



REINVENTING READING IN A PANDEMIC

School Librarians in Metro
Nashville Harness Creativity to
Support Student Literacy

Lindsey Kimery
mskimery@gmail.com

As school librarians we are continually innovating, yet there is nothing like a pandemic to push us past our limits and demand we re-envision reading to bridge the gap between access and opportunity for our learners. While attending the *School Library Journal* Virtual Summit in the fall of 2020, Marlon Styles, superintendent of Middletown City School District in Ohio, said something so simple, yet so important as we search for ways to continue providing continuity of services. He said, "Creativity is free." That resonated deeply with me as a new district-level leader of school librarians trying to find solutions for our libraries in the face of COVID-19. If we were willing to be creative, to think far outside the box, to not limit ourselves by sticking to tradition, then we had the power to invent solutions to the barriers to book access brought on by the pandemic. In short, it was time to break the rules.

To understand how we re-envisioned reading in Nashville, it is important to rewind and share our story. Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) is the second largest school district in Tennessee. With 159 schools, 79,651 students, and 126 languages spoken, our student population is incredibly diverse, not only culturally but also socio-economically. MNPS shifted to virtual learning in late March 2020 on the heels of devastating tornadoes that ripped through the community on March 3, which abruptly caused the closure of schools.

The early days of the pandemic were spent searching for hope amidst the devastation experienced by our community as we cleaned up and re-built with the shadow of COVID-19 looming. Our focus was on supporting families' most basic needs and virtual learning took shape. With the district not yet one to one, we were not immedi-



Data from the 2020–2021 school year for Metro Nashville Public Schools.

ately prepared to shift to a virtual learning format. Our physical school library spaces were shuttered and print books were not permitted to be circulated for the remainder of the school year. With the start of the 2020–2021 school year, we had to restore and increase access.

MNPS started the 2020–2021 school year virtually. Middle and high schools would continue virtually through February 2021. Elementary schools phased to hybrid learning in October 2020 but returned to virtual learning in December, and once again returned to in-person in February. Our team of 130 school librarians were not only thinking about how to provide equitable services to their students and school communities, but together we also

were thinking about how to provide equitable services across the district. It was important that we not operate in our own silos, in our own parts of town, as 159 different schools, but that we share a common vision as one district for equitable library services with our new normal.

Leveraging Partnerships

A powerful source of literacy support in Nashville is our partnership with Nashville Public Library's Limitless Libraries program. Through Limitless Libraries, every student and staff member has a Nashville Public Library card, which provides access to two million additional items. Students and staff can request items through our shared catalog, which are couriered to schools. Tra-

ditionally, students in third through twelfth grades could request items, but due to the pandemic, we broke our first rule and expanded this to also include Kindergarten through second grade. It was important that all students have access to items from the public library. School librarians distributed Limitless Libraries requests through weekly curbside pickups, and families had the option to return items to the school or to the nearest public library branch. Our public libraries were closed to patrons during this time, so between their curbside events and our school library curbside events, this provided additional opportunities for families to get books.

Yet, we quickly learned that curbside is great in theory, but not all families could take advantage of curbside offerings due to work schedules and the lack of transportation. Despite our efforts to partner with school district transportation, which was being utilized to deliver meals to students, we were unable to create a bookmobile system. We have recently learned a solution is in the works! Limitless Libraries will have a bookmobile on the road in 2023.



Collage of curbside social media posts from several MNPS school libraries.

This beautiful partnership is truly an asset in strengthening literacy in Nashville.

Community partnerships are always important, but tapping even further into their power helped us re-invent reading. Because our district was now one-to-one) but school buildings were closed, families and students needed a way to get IT support. Tech help centers were established around the district, which created an opportunity for us to share books. We partnered with Book 'Em, a Nashville non-profit that collects and distributes new and gently used books for children ages 0–18, and held two book giveaways at the tech help centers in September and November. Everyone who visited the tech centers had the opportunity to select books for themselves or for young readers in their lives.

Our school librarians, who were still working virtually at the time, volunteered at the tech centers for the book giveaways. They loved seeing students in person for the first time in months! It was an opportunity to not only support student literacy, but also to check in on their well-being during such a challenging time. Our giveaways even got the attention of a local news outlet who stopped by a tech help site and interviewed one of our volunteers.

Alex Green Elementary
School's curbside station.

Another community partner, Ride for Reading, which collects, sorts, and delivers books via bicycle to children in Title I schools and low-income communities, partnered with several schools for book giveaways. While they were unable to bike to schools and interact with students, they delivered books to the schools for distribution by school staff. Vanderbilt University Athletics, the athletic department at Vanderbilt, created "Sunday Stories" for our students in which a student athlete reads a book via Instagram on Sundays. Both Ride for Reading and Vanderbilt Athletics took the initiative to find creative ways to meet students' literacy needs.

Nashville Reads, Nashville's annual city-wide read sponsored by the Nashville Public Library, organized a virtual author visit with Yuyi Morales to discuss *Dreamers*, which was our 2020 city-wide read that was postponed until 2021 due to the tornadoes and the pandemic. Lipscomb University along with Humanities TN, Tennessee's affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, helped provide copies of the book to our school libraries, with extra copies that librarians could use for giveaways. Our community partners got creative and found innovative ways to support our students' literacy needs. While we enjoy participating in Nashville Reads annually, to make Nashville Reads happen in 2021, we had



The enthusiastic spirit of all our community partners was a welcome source of comfort during such a difficult school year.

to work together to find a virtual solution to connect thousands of students and citizens for our culminating celebration with Yuyi Morales. The enthusiastic spirit of all our community partners was a welcome source of comfort during such a difficult school year.

Book Deliveries

When school librarians are passionate about connecting students with books, their willingness to be creative is endless. While it was not the expectation, many school librarians dropped off book requests to students on their doorsteps. School librarian Alison Brooks and library clerk Cat Brooks of Apollo Middle School created a way for students to use their positive behavior points to request book deliveries. They ran the “Polar Book Express Delivery” close to winter break. With a minivan decked in holiday style, the Apollo Middle library team set off to spread joy and cheer by delivering books to students to enjoy over the long winter break.

Amanda Tucker-Dye, previously of McKissack Middle who is now at Meigs Middle, surprised students with goody bags for their efforts in reading and reviewing books. Alice

School librarian Amber Groves made a poster for the book giveaway.



Above: MNPS librarians Amber Groves and Mary Davis greet students during the September 2020 book giveaway at a district tech help center.

Below: Copies of the Nashville city-wide read Dreamers are bagged and sent to schools to use for book giveaways in conjunction with a virtual author visit with Yuyi Morales.



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Russell of Crieve Hall Elementary left notes for students about their book selections. Students picked up their books at curbside along with a handwritten note from their beloved school librarian, a thoughtful way to personalize the curbside experience and show students that their school librarian loves to know what the students are reading.

With virtual learning, these organic moments and opportunities to talk with students about books and to

celebrate students for reading were hard to come by, so school librarians looked for ways to create excitement around reading. As we faced closed school libraries, our library services team worked with principals to create a schedule to open the school library for a day or provide curbside pick-up so that students could check out books. If it was within our power to control and manage, then it was fair game.

Making Use of Tech Tools

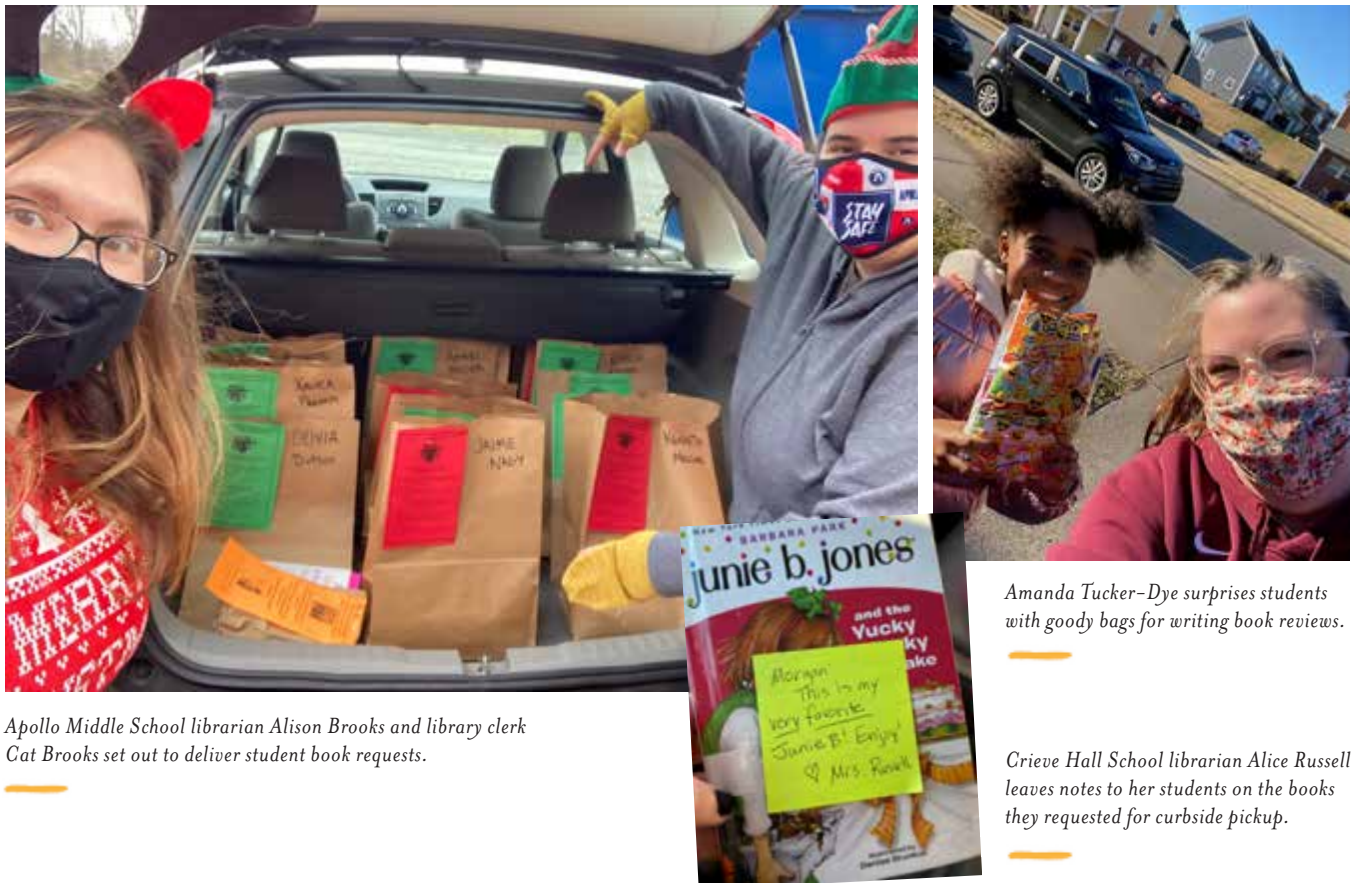
Without the ability to see students in person, school librarians leveraged all available tech tools and platforms to reach students. Book talks, book trailers, mini movies, virtual story times, virtual author visits, virtual book clubs, and a virtual battle of the books were implemented to continue to support sharing the love of books. Readers' advisory took place via video con-

ferencing via Microsoft Teams chat, e-mail, Microsoft Forms, Schoology messaging, and more.

Emmie Stuart of Percy Priest Elementary created a Microsoft Form with genre suggestions for her K–2 students to use with their families to request books. This was a wonderful way to support our youngest readers who had not had an opportunity to learn to use the catalog yet, much less know how to place a hold on a book.

During hybrid learning, school librarian Christa Adams of Creswell Middle School created displays of books with QR codes that students scanned to place holds on books of interest. Christa delivered their requests to their classrooms.

School librarians became pros at video tutorials, creating asynchronous content on how to check out print and digital resources; use Beanstack, our



Apollo Middle School librarian Alison Brooks and library clerk Cat Brooks set out to deliver student book requests.

Amanda Tucker-Dye surprises students with goody bags for writing book reviews.

Crieve Hall School librarian Alice Russell leaves notes to her students on the books they requested for curbside pickup.

Percy Priest School librarian Emmie Stuart created a form for families to use to request library books during virtual learning.



Creswell Middle School librarian Christa Adams creates a display of books with QR codes students can scan to place a hold on those they want to read.

reading tracker app; pick up books curbside; and navigate our digital resources. Social media became more widely used to help spread information about the library, books, and other school-related information.

School librarians recognized their role in providing support to students and families outside of reading and school-related activities. They used their platforms to share information about accessing necessities like food and medical help. School libraries are the heart of the school community, and the pandemic has proved their important function as a hub for literacy, learning, and information.

Policy Changes

Changes to circulation policies were necessary. In the past, we may have had the luxury of agonizing over changes to circulation policies; however, that did not happen this time! Changes needed to be swift. Due dates were extended and overdue notices were waived as students needed additional time with books. Even though students and families could return items to the school or to any public library branch nearest them, returning items promptly could still be a matter of inconvenience and low priority with everything else families were facing. As a district, we waived all lost book fees from March 1, 2020, to the end of the 2020–2021 school year. The Nashville Public Library followed suit in eliminating lost book fines, which was a tremendous benefit to our students and families. With all the chaos in the world, the last thing we wanted to add to the plates of our families was worry over how to pay for a lost book.

The total cost of books lost during this time was significant but in the long run, it was not important to our goal of developing lifelong readers and users of information. We would rather lose books than readers.

Conclusion

As we linger in this space of in-person and virtual learning again this school year, we continue to rely on our resourcefulness, ingenuity, and willingness to try new things and let go of ways that no longer serve our students. Following the March 2020 tornadoes, #NashvilleStrong emerged as a reminder about the never-ending strength of our community, and during the pandemic this hashtag held true as we reinvented how to provide access to books to our students.

For Nashville, this was a time to leverage our community partnerships even more, to work together more to create consistent and equitable services in the face of non-traditional learning, to teach ourselves new technologies and to try new social media platforms to reach our students where they are, and to be willing to bring the books out into the community, beyond the confines of the library walls, in whatever way we could. We will keep rising to the occasion by re-inventing reading and adopting what we have learned into our best practices.

We continue to make curbside available upon request, as students sometimes have to shift to virtual learning due to being quarantined. This may become a permanent best practice to support students whether they are in or out of school. We continue to explore book access in the school building in response to student movement being limited due to a surge of COVID-19 cases. School librarians have created a mobile mini-library to take to classrooms. School librarians continue to create content that can

be shared asynchronously, and they leverage virtual conferencing to provide office hours to support students. Hume-Fogg High School librarian Amanda Smithfield held virtual office hours to support seniors with MLA citations on the night before their research papers were due. Amidst the increased flexibility, we have more tools now, and we're not afraid to use them.

Most importantly, we learned that it is okay to break the rules. No matter what the future holds, as school librarians we must harness our creativity and adapt to the current learning environment so that we continue serving students. We keep brainstorming solutions and chipping away at barriers. And, who knows, maybe one day we'll get our very own bookmobile.



Lindsey Kimery
(she/her/hers) is coordinator of library services at Metro Nashville Public Schools

in Nashville, Tennessee. She is the 2021 president of the Tennessee Association of School Librarians. She's also a board member for Future Ready Libraries. Lindsey is a member of AASL and is chair of the 2021–2022 AASL Chapter Assembly.