readers all across the country, but also gave rise to more initiatives: more Big Reads, which continue to bring communities together, around a different title, and Little Reads, for which communities select a regional, contemporary, or non-fiction title that delights, instructs, or defines them as a community. Readers want to keep the conversation going—the hypothetical "What if everyone read the same book?" has morphed into a local and more personal, in some instances, literal "What page are you on?" badge of honor—and communities are committed to extending their reach and bringing even more people into the conversation.

- *Participants were, overall, very positive about The Big Read book and the idea of a Big Read in their community.* Data from multiple instruments show that most respondents thought that reading The Big Read book was a good choice for their communities and that reading it was a very worthwhile thing to do. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents had, as part of The Big Read, attended a literary event at a public library or checked out a book or tape. Fewer had attended an event at a museum, university, or other institution, or joined a book club, but two-thirds said that participating in The Big read made them more comfortable doing so. Even more, over 90%, said they wanted to engage in other activities like these. The majority said they would like to take part in another Big Read.

- *Even among people who love to read, The Big Read has had a marked impact, with sizeable percentages of participants reporting increases in reading or literary activity after the program and even because of it.* As a group, Big Read participants tend to be more avid readers than the general public or the representative sample who responded to the SPPA survey. Almost twice as many had read a book in the 12 months prior to the program. Over half had read at least one book per month; almost a third, twice that many. Around 45% reported reading for pleasure 45 minutes or more a day.

  Still, the program changed their behavior. During The Big Read, over half of those reading at least 45 minutes a day attended a literary event, joined a book club, and attended a museum or university event—and a third did these things for the first time. Survey respondents said they enjoyed reading a book they would not have selected on their own, or had they not been

part of a larger community read and an even larger national initiative to rally interest in reading great literature. They also described events and conversations that would not have occurred without The Big Read.

After The Big Read, one in five said they read more books than they did before. Many had also checked a book out of the library, purchased a book, used the Internet to learn about topics related to literature, or attended another reading-related event—a third had done these things because of The Big Read. Some readers (29%) reported that what they choose to read, where they find books, and their willingness to engage others in was affected by participation.

- *Though attendance and impact figures were smaller, teens, young adults, and less avid readers were also attracted to Big Read activities and reported changes in reading behaviors during, after, and as a result of the program.* During The Big Read, young adults aged 18-24, though participating in smaller numbers, were more likely than younger or older readers to be attending a library event and getting a library card for the first time, as were those who reported reading less than 15 minutes a day for pleasure. Between half and three fourths of the participating college and high school students read another book after The Big Read and used the Internet to learn about, read, or discuss topics related to literature. Nearly half of the college/university students and some (16%) of the high school students said that was a direct result of The Big Read.

  Survey responses indicate that efforts in Phase 2 of The Big Read to involve younger audiences produced positive results: percentages of participants under 18 rose from 5% to 18%; percentages of 18-24 year olds, from 7% to 14%.

- *Grantees reported that there was still "work to be done" in engaging more diverse and hard-to-reach audiences, but also described extensive outreach and modest successes*. Overall, around three-fourths of the grantee survey respondents cited increases in their capacity to attract audiences (73%), attract diverse audiences (70%), and meet the needs of target populations (74%). As part of new outreach, grantees expanded programming, formed new partnerships, and took events to new audiences and areas not always accommodated by or drawn to arts and literary institutions. These audiences included children, Latino audiences, non-native speakers, and incarcerated populations.

  Response rates and survey distribution no doubt play a role, but participation data also appears to reflect outreach efforts. In The Big Read's first cycle, African-Americans and Hispanics were under-represented, compared to the population as a whole. In P1C2 there was a marked increase in Hispanics participating in the program (from 2.9% to 13.4%). In P2C1, there was a large increase in participation by African Americans, from 7.5% to 19.0%.

- *Partnering with organizations that serve particular populations may offer a key strategy for reaching audiences and areas not always accommodated by or drawn to arts and literary institutions.* Grantees found that youth groups, Hispanic groups and media outlets, literacy agencies—any organizations devoted to serving particular populations brought not only new constituencies but also proven outreach strategies, venues, and programming ideas. Grantees also sought out partners in or with outreach to correctional institutions, which helped them cross barriers and advance a shared community goal of increasing reading. Data suggest a link between grantees' capacity to reach diverse audiences and the number of partners engaged in the effort.

- *Developing or strengthening existing partnerships with schools, community colleges, and universities is key to youth participation in The Big Read.* Young readers and older students in formal programs of study—whether junior high or graduate school—were more engaged when The Big Read activities were part of a required course. Teens and young adults who had read or were reading the book were more likely to attend an event. Of every four teens and young adults who attended an event, three (76%) had read the book. The likelihood of attending an event (among students in our study) increased by age: 34-35% of those under 18 attended an event; 51-63% of adults aged 19-29; and 75-80% of those over 30. For these older students, participation was more likely to be required.

  These finding may underscore the need to keep schools involved and to encourage two- and four-year colleges to explore ways to actively participate, rather than casually encouraging students to take part. Informal learning activities such as book discussions, companion books, field trips, or museum visits can also provide the structure and stimulus to engage teens and young adults in The Big Read. Holding high-profile events at schools or colleges helps guarantee a student audience and generates interest in Big Read books and events.

  Involvement by art, history, theatre, and music faculties, as well as English teachers, expands school and college participation as well and gives students other ways to connect to Big Read books. School, public, and youth librarians are strong allies in engaging teens and young adults. Events in which students take an active role—performers, exhibitors, discussants—can be highly effective in engaging students in The Big Read and building a bridge between school and community.

- *Positive signs about students' reading habits and interests also suggest how The Big Read might capitalize on both, and attract younger audiences.* Feedback from focus-group students, and from their teachers and librarians, suggest that many teens and young adults are reading for pleasure more than 30 minutes a day and reading a variety of materials that include novels, magazines, and newspapers. Although they read blogs and other online communications, overall, the youth in our study reported they still do most of their reading on paper. The majority of youth in our study—68% of high school students and 78% of

college/university students—also said they would like to spend more time reading for pleasure. The major barrier, they say, is time. About a third (32%) said they would read more if they enjoyed it more, and one-fifth said they would read more if they knew what to read.

- *The most successful Big Read events, for audiences of all ages, were family or community events and theatrical events and musical performances.* The celebratory kick-off and finale events, according to grantees, drew big crowds, as did cross-cultural events, which often had a festival atmosphere. Theatrical and musical events that made books come alive were also popular and well-attended, as were events billed as teen-and-parent, younger children-and-parent, and events intended to unite town and gown. Because The Big Read was localized, it was able to bring together many sectors of the community and the organizers also looked to appeal to a variety of interests, all in the service of the specific community book.

- *Exhibits that connected audiences to historical periods, along with appearances by authors, scholars, biographers, and well-known figures or experts on issues, deepened the public conversation about literature.* That The Big Read generated an interest in the themes, issues, and historical periods portrayed in the novels is confirmed by grantees and by a large majority of survey respondents who said participation deepened their understanding and made them want to learn more about issues, periods, and local connections to them. Among the non-school events that attracted students were those that engaged them in thought-provoking discussions of controversial issues—censorship, alienation, immigration issues—or immersed them in arts and culture. One grantee noted that it was often these events that made The Big Read not just about "engaging communities in literate pursuits" but "engaging minds and hearts."

- *Book discussions drew mixed reviews along with recommendations for making them more inviting.* Although book discussions attracting regular book club members were successful, lower attendance from younger audiences and reluctant readers led grantees to rethink and relocate book discussions, opening discussions up to more diverse groups. Some grantees linked student audiences via online discussions. Others made book discussions less formal by relocating to coffee houses or other creative venues and encouraging impromptu book clubs.

- *Very young readers received appropriate support and encouragement in many Big Read sites.* Big Read grantees incorporated Big Reads for Little Readers, adopting companion texts by theme (e.g., *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse for the Big Read selection *Grapes of Wrath*) or author (e.g., Amy Tan's *Sagwa The Chinese, Vietnamese Cat*; Rudolfo Anaya's children's books). art sessions at the museum drew good audiences. These reads leveraged partnerships with schools and children's literacy programs, drew in wide audiences for children's programming, and gave The Big Read a family focus. Several children's Big Read activities also effectively drew parents, and some sites took advantage of this by having free books and lists of upcoming events on hand.

- *Putting books in the hands of citizens, including students and teachers, continues to be an effective distribution and promotional strategy and a gesture that builds goodwill as well as readership.* Grantees in each cycle told stories of the excitement over book and reading kit give-aways. Many also reported that providing classrooms with free copies of the book generated excitement and was instrumental in getting school participation. In some cases the need for classroom sets of books was great, and grantees have promised that books purchased and returned as part of read-and-release programs would be donated to classrooms.

- *Big Read materials have been invaluable instructional and promotional tools for grantees.* Grantees have consistently praised the content and production quality of Teacher's Guides, Reader's Guides, and Audio Guides. Having materials in hand helped grantees enlist partners, playing an especially important role in interesting schools, libraries, and colleges. With school budgets increasingly tight, grantees found that having lesson plans readily available made teachers more apt to join the venture. Grantees also used and praised the public service announcements; anecdotal data suggest that shortened versions offer more flexibility.

- *The Big Read increased the visibility of participating institutions—and their programs and efforts in the arts and literature—in the media and among city officials, peers, and schools.* Across cycles and institutions, the prestige of an NEA grant and month-long programming raised public profiles, showcased the efforts of librarians—including youth librarians—curators, and university outreach personnel, and built organizational skills, confidence, and résumés for future local and national initiatives. Almost all, or 97% of the grantee survey respondents agreed that library visibility had increased as a result of The Big Read; over three-fourths (79%) said that participation increased their skills in planning and executing events; three-fourths (74%) said The Big Read increased their skills in advertising and promoting events; 86% said The Big Read increased their skills in taking part in national initiatives.

- *Libraries continue to play a pivotal role in The Big Read, as grantees, partners, trainers, publicists—and as places where citizens attend events and get books to keep as well as borrow*. Feedback consistently affirms the key role libraries play in The Big Read. Libraries have received approximately half of the grantees awarded, and have often served as partners, bringing the total of libraries participating in The Big Read's first three cycles to almost 3,000. Libraries have been instrumental in getting the word out, confirmed by the fact that a majority of participants said they heard The Big Read from a library. For museums, arts institutions, or civic and service groups receiving grants, library partners have complemented their programming and outreach, especially for younger audiences.

- *The Big Read's appeal to grantees and partners from organizations other than libraries and arts institutions points to broad-based interest in literary reading and new approaches to*

promoting it. In addition to libraries and arts organizations, Big Read grants have gone to museums, colleges, cities, service and health organizations—all of which have been partners, too, along with other nonprofits and businesses. This suggests that interest in expanding audiences for literary reading goes well beyond institutions historically focused on reading and the arts.

Data confirm that this interest can translate into innovative programming and promotional strategies, such as Big Read advertising on buses, scout merit badges, and book-themed performances at medical facilities. Partnerships with institutions championing the performing or visual arts were perceived as highly successful because music, theatre, and visual arts provided effective and varied ways to engage readers and non-readers alike in literature. Libraries or consortia that serve rural and often widespread areas see The Big Read as a way to pool and leverage resources to expand awareness and access.

- *Big Read partnerships laid the foundation for future collaborations linking literary pursuits to arts, literacy, and community development goals.* Almost all grantees say that The Big Read increased their capacity not only in forming but also in sustaining coalitions: 99% agreed that The Big Read laid the groundwork for partnerships to boost interest in literature; almost two-thirds strongly agreed; 89% cited an increase in their organization's awareness of organizations with which they might collaborate, and half saw the increase as substantial. The benefits between literary and arts organizations were often mutual: The Big Read laid the groundwork for partnerships to boost interest in literature—and to advance the arts through literature. Some communities merged literary and literacy efforts, seeing both as key to community and economic development.

- *Encouragement and ideas from the national level, and more strategic local efforts, have improved partnerships with schools.* Some grantees experienced challenges involving schools, especially early in the program, but advice on partnering with schools, efforts to engage them earlier in the process, and strategies for working with teachers and students appear to have broken down barriers. Overall, grantees report success with teachers and students participating as a class; success rates with college or university students and faculties are somewhat lower, but many grantees report productive partnerships. Partnering with schools provides a sort of compound interest, adding not only school-age audiences but also promoting the program and grantee organizations to school peers, colleagues, and families.