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The School-Housed Public Library

Ken Haycock

Combined School/Public Libraries: Some Basic Considerations

The issue of the school-housed public library is certainly not a new one. The debate has been related in the library literature for many years so that there is now documentation of personal experiences, criteria for evaluation and the results of research studies. Unfortunately, this material tends to be overlooked in the heady rush to extend services to the public and the school while miraculously saving the taxpayers' money at the same time. Interestingly enough, the move for combination quarters tends to come from school trustees and not citizens in a community. Savings to the taxpayer are purported to be found in the avoidance of duplication of expensive materials and overhead expenses such as the building, lighting, heating, and custodial services. However, if reading by the adult or the student is inhibited, there is only a poor return on investment. Combined operations warrant careful study to ensure at least the possibility of success in new operations. Several criteria warrant particular attention as possible predictors of success.

Role and Function

While school and public libraries are educational institutions with similar aims and objectives in a broad sense, their specific purposes, approaches, and methods of operation are quite different. At some point there seems to be a basic lack of understanding as to what the role and function of the public library and the school resource center are and how they differ. It is essential that complementary agencies define carefully the role which they play and inform their respective communities of similarities and differences in philosophy and service.

The public library's primary role is to

facilitate the informal self-education of the individual from the preschooler to the senior citizen. These needs and interests may be informational (the name and address of a government department, materials to aid nature study, how to mix a drink, materials for hobbies, materials to help the adult at work), of a research nature (materials for a correspondence or university course), recreational (best sellers, books in the news, advising readers in interest areas, programs for leisure time such as how-to-sew, discussion groups) as well as the cultural and recreational activities of clubs and community organizations. In many joint facilities increased emphasis is placed on programming for adults in the evenings and on weekends to attract users outside of school hours.

The school resource center, on the other hand, is designed as an integral part of the instructional system to teach the student how to learn on his/her own, how to locate, analyze and evaluate information through planned experiences teaching research and study skills and listening and viewing skills. The teacher-librarian, with a strong teaching background plus specialized training in the selection and use of learning resources, plans and develops curricula with teachers and teaches units of study co-operatively as a team teacher with one or more classroom teachers. Furthermore, leadership is provided in in-service programs for teaching colleagues on new materials and resources and their effective use. These services help to implement the school curriculum and are undergirded by a range of library/media services which support, enrich and extend curricular experiences for students.

In order to develop the student's self-concept and ability to reason, materials are selected, organized and circulated

to facilitate the teaching/learning process. The resource center is closer to a special library than a public library inasmuch as its service orientation is determined by the goals and objectives of the specific institution served and it is highly selective in whom it serves, what it does and how it accomplishes its goals.

Need for Planning

The importance of advanced planning for joint operations cannot be stressed too much. This planning must involve all parties concerned, including members of the community and library staffs. The first tasks of the planning group will be to examine all alternatives to providing effective library service, to determine the legal jurisdictions and problems involved and to ensure a philosophical commitment to the project. Unless both the *physical and psychological barriers* of the school have already been overcome, a joint venture will have little opportunity for success. Secondary schools, private schools and religious separate schools can be uncomfortable to some users such as senior citizens, alienated youth, mothers with preschool children and other outreach prospects and religious groups. Some studies also suggest that success is more feasible with only one professional staff member working in a community of less than 10,000 people.

Siting the Library

Just as the resource center should be as close as possible to the physical heart of the school, the *location* of the public library should be at the focal point of the community. The school should be central to the area it serves and within easy access and walking distance of its population. Locating the public library in a school building set apart from its community's core is a foolish waste of

money in most cases. The duality of function necessitates that *quarters* be increased to accommodate a wider range of services. Essential considerations include a separate outside entrance with a large sign for the public, a separate area for pre-school children, meeting rooms, rest rooms and access for the handicapped.

Choosing Personnel

The personnel selected for the project will be a key element. Both professional and support personnel will have to be committed to the project. Specific job descriptions, goals and objectives are necessary and must be reinforced through in-service training in the roles of the two agencies. The expectations of district/system personnel have to be known and accepted or discussed. Flexibility in *management techniques* and practices will allow administration to cater to unique concerns. In different cases the administration, whether vertical in one individual with dual qualifications or horizontal in two individuals on a co-operative basis, may answer to a separate joint policy board, both the board of education and public library board, or their respective boards and their representatives. The written contract will outline the responsibilities of each party, including who hires, evaluates, pays and/or dismisses personnel. The director of the operation can anticipate problems in lending periods, circulation procedures, audio-visual materials and equipment and different salary scales, vacation periods and working conditions. If problems are to be solved rationally before they become serious, *communication* involving all parties through regularly scheduled meetings is important. Continuing communication between the boards should be formalized.

Funding the Venture

The level of support through financial arrangements must be capable of maintaining and increasing services to different target populations on a par with separate and independent units. Successful co-operative ventures rarely save operating costs but can improve service; indeed, communities often have to pay more for the same level of service in a joint facility. In the contract, specifications include who pays for capital equipment, building improvements, personnel, materials, supplies and services and insurance.

Collection Development

The collection of materials should be developed within the framework of a written selection policy which enshrines the citizen's basic right to read, listen and view materials. The principles of *intellectual freedom* are basic to public library service; thus, the collection will reflect the varied interests of the adult population, not the sensibilities of school authorities. Consideration should also be given to a separate card catalog for children and the question of ownership in the event of dissolution of the agreement. In order to avoid compromising service to the student, *hours of service and public access* will be dependent on space and additional personnel. Where other factors such as the collection are adequate but extra room and staff are not available during the day, service may have to be limited to out of school hours, an unfortunate situation for many segments of the population such as shift workers, homemakers and pre-school children. In order to meet user needs and interest, the public library component must be tied to a larger *system* for inter-library loans, advanced information services, consulting services and network access.

Continuous Evaluation

Good management practice means constant evaluation on a formal and informal basis and from both perspectives. Too frequently, one partner, usually the school where there has been a strong program, gains in service but public library service suffers because it is evaluated not on the basis of what should and can be, but on the basis of what was ("something is better than nothing"). Joint projects should be mutually beneficial and subject to contract revision and renewal on a regular basis. Recent contributions to the professional literature on school/public libraries have been mercifully shorn of the emotion and justifications of the past. Combined libraries have enormous potential where sufficient planning with some expertise has preceded decision-making. Not all criteria for successful operations necessarily apply to all situations but most criteria apply to every situation. Analysis of the criteria outlined and current research, especially Shirley Aaron's studies in Florida and Jim Dwyer's in Australia provide an informed basis for study and action by professionals.

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