

TITLE: *The Effect of School Library Closings on Public Libraries in Sacramento, CA*¹

AUTHORS:

Mega M Subramaniam, mmsubram@umd.edu

University of Maryland, College of Information Studies, 4105 Hornbake Building, South Wing,
College Park, MD 20742-4325

Natalie Greene, nngreene@gmail.com

University of Maryland, College of Information Studies, 4105 Hornbake Building, South Wing,
College Park, MD 20742-4325

Denise Davis, ddavis@saclibrary.org

Sacramento Public Library, 828 I Street, Sacramento, CA 95814

MINI ABSTRACT

Investigates the repercussions of school library closings on public library services by presenting a case study of Sacramento Public Library (SPL) and school districts located in the SPL service area.

ABSTRACT

In the current economic climate, school libraries are experiencing extreme cuts in funding. In many cases, these cuts mean eliminations of entire school library positions or the consolidation of positions resulting in as many as four schools per librarian. For example, there will be 20 schools without trained librarians or media specialists in North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district; a district in Wisconsin let 19 librarians go, potentially bringing 10-15 back as "innovation specialists;" and in Wichita, KS, high school librarians will be replaced by non-certified aides (Resmovits, 2011). These cuts directly impact both the students and teachers in these schools as well as the area public libraries that now have a population requiring more attention than before.

While there have been a variety of studies on collaboration between public and school libraries (Brown, 2004; Bundy, 2002; Fitzgibbons, 2000), there has been little research on what happens when one of the entities no longer exists. To address this disparity, we undertook a study on the repercussions of school library closings on public library services and use. Specifically we focused on the questions: (1) Is there a change in public library services as school libraries close? (2) Is there an increase in public library usage as school libraries close? (3) How well do public libraries address the loss of school library curriculum and activities? (4) More generally, do school library closings affect public libraries in any way?

To address these questions, we formulated a case study that examined Sacramento Public Library (SPL) and the public school districts located in the SPL service area. This specific area is somewhat unique in that many of the school libraries in the county share space with the public

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libraries. However, because some of these school librarians have been cut - there was a reduction in school library force by 50% state-wide - it is unclear how materials intended for schools, such as textbooks and other resources, will actually get to the teachers and students. Because of this close relationship between public and school libraries, this case study presents an opportunity to understand the ways in which school library closings have affected public library use and services.

This case study was carried out through the use of surveys, public library usage data, and school library staffing data. We began with an examination of the school library data over the past two years with the help of a representative at the California Department of Education. We also were able to gather public library data with the help of the Sacramento Public Library System, including programming notes from the past two years, library card registration figures, open hours, total number of visits, and total circulation for each branch. The SPL also urged their branch managers to complete a short survey we developed using questions from the 2010-2011 *Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey* (Bertot et al, 2011). Using the data points across the period studied, we were able to determine whether services had been affected by recent school library closings (while acknowledging that this is corollary evidence, not causative.)

Based on the data compiled, we suggest several recommendations for the future of school and public library collaboration. Following the findings of de Groot and Branch (2009), we find that while partnerships are essential for successful programs, public libraries alone cannot properly educate students on information literacy. Public libraries need strong school libraries to supplement their work. The State Library of Iowa developed a guide for the pros and cons of combining school and public libraries (the de facto result of closing one or the other). Among the “cons” was the problem of mission:

“The public library provides a wealth of services designed to enrich the lives of all community members, regardless of age [and] contains materials of interest to all ages and on all topics... The materials in the school library support the school’s curriculum and are selected at the appropriate reading level of the students in the school. The librarian is a certified teacher with special responsibility for helping students become skilled users of information tools, including the Internet. Helping students learn to read and develop an interest in reading are part of the teacher librarian’s job” (State, 2006).

The mission of the school library is “to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information” (American Association of School Librarians, 2009). Examples of public library missions include language about community and inclusiveness, such as the New York Public Library’s mission, “To inspire lifelong learning, advance knowledge, and strengthen our communities” and SPL’s mission, “To provide open access to diverse resources and ideas that inspire learning, promote reading, and enhance community life.” Clearly there are different goals in schools and public libraries. For either organization to be successful, each must be able to focus on the purpose for its existence.

In addition to recommendations for clarifying the differences between school and public libraries, this study has tremendous implications for future policy decisions. School libraries are necessary and students require separate and strong school library programs. Public libraries are

also underfunded (more so every year), and cannot sustain additional responsibilities without increases in budgets. 44.9 percent of libraries have insufficient connection speeds some or all of the time and 76.2 percent of libraries do not have enough public access computers to meet demand (Bertot et al, 2011). As more social services, job applications, and government news goes online, public libraries often serve as the only source for many in the community to access vital information (Sigler, in press). Policymakers should realize 1) the differences in public and school libraries and their strengths in serving the community, 2) the necessity for both, and 3) the need for adequate staffing and funding for each institution.

This research will lead to future studies, such as expansions in focus to state-wide or nation-wide school and public libraries. With the unfortunate reality of nation-wide school library closings, it is imperative to see the impact this is having on public libraries and, in effect, on students and communities.

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