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Expanding Opportunities with Library Cards

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by Kate Dwyer

For the past 22 years, Outreach Education Librarian Kate Dwyer has lived in Takilma, Oregon in Josephine County. After two years as the branch manager for the Illinois Valley branch of Josephine Community Libraries, Kate was hired to oversee the Expanding Opportunities Program, funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services. For more information about the program, please contact Kate at kdwyer@josephinelibrary.org.

Public libraries have much to offer school libraries in collaboration and collective impact, but gaining access to the school setting for meaningful projects can be challenging. In Josephine County, a simple project—aimed at increasing the number of student public library cardholders—has reverberated beyond its face value to build trust and open doors at schools.

Background:
Expanding Opportunities Program at JCL

With funding through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), Josephine Community Libraries (JCL) in southern Oregon provides staffing to educate leaders and residents in Josephine County about libraries and information literacy in the digital age. The Expanding Opportunities Program focuses on three primary areas—education, employability, and entrepreneurship. Dubbed the Outreach Education Librarian (OEL), the JCL LSTA-funded staff person conducts general library education classes for a community that seems largely unaware of the 21st century features of a library system. Not surprisingly, this familiar refrain is often heard: "We don't need libraries anymore because we have the Internet." Through her classes and outreach, the OEL turns this into: "I had no idea! This is amazing! Thank God we have a library!"

In addition to general community education, the Expanding Opportunities Program also includes outreach within the school system, specifically focusing on middle schools (teachers, parents, and students) as a target audience to ensure high value impact. Middle school students are generally ready for an introduction to library databases, and are doing substantive reports that require some research skills. The mission includes training teachers to introduce their students to both school and public library online resources, and working closely with school librarians to multiply their efforts. The lessons include identifying source quality, framing searches, locating and synthesizing information, using citation tools, and issues of digital citizenship. Naturally, some school librarians are already teaching these skills, but it's a big job and they welcome an increase in the capacity to reach more students. Other school librarians have been without resources or support to

take on digital skills training. This partnership emphasizes the importance of the effort and focuses additional resources on implementing a comprehensive program.

Josephine County has two school districts, and between them there are six middle schools, serving about 2,440 students. Each district signed on as a primary partner in support of the Expanding Opportunities Program grant. The OEL met with all school librarians in August to assess their needs and frame the project in ways that would be most helpful. School librarians in one district were ready for additional support for existing efforts, and in the other they expressed frustration at a lack of collaborative time with little access to training on digital resources. They were eager to learn. The project was greeted warmly in official meetings, but there were plenty of barriers to actually getting into classrooms and school libraries.

Although school and public libraries should be natural partners, effective collaboration has proven challenging to achieve in recent years, as budget cuts drastically reduced the capacity of the public library to reach out to its neighbors. In decades past, our school libraries enjoyed a warmly collaborative relationship with the public library, and each devoted time to meeting and planning together. Now, with our public library surviving on a shoestring, and certified school librarians largely replaced with classified staff, dynamic partnerships and visioning have given way to guarded turf and issues of greatly diminished service capacity. Classified staff in school libraries are naturally concerned that outside help will make them less necessary, and this has affected the previous climate of natural partnership. However, school library staff recognize the dire need for digital skills curriculum and this program seeks to address that need and to help school libraries reach more students.

Card Access: Establishing Partnerships through Library Cards

To overcome some initial resistance, and to build trust and value for public libraries among all the stakeholders, the OEL needed a project that everyone understood and could support, and which would be a first step to reaching the Expanding Opportunities program goals.

In August, just prior to the new school year, the OEL approached the Superintendent of each school district to request support for placing a public library card application in every middle school student's registration packet, a fully paper process. They agreed, and were excited to participate.

Program data

Using birthdate as a marker, JCL's pre-project ILS data showed that our library system had already registered 1,300 junior library cards in the middle school age group. So that existing accounts would not be confused with new students registered as part of this initiative, JCL staff created a marker line on Polaris database card records to show if a student had been registered under this program, which would allow us to track growth and usage. This established a baseline to help evaluate the impact of the program.

Application forms

Two data collection questions were added to the front of JCL's usual library card applications: "Does your student currently use the public library?" and "Does your child have Internet access at home?" In addition to these two questions, one school district allowed a specific library use survey to be added to the back of the form, while the other school district did not.

A volunteer made 2,400 copies of the amended application form, and counted them all into leftover Summer Reading bags, labeled for each school. An instruction form for the office staff was included, along with an absolutely indispensable key item: chocolate. The wise librarian knows that any team project is fueled and lubricated by this precious substance, and any supplication toward team members' good graces must be accompanied by a generous offering.

Preparing for registrations

As schools began their registration process, the public library staff and volunteers got ready. Volunteer data entry teams were scheduled. The patron database and bulk mailing manager created task lists. Mailing envelopes were ordered and systems were designed for handling a potential deluge of paper card applications.

At the end of registration week, the OEL made the rounds to schools to gather completed forms. There were significantly more returned forms in the schools where the applications had been placed within the registration packets compared to the schools where the applications were offered on the counter as optional, which was not a surprise. Also, schools where staff had an existing relationship with the OEL had a much better rate of return because office staff were enthusiastic about the project and expressed their excitement to parents, who were then more likely to complete the form.

The school registration process dragged out as late deliveries trickled in or as families took time to gather the documents they needed for school. Staff waited to process the cards until the end of the month, and the OEL made frequent trips to schools to pick up "stragglers."

The "deluge"

Then they were here: over one thousand library card applications. The return had been less than JCL hoped, but higher than the schools had expected. Their experience with forms being returned had led them to expect fewer.

Hundreds of library card applications arriving in a deluge required an orchestrated team response at JCL. Each school's returns were counted and marked as to which school they came from. Forms went to a data entry team which checked each name for an existing library record. When a student already had an active library card, the information was updated so that the record's time to expiration was extended. If there was an inactive record, unused for over two years, a new card was issued assuming it may have been lost, and waiving the usual $3 card replacement fee. (If there were unresolved fines over $10.00, no new card was sent.)

Survey results

Survey data collected on the applications were collated and tabulated into spreadsheets. Seventy percent of parents reported that their students did not currently use the public library. In the school district which allowed a larger survey, the top two reasons for not using the library were transportation issues and "have Internet." This reflects the largest misunderstanding within the community that the OEL has identified to date—the erroneous idea that untrained use of the Internet can replace school and public libraries as a meaningful research tool.

Seventy-six percent of families reported having Internet access in the home. However, informal interviews with students during school library observation times, as well as discussions with teachers, consistently revealed a lack of *meaningful* Internet access. Merely having the home hooked up does not necessarily result in middle school students having educational experiences online. Jockeying for turns, the allure of games, social media time, and various distractions seem to use up students' online time far more than educational content.

Issuing library cards

To issue new cards, the data entry team entered all of a student's information and clipped a new card to the application, with the card number showing. Fulfilled applications were then alphabetized by student's last name.

A "problems team" addressed tricky applications, called schools to clarify hieroglyphic handwriting, made gentle courtesy calls to families with outstanding fines, and tried to get as many forms as possible cleared to move forward.

JCL decided to mail the library cards directly to the students. Team members who had children thought the likelihood of the cards coming home if students received them at school was not high—the cards might languish in lockers, backpacks, or gym bags. Also, receiving items in the mail is a treat for children, so they wanted to elevate the library card with the excitement of mail for the student.

The OEL wrote a welcome letter for students which included their card number and password (some students had not chosen a password, so one had been issued, or they might need to be reminded of theirs, and she wanted students to have immediate access to their accounts without barriers.) The back of the letter listed new young adult materials in our collection, and upcoming library events at all four branches, including a middle school family open house at each branch.

JCL's patron database manager printed each letter with the student's address for a window mailer. Volunteer "stuffers," trained in bulk mailings for JCL, came to an all-day marathon session in which six helpers checked each letter against the card number attached to it, folded the letters, and sealed the flaps. Then, to distinguish the lemon yellow mailing envelopes from junk mail, each envelope was embellished with colorful ink pad stamps.

Out of the thousand applications, many students already had active cards, (i.e. were part of the existing group of 1,300 middle school age patrons), some forms were incomplete or illegible, and some had unresolved issues. In the end, however, almost 600 new cards were issued!

Because the addresses were collected as part of a school registration process, the return mailing bounce rate was reduced compared to other bulk mailing efforts. About 20 envelopes bounced back from the Post Office, and staff located the (still alphabetized) applications for these, determined which school the student attends, and hand-delivered these to the schools.

Publicizing the program

JCL wrote a press release for the project, and the Grants Pass *Daily Courier* published an excellent article, complete with a photograph of a middle school girl in the teen library. Awareness of the project was high at the schools, with teachers discussing it enthusiastically.

Building value for libraries among educators and parents

One of the finest moments of this project was when JCL staff met a mom in the library with her three middle school sons, all of whom had received their first library card in the mail that week. They were warmly welcomed, received a tour of the library, and all went home with books. The library front desk staff were elated!

Out of 600 new cards mailed, in the past three months, fewer than 10 percent have been used at the library. Increased marketing of summer reading programs to young adult readers, inviting teachers to bring student poets to workshops, and increased school visits have all been planned to invite middle school students into the libraries and entice them to participate in activities throughout the upcoming year, with the goal of developing a slow and steady increase in middle school patronage.

Although the student library card usage rate has been low so far (as expected), the program has merits far beyond getting students into the library. Parents, educators, school board members, and media representatives have expressed enthusiasm for the program. Stressing the value of libraries to their students, school principals have thanked JCL for its efforts and become more open to other Expanding Opportunities program goals.

This project demonstrates that repeated entry into the school setting is necessary to build student awareness of the value of public libraries; multiple invitations are required to see a return. But without getting through the door to be a regular visitor in schools, this is hard to build. The middle school library card project engaged school staff and parents as well, leading to enthusiasm for the project's collaborations with school librarians. The increased profile helped stakeholders frame the broader project in a more positive light.

Opening doors

Once our schools saw that the public library had done something tangible and meaningful for their students, the Expanding Opportunities Program became much more welcome. Since then, the OEL has completed hours of observations in the schools where digital skills were already in the curriculum, learning how their school librarians teach and utilize these resources and how kids employ them. She has been welcomed at staff meetings to introduce public library databases, and has achieved a real coup: a public library link on every school library web page in one of the school districts! Digital skills trainings of staff and students are proceeding well and school staff shows enthusiasm for the resources JCL brings to the table.

The Expanding Opportunities Program strives to not only increase student use of public libraries, but to demonstrate the value of school libraries and school librarians. While training teachers in the use of digital resources, school librarians are always included and deferred to as experts, building value for their positions within the school structure. This "rising tide" of library value applies to public and school libraries together.

While there is still much work to be done before our middle school staff and students attain the necessary digital information skills and competencies, thanks to 600 new public library cards, the doors are open, partnerships are on track, and progress is well under way. ⚹