

WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE

Establishing an Educational and Entertaining Library at Elm Park Elementary

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Final Report

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## **Background**

### Elm Park Elementary

At Elm Park Community School 89.3 % of the students come from low income families, with 85.3% receiving free lunch from the school; this percentage is often used to assess the low-income level of the student body. The number of students receiving free lunch at Elm Park Community School is significantly higher than in the rest of the Worcester School District, in which only 72.1% of students come from low income families. Also, this statistic is vastly higher than the rest of the state, which has an average of only 35% of students from low income families. As a result, these students' parents are struggling to make ends meet, and cannot necessarily provide their children with the supplies or support to help further their education and literacy outside of school.

Another challenge that Elm Park students and teachers face is that most of the students' primary language is not English. The majority of the students attending Elm Park Elementary – 52.4% to be precise – are Hispanic, compared with 38.4% and 16.1% in the district and state, respectively. State standardized test scores for the school indicate how these challenges are negatively affecting students' learning and performance. Very few of the students are scoring in the advanced category, and the majority of the students are at the needs improvement level. As a result, the school has been classified as “failing” by the state education department. As a community school, Elm Park Elementary has a student body composed mostly of children who live in the surrounding neighborhood. Because of their proximity, the school becomes a kind of community center, with students playing sports on the field and socializing inside and outside the school after the school day is over. Two nights a week, the school is open until 8 o'clock at

night housing soccer programs, math and science clubs, and English classes for parents and adults in the community.

### Elementary Reading Programs and Challenges

At elementary school, especially in the lower grades, students form the foundations in literacy that will enable them to access and share knowledge for the rest of their academic careers. Children must learn to read so that they may later read to learn. Therefore, students who do not succeed in reading at the elementary level are less likely to have academic success later in life. Additionally, the gap in literacy between different ethnicities and socio-economic classes has been identified as one of most pressing policy issues facing the nation today. Many schools entirely isolate English language learning students, assuming that a “culturally relevant” knowledge of English is all these students need. This assumes that they will never move into the higher ranges of academia or hold a job which requires an in depth knowledge of English grammar and a full grasp on a wide range of vocabulary. Other times, English language learners are ignored altogether and placed in a normal classroom with little support, where they naturally fall behind students who speak English as their first language. There are few well-defined programs for students learning English as a second language, especially at lower grades, which is when students form the foundation in literacy that will facilitate success in other subject areas. Therefore, many of these students fall behind in kindergarten or first grade, and spend the rest of their academic career in remedial classes. One of the most effective methods for developing literacy and understanding in English learning students is the whole language method. In this method, students read as a whole class, in small groups, and individually. They receive support from posters with understandable definitions of words they likely don’t know. After reading,

students review what they just read with various group and individual activities that ask them to identify the main characters and events of a story. This varied instruction, which requires students to seek out knowledge on their own, collaborate and share ideas, and discuss and recall what they just read, builds on the teacher's instruction for maximum effectiveness. Students not only learn English, but learn how to seek out the knowledge they need to understand a story.

Accessibility to books is also a key component in developing strong reading skills in young students. For students who come from a home where there is limited access to books, school and classroom libraries are essential for their development as readers and learners. There are a few characteristics that have been found to encourage use of the library, resulting in more reading experience, better reading skills, and a greater motivation for students to read voluntarily. The library should be open and inviting, with colorful and attractive decorations that will draw students in. It should also be partitioned and private, offering students a comfortable quiet place to enjoy reading. There should be a wide variety of books, spanning many genres and reading levels. Books should be shelved so that they are accessible to the students who need them – lower reading level books should be on lower shelves that smaller, younger students can reach. Shelving some books with the cover facing out can capture students' attention better than entire shelves of book organized spine-out. Lastly, supporting materials that encourage reflection and comprehension should be on display throughout the library. For younger students, puppets or felt boards can be used to re-enact the plot of stories they have just read. For older students reading more challenging books, posters with definitions of common words, easy access to dictionaries, and questions that prompt analysis of books are helpful.

While the foundations of reading are created in first and second grade, the development of higher level reading skills that occurs in grades 2-5 enables students to access knowledge and

teach themselves through reading. During these years, students develop confidence in their reading skills and the ability to comprehend more complex topics or storylines. Therefore, a continuous program that builds strong foundations and continues to challenge students in reading through the upper elementary grades is necessary to fully develop students' potential and prepare them for future academic success. Motivating students to read individually, seek out knowledge, and challenge themselves intellectually is a challenge faced by parents and schools across the country. In addition to effective teaching strategies and libraries that are accessible and inviting, extracurricular programs can help spark an interest in learning.

#### Clubs and Extracurricular Programs in Elementary Schools

In the United Kingdom, the government created a framework entitled "Every Child Matters". Part of this framework involves an extended school day, in which children are involved with clubs before and after school, which helps working parents by offering quality childcare that also doubles as another chance for their children to learn and be educated (Jewell). Beyond helping the parents who work late, these clubs also instill a sense of pride and confidence within the children, by giving them many chances to succeed in areas outside the classroom, and also keeps them safe and off the streets (Jewell). Though this is happening thousands of miles away, the benefits of having an after school program that helps working parents, gives students a sense of motivation, and also keeps them safe, is certainly something that could be of value here in Worcester, Massachusetts. Despite not having the funding or government support to create an elaborate afterschool program similar to that occurring in the United Kingdom, as a team we are capable of creating clubs that give the students of Elm Park

the ability to express themselves, challenge themselves, and continue having safe, educational fun while their parents work late.

One may wonder how a simple club could impact the children at this school. A study done by the University of California in 2000 found that students who participate in after school programs have test score gains in reading and math much higher than those of the statewide average (Brown). Not only did test scores improve higher than the state average, this study also found that school attendance of those who participated in after school programs increased by 1% during the first year, and also reduces grade retention, or having a child be held back a grade (Brown). In an attempt to make this library more than a space, but a place where a difference is made, this team aims to implement clubs and programs that would allow these students to succeed in every way they can, challenge high-achieving students, and encourage students to continue learning outside the classroom.

## **Goals and Plans**

### Goals for the Library and Programs

From the outset of the project, the group aimed to establish a library for the children who attend Elm Park Community School. The aim of this project was to create a welcoming space that encourages literacy both during and after school hours, and incorporates reading and writing into lives of Elm Park students and their families. In order to achieve this goal, we will adopt a two-part strategy. First, we planned to design and equip the space to accommodate the many uses of the library. We hope to engage the minds of all students by creating a colorful and inviting space, with a wall mural designed around the suggestions of students ranging from kindergarten to sixth grade. To encourage students to curl up with a good book after school, we will arrange a comfortable reading area with beanbag chairs and an array of books spanning many genres and reading levels. In order to support students in their studies, we will create a homework table to be used by older students to complete their homework after school. When their homework is done, kids can visit the computer area, which will be equipped with educational games and research resources. Additionally, a game area will supply board games and other activities to keep them entertained until their parents can pick them up. In order to achieve this school we will discuss getting faculty to oversee this operation or possibly getting other students from WPI to volunteer their time to oversee the children. Finally, we hope to construct a small platform stage for visiting authors, guest speakers, and poetry readings.

The second portion of our strategy to create an effective and inviting library and community center was to implement programs that encourage reading and writing and highlight students who show interest or excel in school. To provide a fun outlet for reading and writing, we hoped to create a club of some kind that will share books and create a student newspaper. The



implementation of a reading incentive program that recognizes “reader of the month” and a “writer of the month” award would reward students who put effort into reading often and writing well. These awards, along with potential student publications, writing samples, and student artwork would be on display in the library for the community to share. It was hoped that these programs will inspire students to be more interested in reading and writing, and their parents to be more involved and encouraging of their child’s developing literacy.

## **Challenges and Accomplishments**

### A Term

When the term initially began, the Elm Park Library Group consisted of Emily Cavanaugh and Margaret Hester. During the first full week of the term, the two sat with Professor Dempsey to brain storm ideas and goals for the project as a starting point, which consisted of a donation list looking for books, furniture, art supplies, educational games, along with some loftier hopes of computers, which was later found to be out of reach for this project consisting only of three terms. After this initial meeting, Emily and Margaret began to plan an assortment of clubs and activities that could be held in the space once it is furnished. Shortly after the brain-storming meeting, Jake Lautman and Caulin Lauzon joined the team. Once this final team had been formed, Caulin Lauzon, Emily Cavanaugh, and Margaret Hester met with Paula Proctor, the principal of the school, in early September to see the space and to see how Paula Proctor liked the ideas the team came up with. During this meeting, Paula approved of the ideas, stressing the need for nonfiction books. She also expressed a special interest in making a science club, or a club that would challenge the students who are doing well, as the majority of the schools funding and focus is placed on those students who are academically behind.

Soon after this meeting, the group handed in their forms to be CORI checked, a necessary process before we were allowed access to the school. However, by the end of the first term, the CORI forms still had not been approved. To avoid falling behind on the project, focus was turned to what could be done without physically being in the space. The group, working without a budget, decided to tackle the goals of starting clubs and seeking donations during this time. On September 11th, 2012, Margaret Hester met with Lynn Loftus, a librarian at WPI's library, and an elementary school librarian. During this meeting Lynn raised many great points that the team

had not yet addressed, such as fire safety regulations, how checking out of books will be handled, and thinking about getting books that fit the Massachusetts library standards. Lynn brought a variety of useful books, and placed them on hold for the team to reference.

In order to better understand the community, the group did some research on the area. Caulin investigated the demographics of Elm Park Community School's student body, as well as some statistics about academic success of students of different ethnicities. In 2009 only 7 % of students entering college were Hispanic. Given that over half of the students at Elm Park are Hispanic, they are at a clear disadvantage regarding opportunities for higher education. In our project we not only want to provide these students with a library, but to help spark their interests in learning by giving them a place to read and do other academic activities, hopefully enabling them to have greater academic success in the future.

It was requested that a stage be built for the library so the children would have a place to present themselves for reciting self-written poems or short stories. Caulin drew up plans for a platform stage to fit in an 8 ½ foot gap between bookshelves. The stage would be seven feet wide and extends out five feet, and would be a semicircle with a flat side to go up against the wall. The structure will be made out of plywood and will have a cross section of two by six supports through the middle of it. The top and bottom will both be flat surfaces with a mural to go on the bottom. The mural was planned to be painted on the bottom of the stage, which could be flipped up to against the wall when not in use. Additionally, we planned to paint the top of the stage or cover it with leftover carpet.

Also in the first term of the project, the group began to work through the logistics of starting clubs at the school. To get an idea of how a newspaper might be run, Margaret Hester

began communicating with Jacquelyn Tupper, the Editor-in-Chief of *The Towers*, WPI's school newspaper, starting on September 20th. Jacquelyn said she was definitely interested in helping out, and was going to check to see if other staff members were interested as well.

Communication with The Towers continued in B Term, when the library space was closer to completion. To continue trying to get volunteers to help monitor the children during these after school activities, Margaret Hester began talking with Alpha Phi Omega Fraternity, a national co-ed service fraternity, to see if they were available to volunteer there. Margaret contacted Andrew Moscariello, the president, to see if this would be a project his fraternity would be interested in helping with. However, there were not enough members interested to commit to regularly staffing the library or leading a club.

Seeing as it is absolutely essential to have people there to watch the students during these after school activities, finding volunteers became a growing concern. Jake Lautman proposed the idea of contacting Work Study, to see if this would count as community service for students with work study. On October 1st, Margaret began discussing the idea with Michael DiRuzza from the Financial Aid office. After talking with him, Margaret was put in touch with Mallory Howard.

In addition to volunteered time, donations of books and other materials were an initial concern for the group. Although many books had already been donated, a large portion of these were outdated or damaged, and there was an overall lack of non-fiction books. Margaret reached out to St. Luke's Catholic Church of Westborough to ask specifically for nonfiction children's books donations, and Emily and Caulin also reached out to their respective churches for donations of books. A donation of a few children's books and posters was received when Emily visited Barnes and Noble.

The non-profit tax identification number of the school was requested from Paula Proctor, but was not received until much later in the project. Therefore the group drafted letters to both publishing companies and local businesses such as Target and Staples, but couldn't send them without the tax number, since most businesses are only willing to make donations if they can be claimed on their taxes later.

## B Term

After a brief fall break, the project began to move more quickly. Starting November 1<sup>st</sup>, we were allowed into the school to begin work in the space that would become the library. To start the process, we met with Paula Proctor and Liza Graybill, a former elementary school librarian, to begin planning how the library would be organized and sorted. During this meeting, Liza Graybill explained how to sort books in a way that would make it easy for students to find a book that suited their reading level and interests. The two broadest categories were fiction and non fiction. Within the fiction section, books were divided into picture books (books to be read to children by a parent or teacher), early readers (books with simple language that kids can learn to read from), 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade fiction, and 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade fiction. Within the non-fiction section there were categories such as animals, history, sports, geography and others.

It was also necessary to check each book to make sure they were in good condition, scientifically and historically accurate, and did not contain any racial or gender stereotyping. For example, there was a book found, written in the early 1960s, that was about a young girl dreaming to grow up to be a secretary. Since this book was gender stereotyping and discouraging girls from dreaming of loftier professional goals, it was recycled. Similarly, many history or geography books were outdated, showing east and west Germany as two different countries or

including the USSR on the map of Europe. Any book that had water damage, torn or marked pages, a broken binding or any similar damage was also recycled. While it may seem wasteful to recycle so many donated books, Liza Graybill reminded us that outdated books can teach young children racial or gender stereotypes, as well as impart false knowledge and opinions about life other countries and cultures. This sorting work is what comprised most of progress this term, the group visited the school about four days every week.

This project had a number of group dynamic issues. During our weekly advisor meeting on November 9, 2012, the problems within the group were addressed. The problems consisted of communication issues, people not attending meetings they had committed to, and important tasks being ignored. However, after the issue was addressed and expectations were clearly stated, the group began to function more cohesively. After sorting began and all group members started to contribute more time and energy to the project, the pace of progress increased quite a bit. The group also received help from Alpha Phi, when the new member class came to help sort books for 2 hours on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Despite the increase in productivity, the project suffered a few other setbacks in its second term.

On November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012, Liza Graybill left the project, due to disagreements with Paula Proctor on how to construct this library, leaving us with no expert opinion on how to move forward after the group finishes the initial sorting. Although the group lost Liza, Lynn Loftus agreed to help the group move forward the very next day. In order to continue moving forward with the project, the group tried to set up a meeting with Lynn Loftus and Paula Proctor, to make sure they agreed on what the final product of the library should be. Again, Paula Proctor proved to be difficult to get in touch with, but finally a meeting with her instructional coach, Kristina

Pelczarski, was set for December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Unfortunately, after unsuccessful attempts to find a time when all parties were available, Lynn resigned from the project. As a full time elementary librarian and part time librarian at WPI, she already had numerous time commitments. Lynn recommended that we employ the Dewey Decimal System for organizing books to prepare for a potential circulation system.

Another issue that was not anticipated was getting donations. As a group, we believed that once people heard what they would be giving to, they would really want to be involved; however, this proved not to be the case. Once the tax identification number was finally received from a school secretary, letters were sent to many local businesses, commercial furniture wholesalers, and publishing companies. There were few responses to the requests, and even fewer were positive. Many forwarded our request to their national headquarters, and told us to check back in a few weeks.

After hitting many dead ends, the group reached out to The Towers to write an article about the project, hoping that additional publicity would help bring in some additional donations. The article is as follows:

“These kids don’t have a library. That’s just crazy to me; I grew up reading so much,” remarks group member Emily Cavanaugh, thinking about their interactive qualifying project this year. The group, comprised of Emily Cavanaugh, Margaret Hester, Jake Lautman, and Caulin Lauzon, is working with Elm Park Community School to furnish and staff a library and implement a few clubs to catch the kids’ attention.

Taking a look down the hill to 23 North Ashland Street, Elm Park houses about 450 students from kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade. An astonishing 90% of these

students qualify for free or reduced lunches. In addition over half of the student body doesn't speak English as a first language, a detriment to MCAT scores. The school has space for a library, but there are no books, no chairs, and no librarians. The group's first task is to rehabilitate this area and create a library from scratch. With the help of WPI librarian Lynn Loftus, they plan for it to double as a community center where kids can have fun after school while they wait for their parents to get out of work. Since the start of B term, the group has been working to sort book donations and furnish the space to make it more livable and conducive to learning.

The group hopes to hold monthly essay contests and post results for the kids to see in the library. Since it's doubling as a community center, they also want to make it a space that re-emphasizes fun. Because of the strict budget, they've only been living with the bare minimum. "We're hoping here to expose the kids to fun at school to make an impact that will lead to more academic and professional successes in the future," Cavanaugh says. If they can learn to associate fun with school at a young age, perhaps they'll work harder and stay in school longer.

In addition, it has been suggested to shelve 60% nonfiction and 40% fiction books, so that kids can build reading skills while they learn about science and history. As a result, many of the books that have already been donated are out of date and can't be used.

One other problem with their progress is funding. The school has enough money to pay teachers, but that's about it. There is no room for a librarian's salary



in their budget, let alone extra money for book tags or a check-out system (which normally involves computers and an electronic scanning device).

Other than the library, the IQP group is trying to implement a few clubs at Elm Park to give students a way to bond with each other and learn in a hands-on setting. The science club (engineering plug) will have kids thinking on their feet and performing simple experiments. The newspaper will have kids writing about current events or things they like, and then hopefully compiling them all into a monthly issue that can be read in the library.

Both of these clubs would include after school activities, so they need supervisors. They also need to become individually sustainable, so that the project can continue even after the IQP group has graduated. Because of this, the group needs help from the WPI community. They've reached out to organizations like APO and the community service work study, hoping that people will be excited to help children so close to home when they need it most.

Now they're reaching out to the general student body. This week and next the IQP group will be hosting a book drive for the Elm Park library. A box is located in the library and will gladly welcome any fiction or nonfiction books aimed at students from roughly 4 to 12 years old. If you would like to donate items but don't have access to them until winter break, or if you are interested in volunteering, you can reach the IQP group at [elmparklibrary2012@wpi.edu](mailto:elmparklibrary2012@wpi.edu).

The article was a good source of publicity for the project, and the on campus book drive was very successful. The group received a few boxes of books that were current and in good condition. Additionally, Pastor Andrew Borden of Zion Lutheran Church in Worcester offered

to request donations from his congregation and said that the church had some old Sunday School furniture that they could donate.

### C Term

After the shelves were overfilled with sorted books, the group consulted Principal Paula Proctor about what should be done with the excess. She requested that the extra books be kept in the cabinets in the library, because she fears that students may not initially understand the concept of borrowing and returning books, or may forget about or lose borrowed books. She wants to have a reserve of books in case the library's shelves become significantly depleted in the first few months. Shortly thereafter, we found that the carpet, which we had been waiting for since the outset of the project had finally been installed. The addition of the carpet greatly improved the physical appearance of the space, and to add to that, the group selected some of the best picture books and displayed them in the upper cabinets, as shown below.



As shown in the above picture, in addition to the carpet and books on display, the space was brightened by the donation of 10 beanbag chairs by the Hester family. These fulfilled our need to have a comfortable space where kids could get lost in a book after school. Three table and chair sets donated from Zion Lutheran Church supplied space where students could work on homework or play games. Margaret and Emily invested time in creating colorful, inspiring, and informative posters to decorate the space.



While the group was fortunate in receiving these donations of furniture, our previous term's efforts to get donations were unsuccessful. We continued to contact the publishing companies and local businesses we had reached out to in B term, but they declined to donate. Therefore, while we had furniture and books, we still lacked games and other activities for

students. Margaret made some small chalkboards that students could use to draw or write, or that teachers could use for class activities. Additionally, Emily brought some old board games from home to donate to the space.

The final addition to the space was the construction of a stage, where teachers, parents, or authors could read to students. The stage is a platform about 8 inches tall and 8 feet wide. It extends in a semicircle about 5 feet out from the wall, and was painted to ensure that it would stay in good condition for many years. One of the biggest challenges we faced this term was competing work in the school during their many snow days and vacations. However, we found time to be in the school during the available hours, and finalized the shelving of books and decorating the space. Below are some pictures of the library as it was when we first started working on it. There was no carpet, furniture, stage, posters, and most importantly no books.

Comparing these pictures to the ones shown earlier, one can see how far the space has come.





The completed library is a bright and inviting space that we hope will serve as a resource for students as well as a positive influence on their attitude towards reading and learning.

## **Future Recommendations**

Although our project has ended, there is still work to be done to maintain the library and maximize its potential. As the library continues to grow and develop, we believe that space will need a more sophisticated system for checking out books. This will make it easier to keep track of books, but more importantly, it will introduce the students to how other libraries function outside their elementary school. As libraries are an extremely important resource, this is a key tool that each student should have an understanding of. As this student body is unfamiliar with libraries, Paula Proctor anticipates a large number of books not being returned just simply because these students do not understand the concept of a check-out system. Due to the large possibility that a number of books will go missing, it is important for the school to keep receiving donations so that the shelves do not go bare. The group also plans to provide the school with contact information for a few non-profit organizations that donate books to elementary libraries.

In hopes of getting the student body enthusiastic about books, learning, and their new library, we plan on putting together a grand opening with a reading from a children's author, Margaret is currently trying to get in touch with Kim Harrington and Andrew Clements. One of our original ideas also included a mural, but after speaking with Paula Proctor, a bulletin board would be better suited for the limited wall space, so that pieces of writing and important events could be put on display in the space, so we hope to find a bulletin board for them as well. To continue keeping the space looking "kid friendly" and colorful, we would like to see the tops of the books shelves turned into a gallery of student's art work, so that they feel at home in the space and connected to it. We will try to contact teachers to encourage them to display other student works as well, such as writing or projects. Additionally we would like to encourage

them to use the library as a space where they can recognize the success of their students, perhaps naming a reader or writer of the month and displaying their name and work on the bulletin board. The group is excited for the grand opening of the project, and hopes that the school's parent volunteers will be able to maintain the library as a resource for students.



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