

# CLs for Cooperation

## Public and School Library Reciprocal Responsibility in Community Literacy Initiatives

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**D**o your library patrons understand that one of the roles of the library—whether a public or school venue—is teaching literacy skills? Libraries evolve from community directives and support the needs of their patrons with collections and services. Most library mission statements or philosophical stands maintain that the library aims to be an important piece of the educational growth for young patrons and a place for continuing education for adult patrons. Literacy skills are embedded in that growth process.

While some public library patrons might fondly recall searching print-only stacks in a stately Andrew Carnegie-sponsored building, and some taxpayers can't recall a library in their elementary school, today's youngest patrons have had vibrant youth services programming with aspects of literacy instruction and access to dynamic multimedia collections in recent years.

But dismal economic conditions threaten collections, access, and programming in all libraries. The degree of cuts varies from state to state, but for some school and public libraries, the reported results have been catastrophic in terms of eliminated library positions and reduced hours. This is a loss no com-

munity can afford to accept. Attempts by resolute librarians to maintain collections and programming, especially for the benefit of the library's youngest patrons and specifically to support vital early literacy and information-literacy-skill development, may necessitate cooperative and collaborative activities between school and public libraries at a level not seen before.

Several ALA divisions, including the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), have joined to address and promote the need for enhanced youth services collaboration between libraries.

The AASL/ALSC/YALSA Interdivisional Committee on School/Public Library Cooperation was founded six years ago. Its main objective is to keep abreast of school and public library cooperative activities nationally and to publish these activities to help promote the best practices in school and public library cooperation ([www.ala.org/alsc/schoolplcoop](http://www.ala.org/alsc/schoolplcoop)).

The committee recognizes the specific learning needs for children from infancy to eighteen years old, both for personal recreation and as structured learning. One shared role of public

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and school librarians is patron-literacy-skills education, which includes young patrons and their parents or caregivers. That common instructional mission is behind a current push for more cooperative collaboration between the public and school library worlds. It's a role that has evolved.

## Historical Implications

During the late nineteenth century, libraries did not originally exist in the K-12 environment. The public library took on an educational support role for teachers and students, but there were no children's services or direct loans to the classroom. That void led to more collaborative cooperation between school and public library systems to support classroom research and reading materials.<sup>1</sup>

By the 1930s, a few public library branches had started, either within or close to public high schools. A 1941 report by a joint committee of the National Education Association and American Library Association revealed all K-12 grades needed assistance and library services; classroom collections alone could not adequately support the needs of students.<sup>2</sup>

By the 1950s, school libraries began to emerge in both high school and elementary settings, providing services more directly to students and teachers. That trend did not replace the need for public libraries, which, because of higher funding levels, could still supply a larger bulk contribution of resources to multiple classrooms.

In the 1960s, federal laws allocated additional funding to educational systems to stimulate collection development in school libraries. Federal legislation led to broader levels of interlibrary cooperation between local, state, and regional libraries. Professional standards in public and school library associations encouraged cooperation. "Total Community Library Service" became a running slogan that lasted through the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> Public libraries offered more programs that included preschoolers, toddlers, and infants with parents and guardians.<sup>4</sup> Somewhere within this movement, the line of network communications began to thin between school and public libraries. The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science established a task force to investigate the void. The task force recommended school libraries needed to be included in the networking.

With the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, the public was made aware of America's educational crisis and the need for improvements. But the library community was not included as a part of the solution. Library professionals responded to the oversight—first with *Alliance for Excellence: Librarians Respond to a Nation at Risk* (US ED, 1984)<sup>5</sup> and then with *Realities: Educational Reform in a Learning Society* (ALA, 1984).<sup>6</sup> These publications highlighted three insightful concepts for cooperative networking between libraries:

1. Learning begins before school.
2. Good schools require good libraries.

3. If a society is a learning one, it needs libraries throughout the various developmental phases of life.<sup>7</sup>

That forged the path to the fourth major concept in school library curriculums and public library programs: information literacy.

In 2000, the Public Library Association (PLA) launched an early literacy project developed in partnership with the National Institutes of Health, in support of the division's findings published by the National Reading Panel, *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*.<sup>8</sup> One product of that research-based partnership was PLA/ALSC's *Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR)*, released in 2004.<sup>9</sup> PLA and ALSC released the second edition in 2011.

"*Every Child Ready to Read* swept through Youth Services," said Marge Loch-Wouters, Youth Services Manager at the La Crosse (Wisc.) Public Library.

That tenet product gave Youth Services librarians (who may never have been trained in educational methodology or reading instruction) the tools they needed to help parents. Storytime had been fun before, but it became richer and had more depth, it was not just for babies' entertainment, but also helped librarians become coaches to help give parents (and caregivers) the knowledge and tools they needed to work with children's pre-literacy skills.<sup>10</sup>

Proponents of public and school librarian partnerships to support literacy-skills education and instructional support via library programs offered valid justifications via association workshops; blogs; journal articles about communication, cooperation, collaboration, and literacy at the library; and research.<sup>11</sup>

School librarians moved forward with *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs*<sup>12</sup> and *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner in Action* (AASL, 2009).<sup>13</sup> During this same time, the National Governor's Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) garnered support from numerous states for the Common Core English and Math Standards ([www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)).

History has a way of emulating itself. Direct input from school librarians was neglected; they were not included in the original drafting of the Common Core Standards. Ironically, many aspects of the Common Core Standards were similar to AASL standards. School librarians correlated library standards to the new core education initiatives in AASL's "Crosswalk of the Common Core Standards and the Standards for the 21st-Century Learner" ([www.ala.org/aasl/guidelinesandstandards/commoncorecrosswalk](http://www.ala.org/aasl/guidelinesandstandards/commoncorecrosswalk)).

It might appear from multiple perspectives that by 2012 school and public librarians were thoroughly ingrained and highly valued constituents in national education initiatives. Unfortunately, that perspective is still not secured. School library

emphasis was neglected in the recent reauthorization proposal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and school librarians had to petition the White House with more than twenty-five thousand signatures asking for inclusion for support.<sup>14</sup>

School library programs continue to be reduced or eliminated, and public libraries face personnel and collection reductions, closings, or drastically reduced operation hours. Less stalwart professionals might be discouraged, but librarians tend to remain stubborn and resolute about touting the need and value of libraries for communities. How do we continue to support literacy skills for our patrons and communities? Reciprocity may be the answer.

## Reciprocal Program Awareness

Successful reciprocity between school and public libraries requires concerted efforts of planned, mutual, and shared exchanges. Library promotions, programming events, community needs, and resource sharing provide opportunities for cooperative and collaborative literacy connections.

Public and school library students in initial-library-education coursework at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire share three courses—Children’s Literature and Programming, Collection Development, and Reference. Learning modules embedded in those courses address the validity of public and school library collaboration and require students to share examples of successful events and best practices. Through journal articles, blogs, and actual events, students discovered the following examples:

- a summer reading program at a public library
- a public librarian booktalking at a middle school
- school and public library after-school book clubs and events
- a community-wide one-book YA read
- readathons
- book and movie tie-in events
- shared author visits
- homework help/hotlines
- information literacy pathfinders posted on public and school library webpages
- public webpage resource lists and how-to’s for student research projects
- shared reading lists
- collaborative grants

- annual events and promotions (e.g., School Library Month, National Library Week)
- Banned Books Week, Teen Read Week
- a storytime delivered by high school students
- a school field trip to the library
- collection development cooperation, shared input, and planning for curriculum support.<sup>15</sup>

By many accounts, students had considered school and public librarians not as true colleagues but as distant kin, professionally linked by sharing fundamental core concepts but facing significantly different workplace issues.

Before course collaboration awareness projects, some students conceded libraries may have cooperated on various community ventures, but often admitted to not seeing the need for full collaboration ventures or the need to reach out into domains of other busy librarians, visit others’ respective libraries, or invest more than cursory library webpage explorations.

“It does seem like a lot to add to your professional learning network that might not serve you immediately,” Tessa Schmidt, youth and special services consultant for the Public Library Development Team of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, agreed.

This connectivity is vital, especially when considering literacy skills. Changes in education will have some trickling down effect throughout the community. Public librarians should have access to this information on their radar. It is community news about the process of being prepared to enter school. Children’s early literacy programming can also be about teaching to parents, reinforcing skills, and integration of language awareness. It is in the best interest of the kids for all to be on the same page regarding education initiatives.<sup>16</sup>

And it is in the interest of the community’s public and school libraries to reciprocate in promoting successful programming, especially when the unique needs of the community are addressed.

Connectivity between a school and public library is a daily experience of students in attendance at the Creeds Elementary School in Virginia Beach, Virginia. The opportunity results in success from both perspectives. Creeds Elementary is physically attached to the small rural farming community’s only local public library branch, the Pungo-Blackwater Public Library. School and public librarians, students, and teachers experience an ongoing, shared partnership.

“The school librarian and teachers work very closely with us to coordinate many aspects of the partnership,” Branch Librarian Matt Lighthart said. “We coordinate such things as classroom teacher borrowing of public library materials, subject area requests, and shared space usage, as well as special events. We are still in the process of completely aligning our efforts.”<sup>17</sup>

Lighthart's "Guided Reading Outreach" and "Technology Instruction and Gaming" programs are just two examples of how the libraries' ongoing collaborative efforts successfully promote literacy and technology usage to elementary students in this twinned facility. "The whole partnership is extremely open and flexible."<sup>18</sup>

## Reciprocal Program Promotion

It is logical and essential to promote and summarize successful happenings from your library, but it is a stretch to consider your local colleague's events, and it takes effort. Establishing a habit for this connectivity might be the best way to start.

"From your school newsletter or webpage add information about the public library events," Schmidt suggested. "The school librarian should schedule a meeting with the children's or youth services librarian. It is two-way promotion, so have the public librarian come to a faculty meeting to talk about potential services and contact information. Book lists from both libraries can be made available to support new initiatives. Have information sheets from the schools about preschool on hand in the public library."<sup>19</sup>

Other librarians have suggested having a public library card sign-up station at the school's fall open house event, linking to the public library catalog via the school webpage, and asking a district school librarian to sit on the public library board.

Loch-Wouters believes promoting collaboration comes from contact:

I strongly believe if we aren't talking directly and speaking to each other, we are all lost. We [public librarians] may not have had early literacy education theory courses, so we need to make an appointment with the school librarian and visit at school, or go to lunch and have a conversation, and actively ask our colleagues to translate educational happenings, all to help us to improve our practice.<sup>20</sup>

Public librarians need awareness of current literacy terminology to connect with constituents, the families using the library, and to be knowledgeable when they confer with school librarians and school administrators. Loch-Wouters shares her knowledge of literacy and school library cooperation with extensive posts on her blog, *Tiny Tips for Library Fun* (<http://tinytipsforlibraryfun.blogspot.com>).

The school and public librarians routinely get together during the year for conversation and collaboration between the La Crosse district schools, the main library, and branch librarians. "The collaboration is essential for our students," Catherine Beyers said. Beyers is library media director at La Crosse's Southern Bluffs Elementary and a previous winner of ALA's John Cotton Dana Public Relations Award.

Beyer added:

One example is how the public library supports events like National History Day—with displays, a reception, and prizes. The students walk to the public library, meet with the reference librarian, archivist, and young adult services director. The support for that event in itself has cemented a positive relationship between students and the public library, and students continue to be library users for years after."<sup>21</sup>

Librarians from both perspectives will be at different comfort stages with reciprocal program awareness, from an initial experience to well-established connectivity, and it is essential to pursue the possibilities to satisfy patrons. Librarians who work with youth should want to know what it means when a parent asks about materials for their toddler that emphasize "beginning sound awareness" and for their second grader that focus on "nonfiction literacy." What are efficient methods of learning more about the possibilities of connecting school and public libraries, especially with literacy issues? Consider the concept of reciprocal sharing.

## Reciprocal Sharing

Public and school librarians consistently seek, participate in, and advocate the value of their own professional growth. It is energizing to think learning conversations can be obtained through conference workshops, continuing education events, webinars, social networking, and professional journals. Those are familiar methods and can provide a wealth of new knowledge. Professional association electronic discussion lists also are common venues for conversations about library issues, such as early literacy programming and literacy collection development. Peer sharing is the foundation of learning in all previous situations, and also is the basis for the concept of reciprocal sharing.

School librarians must consider sharing through public library venues, and vice-versa. Sharing could "excite an expectation for what libraries can provide [for patrons], which would then lead to more support for libraries throughout kids' lives."<sup>22</sup>

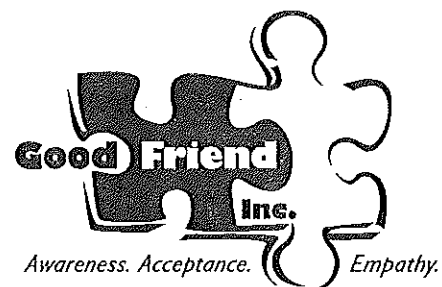
Reciprocal sharing does not have to be a formal presentation, and the possibilities are endless—from a simple link to a booklist to a copy of the plans for a detailed author event. Conversation and reciprocal sharing involves stretching a little, but the subsequent literacy benefits for young patrons, parents and caregivers, and the community might be powerful—and the benefits to the field might be immense. ☺

*For more information on the AASL/ALSC/YALSA Interdivisional Committee on School/Public Library Cooperation, visit [www.ala.org/alscschoolplcoop](http://www.ala.org/alscschoolplcoop).*

*Or visit [http://wikis.ala.org/alsc/index.php/ALSC\\_Committee\\_Pages](http://wikis.ala.org/alsc/index.php/ALSC_Committee_Pages). Click AASL/ALSC/YALSA Interdivisional Committee on School/Public Library Cooperation to see and share ideas related to school and public library cooperative programs, services, and events.*

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