

Stayin' Alive

by

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As public librarians, we all know that we must practice stewardship in order to perpetuate the profession and the institution of public libraries. In the past, public libraries have been a crucial part of our culture. We've been warned that with the advent of the information highway, the institution could become a "dinosaur" if steps are not taken to remain vital and adapt to the changes in our society's informational needs. One good way to do this is to make ourselves even more helpful to other educators, namely, those in the school system. The public librarian can help the classroom teacher, thus extending the services of the public library and ensuring its survival in the future. This principle can be realized through the day to day operation of an outreach program directed by a youth services librarian with help from the library's professional and paraprofessional staff. This program would focus on the following five channels:

Provide Better Access to a More Broad Arena of Information Resources Than That of the School Library

Public librarians can aid the classroom teacher by offering students a more diverse educational base of library personnel. Most school librarians are essentially teachers of literature and its use and enjoyment. They have backgrounds that involve teaching, have been education majors, and have received teacher's licenses. But a public librarian with a master's degree in library science generally has a broad liberal arts background. "We're not all teachers! Some of us were social scientists, historians, or psychology majors before we went to library school," says William A. Goodrich, the director of Smyth-Bland Library in Marion, Virginia. "Last week our reference assistant was stuck on a question from a high school freshman. He wanted to know what the term was for the domed portion of water that clings to a container by surface tension. She couldn't remember the word. The adult services person had a background in science. She knew right away that its called a 'meniscus.' In this case, the librarian becomes a resource in his or her self."

Help in Difficult Times by Using Professional Selection Sources

Because of schools' budget limitations, the public librarian has access to more professional selection sources than the school media specialist. Books selected from bibliographical sources, such as *The Bookfinder* (American Guidance Service, 1977-), can help the library patron with the challenges of life during times of emotional distress.

In 1992, a C-130 Hercules aircraft crashed into the city of Evansville, Indiana causing sixteen fatalities. Some of the fatalities were parents and loved ones of children in the city's schools. The whole city went through a mourning process that was felt by all service organizations that were designed to serve people and their emotional needs. The libraries received calls from patrons wanting information on how to deal with death, how to help young people with loss, post-trauma distress, and grieving. The schools had special trauma counselors visit, but the libraries offered information to the devastated citizens of Evansville long after the counselors had gone home. The school libraries needed access to titles that addressed the mainstay of juvenile literature for young people dealing with such challenges of growing up. Since limited school library book budgets could not accommodate such rare and specific needs, there was virtually nothing available anywhere but in the public libraries.

Help with Difficult Questions, Getting the Teacher Out of a Jam

Most classroom teachers are too busy to keep up with current trends in children's literature. Many depend on older titles they learned about in college. They don't have time to keep up with the art of children's literature, and public librarians can help. Children's librarians are very up-to-date on the titles being provided by the publishers, and trends. They are in close contact with the publishers in their role as book selectors, collection builders, or collection users. They wade through this genre everyday. Who but a children's librarian would know that this is the golden age of picture books in the United States? Publishers are searching for works and writers that will expand the art form, "cutting edge" styles are sought after, and the quality of art is better than ever before. Old taboos, such as never publishing children's literature that addresses sex, politics, or religion, are being broken quickly and cleanly. As new titles on these subjects arrive on the marketplace, school librarians will many times find it difficult to place them on the school's shelves. The school library collection is more limited than a public library collection. The public librarian is backed by the Library Bill of Rights:

“Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.

Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgement of free expression and free access to ideas.

Librarians must resist all efforts by groups or individuals to censor library materials.”¹

Of course, this bill is supposed to back the school library also, but in reality, it just doesn't work that way. *En Loco Parentis*, the policy of educators acting “in place of the parent” which is rejected by the American Library Association does a backflip for school librarians. When a school librarian is faced with the question, “Where do babies come from?” she must depend on the public library and its less constrained collection policy to provide the information the user needs.

Censorship attacks on public school books were high in 1991 and 1992 in Indiana as the religious right continued censorship efforts. These were also the years in which the Midwest was the most likely place to find censorship attempts, according to People for the American Way, which has been surveying schools for a decade. Until this time, censorship attempts had been more numerous in the west. According to the study “Attacks on the Freedom to Learn” which is a compilation of computer searches of newspaper articles, there has been a marked increase in attempts to censor school materials in recent years. In 1992 there were 395 cases, compared with 376 in 1991 and 264 the year before, twelve of these instances occurred in 1992 in Indiana, compared with seventeen a year earlier. Both numbers represent a large increase over the two and four attempts in Indiana annually in earlier years. Mark Sedway, the

report's coordinator, notes that the increase has coincided with the announced plans by religious right groups to alter their political strategies from the federal to the local level. And who will bear the brunt of this pressure at the local level? The school librarian. Who can help? The public librarian. The American Library Association code of ethics states that we must all resist attempts at censorship:

“Librarians are dependent upon one another for the bibliographical resources that enable us to provide information services, and have obligations for maintaining the highest level of personal integrity and competence.

Librarians must resist all efforts by groups or individuals to censor library materials.”²

The school librarian is at a greater disadvantage in censorship cases because of the political and social pressures upon the school administration from parents. And *En Loco Parentis* appears again. The public library has much more leeway because it serves the entire community, not just school children, not just one neighborhood, and not just one student body. This allows the public facility to demand and receive more freedom from these pressures. The school librarian can't put *Forever* by Judy Blume on the shelf, but the public librarian can!

Provide a Contact Person to Act as a School Liaison

One thing that is always frustrating to public librarians is how little classroom teachers use the public librarian's services. Many times public librarians will contact schools offering reserve service or collection and storytelling programs only to be ignored, probably because the teacher just doesn't have time to deal with this. Then the students come pouring into the public library wanting information on the big project of the year. With some forewarning, the student's needs could have been met with a reserved book collection. But, it's too late. Everything is checked out to the early birds. Ann Herald-Short of the Rushville Public Library in Rushville, Indiana, solved this problem with cooperative communication. “We sent packets of postcards to the schools with the hope that they will alert us whenever students will be in need special reference materials. Interestingly, although we have asked nicely each year for the teachers to warn us in advance, we have had little response. The postcards apparently showed we were serious. Few teachers filled out the forms, but they have told us about upcoming assignments.”³

A children's librarian could invite every first-grade class in the city to visit the library. These visits could include online catalog lessons, or various library activities appropriate for the specific age group involved. Or, a librarian could offer to come to school and provide a booktalk, a story hour, or bibliographies and patron registration cards. An inter-agency council could be formed by arranging lunchtime meetings between library personnel and the area's school media specialists.

Provide Classroom Collections to Enhance the School Library Collection

Another way of promoting cooperative programming, planning, and communication is by asking the school principal for five or ten minutes at the next faculty meeting. Each teacher should then be offered a classroom collection delivered to the door with reduced or erased overdue fines and lengthy loan periods. Most teachers will jump at this suggestion, as long as the service makes no more work for them. The teacher is already too busy and won't welcome a collection that uses up much of his or her time. Make it as easy as possible, offering selection and delivery services as well as computer printouts of the books in the collection. Soon, the teacher will count on this collection and students will look forward to it. The teachers will soon be calling the librarian at work requesting the next collection. Becky Smyth, the first-grade teacher at New Harmony Public School in Hew Harmony, Indiana, has received classroom collections for two years. New Harmony's library service to students is limited, so she uses the children's collection at a neighboring community's library. The children's librarian picks out twenty or thirty books for Smyth and delivers them to her school office. The books have a 150 day checkout period allowing for all kinds of flexibility. "We love our books," she says. "With this arrangement, more kids get better access to each book. If we each checked out books individually, we'd be stuck with that one book for two weeks. A week is a long time to a first-grader. Two weeks is an eternity. And the collection is no trouble at all. I just put in a call to the library and pretty soon another box of books shows up. It's great." The classroom collection should always be considered a supplement to, rather than a replacement for the school library media collection. Most teachers will use their school library first. The idea behind this cooperative method of serving the public is to improve access to information and to improve reading skills. The children's room at the Willard Library of Evansville has increased its circulation by 243% since 1993, largely due to sending out these visiting collections.

Until last year, the Evansville-Vanderburgh School Corporation helped the public libraries by providing a "wish list" called the OMAR or Evansville Book

Award. Every year, school and public librarians compile a list of their favorite books, some new, some not. These books are read by school children all over the city. The children vote on their favorites, and the OMAR list is born. This list is used as a purchase list and every library in town must have these titles. Each class is assigned reading from this list during the year. It is a wonderful selection tool as well as a fine bibliography for the classroom teacher. The list comes under the umbrella of the school corporation's duties, but public libraries, school libraries, students, teachers, and parents are involved. It is a wonderful way for the educational community to cooperate.

In summary, as public librarians, we must cooperate as well as reach out to other educational organizations, especially the school system, to ensure our viability in the twenty-first century. We must share resources, whether those resources are print, electronic, cerebral, or flesh and blood. We must constantly find new ways to remain facilitators of information in order to survive in the age of the information highway. The best way to do this is to share our ideas, use the ideas of others, and become a cooperative service to the educational community.

Sources Consulted

The American Library Association Code of Ethics

Herold-Short, Ann. "Small Public Libraries Can Cooperate Too!" *Indiana Libraries* 8, no. 2 (1989): 96-8

The Library Bill of Rights

Sword, Doug. "Hoosier Schools and the Religious Right," Courier Washington Bureau. *The Evansville Courier*.

Weinstein, Frances R., and W. Lawrence Thwing. "Components of Cooperation: Schools and Public Libraries Link for Enhanced Service and Information Access for Youth." *Indiana Libraries* 8, no. 2 (1989): 90-5

Endnotes

1. Library Bill of Rights. Adopted June 18, 1948 by the ALA Council.
2. American Library Association Code of Ethics. Adopted 1981.
3. Ann Herold-Short, "Small Public Libraries Can Cooperate Too!," *Indiana Libraries*, 8, no.2 (1989): 97.