



C H A L L E N G E S

Public Libraries
as **partners** in
youth development

O P P O R T U N I T I E S



PUBLIC LIBRARIES AS PARTNERS IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

In 1998, the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund announced plans for a new initiative, Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development. The goal is to help public libraries throughout the country develop high-quality activities and programs that support the educational and career development of young people during the non-school hours. The initiative draws on the strengths and qualities that have made public libraries so vital to our society over the past 200 years. These include their presence in virtually every community across the nation, free access to all — regardless of age, educational background, income or social status — and their core belief in self-improvement through learning and discovery.

The idea of helping public libraries expand and enrich services for young people has had strong appeal to the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund for some time. Our mission is to foster fundamental improvement in the educational and career development systems that prepare America's school-age youth for life as adults. We are particularly interested in forging stronger links between schools and communities, ensuring they work in tandem to provide adequate and appropriate support for all young people through their stages of development. Increasingly, we have focused our efforts on building a "web of support" that surrounds youth. In the ideal, that means schools that offer high-quality instruction, supplemented by a range of informal learning opportunities that are available to youth during the afternoon hours, on weekends and over the summer, in a variety of settings. These include science and children's museums, parks, public libraries, and school buildings that stay open for an extended day.

In designing this new initiative, the Fund recognized that public libraries have always been part of the support system in communities for young people. Many currently offer educational enrichment activities of some kind for youth. Yet, at best, libraries aren't living up to their full potential as partners in youth development.

That was confirmed through a survey the American Library Association and the University of Illinois conducted for us of current practices in serving youth at 1,500 libraries around the country. The results of the survey, enclosed in this report and accompanying document, provide a clearer picture about the extent of youth programs currently operating in public libraries and some of the challenges they face to do this work well. The survey also helped us identify a number of libraries that are extremely interested in expanding and improving their programs for youth.

The most promising finding is that public libraries are highly committed to serving young people. We discovered that nearly every library provides organized reading programs; more than 80 percent offer cultural programs for youth; and a majority report that they collaborate in some way with schools and community-based organizations. However, we also learned that there are opportunities for libraries to serve youth better. For example, only one out of three surveyed provides any computer classes or workshops. Fewer than 25 percent offer homework assistance or career development programs. The reading and cultural programs that are so prevalent in libraries overwhelmingly serve elementary school students; far fewer programs serve high school students. And very few libraries indicated that they designed programs to reach youth in low-income communities.

Challenges and Opportunities

Through the Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development initiative, we hope to help libraries optimize their potential to reach the children and teens most in need of their services. In Fall 1998, the Fund awarded planning grants to 10 public library systems that already have a proven track record of exemplary service to children and teens. With the assistance of the Urban Libraries Council, these libraries will spend most of this year designing programs to better serve low-income youth in their areas. All of the libraries that submit implementation proposals will be eligible for three-year grants of up to \$400,000 each. The Fund expects to make these awards later in 1999.

If these grants are successful in producing viable programs that are responsive to the public's needs, we intend to make a long-term investment in the public library field, as we have done with our other funding programs. One such program is Library Power, launched in 1988 to enrich teaching and learning through better use of library services in public elementary and middle schools, especially in low-income communities. Library Power operates nationally in 19 communities across the country, serving more than one million students annually in 700 schools. It also represents the largest private investment in school libraries in more than 30 years, with Fund support totaling more than \$40 million.

We believe that public libraries have much to offer young people and in partnership with schools and other community organizations they can strengthen the web of services and support that our children and teens so desperately need.

This report, based on interviews with leaders in the public library and youth development fields, provides a perspective of current library services to youth and the growing, changing needs of children and teens. It also shares examples of some of the exceptional work with youth being accomplished by several libraries. These examples illustrate the ingenuity and dedication of library professionals around the country and suggest the potential that with proper support and leadership waits to be tapped at your public library.

We hope you find this report informative and useful. As always, we welcome your comments.

M. Christine DeVita
President, DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund
April 1999



Public Libraries: *A Community Asset*

In a neighborhood in Brooklyn, home to more than half of New York City's perennial inflow of new immigrants, a Chinese teenager walks through the door of the local branch of the public library. She has come to use the library's computers to familiarize herself with the Internet and how it can help her find valuable information. A young boy in Tucson, Arizona, whose parents work long hours and are often too overwhelmed to help him with his homework, heads immediately after school to a nearby community center. There, tutors hired by the public library help him strengthen his reading skills and improve his study habits. A family of Mexican migrant workers manages to get a lift to the nearest library on the outskirts of San Antonio, Texas. They are accompanying their school-age children on what turns out to be everyone's first visit to a public library, and surprisingly, it becomes an all-day outing for the entire family.

As these stories show, public libraries play an important role in supporting the information, educational and literacy needs of young people in their communities. While this is something libraries have always done, these days the nature and breadth of library services are changing to reflect new, different and growing needs of children and teenagers. Depending on the community, libraries may have programs to keep children reading during summer months when school is out. They may also seek out teen parents to teach them about the importance of talking, singing and reading to their babies. Some even send librarians to read to children in the waiting rooms of social services agencies and health clinics; others deliver books to shelters for homeless families and abused children.

As computers have grown more important in daily lives, libraries have responded accordingly. For those who don't have access to com-

puters at home or in school, the library is often their only opportunity to learn how to operate one, familiarize themselves with various software programs and get an introduction to the Internet.

Throughout the country, librarians report that public libraries are becoming a popular gathering place for children and teens after school and on the weekends, supplying answers to reference questions and meeting research needs. Some are coming for help with homework, while for other young people, the public library offers a bridge from the structure of formal education to the self-direction of lifelong learning. It is a resource for information on career opportunities and job training, as well as all types of personal interests and pursuits. ■

Libraries and Youth — *A Tradition of Service*

Service to youth has been a mainstay of the history of public libraries in the United States. Many of the earliest public libraries founded in this country in the first half of the 1800s were established to benefit youth. By the turn of the century, the specialization of children's services developed rapidly in major urban public libraries. This specialization brought with it many of the aspects of children's services still familiar to us — separate, welcoming rooms for young people; trained children's librarians; story hours for preschoolers; work with elementary schools; and special arts and crafts and cultural programs. Specialized services for young adults came much later.

The fact that libraries are successfully attracting youth is reflected in national statistics. According to a 1995 report by the National Center for Education Statistics (*Services and Resources for Children and Young Adults in Public Libraries*), fully 60 percent of public library users are youth. Thirty-seven percent of users are children and 23 percent range from 12 to 18 years old.

What has been less known, however, is the range of activities and pro-

grams offered to youth in public libraries, or the ways these services are organized and delivered. To find out the answers to those questions and learn more about the opportunities to improve services for young people, the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund in early 1998 commissioned a nationwide survey. The study, conducted in association with the American Library Association and the University of Illinois, is the first to gather statistical data on the availability of education and career development programs for school-age youth in medium-sized and large public libraries.

The survey was sent to 1,500 public libraries in the United States. All 461 library systems that serve populations of 100,000 or more received the questionnaire. The balance was a representative selection from libraries that serve 5,000 to 100,000 people and that met certain criteria regarding staff, service hours and annual operating expenditures.

Response to the survey was extremely high: 83 percent (1,246) of the libraries returned the questionnaire, and all but eight of them indicated they offered programs for school-age youth.*

Overall, the survey showed public libraries offer a range of programs for elementary, middle and high school students. Reading and cultural activities are the most common. Computer classes, homework assistance and career development programs are also offered, but in far fewer places and held less frequently — an obvious area for improvement. Also, the majority of programs are geared to elementary, then middle school students, with the fewest programs designed for high school-age youth.

* For a full report on survey findings, see "Survey of Programs for School-Age Youth in Public Libraries, Technical Report to the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund"; American Library Association, January 1999.



A TRADITION OF SERVICE

Specifically, of those libraries responding to the survey:

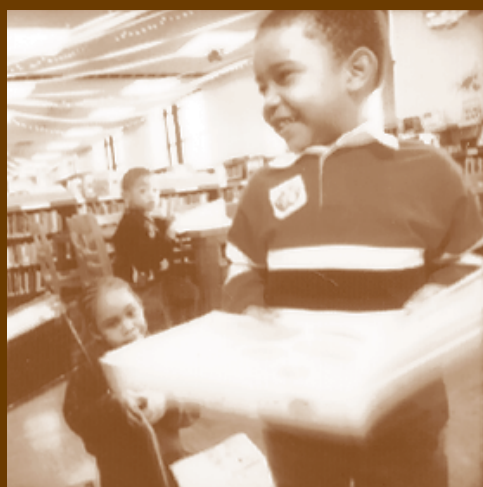
- Nearly 100 percent provide reading programs (book discussions, storytelling and summer reading), which are primarily targeted to elementary school youth;
- 83 percent present cultural programs (presentations by authors, musical or dramatic performances and creative writing workshops), which also are aimed at elementary school youth;
- 42 percent offer community-service and leadership programs (older students serving as tutors for their younger peers or young people working as volunteers in the library), for which middle school students are the primary targets, followed by high school students;
- 33 percent provide computer classes and workshops (introduction to the Internet, web page design or instruction in specific software programs), which equally serve elementary and middle school students;
- 23 percent offer homework assistance (special places set aside where young people can work in private, making basic reference books available for students, tutoring programs or a telephone “hotline” for answers to questions about their school work), which is primarily intended for elementary school students; and
- 19 percent provide career development programs (making information available about careers, organizing career fairs and presentations about different jobs), for which high school students are the most frequent targets.

When asked how often programs take place, libraries reported that reading and homework assistance programs are offered at least once a week, while most computer classes, career development and cultural programs are held less than once a month.

The survey also revealed important information about who plans and implements programs for youth in public libraries. By far, these responsibilities fall to paid library staff. Volunteers are a distant second, but more likely to have these responsibilities than paid staff from school districts and community-based organizations or parents. Notably, libraries report that the role of youth in planning and implementing programs is minimal. For instance, in the few cases where libraries reported some responsibilities for youth, the most common response was “set up or clean up” for reading programs or “recruit youth to participate” in community-service programs. This is another area for improvement and where libraries can benefit from the

experience of others in the youth-service field who have found their programs considerably strengthened by involving young people in planning, designing and helping implement activities.

A final, and extremely important finding from the survey, is that public libraries’ commitment to



servicing youth remains high. This was reflected in the fact that nearly two-thirds of libraries (63 percent) said they provided training or staff development related to their youth work. And when asked to estimate the level of commitment within their libraries on a five-point scale, respondents gave themselves an average rating of 4.56. They also gave high commitment level ratings to library administrators (4.28), library staff (4.09) and library trustees (4.07). Moreover, the majority of respondents reported that they expect to serve more youth in the near future through reading programs, computer classes and workshops, homework assistance and cultural programs. Only a handful of libraries expected to serve fewer youth in any of the six program areas mentioned above.

That level of commitment and optimism – coupled with a growing desire on the part of more and more public libraries to become full partners in youth development – is all the more profound in light of the many ups and downs in funding for youth services at public libraries. Although many libraries have established independent, non-profit “friends groups” to broaden their fundraising activities, most libraries are primarily publicly funded institutions, and that makes them vulnerable to budgetary uncertainties and the shifting priorities of local government. “When library budgets are cut, youth services are the first to suffer,” said Mary Kay Chelton, associate

professor, Graduate School of Library and Information Studies at Queens College, City University of New York. Ironically, Chelton added, “statistics show that kids are libraries’ biggest users, but budgets for youth services are not allocated according to that reality,” Chelton, who has written several reports on library services to children and teens, said that youth programs took their biggest hits in the 1980s. As the focus of federal spending programs shifted from cities to suburbs, youth services – most prevalent in larger, urban systems – were hurt by competition for local funds. “Many public libraries were fighting just to keep their doors open,” she said.

In recent years, public funding for libraries has generally improved and many libraries have been able to restore services. However, larger or well-endowed library systems that can hire specialized staff often find there’s a shortage of trained children’s and young adult librarians. In the 1970s, the library field began to move away from the specialization of staff and toward hiring more generalists. That, coupled in recent years with a growing emphasis on expertise in information technology, has resulted in a decline in library school programs for youth and a dearth of trained professionals in that area.

According to Chelton, because of budget constraints and a lack of qualified candidates, many libraries have made children’s librarians also

responsible for young adult services. “These librarians are stretched to the breaking point,” she said. “It’s true that most libraries can’t afford to hire a young adult specialist until other library positions are in place,” she added. “But historically public libraries have done a better job of serving children than teens. And clearly, more adolescents use the library when there’s a young adult specialist on staff.” ■

LIBRARIES AND YOUTH

Leadership

TUCSON-PIMA PUBLIC LIBRARY PLAYS LEADERSHIP ROLE

Tucson-Pima Public Library is in an enviable position. Supported by a citywide directive from the mayor's office to focus on the needs of youth, the library has been able to play a leadership role in developing policy and implementing programs to help a growing number of youth at risk of failing in school.



Tucson is one of the fastest growing cities in the nation, with a population that has increased more than 40 percent since 1980. Unfortunately for the city of 817,000, many of its youth and families live in poverty. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, 23 percent of children under age 18 who reside in Pima County, where Tucson is located, are poor. Arizona has the third highest rate of teen pregnancies in the nation and fifth highest rates of divorces and of births to unwed mothers. County statistics have revealed that in households headed by women, 40 percent of children live in poverty.

Among the many problems associated with poverty, youth crime rose precipitously in Tucson. In 1992, an alarmed city turned its focus on the issue, and one of the mayor's and council's first measures was to declare Tucson "a family- and child-friendly community." A task force composed of city agencies providing services to youth was formed to look at the underlying causes of youth crime and recommend how to tackle the problem. Tucson-Pima Public Library, which had been working with vulnerable youth through many of its outreach services, was invited to join the task force.

"This was an extraordinary opportunity for the library," said Agnes Griffen, the library's director. "There we were, finally being recognized along with the police and parks and recreation departments as a frontline player with youth."

In fact, this was a well-earned opportunity for the library. Since the 1970s, it had fine-tuned a range of outreach programs designed to serve disadvantaged families and children. A family literacy program targets low-income rural communities and urban neighborhoods, providing families with a free meal and a chance to borrow books from the library's bookmobile. The library also places small collections of children's and parenting books in the waiting rooms of social services agencies in low-income neighborhoods, helping to calm what is often a tense atmosphere and providing parents and children with a way to use the time constructively and harmoniously.

Leadership

TUCSON-PIMA PUBLIC LIBRARY PLAYS



In addition to offering its regular summer reading program, the library deposits book collections at parks and recreation facilities throughout the city and county to help make reading one of the regular activities there. Drawing on professional resources from various community organizations, the library also created a model program to prepare elementary school students for the transition to middle school. The program was so successful, it has been incorporated into the schools.

"We don't measure our success by how many people come through the doors of the library, but whether we can reach them where they are," explained Laura Thomas Sullivan, head of outreach services for Tucson-Pima Public Library.

Sullivan represented the library on the city manager's task force for youth and became the primary author of the group's policy report, *Tucson's Youth: A Vision for the Future*, which was released in 1995. Concurrently, she served as chair of the Metropolitan Education Commission, a forum for delineating education issues in the community and bringing them to the public's attention.

"One of the major issues the commission looked at is the high school graduation rate in Pima County, which is the lowest in the state," said Sullivan. "It became the

focus of the commission's first initiative, which is to help more young people complete high school."

"Library leadership on the task force and the Metropolitan Education Commission helped us to be seen as a key educational institution," reflected Griffen, "and internally we began to see how the library could play a greater role in supporting education."

The library responded to the city's call to action by creating an ambitious program to provide youngsters with homework assistance in neighborhood sites around the city. "Kids who are interested and successful in school are unlikely to drop out and, as research has shown, less apt to get into serious trouble," Sullivan explained. "Some families are ill-equipped to help their children with school work for a variety of reasons, and that's where we felt we could make a difference."

Tucson-Pima Public Library unveiled its new program, Homework Help, in 1995 with 17 sites in branch libraries, schools, parks and recreation facilities, public housing complexes and a variety of other community centers. Today, there are 41 sites, and the library expects its staff of professional tutors to make well over 20,000 contacts with students during this school year.

LEADERSHIP ROLE



The tutors, who are teachers, librarians and college students — all carefully screened before being hired — help students with homework assignments, preparing for tests and improving reading, math and study skills. “Some kids say they come to Homework Help just because it’s a nice place to do their school work,” reported Sullivan.

“The tutor relationship is extremely important,” she added. “The tutors are excellent role models for the kids and informal mentor relationships sometimes do develop.” Most of the tutors are college students, she explained, because library staff feel it’s easier for youngsters to identify with someone closer in age. Personality is important, she said; they must be able to connect quickly with the kids and keep a group going. Spanish-speaking tutors are placed in neighborhoods with large numbers of bilingual children.

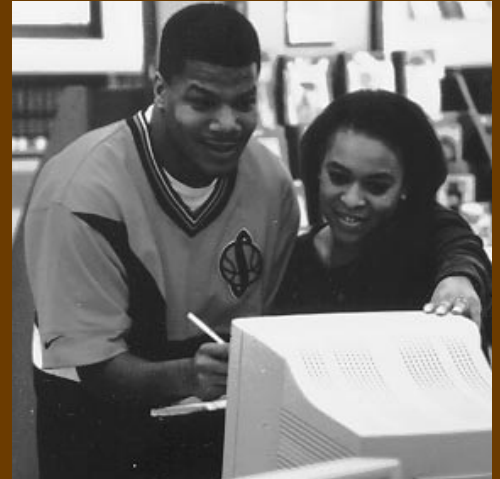
At midyear, and again at the end of the school year, the library distributes a brief postcard survey to students, parents and teachers to ask if Homework Help is making a discernible difference, whether there’s been a change in attitude about school and how grades have been affected by participation in the program. “More than 80 percent of the respondents say the program has helped students and improved their grades,” Sullivan reported.

With its library initiative planning grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, Tucson-Pima Public Library is exploring ways it can help low-income youth start thinking about careers. According to Sullivan, Homework Help would be a natural vehicle for introducing young people to the notion of career goals and development.

Whatever the outcome of the planning grant, young people will have a voice in the process by participating in focus groups and committees. “I want to hear from the kids what they need and want,” said Griffen. “What are we doing that relates to their needs? Where are we missing the boat?”

Griffen also intends to talk more with the business community to find out about areas of job growth and the skills, education and training that are needed. To strengthen its relationship with the business community, the library has redoubled its efforts to support the information needs of businesses.

Ultimately, Griffen said, she hopes the library will secure a seat at the city’s planning table for economic development, just as it did with setting youth policy. “I feel the question now for the library is ‘What can we do to help along the next generation and improve the outlook for employment?’” ■



The Changing Needs of Youth

Specialization is just one of several issues facing libraries that have begun or plan to implement new programs to better serve youth in their communities. The needs of today's young people are different from what they were for the children and teens public libraries have served in past years. These days, with so many parents and other caregivers working outside of the home and feeling pressured to spend more time on the job, children are spending less time with the adults closest to them. Moreover, many children are left unsupervised after school if they're not fortunate enough to have relatives or family friends who can look after them or if their families can't afford to pay for after-school care. Some young people must take on adult responsibilities at home much earlier than previous generations, including caring for younger siblings and tending

to household needs, such as laundry, shopping and meal preparation.

"Adult attention is so diminished for today's kids," said Chelton, who worked for many years as a young adult librarian. "Their support systems are too fragile. They need access to caring adults and a safe place to meet with their friends. The public library can help provide them that."

Chelton's comment reflects a trend first reported nearly 20 years ago – large numbers of children coming to public libraries unattended and staying until it closed or was time to go home for dinner. Susan Roman, executive director of the Association of Library Services for Children at the American

Library Association, said this phenomenon is "still a big issue," causing libraries to respond in a variety of ways. "Some librarians have told me that during the summer they have kids showing up in the morning with lunch boxes in hand." Others have started after-school programs or have simply tried to be more accommodating to the need of youngsters to congregate with friends in a safe place and do their homework.



THE CHANGING NEEDS

“Parents rely on the public library because it still has a good name in the community,” Roman said. “I think that with the back-to-work programs for people on welfare, we’re going to see even more unsupervised children showing up at libraries. These kids need to feel safe, needed and loved. And we want them to love the library because they’re going to need it throughout their lives. But libraries are going to have to work more closely with other community organizations to meet the needs of these kids.”

Another area where young people crucially need the services of public libraries is in navigating their way through the information age. “The information literacy needs of young people have changed dramatically,” said Chelton.

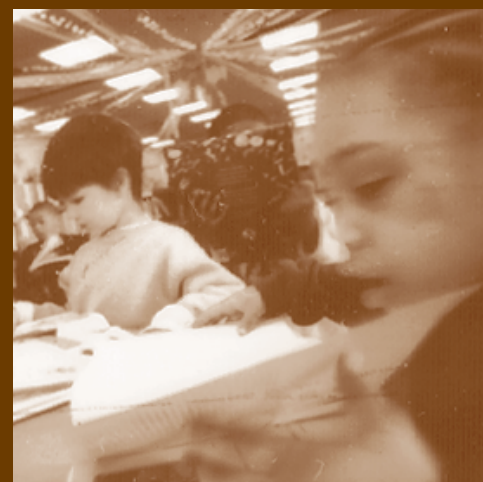
“All people – particularly young people – need help evaluating information and its sources,” said Martin

Gomez, director of the Brooklyn Public Library in New York City. “Libraries must embrace information technology to reinforce reading and help kids become information literate. But we must also teach them how to find information from reliable sources and critically analyze what they get off the Internet.

“Most kids don’t have any critical library skills,” he added. “Helping young people develop those skills is one of the most important things we have to offer today.”

Career development is another area where help is needed, especially since “many teens know very little about choosing careers,” said Chelton. “They need exposure to adults who can show them and tell them about the options available to them.”

“This role has not been fully grasped by public libraries, but should be,” said Eleanor Jo Rodger, executive director of the Urban Libraries Council. “Public libraries can create innovative ways for children and teens to explore and sort out career options without conflicting with school guidance programs.”



OF YOUTH

Innovation

SAN ANTONIO

PUBLIC LIBRARY

In 1996, the San Antonio Public Library launched an innovative program to help the city's large number of teen mothers support the early development of their infant children. Through Born to Read, mothers learn how to talk, read and sing to their babies, activities that help strengthen the emotional bonds between parent and child, and that also lay the groundwork for future language development.

In three short years, this program has become a regular, successful and vitally important service of the library. Now, director June Garcia feels there's even more the library can do to help address another problem related to the city's high teen birth rate — the growth of a young population living in poverty and facing poor prospects for the future.

FROM ONE

Responding to a statewide push by the governor, the library is teaming up with the San Antonio Independent School District on a program to boost the reading skills of students in grades three through five, and also help get them on a path to productive adulthood. The library is using the planning grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund for its "Partners in Youth Development" initiative to design the new program. One of the goals of this effort is to stress the importance of an education and introduce the library as a resource for lifelong learning.

According to Garcia, the district's 65 elementary schools enroll 15,000 children in third through fifth grades. Ninety-one percent are economically disadvantaged and 16 percent have limited English proficiency. While the district has made significant improvements in the state-mandated reading tests over the past five years, Garcia said it still lags behind statewide average scores for all grades.



INNOVATION, ANOTHER IS BORN

“We decided to target third to fifth graders not only because of the governor’s initiative, but because we think this is a crucial age group to reach with our services,” said Garcia. “These kids are at their highest point of curiosity before they get disillusioned in their middle-school years and start falling through the cracks. At this age, they can fully use the library, work on projects to completion and leave the school building for trips and activities.”

A centerpiece of the program, said Rose Treviño, the library’s youth services coordinator, will be meetings with a variety of professionals in the community who will talk about what they do in their work and how they trained for it. “We want the children to realize that they can do something besides work in a fast-food chain or a department store,” she said. “We want them to know they can succeed and understand how they can do it. Many of these kids live in poverty and do not have role models who work in a professional environment.

“We also hope they will discover the library is an avenue for helping them plan for and work toward their future goals,” she added. “The library is a safe place and there are caring adults there who can help them find resources they can use to complete their homework assignments.”

Many young people in San Antonio have already come to know that about the library, thanks to its outstanding track record of serving children and teens with a variety of innovative and targeted programs like Born to Read. They include Dial-A-Story, which offers recorded stories in English and Spanish for children who cannot get to the library; Catalita (KidsCat), a computer program developed by the library to assist bilingual children with library searches; and Youth (Wired), a computer center created for teens that not only offers access to, but provides instruction in computer technology, use of software and development of Web pages. In addition, the library offers Latino and African American heritage programs, bilingual storytelling, story hours and a resident puppet theater that performs at branches and other community settings throughout the year.

The library reaches out to youth in the community through schools and shelters, and it works with a variety of community partners including the local symphony, zoo and professional basketball team. Currently, the San Antonio Public Library has a staff of seven youth librarians at its Central Library and one children’s librarian at each of its 18 branches.

With such a solid history of service to youth, the library is an ideal participant in the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund initiative. And while the work the Fund is supporting will hopefully result in a new program, Garcia feels there will be other benefits, too. She said the library is planning market research to learn more about the needs of youth and how the library can best serve them. The library will conduct surveys and hold focus groups involving children, parents, teachers and other youth services providers in the targeted school district. “We’ll be able to take this experience of research and planning and apply it to other service areas, to everything we do,” said Garcia. “Without research, we’re relying on professional judgement and the preferences and habits of our current customers. That’s served us well until now, but we need to know more about users and non-users so we can serve them better.” ■

Ways to Serve Youth Better

Keeping a finger on the pulse of youth is essential to serving them well. Sometimes their needs are obvious and the fixes relatively straightforward. For example, the lack of transportation, particularly for children without after-school adult supervision, may be what keeps them from benefiting from the services and programs of the public library. Other times a cut in local school-library services may prompt the public library to expand or deepen its services for youth.

But as youth and the culture that shapes them change, some needs may not be as readily apparent to libraries, the young people they intend to serve or even their parents. "When we first met, a very accomplished high school student who was invited to join our board told me, 'I don't use the library;

I get everything I need off the Internet,'" said Agnes Griffen, director of the Tucson-Pima Public Library in Arizona. "That was an eye-opener for me. To convince these kids of the value of the public library, we're going to have to ask them what they want and need and make our services relevant to them."

"We have a lot to learn about them before we can design effective services," Griffen added. "For instance, we don't fully understand how young people are affected by our media-oriented culture. Everything's fast moving for them and we don't really know what impact this is having on their learning styles, perceptions and attention spans. But we have to start getting a handle on that if we're going to be able to meet their needs."

If listening to youth is vital to serving their needs, librarians must be comfortable with talking to them, asking for their opinions and getting them involved in planning programs. As part of a long-range plan to expand services for youth, the Brooklyn Public Library has embarked on a system-wide effort to retrain generalists for specialization in children's and young adult services. "One of the assignments we gave the young adult trainees was to establish a dialogue with teen users about what they like to read," said Susan Raboy, manager of young adult services. "This was a radical departure for some of the librarians, who realized they had never thought of engaging the kids by asking them something about themselves. The librarians were encouraged to approach teens individually by saying 'I'm interested in what you're reading, what you like and don't

like.' Some of the kids were cautious, but the majority were receptive to talking."

Maintaining a continuum of services for children and teens can present difficulty for many libraries. "Public libraries have





reasonably good access to young children whose parents bring them in,” said June Garcia, director of the San Antonio, Texas, Public Library. “Then we lose them around age nine. Some come back in high school, but then we lose them again until they become parents and bring their kids in. It’s become our unwritten goal to never lose them.”

“If we don’t meet their needs as children and teens, it’s naïve to think they’ll come back at 18 or 19,” said Rodger of the Urban Libraries Council. “From a marketing standpoint, that’s not insightful.”

Mary Kay Chelton maintains that most libraries are not in step with the needs of teens. “Historically, public libraries haven’t known what to do with teens,” she said. “Today, most young adult services manuals emphasize supporting voluntary reading when most teens are at the library to do homework or research.

“Libraries,” she added, “are architecturally set up as if all the users are well-behaved, intellectual, independent users. Teens travel and work in groups. Sometimes they arrive on skateboards, dress in attention-getting ways and are boisterous. Most of the behavior that librarians typically abhor and try to discourage is normal for teens.”

“If public libraries are going to better accommodate teens, they have to find a way to accept a level of energy they traditionally haven’t welcomed,” said Rodger. Access to computers, she noted, has attracted more urban adolescent boys to public

libraries. The computers, however, are almost always installed in one-person work stations. “We have to change what we do – our architecture, ambience, old habits – to use our strengths. What if libraries offered midnight Internet surfing the way some parks and community centers offer midnight basketball?”

According to Chelton, an expected change in demographics will make providing adequate and flexible services to teens an even more pressing issue. “The baby boomer echo is about to hit high school,” she said. “Over the next eight years, there will be more high-school-age kids than ever before. Some libraries are anticipating the bulge.” ■

S E R V I N G Y O U T H

Learning from the Experiences of Others in the Community

For help in figuring out effective ways to respond to the different developmental needs of children and teens, public libraries can look to the experience of a group of science and children's museums participating for the past eight years in a program called YouthALIVE! Supported by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund and coordinated by the Association of Science-Technology Centers, YouthALIVE! provides informal learning opportunities for adolescents.

According to Deanna Beane, the program's director, exploratory activities that encourage hands-on learning are ideal for youngsters up to age 12. But,

developmentally, teens need something different. YouthALIVE! has found that work-based learning programs are most effective with adolescents, who need to try out new roles and behaviors in a safe place.

"Teenagers are looking for where they belong in the world," Beane explained. "They need to see where they fit and how they can be useful." Volunteer and paid positions in the museums – most involving direct contact with visitors – allow teens to identify their talents, learn new skills and improve their ability to communicate and handle new situations with people. But it must be authentic work, she pointed out, not just busy work

created to keep them occupied.

"A successful program for kids has to be grounded in their developmental needs," Beane said. "Creating the right fit is so important. We've also learned that respecting the kids teaches them how to respect others. For young people, every adult is a teacher. We adults have to recognize that they're watching us and want to learn all they can from us." ■



LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Service

BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY BRIDGES THE SERVICE GAP

A transformation is taking place inside the Brooklyn Public Library that will profoundly and positively affect how customers are served — especially young adults. The library, which serves the 2.3 million residents of New York City's most populous borough (making it the fifth largest public library system in the nation), is instituting a former practice of matching librarians with specific age groups being served.



Reversing a trend that began in the 1970s to train librarians as generalists for assisting anyone who walks through the door, the Brooklyn Public Library has recognized it can better serve its constituents by specializing its staff. The library has started to retrain 320 librarians in the areas of children's, young adult and adult services.

Services to children — preschoolers through pre-teens — have always been strong at the Brooklyn Public Library, but young adults (age 12 to 18) had been long neglected, admitted Martin Gomez, the library's executive director. "We have not kept up with their changing needs," he said.

The library's goal, said Gomez, is to have a young adult services librarian in each of its 58 branches and the Central Library by the end of 1999. "With age-level specialization, we'll have the opportunity to better understand the social environment of teens and provide them with programs and services targeted to meet their needs and the needs of their communities," he said.

"But first, librarians training for young adult services must learn about the developmental patterns and behavior of teens and become familiar with their reading interests and academic, recreational and informational needs." The young adult librarians will also be coached in developing collections and reference resources for teens, including the Internet. In addition, young adult librarians will be responsible for assessing the need for as well as planning, promoting, implementing and evaluating programs and services. They also will interact with organizations and individuals that serve teens.

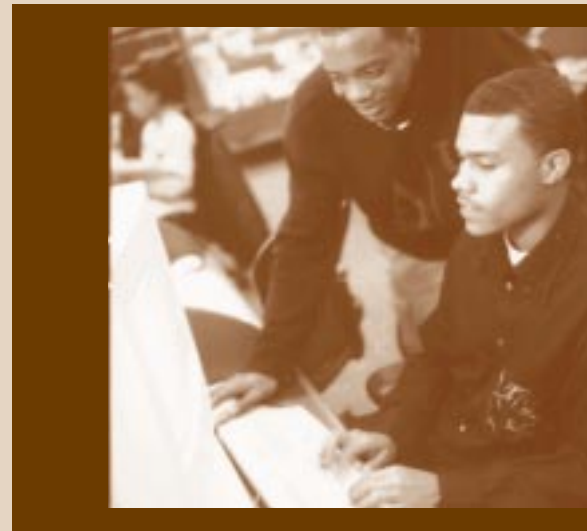
Service

BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY BRIDGES

While making the shift to “age-level specialization,” the Brooklyn Public Library has also reaffirmed its commitment to youth services through plans for a major renovation of the central library’s youth wing. Focus groups conducted with young people and their parents helped the library determine how to redesign the 10,000-square-foot space, which is expected to open in 2000. The new wing will provide space for collections, programs and private study. It will also include a technology loft with computer work stations and a separate room for teens to gather, do homework and read.

The changes underway to better serve the specific needs of individual age groups follow programs the Brooklyn Public Library has instituted over the past several years to expand and deepen its services to teens. Math Peers Tutoring, a model after-school program for middle and high school students at the central library, provides one-to-one help with math in a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere. The program, which uses peer tutors recruited from Brooklyn high schools, was featured by the Young Adult Library Services Association of the American Library Association (ALA) in its 1998 publication *Excellence in Library Services to Youth*. At the central library and eight branches, teens have their own space for an informal weekly gathering in which they can read, listen to music, play chess, do homework and talk with each other. The library also enlists teen volunteers to assist customers in using computers, and it employs more than 200 teens in part-time positions.

Another award-winning program that’s also a hit with teens is Book Buddies. Gomez and the young adult services manager, Susan Raboy, consider it one of the library’s most successful programs. Launched in 1994, the Book Buddies program received a Service to Excellence Award in 1996 from the ALA’s Young Adult Services Association. Book Buddies enlists 13- to 18-year-olds to assist librarians with the summer reading program. The teens read to children, help run arts and crafts and other children’s programs, and assist young-



sters using computers. In 1998, Raboy reported, there were 230 Book Buddies volunteers working at the central library and all 58 branches.

Book Buddies participants come from diverse backgrounds, Raboy said. Many are students recommended to the program by principals and teachers who feel these youngsters are college-bound and could benefit from other positive experiences outside school. Their families also benefit. “Many of these kids are from immigrant families and are caregivers for their families because they have the most proficiency in English,” she said. “They provide a bridge to the world outside the family and the immediate community, and when they become Book Buddies they often connect their families to the resources of the library.”

“I can see their self-esteem and pride grow through this program,” said Gomez. “They’re helping other kids, they’re gaining the experience of working alongside adults and they’re developing leadership skills.”

“For many kids, it’s their first job, their first position of responsibility outside home and school,” said Raboy. In program evaluations completed by 200 Book Buddies volunteers last summer, she reported, the young people said they had fun reading to the children and appreciated the opportunity to be of assistance at the library

THE SERVICE GAP



and of service to their communities. They also gave the library recommendations of their favorite children's books to read aloud.

Brooklyn Public Library is intent on giving teens more opportunities for hands-on involvement in programs like Book Buddies and Math Peers Tutoring. And the library wants to engage teens even more to learn about their library experiences, interests and needs. The planning grant from the DeWitt-Wallace Reader's Digest Fund will enable the library to focus on better assessing the needs of teens in nine low-income neighborhoods and developing more targeted services and programs. Teens from those communities will play a central role in the planning process, according to Raboy. A teen advisory council will be formed with youth from throughout Brooklyn. Focus groups composed of teen users and non-users, parents and caregivers, and youth-services providers from the community will help the library evaluate current programs and identify local needs. In addition, the library plans to convene a day-long Teen Summit to bring together teens, parents, library staff and other professionals from the community to reach a consensus on programmatic direction.

"We want teens to be a working part of the library environment, so that we can plan together and they'll feel the library is really theirs," said Raboy.

"This planning grant couldn't have come at a better time for us," said Gomez. "It will help us define what we want to accomplish through the specialization of young adult services and the new youth wing. We've developed some great programs for teens over the last several years, but the work of the planning grant will allow us to articulate an overarching mission for youth services and better coordinate our programming efforts throughout the system."

According to Raboy, the library is also exploring partnerships with other community organizations to coordinate services and collaborate on programming. She added, "We intend to apply all we learn about planning through this grant to children's and adult services." ■

The Potential to Deepen Services

Public libraries have the opportunity to engage youth more deeply and widely. In broad terms, they need to build institutional capacity to respond to the needs of youth in various communities and to accommodate the developmental needs and behaviors of different age groups. This includes:

- Renewing the library’s commitment to serving youth;
- Clarifying the library’s mission, including how services and programs for youth can best support the mission;
- Making an investment in long-range or strategic planning;
- Training staff in the developmental stages and needs of young people;
- Encouraging a system-wide change in attitudes and behaviors toward youth;
- Inviting parents, caregivers, educators and other members of the community to join in defining areas of need and planning services and programs;
- Involving youth in the planning, designing and delivery of services;
- Forging partnerships and collaborations with schools and other youth-serving organizations and

agencies; and

- Adopting a “positive youth development” philosophy – practices pioneered by the youth-service field that focus on helping young people develop the academic, social and career skills they need to make the transition to adulthood.

“One way for libraries to start thinking about how they might improve services to youth is by viewing young people as assets to the library and the community,” said Rodger. “Every young person, whether a child or teen, has something to give. It’s the library’s role to uncover those gifts and build on them.

“We should be saying to kids, ‘I bet there’s a lot you already know. Tell us about your goals and dreams. What would you like to do better?’ Libraries might find, for example, that while they’re offering homework assistance they might also teach some child development to kids who have to care for younger siblings.”

Young people have assets to give their communities, too, Rodger added. “Youth in urban areas have time, energy and idealism,” she said. “Why can’t they be enlisted as reading partners for younger children or in creating a garden for the library where everyone can relax and read?”

Libraries might find that their needs overlap with young people’s. That was the case with the museums that sponsored YouthALIVE! programs, said Beane. “Museums always need people who are energetic and enthusiastic about being there,” she explained. “They don’t have a lot of money or staff and they need people to be on the floor with visitors, modeling ways to interact with exhibits. As adolescents, the kids working in the museums are still interested in learning and have a sense of wonder about things. Their work allows them to be physically active and have positive social interactions with adults and peers. Plus, they enjoy working with younger children. In fact, numbers served can swell when you enlist teens to help run children’s programs. It’s a tremendously beneficial relationship for the kids and the museums.”

“Libraries that want to invest more deeply in their services to youth must understand that they can, and should, question the conventional wisdom of their field,” said Rodger. “It’s a matter of peeling back the layers of this traditional thinking and asking, ‘Why do we do this?’ or ‘Why don’t we do that?’ In the end, the plans for service may not look very different from what’s already in place, but at least it will be understood more deeply and the institutional commitment and capacity will be greater.

“If we’re willing to think outside the box and do things differently,” she

added, "I think the potential to offer library services that profoundly impact youngsters' lives is powerful."

"The potential is enormous," Chelton agreed, but she added that strong leadership and the will of management are necessary to work through government and library bureaucracy. With increased institutional capacity, some opportunities are just waiting to be tapped, she said. "Adolescents are already coming to the library for homework and research. If all we do is show them how to find answers to reference questions, we've lost an opportunity. So much more can be done to help or even save these kids."

Another applicable lesson from the YouthALIVE! experience is that the level of young people's involvement is all-important. "You know you've got a good program when kids are so excited they want to tell you about what they're learning or they amaze you by putting together a terrific summer day-camp program for younger children," Beane said. "You also know they've been engaged at a very deep level when you learn of a teen on the verge of dropping out of school who's decided to give it another shot or you hear adolescent girls talking about postponing pregnancy because they want to continue their education."

Especially when working with youth at risk of failing in school, quality of programming and depth of engagement are so much more important than large attendance numbers, Beane added.

Engaging youth isn't easy and doesn't happen overnight. But one way libraries can begin to more deeply involve youth is by finding appropriate ways for them to participate in the planning of services and programs. One of the first steps many libraries take in this area is inviting young people to participate in focus groups and surveys. These research tools provide a way for libraries to find out how current customers use the library, how non-users perceive it and what both groups need most from the library. Some libraries also form youth advisory groups that help them stay abreast of the needs and concerns of young people, provide suggestions for new and existing services and programs, and help publicize activities.



DEEPENING SERVICES

DEEPENING SERVICES

The Brooklyn Public Library has successfully enlisted young people in implementing some of its youth programs. The library's acclaimed math tutoring program, Math Peers, involves top-level high school math students in providing homework and studying assistance at several sites. For its system-wide summer reading program, the Brooklyn Public Library invites middle and high school students to read to younger children, provide computer assistance and act as the librarian's assistant. "It's really more effective sometimes for kids to receive services from their peers or, in the case of Book Buddies, from older kids," said Raboy, the library's manager of young adult services. "And the kids offering the services derive great pride from working in these capacities, helping others and giving to the community."

Another way for libraries to extend and deepen their services for youth is by developing partnerships with other youth-serving organizations in the community. "Public libraries can become much more energetic partners in community development," said Rodger. "They should be at the meeting table with other organizations and agencies that are interested in improving the quality of life for the people of that community." The challenge for libraries, Rodger said, is to understand how their skills and traditional roles can be used in concert with those of other organizations.

"Successful partners must first of all

share a vision that's part of the community's vision for its children," said Beane. "Once you've laid out the problem or challenge to potential partners, everyone must be very clear about what they can offer to the solution. That requires some homework."

Several years ago, the San Antonio Public Library became aware of the high rate of births to teens in the city and designed a program that encourages teen mothers to read, sing and talk to their babies to improve their language development and readiness to learn. To gain access to the young mothers, the library partnered with Avance, an organization that works with bilingual mothers with limited resources and education, and with city health clinics sponsoring the federal WIC (Women, Infants and Children) program. The library conducts the program at these various sites, and the partnering organizations publicize it to their clients.

Keeping a broad perspective on young people's needs is part of what Chelton says makes a good youth librarian. "The good ones see themselves as youth development professionals, not simply as information professionals," she said.

"Unfortunately, many public libraries and library schools are more interested in technical competence than the interpersonal skills needed to work with youth."

Chelton, who wrote two reports on exemplary services to young adults and is at work on a third, identified

what she found to be other elements of outstanding service to youth. They include a clear understanding of the need the program addresses, interagency or intergenerational collaboration and the involvement of young people in creating the program. Sustaining successful programs, she added, requires an organizational commitment to long-term support of services.

The youngsters, ultimately, tell you how successful the program is, she added. "When you walk into a successful program, you feel the excitement," she said. "You feel that the kids want to be there, and you can see they have excellent relationships with the staff. You also can feel their pride and their sense of ownership. When they make suggestions for change, they know they have a voice and they'll be heard. There's also expectation on the part of the staff that the kids will be successful not only in the program, but in school and other areas of their lives. The kids may not realize it, but the staff knows that getting through today is not enough. Kids must reflect on their future and plan for it." ■

The Rewards of Service to Youth

The rewards of expanding and deepening services to youth are considerable – for youth, for public libraries and the communities in which they're based, and for society as a whole.

“For kids, public libraries can provide reflection time and the resources for thinking about their present and future,” said Chelton. “They will find their feelings reflected in many of the library’s resources, and it will help alleviate some of the normal developmental stresses kids experience.

“The public library can be a place for interpersonal experiences and independent learning,” she added, “a place to ask hard questions, a place to be with friends and just be. Nobody seems to want to give kids that.”

As centers of lifelong learning, public libraries help communities develop productive members. They also help form critical thinkers, essential to the health of our democracy. “Young people can be pretty cynical,” said Chelton. “But I believe libraries hold the potential to re-engage them in civic life.”

Brooklyn Public Library’s Gomez concurred. “Public libraries are one of the few institutions left that can offer a sense of community, a place where socialization can occur



for all people regardless of age, ethnicity, religion, race, class or education,” he said. “At the library, young people can see different segments of the community gathering for essentially a common purpose – learning – and that’s a rich experience for them.”

For public libraries that dedicate themselves to better serving young people, the rewards are immense. Libraries, which have supported the literacy, education, information, career and leisure needs of generations of Americans, have the opportunity to play an even greater role in the lives of young people.

Community partners stand ready to join libraries in responding to the growing needs of youth; to share ideas and resources that will create a more cohesive network of community services available to young people.

Librarians who enhance their role as youth workers will have the satisfaction of knowing that the weeks or months they spend in programs with young people can transform those young lives and profoundly influence their futures. And they will be helping to shape a generation of people who understand the library’s importance to the community, use its services throughout their lives and support it wholeheartedly for the benefit of future generations. ■

REWARDS OF SERVICE

Contacts

**DeWitt Wallace-
Reader's Digest Fund**
Two Park Avenue, 23rd Floor
New York, NY 10016
Catherine Pino, Program Associate
(212) 251-9710
cpino@wallacefunds.org

American Library Association
50 East Huron
Chicago, IL 60611
(312) 944-6780
Mary Jo Lynch, Director of Research
& Statistics
Susan Roman, Executive Director
Association for Library Services
to Children (ALSC)

Urban Libraries Council
1603 Orington, Suite 1080
Evanston, IL 60201
(847) 866-9999
Joey Rodger, President
ulc@gpl.glenview.lib.il.us
Elaine Meyers, Project Director
emeyers_ulc@mail.msn.com

Planning Grantees:

Brooklyn Public Library
Grand Army Plaza
Brooklyn, NY 11238-5698
Martin Gomez, Executive Director
(718) 230-2403
mgomez@brooklynpubliclibrary.org
Susan Raboy, Manager –
Young Adult Services
(718) 230-2443
s.raboy@brooklynpubliclibrary.org

Enoch Pratt Free Library
400 South Cathedral
Baltimore, MD 21201-4484
Carla Hayden, Director
(410) 396-5395
Deborah Taylor, Coord. School
& Student Services
(410) 396-5356
dtaylor@mail.pratt.lib.md.us

Fort Bend County Libraries
1001 Golfview Drive
Richmond, TX 77469
Roman S. Bohachevsky,
County Librarian
(281) 341-2617
roman@read.fortbend.lib.tx.us
Molly Krukewitt, Coordinator –
Youth Services
(281) 341-2634
molly@read.fortbend.lib.tx.us

Free Library of Philadelphia
1901 Vine Street
Philadelphia, PA 19103-1189
Elliot Shelkrot, Director
(215) 686-5300
shelkrote@library.phila.gov
Hedra Peterman, Chief –
Office of Public Service Support
(215) 686-5372
petermanh@flpsys.library.phila.gov

King County Library System
300 8th Avenue North
Seattle, WA 98109
Bill Ptacek, Director
(206) 684-6600
billp@kcls.org
Susan B. Madden, Young Adult
Literacy Services Coordinator
(206) 684-6626
susanmad@kcls.org

Oakland Public Library
125 14th Street
Oakland, CA 94612
Billie Dancy, Library Director
(510) 238-6608
Patricia Lichter, Interim Children's
Services Coordinator
(510) 238-6706
licht#pc@oak2.ci.oakland.ca.us

**Public Library of Charlotte &
Mecklenberg County**
310 North Tryon Street
Charlotte, NC 28202
Robert E. Cannon
Executive Director
(704) 336-4146
rec@plcmc.lib.nc.us
Patricia J. Siegfried
Youth Services Director
(704) 336-6204
pjs@plcmc.lib.nc.us

San Antonio Public Library
600 Soledad
San Antonio, TX 78205-1208
June Garcia, Library Director
(210) 207-2626
Rose Treviño,
Children's Services Coordinator
(210) 207-2510
rtrevino@ci.sat.tx.us

Tucson-Pima Public Library
101 North Stone Avenue
P.O. Box 27470
Tucson, AZ 85756-7470
Agnes M. Griffen
Library Director
(520) 791-4391
agriffe1@ci.tucson.az.us
Gina Macaluso,
Sr. Librarian – Young Adults
3455 North 1st Avenue
Tucson, AZ 85719
(520) 791-4548
gmacalu1@ci.tucson.az.us

Washoe County Library System
P.O. Box 2151
Reno, NV 89505
Nancy Cummings
Library Director
(702) 785-4742
cummings@washoe.lib.nv.us
Sally Kinsey
Coordinator – Youth Services
& Partnership Libraries
(702) 785-4009
skinsey@mail.co.washoe.nv.us

C R E D I T S

Editorial

Kristen Simone

Photography

Marc Asnin/Saba Photography

New York, NY

and Courtesy of the

American Library Association

Design

Pauline Goulah and Cathy Broadwell

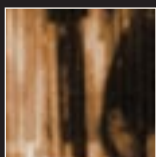
MacVicar Design + Communications

Arlington, VA

Printer

Charter Printing

Alexandria, VA



DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund

2 Park Avenue, 23rd Floor
New York, NY 10016
212-251-9800
www.wallacefunds.org
dwrdr@wallacefunds.org