SPECIAL REPORT:

How the pandemic shifted digital learning and influenced ebook and audiobook usage in schools

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OVERVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on schools and student learning. With the shift to remote or hybrid learning beginning in March 2020, digital book usage skyrocketed. As a result, schools invested in edtech tools more than ever. As one of the leading providers of digital books to schools, OverDrive Education sought to understand the digital shift and how schools are using ebooks and digital audiobooks in the classroom, library and home. OverDrive Education examined data from its network of 46,000 K-12 school partners worldwide, comparing March 1, 2020 – February 28, 2021, to the previous year. This report summarizes these findings and includes case studies from a variety of schools.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Significant increase in schools using ebooks and audiobooks

As of April 2021, 48,700 schools partnered with OverDrive Education for their digital reading services, a 108-percent increase year-over-year. This means the number of students with access to the company's Sora student reading app and their individual school's or district's digital collection also significantly increased (to 23 million, +93 percent).

Students read more during the pandemic

Also noteworthy is students' increase in reading as evidenced by secure aggregated data from Sora app usage. This includes the growth in digital books opened (+228 percent), average hours student spent reading (+25 percent), average hours spent reading per book (+21 percent) and average hours spent per session (+88 percent).

During this pandemic timeframe, digital books borrowed by or assigned to students from their school's digital collection grew by 139 percent. Ebook usage (measured as "checkouts") increased by 155 percent while audiobook checkouts rose by 66 percent.

Students use public libraries through school app to expand reading choices

In addition to checkouts from the school's collection, students checked out 3 million additional ebooks and audiobooks from their local public library through the Sora app (+516 percent). More than ever, school-library partnerships – known as Public Library CONNECT – enabled students to use their school credentials to borrow ebooks and audiobooks from both their school and local public library through Sora.

STUDENTS READ MORE	
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Hours per session	**+88%**

DIGITAL BOOK USAGE IN SCHOOLS	
Ebooks	**+155%**
Digital audiobooks	**+66%**
Via public library	**+516%**

Mar 2020 - Feb 2021 YoY

Digital book usage in curriculum surges

Prior to the pandemic, leveraging digital books as part of the curriculum was still gaining traction. Now, use of digital books in support of curriculum has grown exponentially, contributing to overall growth in student reading, as publishers expand

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digital rights to align with schools' needs and educators realize the convenience of digital access. The most prominent digital book access model in the past year was the On-Demand Class Set rental, which enables a title to be deployed to many students at a time, with a typical 90-day access period. This access model helped drive a 4,500-percent increase in digital title assignments for required reading.

Most high-quality curriculum programs require trade book titles for specific units and grades, such as The Dreamer, by Pam Munoz Ryan for 11th grade. Throughout the pandemic and prior, OverDrive Education teams worked with publishers to identify required curriculum titles and overcome challenges associated with rights, permissions and digital production issues. The result is that Sora can now supply more required trade books in the Class Set model than ever before. For example, as of March 2021, Sora featured 93 percent of EL Education's K-8 Second Edition Required Reads that are available in digital format, an increase from 75 percent in August 2020. Expanded availability of required digital trade books is of interest for any district that uses high-quality instructional materials. Digital Class Sets in Sora can be made available to thousands of students in just a few hours.

CASE STUDIES

Federal relief funding helps strengthen one Ohio district's digital collection

As in countless schools across the U.S., the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a hasty transition to remote learning for the Chagrin Falls Exempted Village Schools (CFEVS) in Ohio. However, because the district had already adopted Sora in 2018, their main challenge was finding ways to bolster their existing digital collection versus needing to implement one. To achieve this goal, CFEVS Library Media Specialist Angie Jameson, M.L.I.S., wrote a local grant to earn funding from the local parent teacher organization to support enrichment and growth of the digital library.

But heading into the 2021-2022 school year, Jameson understood that she might need to turn to additional funding sources to support the increasing demand she was seeing for digital books.

"We were having trouble keeping students in school, so we were definitely relying on these digital texts and now teachers trusted this; they knew I could work into my budget what they needed," she said. "But I did not have an unlimited budget, so while I was able to help a lot of our quarantined students and many of our virtual academy students, there were times where I wasn't able to get teachers and students what they needed when they needed it — and no one likes to feel that way."

At the same time, CFEVS was also rolling out a new curriculum. The district was moving to Lucy Calkins Units of Study, which focus on independent reading and reading volume vs. whole class novels — meaning access to a larger assortment of digital books was critical to students' reading and learning success.

Enter Sora Account Manager Ben Kowalczyk. In the summer of 2021, Kowalczyk alerted Jameson to a grant opportunity available through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), which is administered by the State Library of Ohio and funded through the Institute of Museum and Library Services, an independent U.S. federal agency. In this case, the grant was made possible by American Rescue Plan Act funds allocated specifically toward providing relief to K-12 schools navigating the challenges of the pandemic.

So, over a few days in July 2021, with encouragement from Ben and guidance from OverDrive's in-house grant writer, Jameson wrote and submitted her proposal for a $25,000 LSTA grant.

"I decided to write the grant, and then the OverDrive grant writer provided feedback and suggestions that were really helpful, because I've never written a grant of this nature, so there were a lot of different things that I didn't know how to approach," she said. "And had Ben not reached out, I wouldn't have gone for this, and I know many librarians around me didn't end up applying for this, because they didn't have someone who was nudging them along."

The grant was approved in September of 2021, with the stipulation that funds needed to be spent by March 2022. Plans for the money included purchasing genre-specific digital texts to support Lucy Calkins and books to diversify their collection in response to an audit. Plus, Jameson noted that the district will invest in more audiobook titles, which have been popular with students to support classroom reading.

Now that Jameson has more confidence in her grant writing experience, she already has plans to try for additional LSTA mini-grants to help fund her collection.

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"We're seeing a shift from the traditional need to hold a book in our hands to the willingness to try using some digital reading, so I want to make sure I'm keeping up to date, even when all of the grant money is spent in March," she said.

And her advice to educators looking to replicate her success in her own district? Do it — and don't be afraid to ask for help!

"I suggest that you go for it," she said. "You don't have to do it by yourself. Give it a try - the worst they can say is no, and then you can go back at it and try for something else. With the positive experience that I had with this, I would say if you're on the fence, you should definitely go for it."

Learn more about how you can use U.S. federal relief funding to expand access to digital books here.

Class Set Rentals increase curriculum flexibility at Cypress Bay High School (FL)

For Shawn Maas, Library Media Specialist at Cypress Bay High School, it's been a challenge to find ways to keep its highly social, inclusive student body – comprising over 4,800 students – connected throughout remote and hybrid learning. But having tools like the Sora app helped make the physical separation just a little bit easier, as he describes their digital collection as "pre-pandemic ready."

"Sora provided us the ability to make sure that our students had access to material," Maas said.

In order to create as much continuity and normalcy as possible, Maas used Sora for activities like virtual book clubs and reading and checkout challenges to keep students engaged.

Furthermore, Maas found that Sora has become a key tool for classroom instruction as well, noting an increase in usage of Class Set rentals – which provide for temporary, high-volume reading needs – to supply required reading to students.

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"That's one of the things I absolutely love with Sora. I don't have to pay $30 for the book, I can just get that $5 copy and kids have it for three months, and when they're done, they can release it," he said.

In particular, Maas notes that though classics like To Kill A Mockingbird remain popular, using Class Set rentals has also given teachers the flexibility to experiment with new, more diverse curriculum titles.

Digital books address curriculum needs, learning loss at Elmbrook Schools (WI)

At Elmbrook Schools, where Kay Koepsel-Benning is Director of Library Services, having digital books in place prior to the pandemic helped simplify the process of supplying English Language Arts and other required reading to students. Use of ebooks and audiobooks – Class Set rentals, in particular – for classroom reading in the Sora app, book clubs and grade level reads surged during remote and hybrid learning.

This is a trend that Koepsel-Benning expects to continue even as students have returned to in-person instruction full-time, noting the ease of use and speed of access to materials through Sora.

"I think that will stay in place going forward for some of our curriculum literature," she said.

Furthermore, Sora has played an important role as Elmbrook diversifies its collection. Recently, the district rolled out a "Books for All" project, providing a core set of books for each classroom and grade level across the district with a diversity, equity and inclusion lens. To augment this collection and support virtual learners, the district also made sure to curate digital book collections in Sora.

One of the ways Elmbrook hopes to leverage Sora is to help address pandemic-related learning gaps and support struggling readers, using tools like high-interest ebooks and audiobooks and reading data tracking (including time spent reading) to keep students engaged and accountable.

Virtual book club boosts recreational reading at Stratford School (CA)

At Stratford School, an independent private school with 1,200 middle school students across eight campuses, educators

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knew they'd need to find new ways to keep kids interested in reading as they transitioned to remote learning in 2020. Seeking ways to use Sora to facilitate this, Director of Library Services Keira Pride met with her OverDrive Education team for ideas, and learned that Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone was temporarily available as a simultaneous-use title in the app – meaning that an unlimited number of students could borrow it at once, no waiting.

As a result, Stratford launched a school-wide virtual Harry Potter book club.

"The club was an instant success!" Pride said.

Initially, Stratford planned to host the club just over spring break. That week, educators saw nearly 200 students in grades 4-8 meet each day over Zoom to discuss the books, recap chapters, do crafts and connect with each other as they sheltered at home. The club proved so successful that Stratford brought it back after spring break had concluded, having students virtually meet twice a week for one hour to complete activities and participate in discussions and challenges. The club provided a fun way for students to safely socialize with their peers and kept them reading, all at the same time.

> The results of Stratford's efforts to keep students engaged was a spike in overall recreational reading.

The results of Stratford's efforts to keep students engaged was a spike in overall recreational reading. In the eight weeks after lockdown began, students checked out more than 8,373 books and spent 7,221 hours inside those books.

"Thank you, Sora, for being our partner and inspiring the joy of reading in Stratford students," Pride said.

At Ark Elvin Academy, digital books close a reading resources gap

Prior to the pandemic, Ark Elvin Academy – a secondary and sixth form school in London, England, that serves a predominantly working class, English-as-an-additional-language cohort – did not have a digital collection. In fact, their print library was a fairly recent addition, established in 2017 when they brought in Librarian Jo Jenner. However, at the outset of the pandemic in 2020, it became clear that Ark Elvin would need more than just a physical school library to keep meeting students' needs remotely.

To continue delivering reading resources to students, Ark Elvin partnered with OverDrive Education to add ebooks and audiobooks to their learning toolbox. They started with Secondary Ebooks NOW, a shared digital collection for schools in the UK that includes over 2,000 high-quality titles curated to the secondary level, with a focus on UK authors and titles.

> Looking to a post-pandemic future, Jenner is excited about the new learning opportunities afforded by having a dual print and digital collection.

"The shared collection is up to date. It's very clearly well-managed," Jenner said. She also pointed to Sora as a huge benefit, citing the app's device versatility, ease of use, personalization features and learning tools like notes and highlights and in-app definitions.

Jenner is pleased with the results of Ark Elvin's first full year with Secondary Ebooks NOW and Sora, noting that 82 percent of pupils and staff have begun using the app since the 2020 rollout, which was conducted mainly online. And now, looking to a post-pandemic future, Jenner is excited about the new learning opportunities afforded by having a dual print and digital collection.

"It offers so much more choice for our students," she said.

To learn more about OverDrive Education and Sora, visit discoversora.com.

About OverDrive Education – a division of OverDrive
OverDrive Education offers the industry's largest catalog of ebooks, audiobooks and streaming video for over 48,000 K-12 schools worldwide. The company's student reading app, Sora, helps schools embrace the future of reading, providing 24/7 access to books and powerful learning tools and insights to meet the needs of students and educators. Sora was named one of TIME's Best Inventions of 2019. Founded in 1986, OverDrive – the leading digital reading platform for libraries – and OverDrive Education are based in Cleveland, Ohio USA.

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