TO: PLA Board of Directors

RE: Measurement, Evaluation, and Assessment Committee letter

DATE: May 21, 2024

ACTION REQUESTED/INFORMATION/REPORT: Report (in letter form enclosed below)

ACTION REQUESTED BY:
Daniel Hensley and Jerianne Thompson, Co-Chairs of Measurement, Evaluation, and Assessment Committee

DRAFT OF MOTION: N/A

BACKGROUND:

Members of the Measurement, Evaluation, and Assessment Committee wish to mark the transition of the Committee’s status to an Advisory Group with a brief overview and discussion of PLA’s data projects past, present, and potential future activities and impacts. Please review the enclosed letter for discussion during the Board meeting on June 27th, 2024.
To the Directors of the PLA,

In light of recent revisions to committee structures and scope and ongoing conversations about committees’ role in PLA’s strategic initiatives, members of the Measurement, Evaluation, and Assessment Committee felt it would be helpful to share some reflections on the committee’s contributions so far and to look ahead to the future. As we look ahead at the direction of the Measurement, Evaluation, and Assessment Advisory Group (MEAAG), we wish to bring these accomplishments and ambitions to the attention of leadership at PLA and to the larger community of stakeholders in the field. (For simplicity, we will use MEAAG to refer to both the current committee and the future advisory group for the remainder of this letter.) We understand that there are ongoing discussions about PLA’s and ALA’s budgets and long-term financial sustainability, and we recognize that building and maintaining sophisticated data tools requires significant investment. This letter is intended to articulate the progress PLA’s data initiatives have made and the value they continue to provide to the field.

At the time of MEAAG’s creation in 2017, data-informed practice was an emerging interest in public libraries. At that time, there was significant work happening across ALA and its divisions:

- The ALA Office for Research was narrowing its research focus and served in an advisory role on division committees as needed;
- an active ALA Committee on Research (CORS) continued its exploration across a broad range of topics;
- PLA commissioned research related to literacy and the origin of skills in public libraries; Project Outcome had launched two years earlier;
- and the Public Library Data Service (PLDS) was widely used to supplement the IMLS Public Libraries Survey (PLS) and other national data tools to inform public library work.

Although libraries were increasingly adding data-focused positions at this time, library professionals who focused on data were still a new phenomenon working without many formal networking channels. At the same time, libraries were increasingly called upon to join other nonprofit and educational institutions in moving beyond output-based assessment to adopt outcome-based evaluation and other more meaningful measurements of impact. These developments demonstrated that there was an opportunity to bring together data-focused public library professionals to help guide the field in these emerging data practices.

In the years since its inception, MEAAG has contributed significantly to PLA’s strategic initiatives and public libraries; PLA's field-leading data efforts have, in turn, made a significant impact on data practices in all types of libraries. Through MEAAG’s efforts and PLA’s leadership opportunities now exist for data-focused professionals to share ideas, network, and collaborate. MEAGG provides a direct line to state library administrative agencies for PLA-related communications via COSLA and State Data Coordinator representation on the group; ACRL adopted the Project Outcome model for academic libraries, and PLA and ACRL now collaborate on both Project Outcome and Benchmark; and IMLS, through its representative, has greater exposure to library practitioners whose input goes directly into improvements in the PLS. In addition to these formal communication channels, informal connections between MEAAG and communities such as the RIPL community and PLA’s Data and Measurement Interest Group result in collaboration and capacity building.
PLA’s success in connecting data-focused professionals through MEAAG has had significant impact. Over 2500 public libraries have used Project Outcome since its launch. And as of 2022, about a third of US public libraries report that they use outcome measurement currently. This suggests both the increasing recognition and use of outcome measurement since 2015, and also room for continued improvement. PLA, with MEAAG, has capitalized on an opportunity to fill information gaps in the field by providing unique, timely, and responsive data each year through the PLA annual surveys; PLA staff provide regular training for library professionals; and data tools such as PLA’s Benchmark and Project Outcome have continuously improved to serve the needs of the field as a result of MEAAG’s input. These gains in the coordination of data resources across the field and subsequent increases in understanding and adoption of data-informed practices have improved stakeholders’ abilities to measure impact and advocate for libraries during a time of significant disruption.

These successes provide a solid foundation that PLA can build on as libraries face new challenges. With the ongoing support of PLA staff, MEAAG intends to expand on this work and take it in new directions. Members of the committee are currently working on or planning work in these areas:

**Education** – Efforts are under way to produce more webinars, conference presentations, and case studies. Additionally, members are compiling a set of shared resources to encourage MEAAG affiliates to present about PLA data products and related topics to local and regional audiences.

**Community and awareness** – MEAAG’s goals include activities to increase adoption of PLA data tools and the practice of impact measurement. In support of these efforts, members are pursuing opportunities to collaborate between ALA divisions and expand the network of MEAAG affiliates. These actions are aimed at a long-term goal of fostering an inclusive, cross-functional community of practitioners to support the growth of data-informed practices in libraries.

**Development of resources and standards** – MEAAG will continue to pursue opportunities to develop accessible resources to support adoption of PLA data products and practices throughout the field. Members in particular see synergy between an increase in availability of funding for digital equity projects and a need for consistent evaluation practices for libraries seeking funding for these projects.

With ongoing support, we believe MEAAG and PLA can further strengthen and expand data practices that are essential to the future success of public libraries and their initiatives. Advisory group members also welcome input from stakeholders at PLA, as well as in the wider association. Data-informed practices play an important role in advocacy and planning for libraries of all types, and we hope PLA continues to develop its leadership in this area.

Signed,

Daniel Hensley and Jerianne Thompson

2023-24 Co-Chairs, Measurement, Evaluation, and Assessment Committee