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Thinking Outside of the (Lunch) Box: Building a Program Around Summer Feeding

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Abstract

Charleston County Public Library partnered with Charleston County School District to offer the Summer Feeding Program. This article focuses on the experience of the Dorchester Road Regional Branch in creating an effective companion program to educate and entertain a diverse community and foster a positive experience for those who attended.

Keywords

Introduction

Charleston County Public Library partnered with the Charleston County School District to provide the Seamless Summer Feeding Program, whose objective is "to provide free summer meals in low-income areas during the traditional summer vacation periods" (Summer Meals, 1). At the Dorchester Road Regional Branch, we saw this as an opportunity to reach those in our diverse community who are not regular library users by creating an effective companion program called *Lunch, Listen, and Learn*.

Objectives

We had several primary objectives in instituting this program. We aimed to educate and entertain both our current and potential patrons, expose them to library services and programming, and create a positive feeling regarding the library for each patron. Many community members admit that they have not visited a library in years; therefore, they are often unaware of the many services we offer. Having a program that will entice people to come to the library and having a companion program that will then encourage them to linger gives staff an opportunity to interact with the potential patrons and educate them about the services we offer. For instance, many patrons are unaware of the digital materials available, such as music and magazines. Library staff also have an opportunity to promote future library programs, such as STEAM Clubs, computer classes, or food literacy programs, in addition to the other Summer Reading programs. By having promotional materials on hand and speaking with potential patrons, staff can give these community members a better and more complete view of a 21st century library, which is far from what they remember from decades prior.

We educated and entertained patrons by finding informative yet interesting media for use during the program. Some days we played one genre of music in the auditorium and accompanied it by having a slide that briefly explained the genre. Other days we showed astronauts reading picture books from the *Storytime from Space* website. We also showed the Netflix documentary series *Our Planet* and National Geographic's *Solar System 101* playlist on YouTube. Each Thursday, we screened a movie. In most instances, children learned while eating their lunch, and adults learned while they accompanied the children. By enjoying their experiences and learning about all that a modern library is and does, they were able to leave with a positive feeling and hopefully resolve to return.

Figure 1: Families eating lunch and viewing an educational documentary during the Lunch, Listen, and Learn program at Dorchester Road Regional Library. Satterfield, K. (2019, July 2) CCSD providing free summer lunches to ensure no kid goes hungry. [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.live5news.com/2019/07/02/ccsd-providing-free-summer-lunches-ensure-no-kid-goes-hungry/

In creating the *Lunch, Listen, and Learn* program, we had a few secondary objectives as well. With the hot and often humid days, we felt that we should provide a cool and comfortable place for Charleston County School District employees to hand out meals. We also felt that it was important to provide a cool and comfortable area for our patrons to eat lunch, instead of sitting outside in the heat or immediately leaving the library to eat elsewhere. By providing seating in the auditorium, we also hoped to prevent patrons from eating in the common areas of the library and leaving their litter.

Figure 2: Children eating lunch during the Lunch, Listen, and Learn program at Dorchester Road Regional Library. Satterfield, K. (2019, July 2) CCSD providing free summer lunches to ensure no kid goes hungry. [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.live5news.com/2019/07/02/ccsd-providing-free-summer-lunches-ensure-no-kid-goes-hungry/

Statistics

Our total number of participants for the *Lunch, Listen, and Learn* program was 963, with our average for each weekday varying between 14.9 and 32.8 participants (as noted in Figure 3), and our daily average each week ranging from 10.8 to 33.6 participants (as noted in Figure 4). Our average participants per day were highest on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays when the programming was either preceded or followed by additional Summer Reading programming, which included special performers, family storytimes, and movie screenings.
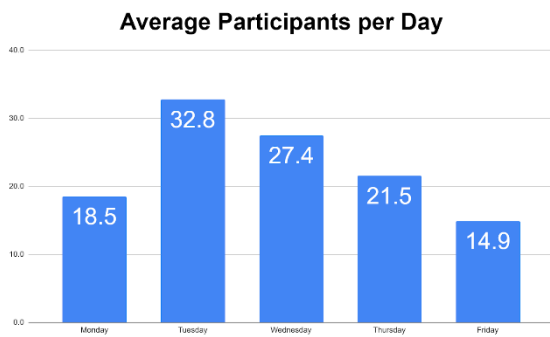

Figure 3: Bar graph depicting the average participants per day of the Lunch, Listen, and Learn program. Reprinted from Thinking Outside of the (Lunch) Box: Building a Program Around Summer Feeding, by K. Hare and H. Smith, 2019.
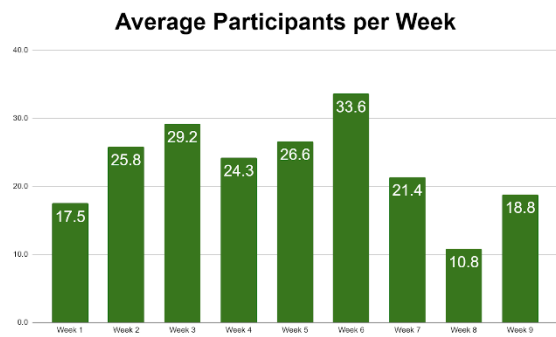

Figure 4: Bar graph depicting the average participants per week of the Lunch, Listen, and Learn program. Reprinted from Thinking Outside of the (Lunch) Box: Building a Program Around Summer Feeding, by K. Hare and H. Smith, 2019.

Tips and Tricks

Lunch, Listen, and Learn was created quickly in order to fill a need, so the schedule of programming was very flexible and unstructured due to the immediacy of its implementation. In evaluating the program in order to improve it and to assist other libraries who may be considering a similar program, we created some helpful tips and tricks.

Create a set weekly schedule. Summer programming is very busy, so having a set weekly schedule will make it easier for staff to set up each day and will make it both structured and predictable for patrons and staff alike.

Plan ample time for the program. Children will need plenty of time to eat, particularly if it is a daycare or camp whose caregivers must assist the children with opening packages. It is important to factor in the time that it will take to set up and break down as well.

Set up plenty of tables and chairs. It is better to have unused tables than to have to set up extras while patrons have to wait, so it is worth the time to set up more than you think you will need, particularly if attendance is unpredictable.

Communicate with the Summer Feeding employees. If a day care or summer camp group calls ahead, relay this information to the Summer Feeding staff so they will be able to plan accordingly. It is also a great idea to ask them if they have preferences for where they would like to set up, or where they need to park their vehicle.

Enlist many colleagues' assistance. Because of the vast amount of Summer Reading programming and the daily needs of this program, it is best to involve as many staff members as possible to lighten the load and ensure there are plenty of colleagues to assist.

Keep hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes available. It is important to keep germs at bay, so providing hand sanitizer is a must. Wipe down tables after each group leaves, and again at the end of the program.

Conclusion

Our staff recognized the Seamless Summer Feeding Program as an opportunity to highlight Summer Reading programming, introduce services and items available for patron use, and build relationships with members of the community that were not regular library users. The *Lunch, Listen, and Learn* program drew in new patrons and created opportunities for staff to engage with and educate visitors on the services and programming available at our branch. It created a new impression of the

facilities, collection, and services available for non-library users, reintroducing them to the public library

and all it has to offer.

References

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