

The Free Public Library's Role in Education

Siobhan Reardon 05 April 2011

Introduction

Quality education and the need for reform is one of those hot topics that touch people's deepest beliefs about child-rearing, community and our country. Some of the topics bundled under education reform include school choice, school finance reform, standards-based education, testing and the 21st-century classroom—but excluded is the role that public libraries can and should play as a true collaborator and support structure that undergirds real reform. A missed opportunity in planning for education reform ignores the significance of public libraries as a viable partner in the educational continuum.

For some time now, reformers at the state and local levels have attempted to revolutionize the way schools operate and students learn with a variety of top-to-bottom and bottom-to-top changes in administration, curriculum and outreach. One of the many issues surrounding education reform is equal access to high-quality education. The factors that improve school quality—well-qualified teachers, modern buildings, adequate funding, effective leadership and comprehensive curriculums—are seemingly less prevalent in schools serving predominantly

poor or minority students, leading to achievement gaps between low-income, African-American and Latino students and higher-income, predominantly white students.

For Philadelphia the achievement gap is ever-present. Philadelphia remains the poorest of the country's major cities, with 25 percent of individuals and more than 30 percent of children living below the poverty line. The city routinely experiences greater unemployment than the U.S. average, and the Department of Labor reports that the city's unemployment rate climbed from 6.1 percent in April 2008 to 11.2 percent in November 2010. Additionally, Philadelphia's widespread poverty is accompanied by widespread low literacy. According to a study by the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board (2009), 52 percent of the city's working-age adults possess below-basic literacy skills. This is a massive impediment for thousands of Philadelphians, and without educational programs provided by the public library, particularly at the critical early childhood stage, the next generations are also likely to struggle with low literacy.

Studies have shown that children in poverty are far less likely to be read to than middle- and upper-income children. A U.S. Department of Education longitudinal study of 14,000 children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds born in 2001 found that less than one third of the low-income children were read to or told stories on a daily basis (U.S. Department of Education 2009). This

was true when they were nine months, two years, and even four years old. Conversely, the middle- and upper-income children were exposed to reading and storytelling for more regularly. Low-income households typically have fewer books, lower maternal literacy, and less recognition of the importance of reading than their middle- and upper-income peers. Thus, low-income children are at a distinct disadvantage for developing the pre-reading skills that constitute kindergarten readiness, and this readiness gap frequently leads to a long-term achievement gap.

In 2005 the School District of Philadelphia found that nearly half (54 percent) of all public school children were already behind in reading preparedness when they started school, and the majority who start behind never catch up to grade-level proficiencies (developmental reading assessment results cited in Philadelphia Safe and Sound [2007]). In 2009, 61 percent of Philadelphia's fourth graders scored below basic on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, compared to 34 percent nationwide. Unfortunately, these children are at great risk for ultimately dropping out of school, and without intervention the cycle of intergenerational illiteracy is likely to continue when they have children of their own.

Why Public Libraries?

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A recent report (ICMA 2011) addresses the potential of

the public library as a viable community partner in tackling community priorities:

As communities develop strategies to address important issues and needs, communicating those strategies to the public is essential. And what community program reaches more of the general adult public than the public library? Libraries also reach large numbers of young people when they are not in school, especially in after-school and summer programs. Any community effort that involves public education, communications and marketing is overlooking an important asset if the library is not included in the plan.

As the area's largest source of free educational and cultural resources and programs, the Free Library serves as an equalizer of access to books, information and events for Philadelphia residents. In fiscal year 2010 the Free Library of Philadelphia circulated more than 6.5 million books and other materials and hosted more than 20,000 programs and events, attended by more than 572,000 children, teens and adults.

Four strategically important Library-based educational programs provide for sustained early childhood and out-of-school time support and clearly reflect the role of the public library in equalizing access to education and educational resources and increasing literacy rates across Philadelphia's system of schools. The four programs are Books Aloud!, LEAP-After-School Assistance, the Teen

Leadership Assistant program and the FLP Summer Reading Program.

Books Aloud! Program

The Free Library of Philadelphia's Books Aloud! Program, which reaches a monthly average of 445 adults and children in library and community sites, is an early literacy program that promotes early literacy skills and library services for parents and caregivers of young children, daycare providers and preschool teachers. The primary goal of Books Aloud! is to empower Philadelphia's adults with the resources and skills needed to read aloud successfully with young children. To this end, the program targets two primary audiences: 1) child care professionals serving children age six and under, and 2) low-income families with young children, including vulnerable populations such as homeless and teen parents.

Traditionally, Books Aloud! programs have been offered primarily at Library locations and have been theme-based and focused on adult populations. FLP staff recently adapted the program to expand outreach and family-style programming to reach at-risk populations in Philadelphia. This method, based on previous successful Books Aloud! initiatives including a two-year partnership with the Philadelphia Housing Authority and a teen parent series, have proven extremely effective in reaching vulnerable families. Preschool Specialists present an average of 15 workshops each month at neighborhood library and

outreach sites throughout the city and typically attract an average of 25-30 participants per workshop. All Books Aloud! participants receive theme packs that include complementary information for adults about reading practices and literacy strategies, as well as award-winning children's books chosen by our professional library staff.

Extremely popular with preschool teachers and daycare providers are the theme-based workshops at Library branches where they can earn free Pennsylvania Quality Assurance System continuing education credits. These workshops focus on helping adults explore early learning concepts such as vocabulary and other early literacy skills, such as print concepts, letter knowledge and phonological awareness, which play an important role in readying children for school. Moreover, the workshops teach educators effective strategies that encourage children to become excited about reading, learning and the Library.

LEAP After-School Assistance Program

Our LEAP After-School Assistance Program focuses on schoolchildren in their out-of-school time. Each year, approximately 80,000 individual children and teens—about one third of the total school-going population in Philadelphia—participate in this drop-in program after school at libraries across the city. LEAP began in 1989 to provide a safe environment, homework help and an introduction to library resources for children after school.

The objectives of the program are to 1) provide a safe environment for children after school; 2) assist children in completing homework and developing learning skills; 3) assist children in developing and improving literacy skills through fun, interactive activities; 4) create a positive mentoring and youth development employment program for teens; and 5) introduce and develop children's skills and comfort in using library and information-based resources.

Today, LEAP remains an invaluable resource for the countless families who depend upon the program. According to one After School Leader (ASL),

the majority of students who attend LEAP at the Free Library's branches, whether receiving homework help, engaged with a program, or just being read aloud to, come to the library because they know someone is there who cares about them and their progress in this fast-paced world. They know there is a safe place in their communities where they can get books, movies, music, use the computer, engage in a fun program, and seek reliable educational help, all for free.

Literacy skills also continue to be taught through LEAP, and this has resulted in important reading progress for many children. Another ASL tells of a young girl who has attended LEAP for three years, since she moved to the United States from Pakistan. When the student began coming to LEAP, in fifth grade, she was reading in English

at only a second-grade level. Over the past three years, the ASL and the Teen Leadership Assistants have worked with this child on reading and other homework every day after school. She is now in seventh grade and reading at grade level, and her school grades in all subjects have been improving steadily. She is always excited to share her successes in school with LEAP staff. Furthermore, as a result of her improved skills, she has become more outgoing and makes friends more easily. This child is representative of two sizeable populations that attend LEAP: students who are struggling academically, and students whose families speak English as a second language.

Teen Leadership Assistant Program

Philadelphia teenagers also continued to benefit greatly from LEAP's model teen employment initiative, the Teen Leadership Assistant (TLA) program, which provided formal trainings, tutoring, mentoring and hands-on work experience for a total of 165 teenagers in 2009–2010. The Library is extremely pleased that all 36 TLAs who were high-school seniors graduated in June 2010, and all indicated that they applied to and were accepted at colleges. Moreover, of last year's TLAs, 81 have returned to serve LEAP either in this capacity or as Associate Leaders (college students) for the 2010–2011 school years.

As part of the LEAP program, TLAs participate in a wide

variety of teen-focused educational programs with themes including physical exercise and nutrition; financial literacy; multicultural awareness; personality assessment; strategies for presenting programs and assisting children at LEAP; and SAT test and college preparation.

Additionally, more than 300 local high school students attend an annual Youth Empowerment Summit, a free, day-long, professional-style conference for teens that is planned, promoted and organized by LEAP's Teen Leadership Assistants. The summit encourages teens to explore their leadership potential and ability to effect positive change in their communities. Activities include a keynote address by a renowned author, poet, activist or educator. The summit also includes a choice of 15 workshops on teen-oriented topics and an informational fair featuring 25 colleges, educational support organizations and social service agencies.

The afterschool program is moving toward being a year-round out-of-school-time program with the after-school component that provides homework support and activities, as well as a summer component that includes helping kids complete their school summer reading assignments while participating in fun library activities.

Summer Reading Program

The final and probably one of the most important education support programs provided by every public library in the United States is the Summer Reading

Program. Summer reading programs began in the 1890s as a way to encourage school children, particularly those in urban areas and not needed for farm work, to read during their summer vacation, use the library and develop the habit of reading. FLP's Summer Reading Program provides thousands of youth with the opportunity to build and enhance lifelong literacy skills while enjoying enrichment activities during the summer months. Without the support of a viable summer reading program many children lose ground in reading over the summer, and begin the school year at a level lower than what they achieved the previous year.

Typically, the FLP Summer Reading Program engages approximately 60,000 children and teens—a quarter of the school-going population—in literacy activities designed to encourage reading and learning. Summer reading programs are especially important in Philadelphia, where large numbers of children and teens need help achieving reading proficiency. Children at every income level who read and participate in the program show growth in literacy and print motivation, and the games and events through the program encourage students to have fun while learning.

The Potential for Collaboration and Improved Education

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Clearly, public libraries play varied and dynamic roles in communities across the country. Our core mission is reflective of our community-based role in guiding the public to good information, advancing literacy and supporting the education of young and old alike. But how do we move the conversation regarding the public library's role in quality education and reform? How are public libraries' rich resources going to be leveraged in helping children, and helping families help their children, prepare for their future?

It starts with the Free Library and the district, archdiocese, public charter, and private schools creating policies that encourage a relationship of collaboration and leveraging resources. Both public and school libraries, and librarians as their intermediaries, are the key institutions that provide collections, technology and programs to meet the needs of young people and their families. But, in particular, the public library can provide the additional out-of-school-time and early childhood educational support necessary for every child to succeed long term.

This can take on many forms. One of the strongest school/library partnerships would be for the School District to house a combined public/school library in a designated space within the walls of a school. The idea being floated now is very much along the lines of shared resources or co-location. The idea here is that for the first half of the day—while school is in session—the library is very much the school media center, with the school media

specialist as the point person. After 3:00 p.m. the public library would then take over the space to provide public library services not only to the school children but to their families and the community as well. We would bring in our own technology and the materials to support after-school activities as well as material of interest to the community at large for circulation. The opportunity here is that the libraries are able to share the collection, the children are able to have a cohesive library service, adults/parents are better able to participate in the child's education in a library setting and the community gets to participate in the overall success of their children. Children and families would be able to circulate the public library materials very much as they do at a regular neighborhood branch library. This concept applies to all schools and in the case of charter schools may actually serve as the library for the school.

Another option would be for the School District, archdiocese and charter schools to work more closely with the public library during curriculum development. If the public library system is aware of the curriculum and teacher development then we would be better prepared to help the children when they come into the public library after school or on vacation, with collections that have depth in specific subject areas, programs to support the curriculum and staff prepared to help. In the case of Nashville Public Library, the public library purchases the curriculum materials for the school system. As an

example, the library provides free internet access in every library location as well as wireless access. Any child can get additional support after the library is closed (and you have a computer with internet access at home) by accessing the myriad databases to help with projects, learn a language or get tutor support through Brainfuse, the FLP on-line tutoring service. This could include more in-depth tutoring during the LEAP After-School Assistance program regarding STEM subjects by hiring teachers whose passion is science, technology, engineering or math. We would look to the School District and others for recommendations for effective tutors.

Finally, a number of home-schooled children's families use the local public library for educational materials to support the curriculum of the child. While public librarians have not typically taken a proactive stance in serving home-schooling patrons, we need to be better prepared to support the ever-popular alternative school options. This will reinforce the public library as an education institution.

Collaborative learning conferences whereby the educators, librarians, civic and community leaders get together annually to discuss the learning and education goals of the community and apply resources—physical, financial and supportive—to support those goals are a must.

Recognition and support for the dual but complimentary roles of the school and public library in quality education

and reform is not only that of the administrators but in part up to the community and community leaders as participants in the overall success for such collaboration. Successful collaboration ensures that children will receive a better education, increase literacy, and become productive citizens.

Siobhan Reardon became the seventh President and Director of the Free Library of Philadelphia in September 2008. She is the first woman to serve in this capacity in 114 years. The Free Library of Philadelphia system consists of 49 branches, three regional libraries, the Parkway Central Library, and the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. With more than six million visits annually, the Free Library is one of the most widely used educational and cultural institutions in Philadelphia.

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