

School and Public Libraries Partners in Student Learning

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Schools and public libraries in the U.S. have a long history of cooperation and collaboration. These relationships are described and the present status of such collaboration is detailed. Reasons why combined libraries may or may not be successful are discussed. New relationships are detailed, and suggestions for ways school and public librarians can work together to partner in student learning are suggested.

Historical Setting in the United States

The history of cooperation between schools and public libraries has a long history in the U.S. The relationship began when schools were developing with the “library” a stack of books on the corner of the teacher’s desk. In a speech in 1876, C.F. Adams, a trustee of the Quincy Public Library, noted that, “Yet though the school and library stand on our main street, side by side, there is, so to speak, no bridge leading from one to the other...” (p. 438)

Adams ended his presentation with

I want very much indeed to see our really admirable Town Library become a more living element that it now is in our school system.... To enable you to do this, the trustees of the library have adopted a new rule, under which each of your schools may be made practically a branch library. The master can himself select and take from the library a number of volumes, and keep them on his desk for circulation among the scholars under his charge.... From that time, both schools and library would begin to do their full work together, and the last would become what it ought to be, the natural complement of the first—the People’s College. (p. 441)

When school administrators did not immediately begin to establish high school libraries, the public library did just what Adams suggested and became a branch of the public library staffed by a public librarian. In some cases, the library was established and stocked with books, but the person in charge was hired by the school district. For

elementary schools, boxes of books were sent to classroom teachers for an established time period and then rotated back to the public library with a new box sent to the school.

When standards for high school libraries were developed in 1919 and for elementary schools in 1925, cooperation and communication continued, but school districts began to assume responsibility for their school libraries. However, it wasn't until the 1960s that federal funding to school districts encouraged the development of elementary school libraries in schools and public libraries could withdraw their classroom collection service.

Types of Cooperation

Schools and public libraries have several possible levels of cooperation beginning with meetings between school and public librarians to share information. Both school and materials from a library and neither librarian has been told. This means that the first student or the student's parent may arrive at the public library and takes everything on the topic home. Students who haven't been taken to the library for preliminary instruction rely heavily on the use of information they find on the Internet with little help in determining what is relevant or accurate. Communication between librarians can help alert the public librarian that an assignment has been given and that students will come to the library to look for information.

An excellent outcome of this type of cooperation happens when the public librarian comes to the school to encourage students to get library cards and to participate in public library activities. A major event has always been the summer reading program. It has been shown that students who continue to read over the summer do not lose their reading skills while students who do no reading at all lose reading skills.

School librarians can also encourage field trips to the public library, especially if it is within walking distance of the school. Going with the teacher helps manage the children and also helps the public librarian when the group arrives.

Working with the public library to establish a longer loan period for teachers who want to take public library resources to their classrooms is also helpful. Making the public librarian aware of the reading levels of students and the curriculum being taught can also help the teacher find appropriate resources at the public library.

A higher level begins with a district with a director of school libraries who works with the person in charge of youth services at the public library. In some cases, it is possible to provide a forum for school administrators to meet with the public library director once a year to share programs in both libraries.

With the high cost of online databases, school and public librarians can collaborate to share in the purchase of such resources. Many consortiums are made between schools and public libraries for this reason. Interlibrary loan between the two agencies can also be helpful. Making sure that students have adequate preparation for

using online resources and e-mail courtesy can help the youth librarian who will have a variety of age levels in the library.

Another level of cooperation exists when the public library is located in the school, but this has major disadvantages as well as some advantages. Research has shown that, while this can work, it has many obstacles to providing library services to students. This begins with the differences in the role of libraries in serving youth.

Differences in the Role of Libraries Serving Youth. Differences exist between school and public libraries in facilities, management, clients, and services. Schools are often placed away from heavy traffic areas and their libraries are located in the center of the building, with easy access to all. The public library should be in the center of the greatest population movement, whether downtown or a branch. Public librarians report to a board of trustees while school librarians report to their principal. The youth librarian at the public library reports to the director, another librarian while the school library media specialist reports to the principal, an educator.

School libraries serve the students who are assigned to their attendance center. They have a captive audience because students are brought to the library with their teacher as a group to conduct research or to choose reading materials. Their presence in the library is not optional. Public librarians must encourage their youth to come to the library. Another challenge exists when a public library serves a different geographic area than the nearby school and may not be able to serve all the students attending a single school.

Libraries in schools exist to integrate learning resources and references into the curriculum while the public library is, indeed, a research library to serve the needs of all the clientele under its jurisdiction. When the school year is over, youth will have only the public library as a resource and source of materials during the summer months. For students who do not have Internet access at home, the public library may also be their only source of online resources. These differences in roles and locations for libraries add to the challenges of combining the school and public library.

Challenges with Combined School and Public Libraries

School and public library boards often suggest combining these two entities. The reason given for this is often one created by administrators in both settings who think that two entities are duplication of effort and combining them will save money. This has not been shown to be true in any situation although some are much more successful than others.

Aaron has given us the pros and cons for combining school and public libraries. Her three phase study conducted some years ago concluded that the successful programs had

A separate area set aside in the library exclusively for adult use.
Much community involvement in and commitment to the decision to have

this combined library including citizens as well as the two legal boards in the planning process.

A single board was established to assume governance.

A formal written agreement was adopted.

A head librarian with the required expertise and commitment to the concept was selected.

A location suitable to both school and public library was chosen.

Professional library personnel and others planned with the architect for both development and construction.

Efforts were made to get people to consider this as an integrated whole rather than separate school and public library programs.

Both boards contributed funds.

Materials for children and adults were shelved in separate areas.

No restrictions were made on materials that children, young adults, or adults could check out or examine in the library.

Emphasis was given to achieving a well-balanced collection to support use by both clienteles.

No restrictions were placed on materials selection.

Many more recommendations are given, with one interesting note. "There was no documented evidence that this organizational pattern was more economical than separate programs."

Jaffe, in a later study, found that "Combined school/public libraries invariably cited their need for additional space." (p. 208) He reported as challenges: adequate staffing, the need for a formal agreement, and some librarians worried about access by children to the adult collection. While limiting access to materials is a violation of the Library Bill of Rights, it often remains a greater concern because adult materials will be found on the library shelves.

In 1995, Bauer conducted a case study to identify factors affecting operations of a combined school/public library program. Her conclusions were that

- Proactive planning provides the most practical perspective for planning for a combined library program.
- Planning processes which allow for participation by all important stakeholder groups is the best hope for meeting the information needs of both public and school library users.
- Intergroup conflict between the separate public and school library programs is affected by factors which the organization can influence.
- Programming excellence, the product of a talented and committed library manager, is the key to successful articulation between school and public library programs.
- Governance of a cooperative program must involve stakeholders' representatives in true decision-making processes. (p. 102-104)

This study concluded that the effectiveness of an organization, when dependent on a single individual, can prove disastrous if no plan exists for dealing with personnel changes. In fact, the library from the Jaffe study cited above did lose its librarian and the

combined branch closed. The personnel factor should be considered if the proposal is merge two successful individual organizations.

When a facility has the school librarian in the library during the day and a public librarian takes over after school hours, some confusion may occur with just who owns what drawers in the desk in the office. The author is well aware of one situation where the workroom in the brand new facility had sets of drawers. The school librarian moved in first, and when the public librarian arrived, she opened drawer after drawer and found a pair of scissors in one, an extension cord in another, implying that those drawers belonged to the school librarian. At the end of the school year, the school librarian gave up and quit because sharing the library just didn't seem to be working.

During the day, the school librarian may be so busy helping teachers and students that to top to answer a reference question for an adult patron may seem beyond the job description. Even if a public librarian is onsite, adults may not know which one is the school librarian and which one is the public librarian. Conducting a storytime for children under two with a school librarian trying to teach a group how to use a reference tool may also cause conflict.

Another challenge facing librarians in combined libraries is access. Some school libraries do not want the public to have unlimited physical access to schools during the day when children are in the building. Locking adults away from classrooms is difficult. Homeless people can be accommodated in a public library, but they are not welcome where school children are using the library all day. Many adults do not like to be in a facility filled with younger children, middle or high school students who may not be kind or thoughtful to the "strangers in their midst."

Because schools are not usually built in a high traffic area, they are not easily reached by public transportation. Also, parking around a school is very often filled by students and teachers who drive to school. The added possibility of hitting a child who may be leaving the school at a time when other children are not being dismissed, even though a parent or caregiver is collecting the child.

Because no one has shown that combining school and public libraries has a high record of success, the pros and cons should be offered to officials considering such a plan. If you are faced with this situation, the research cited above will help answer the challenges of such a project.

Replacing One with the Other

As suggested earlier, public librarians moved personnel and materials to schools in an effort to provide services. In a sense, this halted the development of school libraries because school districts could ignore this expense. However, as schools began to take over their responsibility for information services in their schools, the public library was relieved of this expense.

The argument that you should not duplicate efforts continues to bring discussion of replacing one with the other. When this happens, school officials consider the possibility of sending students to the public library without considering the impact this will have on public library staff, space, and materials. Public libraries are designed to serve the entire community, and their collections reflect broad based interests. On the other hand, school library collections are intended to support the curriculum of the school and less is spent on materials on topics not covered in the curriculum. The difference in collection development emphasis would force the public library to build in a direction with already limited funds to support its own mission. The possibility that school students would be using already inadequate collections as their source of information becomes a real threat to serving the public library's clientele. Again, this is sometimes exacerbated by the fact that a school population may not coincide with public library boundaries.

It would be an unusual public library budget that could support the dual mission, and certainly the staff would need additional professional development and time to meet with teachers who wouldn't be onsite thereby taking the smaller staff away from their assigned clientele. Also, the use of a public library facility during the day could limit its use for pre-school storytime.

The alternative of a school library serving the public places the school librarian into a situation of serving the public during the crowded school day. If it were only a typical school library and not a combined facility, it would not be open in the evenings, during school holidays, and it would be closed during the summer months.

Children need library services, and when librarians are faced with some of the difficult decisions about providing those services, they become very creative. One of those creative solutions to legislators or administrators who argue for a single center of service for funding has been the creation of homework centers.

Homework Centers

In California, a bond issue, Proposition 14, was launched to get state funding for the building of new libraries or remodeling of older buildings. Because the governor was interested in an education agenda, the bill was amended to say that priority would be given to the "joint use" projects between school and public libraries.

Those are fighting words in library circles because many librarians think the missions of the two entities—public and school libraries—are too different to reconcile under one roof. But California's Gray Davis made "joint use" a condition of putting the bond act before voters. With \$350 million at stake and a vast need for new library construction, librarians were in no position to argue.

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However, in implementation, the "joint use" definition the regulations for the law meant either a co-located facility with both under one roof or a joint venture. In an effort to make this something other than a mandate to build combined libraries, a series of

workshops were given to help determine other ways the libraries would be able to serve students building a public library on a property adjacent to a school. One strong recommendation was providing homework centers or another student-oriented service. At this point most public libraries were already providing such service.

Children who have no parent or caregiver at home when they get out of school have often been told by their parents to go to the public library. This has challenged public librarians throughout the U.S. Combining the need with the possibility of funding has been the establishment of homework centers to accommodate students who do not go immediately home after school.

Approximately one in seven public libraries nationwide offers formal after-school homework assistance to elementary, middle, and high school students.... Of course, there's no set formula to a successful homework center; each community must tailor a program to meet its specific needs. But one thing is for sure; good working relationships with local schools can lead to effective homework centers. (p. 57)

Some homework centers have taken on a totally different approach. Shaffer reports a special program in a branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. Their center is both a homework and a writing center which is "equipped with a 1950s-style newsroom and a special vault that leads to a clandestine computer lab." (p. 38)

Four afternoons a week, the library's basement teems with up to 20 neighborhood kids, mostly Hispanic and "African-American students between the ages of six and 13, who came looking for free, one-on-one help in subjects ranging from math and English to science and social studies. Students are drawn to the annex's funky feel—dark blue walls, abstract paintings and an extensive collection of crime-fighting memorabilia— (38)

After homework is finished, the emphasis on writing begins, a project began elsewhere and moved to this branch. In cooperation with a retail store, The Brooklyn Superhero Supply Company, a writing center was established in a store. When it outgrew its space, the creator turned to the Brooklyn Public Library and the writing center joined the tutoring center.

School librarians working with their public librarians can help with the creation and continuation of such centers by making their presence known to parents in their schools. Another type of assistance would be encouraging high school students who are doing community service to tutor younger students. Providing copies of assignments to the public librarian makes this time of more value to students.

Conclusion

School and public librarians need to cooperate at all times, but in the present funding climate, this remains essential. The current trend seems to be to fund projects that

combine the efforts of several agencies, thereby increasing the numbers and variety of persons who will benefit. Guidelines for federal and private dollars are predicated upon shared efforts that will get the most bang for the bucks. Agencies should join hands, choose project ideas that will benefit all, and apply for funding as a consortium.

School and public libraries are natural friends because they serve the same children. Among other opportunities, joint proposal writing provides a convenient mechanism for joining forces to interest a funding agency, to help raise any required matching funds, school library media specialists and public librarians must communicate and cooperate.

No single library collection can or should attempt to meet all the needs of students in schools. Library services to students is the joint responsibility of school and public libraries with school library media center activities concentrating upon curriculum-oriented programs and the public library offering its wide range of reading and other varied program possibilities. Much has been done to solve the needs for materials and services for students. Much more can be accomplished if both agencies communicate and cooperate. (Woolls)

Certainly communication and cooperation makes them partners for student learning.

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