Measuring the Impact of **Library Card Drives**

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Library card drives

with local schools are a mainstay of traditional public library work. For public librarians, working with teachers at area schools to ensure every student has a library card is an important part of outreach. At Columbus Metropolitan Library (CML), library staff and teachers work together to gather student information and issue library cards – either by delivery to the classroom or by planning a class visit to the public library. At the library, students are given a tour, treated to a program or booktalk and turned loose with their new cards to select and check out books before returning to school. Despite the amount of work, it is a positive experience for library staff, teachers and students. But what happens later? Is the library creating new customers? Do students continue to use library resources and services after receiving a card?

In December 2016, CML embarked on a yearlong library card data pilot to find out. By partnering with Columbus City Schools (CCS), CML engaged in a large-scale study involving 1,500 students from five elementary schools located throughout the City of Columbus, Ohio. Specifically, CML compared library usage for students who were issued a library card compared to those who were issued a library card and also provided a trip to the library. The hypothesis was that library card drives in conjunction with a library visit would increase library usage over time. Data was pulled at intervals of five, nine and 12 months. The results challenged assumptions about the impact of school library card drives and visits.

BACKGROUND

CML chose to work with CCS because the majority of CML's library locations serve one or more of the 73 CCS elementary schools. CCS is the largest district in Columbus, serving more than 50,000 students across a variety of socioeconomic neighborhoods. CCS has a Third Grade Reading passage rate of 85.4% and a High School Graduation rate of 78.1% (Ohio Dept. of Education, 2017-2018 school year).
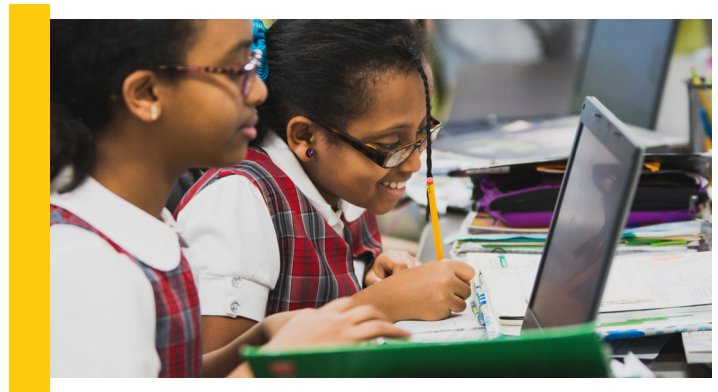
IMPLEMENTATION

To set up a comparison study, classes within each of the five schools were divided into two groups: grades receiving both a library card and a visit to a local library, and grades receiving only a library card.

For grades receiving library visits and cards:
- Students received a library tour, a booktalk or storytime and checked out books of their choosing
- Students received a flier listing library resources and services
- Teachers sent library cards home with students following the visit

For grades receiving library cards only:
- Students received a flier listing library resources and services
- Teachers sent library cards home with students

	Treatment	Control
	Library Visit	Kids Card
Kindergarten	X	X
1st Grade		X
2nd Grade	X	X
3rd Grade		X
4th Grade	X	X
5th Grade		X

Library visits and card drives were scheduled from Oct. 31 through Dec. 31, 2016. During that time, 1,566 library cards were entered into Polaris (CML's integrated library system) via record sets that could be mined to track data.

The chart shown here demonstrates the breakout of total cards issued by group.

Total Cards Issued For All Five Elementary Schools

	Card Only	Visit and Card
Total	766	800
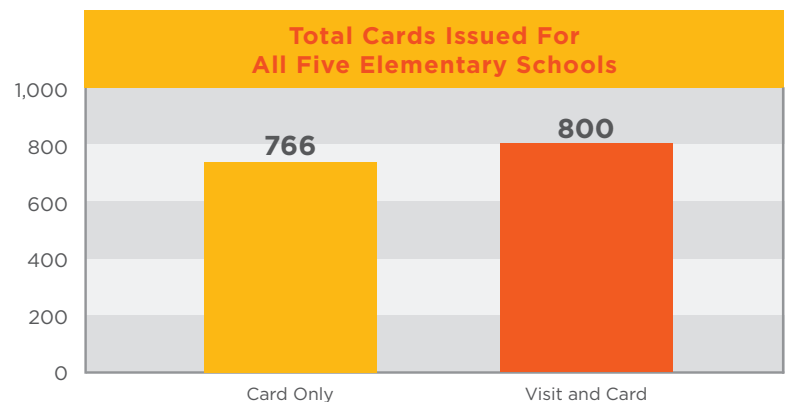
For each data pull, CML tracked various activities that signal library use:

- First-time checkouts
- Public computer sessions
- Summer Reading Challenge participation
- Reading Buddies sessions
- Homework Help Center sessions

Because the school visits included a first checkout on students' cards, in order to normalize the data we began looking at card activity after all visits were completed. The following report summarizes card usage from Jan. 1 through Dec. 31, 2017.

FINDINGS

After 12 months of tracking, data showed a gradual increase in percentage of cards used for circulation, computer usage and program attendance from five months to 12 months. However, there was little difference in usage between the two subsets (students who received a card compared with those who received a card and visit).

	Total Cards Issued	Total Cards Used	% of Cards Used at 5 months	% of Cards Used at 9 months	% of Cards Used at 12 months
Card Only	751	315	18.5%	35%	42%
Visit and Card	785	318	18.5%	35%	41%

Note that at one year, only 1,536 cards remained in the record set due to card replacement and inactivity.

Next, all cards used during the 12 months were analyzed to compare usage on cards issued during the pilot with cards that existed prior to the start of the pilot (some students had cards before the pilot began). More than half of students who had library cards prior to the pilot used their cards during the study, while less than a third of students who received new cards during the pilot used it during the study.

	Total Cards in Record Set	% of Cards Used at 5 months	% of Cards Used at 9 months	% of Cards Used at 12 months
New Card (issued on or before 9/28/16)	933	18.5%*	26%	32%
Existing Card (issued between 9/29/16 – 12/15/16)	603	18.5%*	56%	56%

*Usage at 5 months was not divided by new/existing cards

Looking closer at library services used by students during the study, first-time checkouts and computer usage were the highest (28% and 25% respectively). Library programs such as Summer Reading Challenge, Reading Buddies and Homework Help were considerably lower.

Library Service	Percentage of cards used for service after 12 months
First-Time Circulation	28%
Computer Usage	25%
Summer Reading Challenge	7%
Reading Buddies	7%
Homework Help	6%

CONCLUSION

CML's study reinforced the importance of questioning and then measuring the outcomes of library work. This study clearly shows that, while there was high perceived value among library staff and teachers for combining a card drive with a library visit, in reality, the visit made no difference in later card usage. Overall usage is another story. The study found that 32% of new cards issued during the pilot were used during the following year. Card usage among students after one year is, in CML's experience, on par with usage from other card drive initiatives. Lastly, the study revealed that library card drives impact services such as circulation and computer usage while having little effect on attendance at library programs.

MOVING FORWARD

For the 2018-19 school year, CML's 23 locations will continue to focus on library card drives at local schools. However, knowing that later usage for new cards is likely in the 30% range, CML can weigh this return on investment (ROI) with other outreach initiatives. When necessary, CML can compare the staff time needed for a school library card drive against expected ROI for other work in order to make informed decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR LIBRARY LEADERS

- **Challenge traditional library activity. Does the work actually result in the outcomes library staff think are generated? If no studies have been published or data made available, set up your own pilot study to collect, track and analyze data in order to make good decisions about the effectiveness of your library's staff time and resources.**

- **Investment in evaluating and measuring outcomes of library work, like library card drives or class visits, is critical to ensure there is more than perceived benefit.**

- **Think critically about ROI. Establish a baseline for what your library believes is a good return in order to direct and evaluate future efforts.**