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Ian Duncanson
Beaverton Public Library

Chris Myers
Oregon Episcopal School

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Bridging the Summer Reading Gap

by Ian Duncanson &
Chris Myers



Ian Duncanson has been a young adult librarian at the Beaverton City Library since 2007. Prior to that, he worked as a reference librarian at the Free Library of Philadelphia. He completed his MLS at Indiana University in 2005.

Chris Myers (not pictured) is a librarian at the Oregon Episcopal School where he is an advocate for the development of each community member's research skills.

Public libraries and schools perennially wrestle with the challenge of managing summer reading, especially the question of how to encourage and promote reading without becoming too compulsory or prescriptive. The summer-reading frameworks at Beaverton City Library and nearby Oregon Episcopal School illustrate some of the overlap and differences in the way public libraries and schools approach summer reading, as well as the potential for effective collaboration between the two.

At the Beaverton City Library, part of the Washington County Library Services Cooperative, the summer reading program offers incentives for youth from birth through grade 12 to read material of their choice for a total of fifteen hours over the summer months. Upon completion of their hours, readers receive a free ticket to a Trailblazers game, a discounted rides pass to a local amusement park, coupons for free food, and a popular paperback book of their choice. In addition, the BCL also offers a special book reviews program for teens where students evaluate the books they read and submit the reviews for weekly gift card prize drawings. This system encourages further evaluation and interaction with the books. Reviews submitted online are also added to the teen section of the BCL's Web site, which aims to cultivate a database of game, graphic novel and book reviews. At the end of the summer, a \$100 grand prize drawing is made using all of the reviews gathered over the course of the program. Weekly programs, including book discussion, gaming, and Anime clubs and special presenter events are also offered and advertised through flyers and a refrigerator-friendly summer events calendar. The structured summer reading program offers

a clear goal that students are eager to meet; during the summer of 2009, the BCL had 1,523 participants.

The summer-reading program for the Upper School (grades 9–12) at Oregon Episcopal School is two-pronged. The first prong, similar to the program at Beaverton City Library, is the Summer Reading Challenge. Students are challenged to read 2,009 pages, or 10 separate books, or for 30 hours cumulatively during the summer. Those who complete the challenge win a T-shirt with a design created by an OES high-school student. The Friends of the Oregon Episcopal School Libraries, a parent volunteer group, generously underwrites the T-shirts. About 300 out of the 800 students in the school document meeting the challenge. The second prong, which is more compulsory, allows students to choose one book from a list of titles recommended by faculty members and rising seniors. Each book recommender, or sponsor, gets a chance to give a brief preview of his or her book at an assembly in the spring. Then students select a title, which they commit to read over the summer. In the fall, students meet in mini book groups to discuss the books they read. The sponsors lead these discussions. The books on this list are supposed to be “fun” reads, and teachers are explicitly barred from extending the curriculum into the summer by putting books on the list that are related to one of their classes. This program has been in place in the Upper School (grades 9–12) for six years, and a similar model is being piloted in the Middle School (grades 6–8) this summer. None of this is original to OES, of course. The T-shirt incentive was “borrowed” from Multnomah County Library, and the idea of having students pick one required



book from a list of fun reads came from neighboring Jesuit High School.

Both parts of the program at OES help achieve the basic goal of ginning up excitement about books, and getting students to read, talk about and think about books more than they might otherwise. In particular, having students recommend some of the titles on the summer-reading list has significantly increased student ownership of the program. These two initiatives are supplemented by publicity about the reading programs at Beaverton City Library and other neighboring public libraries. But there is clearly potential for more collaboration between OES and BCL.

For the youth librarians at BCL, promoting the summer-reading program in the local schools, including OES, has been an ongoing challenge. When the end of the school year draws near, teachers and librarians scramble to finish the curriculum, and time is in short supply. Scheduling class visits to discuss the SRP with students can be a challenge amidst the bustle. At the end of the 2008–2009 school year, the young-adult librarians at the BCL visited ESL parents nights, middle school classes, and several classes at a local high school. In addition, the BCL sends its summer reading materials to all of the English teachers and librarians in its service area. Color copies of the summer reading posters, designed by local students, are sent to librarians to hang in the school library. Finally, the BCL Young Adult Division also has a blog (<http://teendomtweendom.blogspot.com/>) designed to keep teachers abreast of library happenings, including the summer reading program.

What more can be done to facilitate cooperation between the two camps on summer reading? For one, school librarians could act more aggressively as liaisons

between teachers and the public library, making sure teachers know about the summer-reading programs and thus might be more likely to tell their students about it. With the required reading portion of OES's programs (and in schools where teachers in English and other subjects mandate required reading), the school librarians could help ensure that the public library has those booklists to help with collection development and program promotion. Many teachers, especially at the high school level, have summer reading lists that they require students to read. These assignments can count towards the library's reading program. The BCL often purchases teacher-required books and OBOB titles for summer reading prizes. The local Powell's Books in Beaverton does a nice job of displaying titles and books from the summer-reading lists of OES and other local schools; with more communication between the schools and the library, BCL could do something similar. Similarly, OES could put a link to the BCL book-review program and teen-reading blog in a prominent place on its library homepage. And it would be very powerful to have a BCL librarian visit the summer-reading preview assembly at OES to talk briefly about the initiatives at the public library, hand out materials, and perhaps even be ready to sign up students for library cards if they don't have them already.

What we're going for, of course, is a feedback loop in which public libraries and schools are mutually reinforcing each other's good efforts to promote reading in the summer. Using existing programs as a springboard, communicating more fully about each other's efforts would be a great step in the right direction. 🌿

