COLLABORATION OF INDIANA PUBLIC AND SCHOOL MEDIA CENTER YOUTH SERVICES: A SURVEY ANALYSIS OF CURRENT PRACTICES

by Jennifer LaMaster

INTRODUCTION

This project was designed to survey the collaborative efforts of Indiana public libraries with their elementary level school media center counterparts. Much has been written about the necessity of collaboration between entities providing children's services – particularly agencies traditionally charged with reading and literacy skills.

The first question addressed in previous historical research was how new is the push for collaboration between public and school libraries? A historical literature review published in *Indiana Libraries* found that the idea of library collaboration is hardly new[1]. That article examined the early, inter-twinned relationship between school and public libraries in Indiana. As early as 1895, presenters at the ALA annual conference encouraged schools and public libraries to collaborate.

The follow-up question for further research then was what types of collaboration (if any) are taking place in libraries today? In order to narrow the topic, Indiana libraries were the focus of this survey. Ninety-one public libraries and elementary school media centers in Indiana county seats were ground mailed a traditional paper survey. The survey was built around seven collaborative guidelines first proposed by the Indiana Library Commission in 1904. In the 100 years between the original guidelines and this survey, the researcher was interested in the current guideline adaptations.

The results were not as promising as predicted. Although continual discussion of the topic has gone on in library schools, conferences and local workshops, Indiana public libraries and elementary school media centers are not collaborating in large numbers. Forty-seven public libraries (79%) reported collaboration while twenty-four elementary school media centers (57%) reported collaborative efforts. However, most of these collaborations were via email, letter or phone. Only seventeen (29%) public libraries and six (14%) elementary school media centers reported face-to-face interaction.

This paper will further discuss the survey vehicle, results and implications of the project.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reviewing the literature on public and school collaboration, one finds a trail of ups and downs. Early in the 20th century, educators and librarians alike were calling for collaboration[2]. Currently, the link between school success and strong libraries is being discussed by both educators and librarians[3].

The concept of collaboration can be a complex one. For the purpose of this project, three elements brought to focus by Daniel Callison, Executive Associate Dean of Indiana University's School of Library and Information Science at Indianapolis, are used to define the concept. According to Callison, collaboration is a three part process: co-planning, co-implementation and co-evaluation[4]. If librarians come together to plan, start and evaluate a program together the project easily falls under the umbrella of collaboration. This process may be simple or complex. What often hangs up the process is the feeling by professions that collaboration requires heavy allotments of time and money. As will be discussed in the conclusions, the most positive collaboration found in this study happened in very informal settings, but still incorporate the three elements discussed by Callison.

Callison's 1989 survey of public and school library collaboration found the top three barriers to collaboration to be lack of time, lack of administrative support and lack of creative programming[5]. He also reports that of the two groups, public librarians were the most hesitant to embrace the idea of collaboration[6]. Callison did find though that most public and school librarians felt strongly that the two units should work together to serve their common patron base, children and young adults.

Another strong voice in the study of children's services in Indiana is Shirley Fitzgibbons[7]. Fitzgibbons' findings also strongly support the need for collaboration among bodies serving children and young adults. Among her recommendations for successful cooperation are a shared vision and common goals, ongoing evaluation, commitment to the process, adequate funding and staffing[8].

Similar themes of both the barriers and successes found locally in Indiana have been discussed on a

national level by Mathews, Flum and Whitney[9] and more recently Miller and Shontz[10]. Mathews, Flum and Whitney summarize that public and school libraries are not up for the challenge required of them in the 21st century. Low staffing, funding and education levels of library personnel will hinder the success of public and school library collaboration. Miller and Shontz's annual survey of public and school libraries found in 2003 a growing collaboration between public and school libraries. They found that 50% of school media specialists regularly communicate with their public library counterparts via email, phone or fax and 60% promote or share responsibility for summer reading programs[11]. While financial and human resources are still a limitation, Miller and Shontz conclude shared resources may be a way to help shortfalls.

STUDY DESIGN AND EXECUTION

As early as 1879, ALA and the various national teachers' associations were encouraging public libraries and school libraries (or classroom teachers in smaller communities) to collaborate together. In 1904, the Public Library Commission of Indiana outlined plans for collaboration with schools in "Library Work with Schools." *Public Libraries* 9 (1904): 500-501. Seven goals were discussed:

1. Create healthy public sentiment favoring library work in schools.
2. Creation of library institutes to discuss library interests in individual communities bringing together citizens, teachers, librarians and superintendents under one roof for discussion.
3. Publish book lists of suggested reading materials monthly to the community.
4. Incorporate library education into the normal schools.
5. Librarians and teachers should confer as to the best reference and children's books for various age levels.
6. For library instruction for school librarians.
7. Encouragement of "child study and psychology" by parents, teachers and librarians as a selection tool for school collections.

The survey was constructed with these seven goals in mind. The purpose was an exploratory survey to see if Indiana public and school libraries still practice the 1904 guidelines.

I decided to sample one public library and one public elementary school from each of the county seats in Indiana. One county did not have a public library and school within the same city (according to mailing address) so it was excluded from the sample. This left us with 91 counties in which a public library and an elementary school fell within the boundaries of the same city. Public elementary schools were chosen by random in those county seats containing more than one school. Public library branches were not included, only main branches as listed on the Indiana State Library Webpage (http://www.statelib.lib.in.us/www/isl/ldo/libdir.html).

Public libraries and public elementary schools were mailed the appropriate survey (see appendix A for survey) along with a letter of introduction (see appendix B) and an addressed, stamped return envelope. Three weeks after initial mailing, all non-respondents were mailed a postcard reminder. Surveys were collected on paper and results compiled using Microsoft Excel's Statistical Package. Answers were hand coded by researcher and data was entered by hand also by researcher.

In all, 59 public libraries (64%) responded as well as 46 (51%) school media centers.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Are public libraries and school media centers in Indiana collaborating according to the 1904 guidelines? In general, yes. 57.1% of responding school media centers admitted to direct communication with their local public libraries, and 79.6% of public libraries communicated directly with their local schools. Most of this communication was via phone, email, letter, or other method. Only 14.2% of school media centers and 28.8% of public libraries responded that they met face-to-face at least once a year with their counterparts. By comparison, Miller and Shontz found nationally that 50% of school media specialists communicate regularly with their public counterparts via email, phone or fax. Indiana public and school libraries seem to be communicating better than the national average.

The fear is that while communication is taking place, true collaboration may not be. The three elements of collaboration by Callison require co-planning, co-implementation and co-evaluation. While the majority of libraries admit to communicating with each other, their feelings on actual past collaboration is not so positive. When asked to rate their feelings of past collaborative efforts with public libraries, school media respondents averaged a 2.5 on a 0 to 5 point rating continuum. Conversely, public libraries gave past collaborative efforts a 2.7 average on a 5 point scale. Both units had a much more positive outlook on community feelings toward library service to children in the community. School media personnel gave community feeling an average 3.5 rating on a 5.0 scale. Public library personnel reported a 4.0 rating. Clearly the interest in children's services is present, but the collaborative efforts are not working for the adult professionals.

Other areas analyzed by this study included reading list creation, parenting collections, community forums to discuss children's services and school librarian

education. Of respondents, 66% of public libraries and 42% of school libraries report creating suggested reading lists for their patrons. Unfortunately few reported making lists with the frequency of the 1904 suggestions: 16 public libraries and three school libraries report creating lists more than three times a year. Parenting collections are more often found in public libraries (83% of respondents claim a parenting collection) than school libraries (21% maintain parenting collections). Community forums are rare in both settings: 27% of public libraries report a public forum in the last year while no school libraries reported a public forum taking place. Finally, of survey respondents, over half the school library respondents (55%) had at least a bachelor's teaching degree and license with school media certification.

So what is hindering collaboration? Both groups were asked open ended questions regarding roadblocks and aides to collaboration. Much like Callison's 1989 findings, the highest response of both groups was time. School media staffs are often responsible for multiple buildings and multiple assignments. One respondent reported being responsible for both K-12 library services and K-12 counseling services. Both groups also report lack of training and education of the other group and themselves. While as a whole the school media personnel report higher levels of education (averaging education at the bachelor's degree level plus hours in school media), 10 respondents answered that their school district has eliminated professional librarian positions in the schools and fill the position with under-trained paraprofessional. In one case, the school staffs the library with parents only. Public libraries also have trouble staffing professional librarians in children's services. The average reported education level was a bachelor's degree for children's services librarians. Both groups considered their lack of pay, lack of professional training and lack of flexibility in job hours as major hindrances to collaboration.

While professional staffing is one element of the problems, enough staffing is also mentioned frequently. Multiple building school media specialists have counterparts on the public library side. Some public libraries only support one children's services librarian for the entire county.

Most disappointing was the roadblock of ownership or territorialism. Both public and school media respondents rate "turf wars" in their top five roadblocks to collaboration. It is a shame that working together for a joint clientele created this type of tension. Perhaps more needs to be done in library schools or staff development to address this issue.

Generally, although only two school media and two public library respondents directly address the issue, the main roadblock seems to be a lack of common goal in collaboration. The four respondents to directly address the issue speak of a shared commitment to community literacy and children's love of reading. The lack of a shared goal makes it appear that neither group knows why they are collaborating. Maybe they just were told to work together. By creating joint mission statements, perhaps collaboration could move forward.

So what is working? While it is easy to bog down in the negative, some very positive collaborative efforts are happening in Indiana. Both school media and public library personnel report summer reading programs developed and marketed collaboratively have been successful. Others report shared document delivery services with the school and public collections. Some share responsibilities in Accelerated Reader programs. In more rural communities, simple proximity of the school building and the public library make for easy joint participation. Others share OPAC systems and collaborate via collaborative websites and homework hotlines.

How does success happen? Respondents point most often to persistence, direct contact with the other agency, administrative support and committed personal relationships. five public library respondents directly address that they live in a small community and know the school personnel as friends outside of the workplace. This commitment to the relationship and the community shows in the amount and quality of collaborative efforts. In larger communities, respondents claim to coffee shop meetings, breakfast meetings and a great deal of email. As Fitzgibbons pointed out, commitment to collaboration and open channels of communication are key.

CONCLUSIONS

Successful collaboration between public and school libraries is key. This study was based on guidelines that are over 100 years old. One respondent criticized the study stating that school libraries stand on their own more now and do not require the assistance of public libraries as they did in 1904. Most of the literature would disagree. Mathews, Flum and Whitney, as well as Callison directly address the need now more than ever for public and school libraries to collaborate to give children and young adults the reading literacy and information literacy skills required to succeed in the 21st century.

So what can be done to improve collaboration? The findings of this survey point to three key elements: the creation of informal networks, lessening of territorialism, and the development of shared goals.

First, the most positive respondents relied on informal collaborative networks. Successful collaboration was reported by professionals whose children were on the same sports teams, went to the same church, and attended the same exercise classes. The respondents often stressed that they were friends with their counterparts or at least friendly with each other. Collaboration does not require meeting rooms and set

times. One community reported the success of coffee hour at a local coffee shop. Co-planning, co-implementation and co-evaluation can take place in an informal setting.

Additionally, this researcher was dismayed at the responses regarding territorialism. Both public and school media personnel reported in their top five roadblocks that the other unit wouldn't collaborate due to some invisible line of yours and mine. Considering both bodies share the joint mission of providing services to the same population and considering both bodies complain of a lack of resources, it would stand to reason that pulling resources and collaborating would be a benefit to all. Several successful programs of summer reading programs, shared OPACs and simple interlibrary loan point to the benefits of collaboration for the children and adults involved in providing services.

The main factor that umbrellas all these issues is the need to develop shared goals. Fitzgibbons strongly argues for an educational focus of resources for both units. Several respondents of this survey point to shared mission statements and goals as being the backbone of successful collaboration. Once the players assemble and agree that reading and information literacy for children and young adults is the goal (or something similar) then collaboration is self-generating. Community members should also be brought into these goals discussions. Having all parties agree on the importance of children and youth services is the first step.

For over 100 years, Indiana has struggled with the practice of collaboration among public and school libraries. While the literature agrees of the importance of collaboration, the actual practice has been above the national average, but still not enough. What will it take to provide the necessary service to children and young adults in the 21st century? The development of informal networks, elimination of territorialism and development of shared goals will certainly start Indiana libraries on the right path.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] LaMaster, Jennifer (2004). The Roots of Collaboration. *Indiana Libraries*, *22*, 3-6.

[2] Cole, George Watson (1895). How Teachers Should Co-Operate with Librarians. *Library Journal*, 115-118.

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[5] Ibid., 43.

[6] Ibid., 44.

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[11] Ibid., 55.

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