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Public libraries: partners in youth development

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Abstract:

This paper reports on a significant new approach to young adult services in American public libraries. Rather than focusing on books or information, young adult librarians are instead beginning to focus on the adolescents themselves. The intent is to bring the library's resources to bear on the healthy development of these young people.

Specialized services for young adults developed later than those designed for children, and they have never been as well-institutionalized in public libraries in the United States. While statistical surveys indicate that about twenty-five percent of all American public library users are teens between the ages of twelve and fourteen, only eleven percent of all public libraries have a young adult specialist on staff (*Services and Resources for Children*, 1995, p. 9)

Many public libraries have provided no separate services for teens, expecting them to move between the children's and adult reference departments as their needs dictated. Other libraries have maintained small collections of materials for teens: titles that appear frequently on high school reading lists, popular paperback books, magazines, and pop music recordings. Where young adult librarians were in place, services might have included school visits to promote the library and reading and programming such as film showings and poetry readings.

More progressive young adult librarians have since at least the early 1990s made an effort to involve teens more directly through various youth participation initiatives. Typically, teens involved as youth participants were asked to give input to librarians about the services aimed at them. In Broward County, Florida, for example, a Young Adult Library Advisory Board (LAB) planned and implemented a number of activities for fellow teens, including dance parties, computer game nights, and informational programs about local colleges. LAB members also served as peer tutors and technology aides for the library (Chelton, 1994, p. 67)

Youth participation programs such as LAB were encouraged at the national level by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), a division of the American Library Association (ALA). YALSA offered guidance to librarians who were incorporating youth participation into their library services and even developed strategies for involving teens in its national conference programs (Jones, 2002, p. 111).

Until recently, however, most youth participation programs were aimed primarily at acquiring information from teens about the books, popular music, and programs they wanted at their libraries. The desired outcome was better collections and more relevant programs and services. Only gradually have librarians come to understand that teens who were active participants as planners and advisors also received some desired developmental outcomes.

A major source of new understanding about the positive developmental outcomes that can accrue to adolescents through a deeper involvement with their public libraries has been an initiative funded by the Wallace-Readers Digest Fund. Administered by the Urban Libraries Council, the Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development (PLPYD) project has been an effort to integrate principles of positive youth development into public library services.

Nine public libraries throughout the United States have participated in the project. These libraries have worked with community partners and with the targeted low-income teens themselves to develop service programs consisting of challenging activities and opportunities for young people designed to support six basic developmental outcomes:

- Youth contribute to their community.
- Youth feel safe in their environment.
- Youth have meaningful relationships with adults and peers.
- Youth achieve educational success.
- Youth develop marketable skills.
- Youth develop personal and social skills.

The nine PLPYD libraries used a variety of strategies to help their teen participants acquire these outcomes that authorities agree are necessary for a successful transition from childhood to adulthood. The Washoe County Library in Nevada developed Teen Action Teams that provide outreach services to children in low-income neighborhoods. Teens at the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County in North Carolina operate a computer design and copy store at the library. Oakland Public Library is one of several libraries that developed a teen employment program; their teens serve as homework helpers to younger children. In King County, Washington, Techno Teens are paid to assist patrons with the library's computer systems (Urban Libraries Council, 2002).

The prestigious National Research Council has recently issued a report that documents the weakening of informal community supports that were once available to young people in the United States.

The report urges a new direction in public policy that would place children and adolescents at the center of community life, where they can engage meaningfully with caring adults and develop the values, knowledge, and skills necessary to become healthy adults. The authors of this report challenge organizations, including libraries, to design programs for youth that supports this shift in policy (Eccles and Goodman, 2002). By adopting youth development as an operating principle, public libraries can become part of an essential web of support for young people and their families. The PLPYD demonstration project has shown how it can be done, and now YALSA has adopted youth development as the underpinning for its latest normative statement of the philosophy and practice of excellent library services for teens (Jones) We can only wait and see if public library decision-makers will be more convinced by the rhetoric of youth development than they have been by the arguments made previously for specialized young adult services.

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