Studio in a School

Retooling Public Libraries to Attract and Engage Teens After School

by Lisa Wahl Moellman and Jodi Rosenbaum Tillinger

According to the National Child Care Survey, approximately seven million children are spending some amount of time each day in self-care (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). When adolescents are included in these figures, some evidence suggests the number of youth without care after school approaches 15 million (White House, 1998). The large number of children and adolescents who are unsupervised during out-of-school hours has prompted a broad national dialogue about child and youth care in communities today.

The quality and accessibility of out-of-school options are important because youth without afterschool opportunities are at risk for a host of negative outcomes. The afterschool hours are when youth are most likely to perpetrate crimes or become victims of crime, to be in or cause a car crash, to use drugs and alcohol, to experience depression, and to engage in risky sexual activity (Newman, Fox, & Flynn, 2000). Beyond addressing these pressing social concerns, adults must also take collective responsibility for shaping positive youth development as an *economic* necessity. Leaders across disciplines are pointing to social, economic, and technological trends that have changed the nature of work and of class composition in leading nations. There is increasing disparity between the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to earn a middle-class income in the present economy and those actually acquired by students in most public schools today, especially in urban districts.

Afterschool programs hold great potential to equip *all* youth with the skills and attitudes necessary for participation in our increasingly complex society. Public libraries represent community spaces in which teens who seek to cultivate their passions and interests can explore, create, and make progress in a low-

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stakes environment. Libraries can be venues in which teens define themselves at their own pace and in personally meaningful ways (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2001). Communities that want to support youth must understand the powerful role civic institutions such as libraries can play during the out-of-school hours.

What Do Teens Want and Need After School?

Adolescents tend not to be inclined toward rigidly structured programs. Instead, they gravitate toward programs that provide motivating and meaningful activities that respect their need for positive relationships, flexibility, and choices (Forum for Youth Investment, 2003). In gathering data for a 2002 report to the Boston After-School for All Partnership, the Center for Teen Empowerment (2002) conducted youth surveys and focus groups. The report stated that youth ages 13–18 want afterschool programs that provide opportunities for choice and voice. In focus groups, over 90 percent of participants 13 years and older said they want caring adult leaders who will help them develop a variety of new skills (Center for Teen Empowerment, 2002).

This age group ranked employment as their most important out-of-school opportunity. Thirteen- to 18-year-olds were also clear about their desire to have their ideas respected and integrated into afterschool programming and decision-making processes. Youth went on to say that afterschool programs should have updated technology and equipment, including advanced hardware and software (Center for Teen Empowerment, 2002).

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Teens also expressed a desire to participate in activities of their choosing, motivated by their own interests; they wanted afterschool programs that would allow them to determine their own points of entry and degree of engagement. Youth emphasized that the school day can be especially structured, impersonal, and demanding. They rated afterschool programs that mimic the rigidity and organization of the regular school day as highly unappealing (Center for Teen Empowerment, 2002).

Teens have been identified as one of the least served populations during out-of-school hours (Boston After-School for All Partnership, 2003). Knowing that teens want jobs, opportunities to learn new skills, and a flexible structure they've helped to design, communities are obliged to provide accessible spaces that meet these needs. Public libraries, free to all and available in every neighborhood, have the potential to offer the resources and structure teens want.

The Public Library as a Youth Development Partner

Public libraries are well poised to serve young people by serving as a bridge between the formal learning of the regular school day and the more self-directed, real-world application of knowledge required in the 21st century. Nationally, young adults represent 23 percent of library users, with the majority visiting the library to use computers. However, many libraries have neither enhanced spaces for youth nor expanded resources and programming to capitalize on the presence of this sizable demographic. In fact, most library budgets earmark minimal funding for young adult services, and these services are often first to be discontinued in times of budget restraint (Whalen & Costello, 2002).

In this technology-driven era, with an ever-increasing range of information access points, many people are questioning the relevance of library buildings and services. A number of library systems have recently incurred significant budget cuts that have resulted in reduced operating hours and staff layoffs. For many systems, the current fiscal reality makes larger investment in teen programming seem counterintuitive. However, rather than enacting flat cuts across the system, libraries could look to exemplary organizations in the private sector that have successfully refocused goals and resources during recessionary times. In doing so, libraries may find that enhanced teen user rates could broaden the base of public support and, in turn, provide significant leverage to advocate for increased funding. Library systems have the potential to expand teen services as a mechanism to generate public support and political will—

both of which are essential to ensuring libraries are valued and funded well into the future.

With 7-15 million American youth in need of affordable afterschool programs, communities urgently need to maximize use of free civic spaces. Eleanor Jo Rodger, executive director of the Urban Libraries Council (ULC), stated convincingly, "If we don't meet their needs as children and teens, it's naïve to think [youth] will come back at 18 or 19" (DeWitt Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund, 1999, p. 15). Working with municipal and community partners, libraries have an unprecedented opportunity to enhance their existing networks in city neighborhoods. Some library systems have seized this opportunity to become effective youth spaces that attract and respond to urban youth. Other urban systems are at a crossroads, grappling with issues of mission and readiness. Libraries have enormous potential as a network of free civic spaces. How might we reinvent library branches as hubs for youth development? In what ways are libraries uniquely poised to support the learning and technology needs of youth outside the formal structure of the school day? How can we increase libraries' potential to draw in and serve the vast number of young people who are without supportive and engaging afterschool opportunities?

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The ULC Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development (PLPYD) project, funded by the DeWitt Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund (DWRDF), advocates that public libraries are poised to become full community partners in promoting educational and career development for youth (Meyers, 1999). Grounded in a positive youth development philosophy, the PLPYD project challenged nine library systems, from 1999 to 2002, to improve teen services, develop tools for effective practice, and evaluate developmental outcomes (Dewitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, 1999).

The PLPYD project identified a number of issues central to improving services for youth. The most important findings came from youth themselves. Between November 1998 and May 1999, ten communities that had been awarded planning grants by DWRDF held a number of focus groups in which they discovered that most teens find libraries "uncool" (Meyers, 1999).

According to a report by the DeWitt Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund (1999), a majority of focus group participants said their ideal library would have:

- Librarians who like to work with youth and who make teens feel wanted
- A special place of their own in the library that can be used as a multipurpose space
- More and faster computers, new graphics and multimedia software, and better technological assistance
- Opportunities to work in libraries as tutors, club leaders, technology assistants, customer service representatives, and website maintenance assistants

Focus group participants believed the library should help them to explore career opportunities and learn valuable job skills, beginning with *employing them* to serve other children and youth (Dewitt Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund, 1999).

Following the planning phase, nine library systems received three-year implementation grants, with which they developed an array of programming and opportunities to attract and involve teens. A final report by Yohalem and Pittman (2003) illustrates the many ways in which libraries have more fully entered the youth development arena by engaging in both *inreach* and *outreach*. Yohalem and Pittman use the term *inreach* to describe capacity-building and organizational activities associated with successfully shifting traditional library culture. As these library systems engaged in the change process, youth and community development became central to their mandate. Critical inreach activities included staff support and training, the development of teen-friendly policies, and the establishment of leadership and employment opportunities for youth (Yohalem & Pittman, 2003).

Simultaneously, libraries engaged in a host of *outreach* efforts in order to connect with youth-serving partners, municipal agencies, and teens. Active efforts such as marketing, collaborating with other youth organizations, and becoming involved in existing community partnerships enabled libraries to get on young people's radar screen. Moreover, effective outreach assisted these systems to become valued voices at the youth development tables in their communities (Yohalem & Pittman, 2003).

The Library's Unique Role in Promoting Positive Youth Development

Because libraries support the notion of "free-choice learning," they are an ideal space in which youth can engage in real-world, self-paced learning opportunities (Pittman, 2002). "Free-choice learning" is defined by Dierking and Falk (2003) as "learning that is guided by learners' needs and interests—the learning that people engage in throughout their lives to find out more about what is useful, compelling, or just plain interesting to them" (p. 77).

During out-of-school time, public libraries are situated to be places for teens to engage in relaxed, socially oriented learning opportunities that align with their interests. As spaces for intrinsically motivated learning, libraries house resources teens can use to drill deeper into concepts that have captured their attention. Exploration, especially through relevant projects, can promote civic engagement and foster stronger connections between youth and their communities. Libraries also present opportunities for youth to apply and synthesize learning across subject areas. This type of informal learning can be particularly appropriate and conducive for the increasing number of immigrant youth. Teens striving to learn English and navigate a new culture may find the library to be more supportive and manageable than their school is.

Recent findings indicate that cultivating passion, sense of agency, and new skill sets in young people during out-of-school time has a positive impact on students' learning during the regular school day (Farbman, 2003). Through informal learning opportunities youth explore, apply, and develop their skills. In fact, a pivotal study on informal learning in high-performing workplaces, led by Monika Aring at the Education Development Center, showed that "people learn 70% of what they know about their jobs informally, through projects, meetings, and networking" (as cited in Pearlman, 2002). The report emphasizes that authentic learning is social and is situated in a meaningful context.

Libraries are poised to offer a range of structured options that support the learning needs and interests of teens. Dierking and Falk (2003) have identified learning goals that can be realized via "free-choice" activities-outcomes that fit well with learning in public library venues:

- Developing lifelong learning skills in real-world contexts
- Engaging in self-guided study in areas of interest
- Interacting with adults in meaningful ways; experiencing adult models of problem-solving and social interaction
- Finding pathways to increased independence and responsibility
- Mastering new skills and exploring life choices
- Locating supportive adults and peers for guidance in learning

Seizing the Momentum

Getting it right with teenagers is not easy. The Boston Public Library (BPL) is an example of a large urban library system that wants to get it right for Boston's teens. The PLPYD project emphasized that urban libraries most successful in realizing system-wide change for youth engaged in a comprehensive research and planning process prior to implementation (DeWitt Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund, 1999). Aligned with this recommendation, the BPL has embarked on an extensive planning process, funded by the Boston Public Library Foundation, aimed at reinventing teen services to better engage youth after school. At the time of this writing, the BPL has completed an initial research and development phase culminating in an organizational implementation plan.

Urban libraries most successful in realizing system-wide change for youth engaged in a comprehensive research and planning process.

As a key activity in this process, a collaborative working group researched successful library systems in other urban centers that had revitalized one or more segments of their teen services. The working group communicated with library and municipal personnel in Chicago, Phoenix, Tucson-Pima, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia. They also interviewed researchers and evaluators of library teen services, including the ULC and Chapin Hall Center for Children in Chicago.

Across the board, the planners and evaluators the BPL consulted emphasized the importance of clearly identifying the opportunities and challenges associated with creating "cool" teen spaces and programming in library systems. Respected youth-serving organizations—and teens themselves—explained to BPL representatives what it would take to get young people hooked into library spaces. In its implementation plan, BPL leaders have identified six keys to successfully attracting and serving teenagers.

1. Create Dedicated Teen Spaces That Are "Cool"

Teens, librarians, and members of the youth-serving community in Boston have told the BPL that there is a tremendous need for comfortable, teen-friendly spaces designed for socializing and relaxing. The BPL has heard—from youth focus groups, a teen survey, and numerous community partners—that teens need flexible spaces that can accommodate multiple activities. Currently, in most branch libraries of the BPL, approximately half of the space and resources are reserved for small children and half for adults. Twelve- to 18-year-old customers do not currently have access to a dedicated teen space in most branch libraries. The BPL sees creating dedicated teen spaces in every branch as an important system-wide goal.

Teens and staff from other model systems suggest that a library teen space could include a lounge area, a technology lab, a career and college center, a café, and areas for both individual and group study. The BPL is interested in bringing together architectural firms and young people to participate in a conceptual design competition focused on recreating the downtown teen space. BPL intends to put teens at the heart of the process, approaching space redesign as a collaboration between youth and professionals.

To move forward in an intentional manner, the BPL intends to pilot the teen initiative at the historic central branch at Copley Square, the first publicly supported municipal library in the nation, built in 1848. As the BPL plans for rolling out the initiative to its 27 branches in subsequent years, it will need to consider the unique characteristics of each community and branch space.

2. Embed Youth Voice in Governance and Program Development

The BPL has identified two questions critical to this initiative: "If we build it, will teens *come*? What must we do to ensure that teens want to *come back again and again* to the library?" Dialogue with teens, youth-serving organizations, and other library systems confirmed that teen customers must have opportunities to shape the programs, policies, and services that affect them; otherwise, they won't participate. In order to be an effective resource to youth, the BPL must offer opportunities and services that align with teens' schedules, needs, and wants. The BPL thus plans to develop a Teen Advisory Board, better supports for teens who currently work for the BPL as tutors for children, and a stronger connection with youth-serving organizations in Boston.

First, to ensure that youths' voices become embedded in the organization, the BPL is planning to establish a Teen Advisory Board (TAB) that will provide recommendations to the BPL about youth-friendly trainings, policies, and procedures, as well as about employment and programming opportunities. The TAB will also publicize opportunities for teens at the BPL and contribute to the maintenance of a new teen website.

Second, to better support teens already working within the library system, the BPL has identified a need to provide enhanced training and programming for teen tutors working for the library-based Homework Assistance Program (HAP). Currently, this program provides stipends to over 60 teens who serve as afterschool tutors for younger children throughout the library system. By providing increased services and training to HAP tutors, the BPL will further develop the potential for teens to engage in a unique service-learning opportunity.

Finally, the BPL is developing a youth engagement strategy centered on partnering with city agencies and youth-serving organizations to tap into well-developed teen networks. During the initial phase of the planning process, the BPL gathered preliminary feedback from Boston youth. However, on an ongoing basis, stronger collaborations with community-based organizations and with the city will assist the BPL to get input from a broad and diverse representation of Boston's teen

population. This effort will also help to publicize opportunities and resources at the library and to correct teen misconceptions about library cards, overdue books, and lost book fees.

3. Offer Meaningful Teen Employment Opportunities

Young people have indicated that effective programming must include employment opportunities; jobs are at the top of their list (Center for Teen Empowerment, 2002). In collaboration with community partners who can support the library with recruitment and training activities, the BPL has identified several new youth employment opportunities. Currently, teens can apply for jobs at the library as HAP tutors for an annual stipend or as shelvers in branch libraries for an hourly wage. In expanding the employment program, the BPL is considering new teen positions including patron assistant, technology intern, and even tour guide at the historic Copley library.

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4. Enhance and Expand Technology Resources

In focus groups and meetings, librarians and teens alike recognized that youth want access to better and faster technology. In an increasingly technological world, libraries are well poised to equip *all* young people—especially those at risk of being digitally excluded—with the ability to constructively and fluently engage technology as an integral part of their lives (Papert & Resnick, 1993).

The BPL plans to provide a computer lab in its pilot space, offering mentored technology experiences for youth. Currently, the BPL offers wireless Internet across the library system; it is therefore in a unique position to expand technological opportunities for young people who don't have regular Internet access.

The BPL, however, aims to provide more than access points. When teens and technology are brought together in the library, adult volunteers help maximize the experience. Adult mentors provide the scaffolding needed for teens to express themselves constructively and proficiently with high-tech tools (Resnick, 2002). As the BPL moves forward on this component of the initiative, its technology committee will examine not only hardware and software needs but also the recruitment and training of adult mentors for the technology lab.

5. Expand Collaborative Community Programming

Building on a tradition of community partnership, the BPL and youth-serving organizations in Boston have identified collaborative opportunities to provide strands of successful community-based programming in a revitalized library space, including youth-led media literacy seminars, community research and service projects, and teen-identified workshops.

The BPL has taken note of Yohalem and Pittman's (2003) recommendation that libraries not overstructure programming for teens. While enrollment-based workshops might align with the needs and interests of some youth, others come to the library seeking a supportive space for self-directed learning. Still others simply want to socialize and "chill" in safe and comfortable surroundings. In the current environment of educational reform, which favors enrollment and academic programs in afterschool time, the BPL advocates for free-choice learning spaces that provide a balanced array of opportunities for teens. Providing programming that offers differing levels of intensity and requires differing levels of participation is central to this perspective.

6. Bolster Learning Supports and College/Career Resources

With so many students struggling to master the skills necessary to be successful in school, libraries can offer creative opportunities to support scholastic achievement. The BPL aims to aggressively promote its free online tutoring and homework support services for youth. Once teens are hooked into programming and feel comfortable in the space and supported by the staff, the BPL recognizes the tremendous opportunity it has to guide teens to its many other resources that would support their learning—especially the books!

In identifying its unique youth resources, the BPL recognizes that it is in a strong position to provide support to teens in navigating college and career pathways. While some youth have access to higher education guidance in their schools, many do not. The library

offers teens an ideal space in which to explore job and college opportunities, as well as to get expert advice on their higher education decisions. The BPL has maintained an historic partnership with the Higher Education Information Center (HEIC), a model college and career access center housed at Copley central library. As a core component of revitalized teen services, the BPL plans to create a dedicated area in the teen space for HEIC advising and resources, career and college workshops, and regular visits from college admissions and financial aid officers. The BPL is also exploring the possibility of placing a career specialist in the teen space who would assist teens in finding and securing employment.

While teen services look very different across model systems, most systems recognize that serving teens effectively requires an institutional culture shift—one that identifies teens as partners in programming and as assets to the library.

Moving Forward

As the BPL moves into the pre-implementation phase, it must consider how best to build sustainable organizational capacity for expanded teen services. Success in moving forward depends, in Yohalem and Pittman's terms, on effective *outreach*—efforts to connect with external stakeholders including teens—as well as *inreach*—bringing internal resources together to serve teens more effectively.

Outreach

BPL's outreach efforts in implementing the teen program focus on learning from best practices, engaging community collaborations, and partnering with teens.

Learning from Promising Practices

As BPL continues to refine its vision for enhanced teen services, it will look to successful model libraries. While teen services look very different across model systems, most systems recognize that serving teens effectively requires an institutional culture shift—one that identifies teens as partners in programming and as assets to the library (Yohalem & Pittman 2003).

The Free Library of Philadelphia sees its teens as assets. Its LEAP After School Program employs over 200 teens as Teen Leadership Assistants (TLAs) who provide support to patrons with technology and with programming for younger children. TLAs also plan Philadelphia's annual Youth Empowerment Summit. Teens receive ongoing training in customer service, workplace etiquette, technology and information literacy, and skills for working with children. Additional programming focuses on career development and public speaking. The Free Library of Philadelphia is valued as a youth development partner in the city, serving as a source of youth training for other municipal departments (Peterman, 2002).

The Phoenix Public Library sees its teens as partners. Inspired by the model of Los Angeles Public Library's successful TeenScape, Phoenix teens helped design a 4,000-square-foot teen space in Phoenix's downtown branch. Called Teen Central, it is *the* place to go after school, drawing 400-500 teens per day. A Library Teen Council advises the library on ensuring that programming, policies, and resources are relevant to teens. Teen Central supports both social and educational activities in a space designed for playing games, lounging, using computers, studying, and browsing an extensive collection of CDs, books, and graphic novels. There is also a café where teens can eat and chat (Phoenix Public Library, 2002).

Yohalem and Pittman (2003) provide a synopsis of teen programming and opportunities developed by the nine library systems funded through the PLPYD project. They emphasize that effective libraries demonstrate a commitment to a strengths-based youth development approach that builds on young people's energy and talent.

Sustaining Community Collaboration

Sustaining effective community collaborations is complex. It requires the staffing and infrastructure necessary to tend to relationships and to coordinate win-win partnerships that further each organization's mission while furthering meaningful collective work. In forwarding the teen initiative, the BPL is not only engaging partners for recruitment, training, and programming at implementation, but is also reaching out more broadly to the youth development community in Boston. Ongoing dialogue with community-based organizations and youth-serving agencies will help to

garner external support for the BPL Teen Initiative, while informing BPL designs for youth engagement, staff training, teen programming, and teen employment efforts.

Harnessing Teen Buy-In and Participation

The BPL has begun a process of talking with youth in Boston through preliminary focus groups. It has also developed an online survey that attracted over 300 respondents. The survey, expanding on one previously developed by Boston Mayor's Youth Council, focused on teen perceptions of the library. This preliminary data clearly showed that creating a welcoming climate for teens—a culture built on mutual respect between staff and youth—is central to teens' willingness to participate in library offerings and opportunities. Teens will be invited to help shape BPL staff training sessions and to join them in an advisory capacity. The BPL also acknowledges that the TAB must be a leading voice in shaping programming and leadership opportunities.

Inreach

Outreach is critical to the success of BPL's teen program, but *inreach* is also important to ensure that the institution will be prepared to receive teens when they arrive. Inreach efforts include creating institutional buy-in, integrating youth development principles into the library's core values, and providing effective ongoing staff development.

Integrating Youth Development Principles into BPL's Core Values

Facilitating a culture shift among staff in any library system requires the leadership to guide personnel in conceptualizing teen services as an important bridge between children's and adult services. If staff members understand that youth development is synonymous with community development, they can begin to think of teen patrons as core library customers. Then they can begin to explore the relationship between, on the one hand, the traditional mission of the library to provide safe spaces in the community and opportunities across the lifespan and, on the other, teens' developmental needs for safety, educational enrichment, leadership opportunities, and adult guidance. In attempting to integrate youth development values, the BPL will examine common adult stereotypes about teenagers and the traditional adult-oriented culture of the libraries.

Harnessing Staff Buy-In and Participation

In order to assist this developmental process of integrating values, ongoing staff training in positive youth development is central. Allocating resources for professional development and training in this area signals to staff that their leaders value this organizational learning. Creating welcoming spaces and relevant services for teens is grounded in providing continuing, high-quality staff development. Staff support also depends on providing opportunities for librarian input in the planning process. Librarians across the system emphasized the need both to plan for sustainability of teen services and to ensure that books and literacy stay at the heart of library services.

Evaluation

Evaluating outcomes in non-enrollment programs is difficult. Despite the case for offering a range of programming options for teens, researchers note that consistent and sustained programming is associated with achievement gains (Farbman, 2003). Unfortunately, programs that require daily attendance are often not feasible for teens. Many youth have responsibilities at home or part-time jobs; many simply want the freedom to participate in self-directed learning, sports, hobbies, and socializing (Forum for Youth Investment, 2003). The BPL will work to develop program evaluation tools that measure developmental outcomes appropriate to the multiple levels of programming offered. Youth must have free access to relevant neighborhood assets, such as libraries, that complement their lifelong learning and development.

Maximizing Community Assets for Youth

As communities become more diverse, libraries must serve democratic principles by providing equal access to information and knowledge. Increasingly, this equal access means offering relevant spaces in which youth feel welcomed and can find sophisticated technology and technology support, youth identified programming, resources to navigate career and college pathways, and employment opportunities.

Without affordable, flexible, and engaging programs, teenagers are left to navigate sensitive transitions without adult guidance. Likewise, the community loses a remarkable opportunity to develop leadership, civic engagement, and career readiness in its young people. In light of the current deficit of affordable

afterschool opportunities for teens, it is imperative that we maximize use of our existing civic spaces on their behalf. Since teenagers vote with their feet, we must make it our goal to create engaging libraries that effectively attract and respond to youth who do not benefit from enrollment programs.

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