

FEATURE

A BULLDOG



MOBILE IS BORN



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Sometimes great initiatives in education start with just a glimmer of an idea and a belief that building a foundation under that idea can effect change. That glimmer of an idea came to Bandera Independent School District (BISD) from a middle school English teacher who attended an International Reading Association Conference and heard about teachers who, in the summer, brought tubs of books to students

from low-income families. The BISD English teacher shared with a middle school colleague the idea of promoting summer literacy. Together, they approached BISD superintendent Regina Howell, who encouraged them to put together a group to explore the idea further. Eventually, a group that included district librarians, teachers, and campus administrators decided to apply for a grant to pilot a summer

bookmobile. After almost a full year of planning, BISD's Bulldog Mobile was born in the summer of 2014. With a borrowed truck and trailer, plus a generous \$2,000 grant from the Bandera Independent School District Education Foundation, the mobile literacy center was intended to provide free literacy materials to encourage summer reading and to decrease a slide in reading skills over the summer. This "summer

Birthing the Bulldog Mobile was a community effort, even the logo was created by a team.

slide” often results in widening the achievement gap that manifests when disadvantaged students lose academic ground over successive summers.

Located in the Texas Hill Country, Bandera ISD is a rural district that encompasses over 400 square miles. BISS buses travel 2,758 miles per day to transport students to and from the district’s two elementary schools, middle school, and high school. Sixty percent of BISS students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, and many do not have Internet access at home. While two community libraries serve children in the district, most BISS children do not live within walking distance of those public libraries, so access can be difficult.

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The Bulldog Mobile pilot was definitely a community effort. The middle school librarian facilitated the organizational aspects of launching the Bulldog Mobile, including purchasing new books and procuring donated materials from teachers and one of the community libraries. She created a Doodle (a free scheduling tool by Google) to recruit and schedule BISS employees to volunteer. She conducted a district-wide contest to name the bookmobile and to design the bookmobile’s logo. The name and final logo reflect elements of contributions by both middle school and elementary students. A parent donated her

expertise to convert the logo to magnets to display on the side of the Bulldog Mobile. A librarian tagged the books with Bulldog Mobile labels, sorted books according to audience and genre, and stored the books in plastic bins; she marked books with colored tape that corresponded to a color on the bin’s label so that volunteers could easily return the books to the correct bin: picture books, early chapter books, sci-fi, fantasy, etc. One of the campus administrators worked with the district’s transportation director to reserve a district-owned F250 truck for the Bulldog Mobile’s use, and the high school band allowed the Bulldog Mobile to use its instrument trailer to function as the bookmobile for the summer.

The Bulldog Mobile ran once a week for five weeks during the summer of 2014. It made four stops on a sixty-mile route: the middle school, an elementary school, the Boys and Girls Club Teen Center, and a community pool. Books were circulated on an honor-system basis. Current BISS students accessed Accelerated Reader and took AR tests on iPads borrowed from Bandera Middle School with Internet connectivity provided through a Verizon wireless mobile hotspot. For each book returned to the Bulldog Mobile, the student patron received a ticket to be included in a drawing at the end of the summer for age-appropriate prizes, including backpacks, zippered binders, and school supplies. If students missed returning books to the Bulldog Mobile in the summer, they could return them to any BISS library



after school started. The Bulldog Mobile was staffed entirely by BISS employees who volunteered their time. Snacks were available for students who visited the Bulldog Mobile. A head count was taken at each Bulldog Mobile stop, but circulation records were not kept.

BISS partnered with Bandera Boys and Girls Club; this partnership allowed students who attended Boys and Girls Clubs at BISS facilities to visit the Bulldog Mobile. Boys and Girls Clubs had, as part of summer programming, a reading activity called “Readaccess” and access to the bookmobile generated additional excitement about reading. Jackie Tharp, a director of one of the elementary units, said, “I saw kids leave games and ask if they could go and read their books. Some kids even asked us to read their books to a group [because] they wanted to share what they had read.” According to Bandera County Boys and Girls Club director Greg Parker, “This past summer, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Bandera County participated in a program curriculum structure titled ‘Summer Brain Gain.’” Summer Brain Gain is a summer learning loss prevention program developed specifically for Boys and Girls Clubs and composed of one-week modules with themed activities for elementary school, middle school, and high school students (BGCA n.d.). Parker

added, "The bookmobile really became one of those weekly activities that helped our mission succeed. This structure and philosophy really concentrated on summer learning loss prevention, making sure kids weren't falling behind the ten weeks they were out of school but rather keeping them on schedule or even moving them ahead. Weekly Bulldog Mobile visits enhanced our program."

The Bulldog Mobile logged more than 450 visits in five weeks. The Boys and Girls Clubs provided attendance sheets for the days that the Bulldog Mobile visited. To identify students who had visited the Bulldog Mobile at least one time during the summer, those lists were combined with lists of students whose parents had brought them to Bulldog Mobile locations. The attendance lists were cross-referenced with end-of-year and beginning-of-year reading test results. Traditionally, disadvantaged students lose three months of growth over the summer break (Ya-Ling and Gordon 2007). Data from the end of year test at BISD was compared to the beginning of year tests to determine if access to the Bulldog Mobile made any impact on preventing students from

losing ground or helping them gain ground over the summer months.

According to my calculations made in preparation for our second-year grant proposal, nearly 67 percent of the children who visited the Bulldog Mobile at least once either maintained their reading skills or gained reading skills. Parker said, "The best result is when we received testing data that showed the majority of our members read at or above their grade level when they returned to school in the fall. Mission accomplished for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Bandera County, and it was a success because of the dedication of Bandera ISD Book Mobile leadership and volunteers!"

The Bulldog Mobile has received funding through a BISD Education Foundation grant to continue for summer 2015. The plan for summer 2015 is to expand service to more stops, and to plan a literacy activity for each visit. While the idea of starting a bookmobile may seem daunting, BISD's experience was truly an example of building a solid foundation under the glimmer of an idea by starting small and using what you have: willing volunteers, a generous education foundation, support of a community organization that works with students, a truck, a trailer, a hotspot, borrowed iPads, and bins of books. Simple ingredients that,

when combined, make a difference to students and their families.

To access more information about the Bulldog Mobile, view an infographic at <http://my.visme.co/projects/c561b9>.



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Middle School. She is also an MLS student at Texas Woman's University (graduation in December 2015). As a former ELA teacher, she has more than twenty-four years of experience sharing books, technology, and learning with secondary students. Follow her on Twitter: @SuzyGroff. She blogs at <http://banderamiddleschoollibrary.weebly.com/around-bms>.

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