

Tablet Time: Amigos Fellowship & Opportunity Award Program Final Report

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Summary

In 2013, the Irving Public Library had a Reach Out team, a provider of inclusive programs that met the needs of families living with special needs. One of the Reach Out team members wrote a grant proposal to Amigos Library Services requesting tablets as a means of serving this special community. The result of this endeavor was Tablet Time, a program with two basic components: an actual time to play on the tablets and parent training. Tablet Time, both the play time and the series of parenting workshops, began at the West Irving Library. Play time, when the iPads were available for use, took place one Saturday afternoon a month. Four parent workshops were taught on Tuesday evenings by Linda Westrick, a trainer with the PATH Project, one of three federally funded Parent Training and Information Centers (PTI) serving Texas parents of children and youth with disabilities. In addition to the workshops, the Special Needs Department of Irving ISD conducted one staff training that covered what the school district provides for families, and one training for the public about where and how to access community resources. The first Tablet Time program was held February 15, 2014. Twelve programs were presented altogether, and a total of 272 people attended for an average of 23 per program.

Success of the Project

Debra Miller, the initial coordinator of the Amigos grant, left her job not long after it was awarded, and library manager Debbie Vaden, now retired, took over the responsibility. Vaden and the Reach Out team brainstormed a few adaptations to the programs outlined in the grant application, and subsequently, the metrics of success evolved into the following:

- Expansion of the library's special needs programs and services
- Return attendance at Tablet Time
- Acquisition of technology, both for staff and patron usage

We were successful in acquiring technology that, even today, greatly benefits our staff and patrons, and we expanded the library's special needs programs with the addition of Tablet Time. When the Reach Out team met with parents at two Irving ISD Special Needs Department parental training sessions, the number one need expressed was for special needs youth to have the opportunity to socialize with their peers in a public and safe environment. Tablet Time was created to provide this opportunity; unfortunately, though we had an average attendance of 23, the attendees comprised library regulars and patrons who happened to be in the building at the time of the programs. Though the attendees did find value in learning how to use the library's iPads, as well as their own tablets, to engage their children in storytimes and literacy building activities, the primary target audience of special needs children and their families was

absent. Of the twelve programs executed between February 2014 and April 2015, only one special needs child attended. Consequently, the live presentation and video as proposed in the grant, as well as the subsequent articles in Library Journal and TechSoup were never completed because, as the program did not attract the intended audience, there was nothing to film or report. Also, although Tablet Time was conceived because of suggestions from the special needs community, either we didn't communicate well enough—directly or through our marketing efforts—to draw them to the program, or the program we conceived to fit their need wasn't desirable. As a result, the Tablet Time program has been cancelled.

Final Thoughts

The library's Communications team played a huge role in getting the program up and running in two ways. One, they created flyers and posters, posted information on Facebook and Twitter, as well as local support groups and listservs. They also posted a feature article about Tablet Time in City Spectrum, which is the City of Irving's newsletter that is received by over 200,000 Irving residents. The second way Communications contributed is in their role of staff and public technology training. Since our IT department doesn't support Apple products, one of the Communications team members loaded the initial apps onto the tablets and taught staff how to operate the devices.

Though the Tablet Time parenting workshops didn't reach the target audience, the parents who did attend were so enthusiastic, the library decided to offer parenting classes, such as Baby Matters and Little LEADers (literacy, education, and discovery), every month as part of our overall services. The iPads we were able to purchase as a result of the grant have been of great benefit, not only to staff for training purposes, but for our patrons as well because the tablets are now a regular feature of our library storytimes. Additionally, one of the Reach Out team members, Corine Barberena, uses the tablets during her monthly storytimes for adults with learning disabilities at Lively Pointe Youth Center. She did her first storytime with the tablets on February 18, 2015, and according to her, some of the adults who had rarely responded to the stories or activities are now engaged by the iPads, which have become a component of Corine's program.

In conclusion, the Irving Public Library will continue its work establishing the library as a place of inclusion among families of special needs children and brainstorming program ideas that will engage and inspire them.

We are very grateful to Amigos for allowing us the opportunity to provide an enhanced service to our community.