

# Building a Reading Place in a School

## Why build a reading place at school?

- Less and less attention has been paid to the library experience in school systems. Many schools don't have full time dedicated librarians, and rely largely on access to computers and other devices to fill the gap. Without reading leadership by local staff and faculty, students are less incentivized to read themselves;
- Reading spaces provide the environments necessary to entice children to read, as children are impacted more by their environment. As Maria Montessori once said, "The child has a different relation to his environment from ours. Adults admire their environment; they can remember it and think about it; but the child absorbs it."
- Reading spaces create spaces where students and faculty can form connections through passive interactions like seeing, hearing, or active ones like talking;<sup>1</sup>
- It gets more children reading! Here is why reading is important to childhood development:
  - » Reading expands young minds by introducing new words into their vocabulary and providing an understanding of both what those words mean and how they shape the world around us;<sup>2</sup>
  - » Giving children information about books and a choice to pick what they read helps teach self control and independent thought in the choices they make.<sup>3</sup>
  - » Reading helps children learn language rules, how to find and process information, how to pull meaning from text, and how to effectively communicate.<sup>4</sup>

## Case Study - Calgary Reads Reading Place Program

Stacey Pinney, CEO of Calgary Reads elaborates on her experience implementing reading places in Calgary schools below.

"The library used to be the heart of a school and it was the reading place. There was always a librarian, and once a week, you got to go down to the library and listen to a story and pick some books. So much of that ceases to exist anymore because of budget cuts and changes in pedagogical beliefs.

A librarian is now an extinct staff person, you might have a library technician, who's in charge of making sure the books are on the shelf. But the most magical librarians weren't the ones that told you to be quiet. They were the ones who read you beautiful stories that you laughed at, you talked about, and they let you take them home to read again. And when a librarian leaves a school building, reading goes down [...]

So where was the cozy space to be curious to cuddle up to be exposed to the joy of reading? We asked our school partners, and we started with six schools, and we said to them, "You know what, our volunteers coming into your building aren't enough. We have a hunch that there's more that we need to do to ensure that children are hooked on books," and "will you let us try some stuff in your building?" And "we want to start with bringing back the essence of what a library is!"



## Key Steps to Enhancing a Reading Place in a School

**1. ENHANCE THE EXISTING READING PLACE.** A school already has the foundations of a great reading place in its library or learning commons. A reading place takes these existing spaces from operational to inspirational. Choose what parts of your library or reading commons can be revamped, and determine if additional space is needed elsewhere. A school reading place could range from an entire room to smaller nooks and corners in the library. The trick is finding a space that can have cozy places of retreat, while also allowing spaces for students to interact and read in a shared space.

**2. SCOUT AND BRAINSTORM.** Scouting and brainstorming reading places for a school isn't that different from your own home. The difference is the number of considerations that need to be taken into account. After all, coziness at school is different from coziness at home. Considerations of accessibility, lighting and visibility are all important to include in your exploration. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how we think about surfaces and safety as well. Consider surfaces and materials that provide the comfort and coziness of a reading place, but also ensure they are easy to clean.

Think about how old your students are, and what their unique needs and points of view would be in the reading place. Schools also have a series of design needs that are sometimes hard to understand. We can help you with this as you weigh all the things that go into a successful reading place.

Spend time talking to your students and learn about what they want, like, and don't like in a space. A reading place that is co-designed with the readers who use it, is more likely to be used than one created for them.

**3. GET AND PRESENT SOME BOOKS.** The greatest benefit to building a reading place in a school is that you already have the most important element: Books! One way schools are able to improve their reading place book selection is by displaying them in a way that makes the space clearly about the books. Turn books into displays like book stores do! The space is meant to cherish reading, and the one way to show that is to cherish the way books are presented.

**4. ENSURE YOU HAVE THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS.** A reading place is characterized by 3 main ingredients: Books, Book lighting, and book shelving. There are a series of other building blocks that make up great reading places, including: reading seating, reading nooks, reading artifacts, decorative words and artwork, and themed curiosities to fully submerge a reader in a space. Find the design ingredients that you need, and those that will make the space connect with readers. We can help you to find unique reading place materials.

**5. START BUILDING.** Now that you have the inspiration and direction from your reader, the books, and a place in mind, it's time to start building your very own reading space! Create curiosities and nooks in a space that is perfect for you and your students. Collaborate with your colleagues to identify how using this space can work into the daily schedule of the school to ensure that logistical issues support the intention of the reading place. Don't forget to have fun, and use the space with your students to show that you value reading and lifelong learning!

**ONE LAST THING...** Great reading places grow and change, just as students do. Think about how the space is used differently over time. What's working? What isn't? Does the reader still relate to the atmosphere and artwork in the space? Is the furniture the right scale for the reader?

1. Gehl, J., & Rogers, L. R. (2010). *Cities for People* (Illustrated ed.). Island Press.

2. Bonnie B. Armbruster; Fran Lehr; Jean Osborn (2006). *A Child Becomes a Reader* - National Institute for Literacy.

3. Duncan, S., Martin, J., Haughey, S. (2018). *Through a Child's Eyes*.

4. What is literacy? (n.d.). Government of Alberta Education. Retrieved February 12, 2021