



Call to Action: Eliminating Fines & Fees

Colorado Libraries for Early Literacy believes that all children deserve to experience both the joy of reading and the lifelong benefits that early literacy brings; therefore, we call upon public libraries to eliminate late fines and critically examine other fee structures that prevent all families from accessing these essential literacy opportunities.

Whereas:

Access to Books is Essential

- Public libraries help families create book rich environments and provide literacy experiences that contribute to children’s school and lifelong success.
- The vast majority of parents, and particularly parents of young children under the age of 6, feel that libraries are “very important” for their children because libraries provide extra resources not available in their homes (Zickuhr et al., 2013).
- Access to books is essential to children’s reading and school success. The US Department of Education states that “the data and research are clear – children who have access to print reading materials have better literacy outcomes.” According to statistics from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, “less than 15 percent of students with between 0 and 10 books scored proficient in 2015, 50 percent of students with more than 100 books did.”

Colorado Families Rely on their Public Libraries More than Ever

- Charging overdue fines for returning late materials, and fees for replacing lost or damaged materials, creates a barrier to access for children. Parents may be reluctant to check out materials for their children for fear of incurring these charges.
- Homeschool enrollment has more than doubled in Colorado, increasing families’ reliance on the public library for access to print materials (Oravetz, 2020).
- Paying late fines puts an extra burden on Colorado’s already financially-strapped families. More than half of Colorado families have lost income since 2020 (Delap et. al, 2021).

Fines and Fees Contribute to Social Inequity

- Almost all libraries suspend borrowing privileges when fines accumulate past a certain threshold, and more than half of public libraries refer patrons to a collection agency (Dixon and Gillis, 2017).
- Fines and fees disproportionately impact overburdened and under-resourced families, who are most frequently blocked from accessing the library due to overdue fines (San Francisco Public Library, 2019; Saint Paul Public Library, 2018), and whose children already have substantially less access to reading materials in the home than their counterparts (Neuman & Celano, 2001).
- While some libraries provide flexibility to their staff members to waive fines for certain situations, this technique is subjective and inconsistent, and subject to staff members' implicit bias. Implementing a policy of eliminating fines for everyone is the most equitable approach.
- Other methods of reducing their fines (such as donating cans of food, reading in the library for a certain length of time, or providing a fine amnesty week or month) are also inequitable measures. These measures place barriers disproportionately upon families that are unable to visit the library during a given time period, and those who are unable to provide donations.
- Removing this barrier to access library materials relieves the burden on current card-carrying families and welcomes back families with previously blocked accounts.

Charging Fines is Based on Incorrect Assumptions

- Research does not support the assumption that charging late fines brings back borrowed materials faster, or at all. The vast majority of overdue materials are returned within one week of the due date (Dixon and Gillis, 2017) and there is no significant difference between the late return rates in libraries that charge late fines and those that don't (Johnson DePriest, 2016).
- Libraries across the country are increasingly eliminating late fines (Urban Libraries Council) with no reported negative outcomes (San Francisco Public Library, 2019). Many libraries report positive outcomes after going fine-free, such as increased circulation, community goodwill and financial support (Bromberg & Fink, 2021; Dixon & Gillis, 2017).
- Revenue generated by fines is often less than one percent of the library budget; when libraries factor in the cost of charging and collecting late fines, and the cost of staff time,

they often find that they are spending as much as, if not more than, they are collecting (Johnson DePriest, 2016; San Francisco Public Library, 2019).

Colorado Libraries for Early Literacy calls upon public libraries to eliminate late fines for overdue materials. Additionally, we urge public libraries to reconsider all financial barriers that prevent access—such as charging patrons fees for the replacement of lost/damaged items and sending patrons to debt collection services, particularly if this practice negatively impacts a patron's credit score. Similarly to retail industries, we encourage public libraries to budget for these costs whenever possible, and to treat lost/damaged print materials as the cost of doing business—particularly with our youngest patrons. We encourage public libraries to remove replacement fees for lost/damaged materials with heavy circulation and materials that are older than a certain publish date, and to consider creating fine-free cards for teachers and children.

Colorado Libraries for Early Literacy stands with the American Library Association (2019) in identifying monetary library fines as a form of social inequity. We encourage all public libraries to scrutinize their practices of imposing fines and actively move towards eliminating them.

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