



**20
24** | ACCESS
BOOKS
ANNUAL
REPORT



FALL 2024 - SPRING 2025

OUR MISSION:



THE MISSION of Access Books is to provide high-interest reading material to under served children & youth in Los Angeles by providing a myriad of literacy opportunities and access to high-interest books.

"To have access to such high-quality book selections in such great spaces is truly life changing. For many kids, this will be the only bridge getting to, staying in, and maybe going further after high school"

- Teacher Librarian

OUR VALUES:

DIVERSITY & REPRESENTATION MATTER

When the books in a school library do not reflect the lives and reality of the students at the school, or are full of outdated information and harmful stereotypes, children are not inspired to read. We believe that every child has the right to see themselves in the books they read, as well as to become inspired, and gain empathy by walking in the shoes of others.

SCHOOL LIBRARIES MATTER

Many see school libraries as outdated and irrelevant. We know this is not the case. In this digital world, school libraries are crucial in preparing students to problem solve and make sense of fact from fiction. As Carol Kocivar, past president of the California PTA stated, "At its heart, the school library is a place where students strengthen their literacy skills and learn how to think critically using a variety of resources." Access Books sees the school library as a critical aspect of democracy- creating well-informed citizens. A quality school library allows students unlimited access to diverse ideas and provides skills to be lifelong learners. School libraries provide a safe oasis where children can explore their interests and learn new interests. Research shows that students are more likely to read more when they can choose what they read. Student choice is powerful when it comes to fostering a love of reading. There is a direct correlation between the quality of a school library and reading ability. Although school libraries are advantageous to all students, vulnerable populations see even greater benefits.

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

We are living in uncertain times with many unknowns. Across the country, libraries, information, and books are being hindered and even banned. As a wave of book bans hit school libraries across the country the past few years, in which primarily books written by and about Black and LGBTQ+ youth were targeted, we were proud to be doing our part to ensure that ALL children are able to see themselves in the books they read.

More than ever before, we believe that equitable access to high quality reading material, especially material that students get to choose for themselves, that reflects their own interests and experiences, is of the utmost importance. But that access is now under fire on multiple fronts. The first, and most important, remains the inequitable distribution of funds in California schools. The schools serving the lowest income students in the state still receive the smallest amount of funding, and none of that funding is dedicated expressly to the school library. The disparity in access to high quality reading material and vibrant libraries is growing. We have much work to do to ease the inequity.

Our work is possible because we have an ever-growing cadre of committed and dedicated volunteers. The Access Books staff leads the way in the day-to-day operations and in school activities that we support. Their commitment to our mission is unwavering and our work would not be possible without them. Our donors make this possible.

In our small slice of the world, Access Books strives to create welcoming spaces with an abundance of interesting books so students can experience another world, an adventure and for many, calm. Access to books, connections with authors and home libraries were the focus of our year long activities. We are grateful to our volunteers, donors and staff for staying optimistic, committed and involved in creating **Literacy and Access for All**.

Rebecca Constantino, Ph.D.
Founder & Executive Director



A YEAR IN REVIEW

The 2024-2025 school year was productive and impactful. All of our efforts and programs focused on promoting and supporting reading for pleasure, children being able to choose their own books and immerse themselves in reading, which allows them to develop into readers. We know that readers have better outcomes across their lives, from academics onward.



We distributed **158,000** books (21,000 to fire victims) throughout the greater Southern California community.

We distributed close to **1,000** books to book clubs and sponsored four podcasts.

Close to **5,000** students enjoyed an author visit.



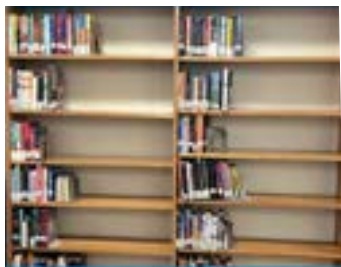


LIBRARY REFURBISHMENT



Many of the books we replace are tattered and stained like the one pictured above

During the school year we refurbished seventeen school libraries across southern California- from East Los Angeles to Orange County. Most of the schools we serve have collections dating back to the 1980's. At many schools, the Access Books team assisted the library aide to weed the collection, discarding outdated titles and tattered books. Hundreds of volunteers assisted in painting murals and cataloging and shelving books. The Access Books librarian spent 6 weeks curating each fall and spring collection. As she says, "we want a well-rounded collection that assists with the curriculum but also has titles students want to read and titles we know will interest them in reading more. We want the collection to reflect their community and history. It is especially important that students read and experience stories and authors that reflect them and their culture. Lastly, we want classics that never get old."



An example of what a typical school library shelf looks like before and after an Access Books refurbishment



As one principal commented, "I did not believe you would get all this completed in just a morning. I am so blown away by the books and the murals look fantastic. I can't believe it!" Jose, a 4th grade volunteer reported, "I need to get to school early on Monday. I already know what books I want to get."

"Your efforts have made a meaningful difference. The joy on our students' faces as they walk through the library speaks volumes. They are excited, engaged, and eager to dive into the high-interest books you've provided, many of which they might never have had the chance to read otherwise. One of the students' new favorite spots is the reading couch. It's become a cozy corner where they curl up with a book and get lost in other places and times, sometimes even magical ones." Fremont Elementary School principal





SCHOOL-WIDE PROJECT

FOSTER ELEMENTARY LIBRARY REFRESH:

Thanks to a generous donor, we spent a year at Foster Elementary/Middle School in Compton. The first part of the project was to refurbish the library. 65 volunteers spent the day creating the new space for the students.

In addition to the refurbished library, and updated collection, a young men's volunteer group cleaned out a grassy area near the library and built a raised garden for each class. The students planted a vegetable or succulent garden. We provided portable benches for outdoor classes in the new garden area.



BEFORE VS. AFTER



"Many of our students have no access to the outdoors unless it is at school. This is such a peaceful place and I know they will come here without their class and enjoy it. I am amazed that it was pulled together in one day," the principal remarked at the end of the service day.

On Monday morning, squeals of delight were heard all day as classes visited the new space-themed library and saw the garden area. "It is so magical. It is amazing," said one 4th grade Jasmine. David, her friend added, "I have a big stack of books I want to read."



At the completion of the library project, we provided three school-wide book bundles in which each student received a packet of 5-8 books. We sponsored three school-wide author visits. Each student received the author's book and enjoyed a small class workshop with the author. Lastly, we held two parent literacy education workshops- one in English and one in Spanish. Each family received a collection of 40 books ranging from board books to chapter books to start their home library. One parent reported, "the lady was so nice. She gave me good advice and made me feel comfortable asking questions. I feel better now that I can help my daughters. The books are so nice. It was a great time."



BOOK BUNDLES



PALISADES FIRE-AID

Our spring semester began with tragedy as fires raged in the communities we serve and those who support our mission. While immediate shelter, food and assistance with logistics were critical to affected schools and families, the Access Books community knows books provide both a refuge and escape.



Within days of the fires, we were coordinating with schools and families. Our volunteers and donors (as well as the staff at our donated warehouse and a NYC mom group) helped us sort and distribute close to 21,000 books to schools and families. While coordinating this, we kept our usual busy schedule.



AUTHOR VISITS

One of our most popular programs is Author Visits. We are lucky to work with engaging, fun, and committed authors. At each author visit, students receive a book by the author to keep. These events are both impactful and rewarding. The excitement around author visits is school-wide. Once one class visits, the word spreads, and eager students can't wait for their turn.

A visit with Ernesto Cisneros (<https://www.ernestocisneros.com>) was especially impactful as the discussion turned to family, immigration and belonging. The teacher remarked, "it was almost like a therapy session. The writer had such a beautiful way of sharing his story and writing and including the students. Plus, he was really funny!"

We hosted close to forty author visits with close to 5,000 students attending.



CHRIS HARRIS



JORGE CHAM



JENNIFER TORRES



HELENA KU RHEE



BENSON SHUM



YALLWEST



On a misty and chilly day in Santa Monica (May 3rd), 387 students from schools in Compton and East Los Angeles spent the day at the YALLWEST book festival.

<https://www.yallwest.com>

"This is my 3rd year to come, and I was just so happy that we got to do it again! I loved everything last time! I loved meeting and seeing authors, all the free book things and I really, really love the books you gave me," exclaimed Camila from Bunche Middle School in Compton. Upon arrival, students quickly dispersed to go to different events, peruse booths and wait in line for photos with authors.



The teacher librarian from El Sereno Middle School summed up the day, "The YALLWEST Festival is the first time our students get to experience being totally surrounded by people as excited and enthusiastic about books as they are. These are the kids that have deeply held favorite authors and series and genres, that just want to talk about their favorites with other like-minded readers and are beyond thrilled to actually meet authors in person. What a joy to be able to bring them to YALLWEST and receive books to take home with them!"



BOOK BUNDLES



During COVID school closures, Access Books gave away bundles of new books for students to create a home library. This popular and much-needed aspect of the program is still going strong. Hundreds of volunteers created book bundles for close to 10,000 students. 70,000 books were distributed in carefully selected bundles. For many students we serve, these are the only books they will own. As one principal stated, "what is so amazing is that every title is great. It is not like you got rid of cheap books and put in a good one. They are all great. This shows our students that what they read and have access to read is important to us."



BOOK CLUBS

We provided 1,000 new books for book clubs at schools we have served. The library aides select the titles they want to share with their students. The book club sets can be used several times with a different set of students.





SPECIAL ART PROJECT

We had a 3-day special event in May to celebrate Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. Every 3rd-7th grader at Foster Elementary and Middle School received the book, *Wings of Fire: The Dragonet Prophecy* by Tui T. Sutherland. The book touches on many emotions. After reading the book, students participated with a visiting artist where they learned how to use clay to make an image of themselves in dragon form. "I was so excited to get the book. When we came in and got to do art and talk about the book, I was so excited. The teacher was easy to follow and, she really helped us talk about what we felt when we read the book. It was so fun. I want to read the next book and do more art."



3RD ANNUAL AUTHOR SERIES

Renaissance High School



Paul Tran, M.A., an English and Film teacher, developed the Author Series for students at Renaissance High School for the Arts, a public performing arts school in Long Beach, California. The program features authors who participate in a full day of readings and workshops. Each participant receives books by each author, provided by Access Books. Students also share their own work during the event.

The event was a big hit, with standing room only for the students and staff. LA Times columnist, Gustavo Arrellano is a 2025 Pulitzer Prize finalist and he was also the answer for a question on the AP exam. He was joined by David Hernandez, Food Editor at the LA Times and author of *Down and Delirious in Mexico City*. Both delivered magnificent presentations to the students and gave incredible writing advice to all, aspiring writers, and avid readers alike.



DANIEL HERNANDEZ



GUSTAVO ARELLANO

A special needs student struggling with academics saw the book *Ask A Mexican* by Gustavo Arrellano on Mr. Tran's desk and picked it up. He started reading, and it was the first time a staff member with the school had ever seen him with a book in the four years he had been attending. The student began reading and found the material so engaging that he proceeded to share several passages aloud with his friends. One student remarked, "it was so amazing to meet someone who has written so much and so many people read. Both of them were encouraging and funny. It was an awesome day!"



Said Mr. Tran, "I want to open a world to my students to see the value of books, writing and writers. It is important to me that they have opportunities to meet authors that have similar stories and backgrounds. Students discuss this event year-round. It is a cornerstone of our literacy program."



PODCAST

Once again, we partnered with Kitty Felde's Book Club for Kids Podcast. Students receive a book, read it, and enjoy a lively podcast with the author and host. One principal told us, "It was so special and fun! The students were treated like real readers as if their opinions mattered. They felt so valued, and the discussion was really lively. Everyone was excited!"



Sofia, Analy, Yasmin, and Simei from Rosecrans Elementary School in Compton, California who discussed 'The Darkest Side of the Moon' by MC Ryder.

PARENT EDUCATION

This fall, we hosted 3 parent education workshops at McKinley Elementary (one in English and one in Spanish) and Dickison Elementary (English). The workshops focused on the home to school connection, strategies for literacy in two languages and how to communicate with teachers. Each participant received a set of 50 books to build a home library. Looking at the collection, 4th grader Nico said, "I want to keep all the books myself. I don't want to share. I have never had this many great books!"



INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS

We were fortunate to work with volunteers who took donated books worldwide.

Thanks to intrepid volunteers and Scholastic Books, this Fall we were able to provide 2,300 books to 3 orphanages in Mexico City.

In the Spring, two volunteers took 1,000 books to an orphanage in Mexico City. A group took 1,300 books to girls in Afghanistan and one volunteer delivered books to an arts program in Ethiopia.



MOVING FORWARD

We are fortunate to live in a community that values literacy, equity and service. Thanks to our generous donors, committed volunteers and dedicated staff, we can continue to serve our community. It is with gratitude that we look forward to another school year.

Looking ahead to the next school year, the outlook for school funding, both nationally and in California, is not improving. And when schools tighten their belts, the library is often the first to get their funding cut. But we know that all children need access to high quality libraries, and especially to new and engaging books. We hope revisit sites where we have done projects in the past, collecting information about the impact of our library grants that will help us to improve our operations moving forward. We remain committed to continuing our school library projects.

EXPENSES:

\$1,154,984

- PROGRAM EXPENSES
\$947,086
- OPERATIONAL EXPENSES \$207,897



INCOME: \$961,958



- FOUNDATION GRANTS
\$607,814
- CORPORATE GRANTS
\$42,151
- INDIVIDUAL DONATIONS
\$155,286
- FEE FOR SERVICE \$136,500
- GOVERNMENT \$5,000
- INTEREST \$14,184.14
- CASH REWARDS \$1,023



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Franny Parrish - Library aide, Dixie Canyon Elementary School

Amanda Sobremesana - Principal, Maple Elementary, Fullerton Unified

Marcia Sidney-Reed - Principal, 186th Street Elementary School, Retired

STAFF

Executive Director – Rebecca Constantino, Ph.D.

Library Program Director – Meghan Cason

Volunteer & Site Coordinator – Lorri Kampfner

Mural Program Director – Sydney Kysar

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