



Why Books on Bikes?

As the Quarles Elementary School librarian in Winchester City, Virginia, I saw a need for students to have access to reading materials over the summer. In the past I have struggled to get books into students' hands, even though I open the school library during the summer. During these open library times, students have the opportunity to check out backpacks that contain books based on a theme or by a single author. For example, a popular backpack contains only books written by Mo Willems. I also have established a little lending library in front of the school so that students can access books at all times. However, I know students have difficulty getting to the school to take advantage of these opportunities. I needed a way to get books into the students' communities. I realized that I could

combine my love of bicycles and books by creating a bike bookmobile program.

Existing Programs

After research, I was able to find three existing bike bookmobile programs in the United States. Because of a fellowship from Fund for Teachers, this past summer I was fortunate enough to see these programs in action. My journey started in Denver, Colorado. After a tour of the Denver Public Library, I met up with Zac Laugheed, who, with Jen Morris, started DPL Connect. The day I visited, DPL Connect was stationed inside a convention center during a comic convention. I was able to observe the custom-built bike bookmobile and enjoyed seeing the brightly colored signage surrounding it. Seeing this signage and discussing it made me

aware of the importance of using signage to communicate with the public about the program.

Visiting with DPL Connect, I observed the powerful impact that the bike bookmobile has on the public. People attending the convention approached the bookmobile and were excited to learn more about the program and to check out books. DPL Connect has a checkout system for cataloged material that requires a form to be filled out; the info includes the catalog number of the book.

In Seattle I met with Jared Mills and learned about his Books on Bikes Program. I met up with Jared at the Seattle Public Library. This program goes to community events like farmers' markets. Not only did I get to see the past year's bike bookmobile, but I also saw the



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two newest bookmobile additions to the program. These carts are lightweight to aid staff members' hill climbs in the city. Like the Denver trailer, these bookmobiles also used signage and displayed the books in an eye-catching way. Jared and his colleagues use Wi-Fi and an app to check out books.

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These two programs are similar in that both are services of a public library and are focused on providing a library presence at special events. Both programs support issuing

new library cards on the spot and checking out books. Non-cataloged books are also brought to events for patrons who could not obtain a library card. Both programs charge fines for overdue or lost materials checked out from the bicycle bookmobile. These programs also require patrons to return books at the library, not to the bookmobile. Both promote their programs and use social media to publicize the locations of the stops.

Next I was able to visit Street Books, a program in Portland, Oregon, that serves people living outside. This program goes out every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday on a set route in search of patrons. I really enjoyed seeing Laura Moulton's bicycle cart because it was attached to the front of the bike and was handicapped accessible via a pull-out drawer. This nonprofit

program does not require a public library card. There are no restrictions on checking out books and no fines for overdue or lost material. A traditional pocket and card system is used; the librarian notes the borrower's name. The bookmobile "driver" also gives patrons cards to remind them what day of the week the bookmobile will visit again so that patrons can return or check out more books. If patrons are willing, the librarian takes their pictures with their selected books.

Prior to visiting with Street Books, I had almost no interaction with people living outside. At first I was uncomfortable in this new setting. But as I biked along with Street Books that day, my attitude changed. By observing Laura's kind interactions with her patrons I learned a lot about the impact

positive interactions can have on self-esteem. Laura not only treats each patron with respect, each patron treats Laura as a welcomed acquaintance. Patrons who had used Street Books in the past were happy to see the librarian visit again. Patrons who were new to the program and unsure whether to get involved warmed up during the mutual discussion of books. Seeing Street Books in action reaffirmed my belief in the power of books.

Though the three programs had different target audiences, all the bike bookmobiles that I observed generated excitement and interest in reading. Public interest for each program was high. People were curious about all the programs. Librarians involved with these programs talked about the importance of funding and grants. Seeing the three bike bookmobile

programs in person and meeting the passionate creators of each program were very inspiring experiences.

My Books on Bikes Program

My experience visiting with the three bike bookmobile programs inspired me to take what I learned from these programs and integrate this new knowledge into a bike bookmobile program for my school. I was able to get my program, Books on Bikes (BoB), started during the summer of 2014. About 90 percent of our school population is eligible for free and reduced-price lunch; many of my students don't have books in their homes. Because of a lack of reading material, our students experience a "summer slump" during which reading scores decline between spring testing and students' return in the fall. BoB allowed me to get books into the hands of the students to help prevent this summer slump and to promote the love of reading.

With AASL's
Innovative
Reading
Grant

sponsored by Capstone, I was able to purchase 740 new paperback books. I chose to purchase paperback books because the light weight makes them easier for me to transport by bike. The grant allowed me to provide students with high-quality books of interest to them. For checkout I used cards in the back of the books. To borrow books students or their parents would write their names on the cards, and I would collect the cards. In addition to the grant, I also received support from Winchester's Bicycle Outfitters; they provided bike maintenance and a high-quality bike trailer. I chose to use a colorful bike of my own and attach the trailer for the books.

This summer I checked out 336 books! My goal was to check out at least fifteen books during each bookmobile outing, but as students got accustomed to the program and the times that I would be in the neighborhoods, the number of checkouts greatly increased. I also shifted my original times for the bookmobile program. Originally, I was going to leave school on Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 2:00 p.m. However, because of the heat in Virginia during the summer days, very few students were outside in the

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afternoon. I changed the schedule to leave school at 6:00 p.m. on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. I followed a biking route that I had made up using a map of our school zone. As weeks passed and students got used to the program, eager readers started to stand outside their homes waiting for the bookmobile.

I had students call my name from their windows, asking me to stop. I had students waving at me from a block away. Excitement was high as students saw the bike bookmobile coming! At one apartment complex I had at least ten children around me eager to get books.

As I rode my bike bookmobile through my school's service area, if I came across children too young or old to attend my Pre-K-4 school—or from a different school—I still checked books out to them. Getting books into children's hands was more important to me than getting all the books back. The cost of unreturned books was considered to be part of the expense of running the program. Not only did this program positively impact the students at my school, it also affected the community.

BoB promoted a love of reading as no penalties were given for students who didn't return a book. All students were welcome to select and check out another book. When students did return a book, they were able to select a small prize, such as a bookmark or an eraser. Students were eager to select new books and excited about the collection to choose from. Students would run out of their homes when they saw the bookmobile. BoB generated more excitement from students than the ice cream truck! Not only were students interested in the bookmobile, but by the end of summer people in the community were offering warm greetings as I biked past.

Because of the excitement of BoB, I was fortunate to have seven volunteers cycle along with me at various times to learn more about the program. These volunteers included teachers from other schools who are interested in starting a similar program. I also had two volunteers who are English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. These teachers were major assets. Many of the families that I encountered spoke only Spanish. I was able to communicate that I had free books, but beyond that I was limited. The ESL teachers were fluent in Spanish; they made the families feel comfortable and the bookmobile more approachable.

To reduce expenses, I did not have a custom cart constructed; I used a cart intended to hold a child, filled the cart with books, and pulled it behind my bike. Having seen the three very differently constructed bookmobiles, I would like to have a cart like the one Street Books uses to allow easy access for all. Students were often reluctant to rummage through the BoB trailer to select a book. Also, I would like the books to be more easily accessible as a student on crutches and a student in a wheelchair had trouble accessing the books in my cart. At the time of this writing I am working on funding to be able to purchase a new bookmobile for summer 2015.

My entire community benefits as I bike books to students. Not only am I spreading the love of reading, but I am also showing the benefits of a healthy lifestyle.

At the time of this writing, I am in the process of establishing a bicycle safety program for students at my school. With a grant from Virginia Safe Routes to School, support from Winchester's Bicycle Outfitters, and support

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from Cannondale Bikes, I was able to purchase four new bikes and helmets for use at Quarles Elementary School. Last summer many of the students who checked out books were interested in my bike; they didn't have bikes of their own but longed to be able to ride. Students who had bikes were often riding incorrectly, and very few wore helmets. Because I was able to obtain bikes and helmets students are now able to stay after school for the bike safety program. I look forward to observing students riding their bikes safely and for students' love of biking to grow.

As I continue with BoB, I hope to inspire others to create their own programs. The greatest reward is knowing that students have access to reading material and are on their way to becoming lifelong readers.



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