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## COVER PAGE

Innovation Study Title      **“6 by 6, Ready to Read” Early Literacy Program**

Category                      **Sustainability**

Jurisdiction Name            **Johnson County, Kansas**

City/County Manager        **Hannes Zacharias**

Population                    **542,737**

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# **“6 by 6, Ready to Read” Early Literacy Program**

## **Johnson County Library (KS)**

*Ensuring Success for At-Risk Kids*

### **SYNOPSIS**

#### **Intent**

*Being functionally literate* has everything to do with an individual’s trajectory for workplace competence and economic success. Literacy is the basis for sustainable, healthy communities in our society.

But reading – unlike language – doesn’t come naturally. It’s actually a process of decoding and comprehending.

Learning to read is therefore difficult for those *unprepared* for it, and then the problem compounds itself through the grades – culminating in dropping out of school because those children cannot keep up, let alone succeed.

***This is a national issue:*** 35% of children enter school at risk for academic difficulties, and 60% have difficulty learning to read. And ***one of every five adults*** in the U.S. is functionally ***illiterate***.

Conversely, children who are *prepared* for learning to read *do* learn to read easily. Children who excel in school are those who *continue to read frequently* for leisure in early grades.

Children who learn **six pre-reading skills by age six** will be more successful readers, researchers find. These six skills have been identified by the American Library Association in *Every Child Ready to Read* (ECRTR), a program of instruction for parents and caregivers.

However, parents and caregivers *most in need* of early literacy training are precisely those who will not understand terminology such as “phonological awareness” – one of the six skills – nor do they visit libraries. Yet learning these pre-reading skills should begin ***in infancy***.

Therefore, the **intent – and challenge** – was to ***adapt*** ECRTR to make the language more “user friendly” and easier to understand, to ***create*** highly accessible programming and resources based on ECRTR, and to ***reach*** parents and caregivers of at-risk children.

To do this, the Johnson County Library **re-branded ECRTR concepts as “6 by 6, Ready to Read”** – based on ECRTR’s “***six pre-reading skills by age six***” – utilizing original illustrations by national author-illustrator Brad Sneed for the accompanying marketing tools.

**The “6 by 6” initiative** is comprised of five parts:

- 1) **translating** academic concepts into wording *at an elementary-school reading level*,

- 2) **branding** the new program name, new wording of the concepts, and accompanying illustrations;
- 3) **devising tools** for use by parents and caregivers to reinforce the ideas, using these branded concepts and illustrations;
- 4) **creating a program**, spaces, and resources in libraries where children and their caregivers practice the skills within a literacy-rich literary environment; and
- 5) **implementing** an extensive outreach program, targeting at-risk children and their parents and caregivers such as those on the *waiting list* for Head Start, at various job training sites, and at preschool teacher conferences, etc.

Support materials include a corresponding Web Page ([www.jocolibrary.org/6by6](http://www.jocolibrary.org/6by6)) depicting the six skills and 50+ video clips (some in Spanish) of fingerplays performed by library staff members and a Spanish-language brochure. An area hospital serving low-income families is distributing 5,000 “6 by 6” DVDs to new mothers.

These reinforcement tools for parents and caregivers are integral to the initiative’s effectiveness. *To instill the skills, parents and caregivers must act with intention.*

## **Outcomes**

The **main outcome** is rendering a complex message very understandable to – and usable by – every parent and caregiver in the most basic, everyday interactions with their children.

Staff’s objectives include:

- Creating a re-branding scheme for the six pre-reading skills for “Every Child Ready to Read,” with the intent of
- Making these skills more accessible to *pre-readers’ parents and caregivers, because small children cannot act for themselves*, for use in in-library programming and in
- Developing an outreach program to reach those most in need.

To gauge effectiveness, staff set **outcomes evaluation objectives**, using pre- and post-surveys:

- 20% of 300 families reached will increase time spent reading aloud to their children and playing word games with them
- An increase in numbers of library card holders within the parent-caregiver participants
- Use ALA evaluation tools for Every Child Ready to Read to evaluate early literacy behaviors of parents and caregivers, based on responses from the intake forms and follow-up evaluation.

To date, evaluation indicates initial success. The pilot in-library “6 by 6” program space served at least 28,033 people in its first year, 2010; “6 by 6” programs are being offered at most branches; and 21 thematic kits have been developed to support them.

In 2010, staff reached 556 parents and caregivers in off-site classes and early childhood conferences, plus 67 preschools. Before-and-after questionnaires revealed that *parents and caregivers are now reading more to their children. They increased the time they shared books daily with their children by more than 16%, and 60% of the targeted audience used the “6 by 6”*

skill cards. Responding parents also increased their number of visits to the library by 14%, increased their discussions with their children about letters and sounds by 12.5%, and increased vocabulary-building activities by 9%.

**A major outcome:** The State Library of Kansas is adopting "6 by 6" as THE model and THE tools for statewide Early Childhood Learning programming. A Memorandum of Agreement has been signed, and JCL staff will present the first regional training session in August 2011.

### Costs

Total out-of-pocket, non-staff costs to date are \$54,000 – all from grants:

- An initial grant of \$25,000 from the Kansas Health Foundation funded printing of card sets that reinforce the pre-reading skills for parents and caregivers.
- A grant of \$5,000 from the Capitol Federal Savings Foundation funded DVDs of fingerplays that were distributed to new mothers at Shawnee Mission Medical Center and to preschoolers registering for Summer Reading Club in 2010.
- A recent grant of \$24,000 from the Johnson County Library Foundation will make it possible to purchase new equipment for the Early Literacy Space pilot at a branch library and to place equipment in a second branch library.

All other costs have been in staff labor, which drives this program. Library staff takes the program to outreach sites, 27 staff members are depicted doing fingerplays and rhymes on the library's "6 by 6" Web page and DVD, and staff help library visitors use the interactive modules in "6 by 6, Ready to Read" Early Literacy Spaces in branches – to instill the pre-reading skills.

The investment of staffing and focus for the "6 by 6" initiative is due to Early Literacy being a priority in the library's strategic plan.

### Innovative Characteristics

Re-branding of the six pre-reading skills to "6 by 6, Ready to Read" includes new wording for academic concepts, original illustrations, and reinforcement tools such as "cue card sets" depicting the six skills. The library is pursuing a trademark for this branded program.

Using the "6 by 6" theme as a springboard and keying off the idea of flash cards used for arithmetic, Communications Manager Kasey Riley approached children's book illustrator Brad Sneed in 2009. She asked him to create, *pro bono*, illustrations to identify with the six pre-reading skills in ALA's "Every Child Ready to Read." They decided on the following:

1. *Have Fun With Books (Print Motivation)* - **Monkey**
2. *Notice Print All Around You (Print Awareness)* – **Kangaroo**
3. *Talk, Talk, Talk (Vocabulary)* - **Toucan**
4. *Look for Letters Everywhere (Letter Knowledge)* - **Peacock**
5. *Tell Stories About Everything (Narrative)* - **Turtle**
6. *Take Time to Rhyme, Sing & Play Word Games (Phonological Awareness)* - **Goat**

This re-branding is integral to making these skills more accessible to *pre-readers' parents and caregivers*, to creating effective reinforcement tools, and for use in programming.

A Web page, [www.jocolibrary.org/6by6](http://www.jocolibrary.org/6by6), depicts the "6 by 6" skills with 50+ video clips depicting library staff performing fingerplays with rhyming (one of the six skills). A DVD with the same content is distributed to new mothers in an area hospital serving low-income residents. No consultants were used.

### **Obstacles & Results Achieved**

After less than two years of implementation, managers have identified several obstacles.

First, penetration in the at-risk community is difficult, particularly among the Spanish-speaking. In fact, many Spanish-speaking immigrants are illiterate in their own language, presenting an array of issues other than the immediate inability to read a Spanish-language brochure about early literacy. Outreach staff is attempting to reach this population, but the library needs more bilingual staff members.

To overcome this obstacle, the library is reaching parents and caregivers of at-risk children by:

- Working with Head Start of Shawnee Mission, which has 215 enrolled families and 350 families on a waiting list. Library staff members visit regularly, offer parent workshops, and give them special invitations to library events.
- Partnering with Johnson County Health Department and child care associations to reach licensed child care providers and preschool teachers. With help from these and other organizations, the library is getting "6 by 6" materials into the hands of caregivers in the federally identified Title I neighborhoods.
- Establishing an ongoing presence in apartment buildings with a high number of Spanish-speaking residents (with apartment managers' permission). Staff visit regularly, make presentations in Spanish, and leave small deposit collections of children's books and "6 by 6" materials.

Second, achieving penetration of the collective public mind is problematic. That is, maintaining continuous promotion becomes difficult after the pilot period – a problem complicated by lack of funding and organizational attention. Once launch has occurred, organizations tend not to continue investing in promotion. (*Does McDonald's ever stop promoting itself?*) However, "6 by 6" is an ongoing program with an unending need for awareness and education.

### **New Issues/Problems/Unintended Consequences**

Privacy issues impede the use of marketing lists to contact individuals in the target population. High turnover in the childcare field, due to low wages, creates a challenge. Some library staff members are uncomfortable presenting "6 by 6" information to parents and caregivers who may have other reasons for visiting the library.

## Innovation Study Components

### 1. Innovation/Creativity

The local public library is one of the few organizations whose service spans an individual’s lifetime, whereas formal schooling begins at age 5 (and typically ends by age 18 - 22). *Early literacy needs to begin in infancy* – when the human brain is experiencing its greatest growth.

*If the public library doesn’t do this, who will? And what other entity is more ubiquitous?*

The innovation and creativity in the “6 by 6” initiative is in:

- Reframing academic concepts into everyday language
- Using marketing techniques to render those concepts accessible to at-risk populations by creating reinforcement tools such as cue cards and video clips of fingerplays
- Highlighting a single children’s book quarterly to stimulate interactive experiences for children and their caregivers that support the early literacy skills

“Live” demonstrations of fingerplays and songs are at [www.jocolibrary.org/6by6](http://www.jocolibrary.org/6by6), and a matching DVD take the ideas and modeling to new mothers, caregivers, and families.

The “glue” for the re-branding initiative is the set of illustrations, created *pro bono*, by author-illustrator Brad Sneed for each skill – *animating the entire project and creating an attraction factor*. No consultants were used.

### 2. Outcomes Achieved

More than 5,700 preschoolers in Johnson County are living in poverty (12% of all preschoolers). Even though Johnson County is considered a wealthy suburban area, its poverty rate has increased 150% in the last nine years.

Poorer residents are usually less educated and less aware of early literacy concepts. The Johnson County Library *identified this problem as an opportunity* for specific service.

Therefore, the library has focused its “6 by 6” initiative on low-income neighborhoods, immigrant populations, Title I school areas, Head Start families, etc. The pilot in-library “6 by 6, Ready to Read” Early Literacy Space is in a branch library in a low-income area. There, visitors – adults and children – learn *and practice* the six pre-reading skills. However, the more critical thrust is outreach to at-risk populations that never visit libraries.

To date, evaluation indicates initial success. The pilot in-library program served at least 28,033 people in its first year, 2010. In 2011, “6 by 6” program spaces are being offered at most branches; and 21 thematic kits have been developed to support them.

In 2010, staff reached 556 parents and caregivers in off-site classes and early childhood conferences, plus 67 preschools. Before-and-after questionnaires revealed that *parents and*

*caregivers are now reading more to their children. They increased the time they shared books daily with their children by more than 16%, and 60% of the targeted audience used the "6 by 6" skill cards. Responding parents also increased their number of visits to the library by 14%, increased their discussions with their children about letters and sounds by 12.5%, and increased vocabulary-building activities by 9%.*

Service delivery includes the Web page and DVD with 50+ fingerplays and rhymes demonstrated. These video clips are very popular, and parents sometimes stop staff members they recognize out in the community – at a grocery store, for example – to compliment the videos *and request an autograph for their child!*

After viewing "6 by 6" videos, 100% of survey respondents said they either did or plan to visit a library with their children. In addition, 94% said they "read" a wordless picture book to their children, 95% said the videos provided ideas about how to encourage early reading skills in their children, and 94% said they would recommend the videos to others.

Although access to government was not measured, it's highly probable that residents participating in "6 by 6" programs have an enhanced view of governmental offerings. It's too soon to evaluate impact on the overall health of the community, but it's also clear that "6 by 6" participants have been positively impacted and that follow-through is occurring.

**Best outcome:** *So impressed is the State Library of Kansas with this program that the "6 by 6" initiative is being adopted for all libraries in Kansas. A Memorandum of Agreement has been signed, and JCL staff will present the first regional training session in late August 2011.*

### **3. Applicable Results and Real World Practicality**

In less than two years, the Johnson County Library adapted academic concepts and created reinforcement tools to implement a full-scale program, both inside the library and in outreach – a program that is now in its second full year of implementation. Initial evaluations reflect not only positive results, but also vibrant enthusiasm among residents for this program.

The "6 by 6" initiative is highly replicable – as proven by the State Library of Kansas' adopting the program statewide. The cost for marketing tools is relatively inexpensive, and the greatest investment is in staff.

### **4. Innovation Study Presentation**

The library's Youth Services Manager, Communications/Marketing Manager, and Youth Outreach Librarian will co-present. These three presenters reflect the hybrid nature of this program – a marketing initiative delivered by children's librarians to parents and caregivers of at-risk children.

The presentation will include their own narratives, embellished by Powerpoint, examples of video fingerplays with rhyming (*one of the six skills*), and handouts.