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CENTER FOR CHILDREN  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO



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DISCUSSION PAPER

## New on the Shelf: Teens in the Library

*Summary of Key Findings  
from the Evaluation of  
Public Libraries as Partners  
in Youth Development,  
A Wallace Foundation Initiative*

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*Summary of Key Findings from the Evaluation of Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development, A Wallace Foundation Initiative*

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## Introduction

Several trends have come together recently to intensify interest in how public libraries might best support the development of youth in their communities. First, more and more teenagers have been visiting public libraries because they are safe, comfortable, and affordable places to do homework, use computers, and socialize after school. In turn, parents, communities, and policymakers increasingly view public libraries as part of a network of supports for youth that includes schools, churches, parks and recreation centers, museums, and youth-serving organizations.

Libraries, publicly funded and present in most communities, are viewed as a promising resource for low-income youth who have less access than their more affluent peers to the educational and career development services they need to become productive adults. However, most libraries have limited resources and staff to work with youth. Although nearly a fourth of library patrons are teenagers, public libraries traditionally have devoted less of their space, personnel, and financial resources to services for teens than to any other age group.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, public libraries also have been grappling with questions about their mission and relevance in the age of the personal computer and Internet. In response, they have sought to define themselves as multifaceted institutions that not only provide printed and digital resources and expert guidance to these information sources, but also serve as cultural, educational, and social hubs for communities. Such a broad vision opens up new ways for thinking about how public libraries might work best with youth to broadly support a range of needs—intellectual, vocational, personal, and social.

Such an approach fits well with the principles of the youth development movement, which emerged as an important force during the 1980s and 1990s.

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). *Services and Resources for Children and Young Adults in Public Libraries*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (NCES 95-357), 1995.

Increasingly influential with policy makers, legislators, and funders, youth development principles view young people as resources instead of problems, and stress the importance of community supports for youth development, including safe spaces, relationships with supportive adults, and meaningful activities. As the influence of youth development principles has spread, interested parties both within and outside the library field have come to view public libraries as institutions that can offer important developmental supports for youth, particularly in underserved, low-income communities.

Given these trends, The Wallace Foundation launched the Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development (PLPYD) Initiative in 1999. The goal of the Initiative was to “support the development of innovative models for public library systems to provide high quality educational enrichment and career development programs for underserved low-income teenagers and children.”<sup>2</sup> Public libraries selected for participation in the Initiative were challenged to develop or expand youth programs that engaged individual teens in a developmentally supportive manner, while enhancing library services for all youth in the community.<sup>3</sup> PLPYD libraries were encouraged to ground their work in youth development principles, and to develop partnerships with schools and other community institutions. Recognizing the need of low-income teens for affordable social supports located in their neighborhoods, Initiative funding was directed towards libraries that serve predominantly low-income communities.

This summary is based on the report from Chapin Hall Center for Children’s 4-year evaluation of the Initiative.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of the evaluation was not to assess individual sites, but rather to derive lessons from the Initiative that are relevant to the library field as a whole. The evaluation focused on identifying which types of youth programs and implementation strategies were more or less effective in engaging youth and furthering the broad goals of the Initiative; the costs of

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2 Wallace Foundation (formerly, Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund). Request for Implementation Grant Proposals, 1999.

3 The nine participating libraries, which included both leading urban libraries and smaller county systems, received grants of approximately \$400,000 each for a 3-year implementation period. The Urban Libraries Council (ULC) was engaged to provide support and technical assistance to the sites throughout the Initiative.

4 Spielberger, J., Horton, C., & Michels, L. Findings from the Evaluation of Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development, a Wallace Foundation Initiative. Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2004.

**THE PLPYD LIBRARIES:**

**BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY**  
BROOKLYN, NY

**ENOCH PRATT FREE LIBRARY**  
BALTIMORE, MD

**PUBLIC LIBRARY OF  
CHARLOTTE AND  
MECKLENBURG COUNTY**  
CHARLOTTE, NC

**FORT BEND COUNTY LIBRARIES**  
RICHMOND, TX

**KING COUNTY LIBRARY SYSTEM**  
ISSAQUAH, WA

**OAKLAND PUBLIC LIBRARY**  
OAKLAND, CA

**FREE LIBRARY OF  
PHILADELPHIA**  
PHILADELPHIA, PA

**TUCSON-PIMA PUBLIC LIBRARY**  
TUCSON, AZ

**WASHOE COUNTY  
LIBRARY SYSTEM**  
RENO, NV

developmentally enriching youth employment programs for public libraries and how they might be financed; the most important benefits of the Initiative for youth, libraries, and communities; and the lessons of the Initiative regarding the capacity of public libraries to provide services, programs, and jobs that meet the developmental needs of youth. Evaluation data included interviews and surveys of youth, library staff, and community informants, program observations, and administrative records at all nine sites. A study of youth participation was conducted at three sites, while programs at four sites were the focus of an in-depth examination of cost and financing issues.

This report presents key findings and lessons from the evaluation about the effects of the PLPYD programs on youth, libraries, and communities and what it takes to implement and sustain high-quality youth programs in public libraries. Considered as a whole, the PLPYD experience demonstrates that:

- Public libraries have the potential to design youth programs that provide developmentally enriching experiences to teens and have a positive effect both on youth services and on the library more broadly.
- Implementing and sustaining these projects is complicated, time-consuming, and expensive.
- The success or failure of particular programs depends on the library's resources and the degree to which these programs are an integral part of the institutional mission and goals of the library.

Many library staff expressed the view that their libraries are understaffed and underfinanced, and, moreover, that teens are only one of many constituencies they serve. Thus, regardless of the level of financial and human resources, we learned that youth programming is more successful when the goal of serving young people well is embedded in the library's mission. This integration is necessary in order to allocate funds; hire, train, and retain staff; and commit the time—that is, the intensive staff time in the short term to implement and manage good programs, and the period of time over the long term—for programs to reach maturity and show results.

## Library Youth Development Programs: Potential Benefits for Youth, Libraries, and Communities

The PLPYD Initiative provided a valuable opportunity for public libraries to test new ways to enhance their resources, programs, and services for youth. Participating libraries used the PLPYD funding to invest in a wide range of paid and volunteer positions for teens such as homework, computer, and general library assistants; members of youth advisory councils; library advocate and outreach staff; and copy and design center employees. They sponsored a variety of youth training experiences to foster personal and social development, job skills, knowledge of technology, and awareness of future career and educational opportunities. They also provided training, drawn largely from the ideas and practices of the youth development field, to library staff to increase their knowledge of adolescent development and skills in working with youth. In addition, the libraries attempted to engage a variety of community organizations, including youth development programs, youth-serving agencies, youth jobs programs, and schools, to assist with youth recruitment and training and program facilitation.

Findings from the evaluation indicate that the PLPYD Initiative had a number of positive impacts on participating youth, library systems, and communities. They suggested that public libraries have the potential to provide an important developmental support to teens, especially those in low-income communities, and that teens can make meaningful contributions within the library. Beyond providing quality collections and information, libraries can be safe and welcoming places and offer adult relationships and role models, and meaningful activities for youth. Library youth development and employment programs also have the potential to build the capacity of the library as an institution and strengthen its ties with the community.

### POTENTIAL BENEFITS FOR TEENS

**Library-based youth development programs can provide both specific job skills and personal and social development.** Interviews and surveys with youth and adult participants, as well as program observations, showed that the PLPYD programs provided contexts for a range of developmental experiences for youth. Although we could not measure changes in teens over time that might be directly attributable to

*“I’ve seen kids just really mature, accept responsibility graciously, and I’ve seen their self-esteem go out of the roof. They are so proud of themselves. A lot of them really weren’t aware that they had the ability. This has really helped them to understand that they really can do anything that they want to do. I think it’s wonderful.”*

**COMMUNITY PARTNER**

*“I think they leave with something... Self-esteem, becoming more dependable, more conscientious of the time, coming to work on time; how to call if you’re not going to be there; taking responsibility for your own actions, knowing that this is how the real world works.”*

**BRANCH MANAGER**

*“Helping the kids [gives me a sense of accomplishment]. I don’t like a boring job that you just sit there, doing paperwork. But if I’m up running around to keep my energy as well as having fun in doing it, it feels like I’m accomplishing something each day. Sometimes after school I’m like, ‘Oh, I’m ready for bed.’ But as soon as I get here, I’m up.”*

#### **18-YEAR-OLD BOY**

*“Working with different people and working with computers and learning new things... maybe that will help me out in the future.”*

#### **16-YEAR-OLD GIRL**

their PLPYD experiences—as opposed to other experiences at home, in school, and in the community—they perceived their experiences to be beneficial.

For many teens, PLPYD activities seemed to be their first experience of working toward goals with adults who took them seriously and appreciated their contributions. Youth participants mentioned such benefits as learning technology and other job-related skills, developing such personal qualities as patience and perseverance, and experiencing feelings of acceptance, belonging, and contributing to a group. Youth also expressed their satisfaction in helping other people and in being recognized by librarians and patrons for their contributions. At the same time, program coordinators and library staff reported a range of outcomes they observed in youth, particularly increased self-confidence, sense of responsibility, self-esteem, and desire to be successful, and improvements in peer and adult relationships.

Reflecting the broad goal of PLPYD to expose low-income youth to new educational and career possibilities, some youth also reported that their work at the library made them more aware of what they did or did not want to do in the future—or simply encouraged them to think about their future. Some youth also recognized that they were learning skills that would transfer to their future desired careers, even when those careers were not the exact job they were doing at the library.

**Library-based youth programs can provide opportunities for teens to develop positive relationships with adults and peers.** One factor that stood out as critical to maintaining youth participation was positive relationships with adult program leaders and other library staff. The PLPYD youth programs initially attracted teens by offering them interesting and fun activities, a chance to serve others, monetary incentives, and, in some cases, a “real job” where younger teens could work at the age of 14. Once they were recruited, their relationships with program and library staff and their peers, as well as the quality of their activities, kept them involved. By most accounts, program and library staff treated them respectfully, valued their services, and tried to provide opportunities for them to take initiative and responsibility.

**Library-based youth programs can increase knowledge and use of the library by teens.** The PLPYD programs not only attracted the attention of teens who had been regular users of the library prior to the Initiative, but also succeeded in

engaging teens who did not usually come to the library. The PLPYD programs attracted both boys and girls. Although a higher percentage (59%) of the participants across the nine sites was female, some sites found the number of boys who expressed interest in PLPYD activities encouraging. Many youth said they learned more about the library and viewed it differently than they did before the PLPYD Initiative. Youth said they now know more about the resources at the library, have a “behind the scenes” view of the library and have a greater appreciation for a librarian’s job. They also viewed librarians as more friendly and saw the library as a place they can be social and have fun—instead of “quiet and boring.”

## POTENTIAL BENEFITS FOR LIBRARIES

**Library-based youth development programs can improve the skills and attitudes of library staff in working with youth.** One of the most notable benefits of the PLPYD Initiative was that it fostered more positive attitudes towards youth among library staff. Staff attributed improvements in attitudes towards teens to both staff training and direct experiences working with youth. Staff reported they learned more about adolescent development, got to know teens better as individuals, and learned to be clearer in communicating expectations. These findings were consistent with reports from youth, who noted that although library staff were often unfriendly when they started working at the library, as time passed they became more friendly and were more willing to listen to their ideas.

**Changes in staff attitudes and interactions with teens can influence the broader culture of the library.** An improved attitude among staff towards teens was the most consistently reported positive impact of the PLPYD experience across the nine sites. This finding is important because it demonstrates that staff attitudes towards teens can be changed through new or expanded youth programming, greater opportunities to develop personal relationships with teens, and staff training in youth development principles. This change represents an important step because more positive staff attitudes towards teens generally have a positive impact on a library’s ability to attract youth patrons and interact with them in developmentally appropriate ways. Moreover, principles such as “doing with, rather than for” youth and asking them for their ideas became recognized as a valuable approach that could be applied in working with other patron groups and other library staff.

*“You look at kids differently after you’ve worked with them and get to know them. Sometimes what they look like is not who they are. You see a great big kid with his pants falling down, and slouching and you may think certain things about him. But once he’s worked in the library for a day or two, and you see him, you think, ‘This is such a good kid!’”*

### BRANCH MANAGER

*“The library staff have gained greater understanding and respect for what young people can contribute to an organization... over the last two years, they have realized that youth are a viable work force for them, that they can be very responsible, that a lot of the youth are better workers than some of the adults, and that they are really open and want this opportunity.”*

### COMMUNITY PARTNER

*“Knowing about youth developmental assets and putting our library programming into that framework has really lifted our position to another level with funders and our community. It’s lifted our profession to another level.”*

#### PROGRAM COORDINATOR

**Teens employed by library-based youth programs can provide valuable services to library staff.** The PLPYD Initiative proved to staff that teens could be entrusted with a wide variety of tasks and could be genuinely helpful to library staff. According to the executive director of one of the libraries, “The focus on high school kids as employees who do things other than shelving books has been sort of a breakthrough concept.” Another executive director reported, “We’ve learned to value the contributions that teens can make. We’ve come to trust them with tasks and job responsibilities that are far beyond what we had traditionally allowed them to perform. Staff are learning that youth can accept those roles, perform them very well, and can be real contributors.” Not surprisingly, youth enjoyed performing a wider range of work. (Shelving books, in fact, was their least favorite task). And, when they were well structured and well supervised, these expanded work roles for teens provided a much broader range of developmentally positive experiences.

#### **Learning the language of youth development helps to connect public libraries to a larger network of youth organizations and policy discussions.**

Staff credited youth development principles with changing the general culture of the library by providing an important “new language” for library administrators to work with and helping the library establish a new leadership role for itself in the community—one that connected them to a broader public discussion and policy discourse. “The phrase, ‘positive youth development,’ is a great handle to put on what we all are trying to do,” explained one senior administrator. Another noted that being able to speak the language of positive youth development “gives me confidence that I can talk about this in a way that’s credible to politicians. I can speak to the fact that this is a national effort in libraries and other institutions. It’s documented and researched that this is an important and worthwhile thing to do.”

*“Most of the children in my area can’t afford a computer at home, so having computers at the center will give them the opportunity to be involved in the computer, learn all the different things, and when they go back to school, they can talk to their friends about being on the Internet... It will really enhance them and build their self-esteem.”*

#### COMMUNITY PARTNER

### POTENTIAL BENEFITS FOR COMMUNITIES

**Library youth programs can provide needed services to the community.** The PLPYD programs provided a variety of services to the community, including homework help and other activities for neighborhood children and assistance with computer technology to patrons of all ages. Staff of community organizations expressed gratitude for the steps the libraries were taking to provide jobs and better services for youth in their communities. Although most programs were located in library buildings, one county library placed computers, printers,

wiring for Internet access, craft materials, and youth employees directly in local community centers in addition to branch libraries. In another county library system, teens produced a Spanish-Dial-A-Story program that attracted an average of 700 calls a month, testifying to the popularity of this service in the Spanish-speaking community.

Some providers, such as community arts and educational organizations and neighborhood development organizations, said their connection with the PLPYD programs allowed them to reach youth they had not been able to serve previously. Staff sometimes described their teen participants as “ambassadors” for the library because they had learned about the many resources that the library offered and communicated that knowledge to their families and friends.

**Library youth programs can make the library a more comfortable place for other community members.** Of the seven PLPYD sites that started new youth programs as a result of the PLPYD grant, four believed that the Initiative had helped to increase teen patronage of the library in their community, and three believed that the Initiative had increased adult patronage as well. Notably, these three sites employed teens to provide computer assistance and other help to library patrons. Library staff reported that many adult patrons liked the help that their teen employees were providing, as well as the general fact that local youth were working in the library. Relatedly, three sites believed their teen employees had helped to diversify its staff and improved the library’s ability to serve diverse ethnic, racial, and/or national groups in the community.

**Libraries, through their youth development programs, can become more visible in the community and provide leadership on youth issues.** Although all of the PLPYD libraries were highly regarded in their communities when they began the Initiative, three sites believed it strengthened their leadership role, particularly with regard to youth issues. For example, in one of the urban libraries, staff reported that the Youth Empowerment Summits that were organized as part of its PLPYD Initiative helped strengthen the library’s connection with community organizations, schools, and businesses. As the library’s reputation for providing high-quality after-school experiences and training for youth grew, the city’s Recreation Department and other organizations sought help in training their youth workers. This helped to strengthen the library’s connections with the community and build relationships with other city agencies concerned with youth.

*“The project is changing the face of youth in our community. The public comes in and sees these helpful, knowledgeable teens, and that’s the opposite of what the media is presenting as the image of local teenagers.”*

**PROJECT DIRECTOR**

## Making Youth Programming Work

Library-based youth development and employment programs have the potential to produce important benefits for youth, libraries, and communities, but these positive impacts are unlikely to be sustained without an infrastructure of support. A key factor in sustaining the PLPYD programs was leadership, as reflected in an executive director who valued flexibility and innovation and strongly supported youth programming, and a high-level youth services administrator to facilitate the assimilation of the new youth programs into the larger institution.

Thus, if other public libraries are to follow the path forged by the PLPYD Initiative, they need to systematically build their capacity for youth programs and services in a way that is sustainable and compatible with their institutional goals and mission. Based on the experiences of the PLPYD sites, we offer the following lessons in three areas for public libraries to improve their youth services and resources for youth in their communities: the staffing and support of youth programs, youth engagement, and institutional capacity.

### STAFFING AND SUPPORT OF YOUTH PROGRAMS

**Dedicated staff are essential to effective youth programs.** Across the PLPYD sites, program staff, senior administrators, and librarians agreed that youth programs require a staff person whose priority is to manage the program on at least a part-time basis. Typically, this person is needed to oversee the program on a day-to-day basis, communicate with senior administrators and branch staff, recruit youth, develop staff and youth trainings, and work with any program partners. Another consistent finding was that the program coordinator needed the active support of at least one senior administrator in order to do his or her job well. If this support was not provided, the coordinator was too isolated from the larger structure of the library, which had a negative effect on the overall program.

**If well supported, non-library professionals can make an important contribution to youth programs in public libraries.** Outside professionals with experience in education, technology, youth development, and youth employment can bring knowledge, experience, and community resources that library staff do not have, although it will likely take time for them to learn the library system and develop working relationships with branch staff. Most of the PLPYD sites where youth jobs and programs were likely to be sustained beyond the implementation period had key leadership from non-library professionals. These individuals learned the culture

of the library, how to communicate with library staff in their terms, and how to apply youth development principles to library settings.

**Beyond a dedicated program leader, successful library-based youth programs require the involvement and commitment of branch staff.** Branch staff need to understand the purpose of the program and how it forms a part of the larger mission of the library. They also need to have open channels of communication with the program director, and trust that their views will be respected and considered. Despite the time it requires, it is also important that some branch staff play an ongoing role in important aspects of program operations, such as hiring youth. If this does not occur, staff are likely to disengage from the program, depriving it of the support necessary to sustain it over the long term.

Other library staff who are not formally engaged in a youth program also may be important to it. For example, if security guards are unfriendly or hostile to youth, the library will not be able to develop a welcoming environment for youth regardless of particular programs. Alternatively, youth employment programs will probably require the help of human resource staff to review job descriptions, discuss union issues, manage payrolls, and so on. In general, the larger and more intensive the program, the more it will require at least some involvement from a variety of departments throughout the library.

**Ongoing staff training to build knowledge of youth development and ways of working with teens is an important part of successful youth programming.**

Positive changes in staff attitudes towards teens are not likely to last unless they are reinforced with a youth service infrastructure, which emphasizes the importance of ongoing staff training and planned opportunities for staff to work with youth to maintain positive staff attitudes. Training is a critical means of educating staff about the nature of adolescent development, how to work well with teens in library settings, and the purpose and value of youth programming. To be effective, training must be relevant to staff and respectful of their time constraints. Emphasizing a youth development approach can be very helpful if it encourages staff to relate to teens in new ways and addresses their practical concerns about working with youth. Other effective strategies are providing training for other library staff—branch managers, adult librarians, and security guards—and holding joint trainings for adults and teens.

**Working with community organizations can strengthen library-based youth programs but takes time and effort.** The organizations most frequently associated with the PLPYD Initiative were youth development programs, youth-serving agencies, youth jobs programs, and public schools. Other organizations included colleges, social service and philanthropic organizations, technology training centers, career and college preparation programs, churches, media outlets, banks and businesses, community arts programs, youth development programs, health organizations, and parks and recreation centers. Most partnerships evolved to accomplish specific PLPYD program goals. Community partners most often assisted with program facilitation, youth recruitment and training, and provided space, materials, and transportation.

The most productive relationships were ones formed with people and agencies that could extend the outreach, resources, and expertise of the library but also understood the goals and needs of the library. This required clear and ongoing communication to clarify goals, roles, and responsibilities.

## FOSTERING YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Even in the best of circumstances, it can be difficult for adults to get the attention of adolescents and engage them in structured activities. Many youth who participated in the PLPYD Initiative found their way to their library's youth programs because they were in the library or had friends who were involved. However, outreach to schools and youth-serving organizations were essential to recruiting youth for the programs in the first year.

There were several challenges in engaging youth for the PLPYD youth programs, particularly in recruiting hard-to-reach teens and teens who had not been library users:

- Limits in the number of youth that could participate due to funding, staffing, and program content;
- Restrictive human resource policies within the library about the employment of younger teens, the number of hours teens could work, and the range of roles and responsibilities youth could assume; and
- Difficulties in identifying potential participants in the absence of demographic information about them (the collection of which public libraries traditionally have resisted).

**Outreach to and fostering the participation of underserved youth is not easy for public libraries.** Locating the PLPYD programs in libraries or community centers in low-income neighborhoods was an effective way of targeting low-income teens. However, special efforts still were needed to engage youth who do not usually come to the library.

Community organizations that work with low-income youth can assist in recruiting youth, but must understand the library context and program goals. In the PLPYD Initiative, there were advantages and disadvantages to using outside organizations to recruit youth for library jobs and programs. Schools, youth-serving organizations, youth employment programs, and occasionally, city or county juvenile justice departments brought in more “hard-to-reach” teens and teens who do not normally come to the library. However, the varied priorities and goals of outside organizations influenced which teens were identified for jobs, and they did not always fit well in the library environment. Thus, the success of referrals from outside organizations depended on clear communication between the library and the outside agency about program expectations and the ability of library staff to work with more difficult teens.

**Both program factors and personal factors affect participation in library-based youth development programs.** In the PLPYD Initiative, youth were attracted by the service opportunities in the library programs, financial incentives, and the desire to use and develop computer skills. Their decisions to participate were influenced, in part, by other responsibilities and after-school activities and family support. Although most of the PLPYD youth were able to make arrangements to get to their jobs, transportation was a significant barrier for some, particularly in rural areas. It was also one barrier that program and library staff tried to overcome, for example, by planning activities for times when teens could attend, scheduling them close to where teens lived, or providing bus tokens for use of public transportation.

**The relationship between teens and their supervisors or program leaders strongly influences their connection to their library job or activity.** In interviews, teens often spoke about the positive effect of a relationship with a project coordinator or a library staff member. Clearly, the longer teens were involved in an activity or job, the greater opportunity there was for them to develop positive relationships with caring adults. These relationships appeared to be critical factors in maintaining youth participation.

Positive relationships between youth and library staff did not happen immediately. It usually took time for both adults and youth to appreciate the skills and perspectives of the other, especially those not used to working together. It was not uncommon for teens to note that library staff were “unfriendly” when they first started working at the library but became friendlier over time. Similarly, it was not uncommon for staff to complain about some of the teens’ behaviors when we interviewed them in the first year of the Initiative, and later, during the second and third years, to extol their contributions and accomplishments.

**Youth participation requires both structure and flexibility on the part of adult leaders.** Flexibility on the part of project and library staff emerged as an important factor in retaining youth in PLPYD jobs and programs. Yet, this flexibility came at some cost to library staff. Libraries implementing homework help and computer assistance programs needed teens when they were busiest, that is, during the after-school and evening hours. Because of transportation difficulties and other activities, teens were not always available at the times they were most needed. On the other hand, less-structured and less-intensive programs such as youth advisory groups tended to be less engaging activities for teens.

**Providing a range of positions for youth of different ages and abilities and engaging older youth as mentors to younger youth are promising strategies in youth programs.** In the PLPYD Initiative, a “scaffolding” or “apprenticeship” model that provided steps for teens to move up to more responsible, higher-level positions—and perhaps serve as mentors to younger and newer program participants—was one way to maintain interest among youth. High school students also responded well to programs that used college students as program assistants or “mentors.” College students served as role models of someone who was in higher education and had career aspirations. In addition, teens enjoyed working with them, and often saw them as having backgrounds that were similar to their own.

**Intensity of participation affects the benefits perceived by youth.** The quality of the experiences and benefits reported by youth tended to be stronger for those who were engaged for longer periods of time. Teens who had taken part in consistent activities (e.g., regularly scheduled jobs as homework helpers or computer assistants) for several months or longer were more likely to report benefits than those who had been involved for shorter periods or in less-frequent activities. In addition, teens who had been regular volunteers or users of the library before becoming involved in PLPYD were more apt to report positive effects than other teens for whom their PLPYD job or activity was their first substantial experience with the library.

## INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

### **Youth employment programs are very costly for public libraries to run.**

However, there is considerable variation among intensive youth programs that employ teens as providers of homework help and computer assistance. By far the largest cost component is personnel, including teen salaries and program and library staff. Employing youth in homework help programs typically will be more expensive than having them serve as library assistants because homework help programs generally require an additional layer of staffing in the form of adult program leaders to work with teen staff. In addition, these programs usually require more of a time commitment on the part of the program director, given the wider range of program elements involved.

**Raising funds to sustain these programs over time is challenging.** Although public libraries get the bulk of their funding from local government, special programs are typically funded through private donations. Sustaining programs over the long haul, however, requires public funding or a commitment within the library's budget.

**Although they are expensive, there are advantages to programs that engage youth intensively.** Intensive programs are defined as those that involve regular youth participation over a substantial period of time: for example, employing teens as part-time computer help, homework help, and general library assistants at several sites, as well as in one library's copy and design center. (Notably, all of the programs that produced intensive engagement involved paid teen positions. When volunteer positions were used, the tenure of youth involvement decreased substantially.)

The PLPYD experience suggests several advantages to intensive programs. First, because youth remain substantially involved over a longer period of time, they are more likely to reap the educational, vocational, and personal benefits found to be associated with library youth programs. Second, intensive programs allow library staff to get to know youth well as individuals, which seems to be one of the most effective ways to improve staff attitudes towards youth.

Continuity in teen-staff relations also allows youth employment programs in particular to become an important support to library staff, as youth have the time to learn to do their jobs well with a minimum of adult supervision. At the same time, when teens are employed in positions that involve substantial interaction with library patrons, longer job tenure allows them to develop beneficial relationships

with those that they serve. (Children, for example, may form valuable relationships with teen mentors in homework help programs.) Taken as a whole, these factors tend to have a positive impact on the entire library system, as youth become well integrated into the institution and, in most cases, part of its public persona.

**Public libraries need to assess and build their capacity for youth programs and services systematically.** It is helpful to think of youth programs and services on a continuum that extends from establishing a good young adult collection to developing and sustaining intensive youth programs. Although the particular mix of programs and services that fit a given system will vary, all libraries must be careful to think about how to build their capacity in a systematic and sustainable way. A number of sites in the PLPYD Initiative attempted to implement ambitious youth programs that they were not prepared to sustain once the implementation grant ended. And, because insufficient attention was devoted to building a lasting infrastructure for youth services, several of these programs left a minimal institutional legacy once they were discontinued.

Only public libraries that have built a solid infrastructure for youth programs and services should attempt to move to a higher level of programs and services: for example, establishing dedicated teen space, providing volunteer opportunities for teens, or hiring a youth services coordinator to develop youth programs. And, in so doing, they should be careful to design programs that will build capacity in a sustainable way.

**Youth programs work best when they are part of a strong sense of institutional mission.** Having a strong sense of mission that permeates the institution—which typically requires a strong executive director—helps to create harmonious relations among different levels of staff, and boosts the energy and morale of employees throughout the system. This, in turn, supports the implementation of youth programs that require the support of both senior administrators and librarians and demand a substantial investment of time and energy.

It is critical, however, that the connection between youth programs and services and the larger mission of the institution be understood and accepted by both senior administrators and all members of the library staff. If the general purpose of a youth program is understood and accepted as an important part of the overall mission of the library—and this mission has been previously internalized and

embraced by library staff—then staff are much more likely to support the program regardless of daily mishaps and its inevitable ups and downs. If the mission of the library is not commonly understood to include substantial investments in youth programs and services, this should be addressed before trying to make such investments.

**The more expensive a youth program, the more it needs to show benefits that extend beyond those directly involved.** Today, both public agencies and private funders routinely demand that institutions that receive funding to provide public or social services demonstrate that they are spending money in a cost-effective way. With regard to youth programs, this frequently involves requests to provide outcome measures or some equivalent documentation of program effectiveness. Although it can be difficult to provide clear data on youth outcomes due to the complexity and cost of the necessary research, it is important to have some clearly defined set of objectives that youth programs can reasonably be expected to accomplish.

For example, employing teens as homework help assistants is relatively easy to justify, as some staff will be needed to assist children with homework in such programs in any event. Given a high-quality program, having teens perform this role can be reasonably expected to produce positive outcomes for the youth involved, the children in the program, the other staff involved in it, and the community more broadly.

**Well-designed, high-quality youth programs can help build library capacity in a variety of ways.** Staff training, for example, is an important component of any quality youth program. Learning how to conduct regular staff trainings represents an important capacity building measure for the library, both with regard to youth services and more broadly.

Teen employment programs may also build capacity by providing staff with a source of flexible, multipurpose support. As several libraries that participated in the PLPYD Initiative found, simply realizing that teens could be productively engaged in a variety of tasks beyond shelving books represented an important breakthrough. In cases where youth employees interacted with the general public, several PLPYD libraries found that they played a valuable role in helping the library to better serve diverse cultural and linguistic communities. At the same time, these programs are believed to hold promise in terms of meeting future recruitment needs, particularly with regard to diversity.

## Conclusion: Public Libraries and Youth Development

Given the increasing tasks facing youth and the complex skills they must develop for future careers, *all* community institutions and policymakers—not just public libraries—need to reexamine their roles in supporting youth. Local communities provide an important context in which children, youth, and families grow, develop, and function. People who are less affluent or less well-integrated into the larger society (such as children and youth) are particularly reliant on the local community to provide needed goods and services and for connections to opportunity and information. Public libraries, along with schools, youth-serving agencies, religious organizations, and other community-based organizations, represent a source of space, access, staff, materials, knowledge, and connections that can improve the well-being of children and youth and support their development.

The PLYD Initiative demonstrates that public libraries can provide an important developmental support to teens, especially those in low-income communities. Public libraries provide free access to information, technology, and safe places to be during out-of-school hours. In addition, libraries have the potential to offer high-quality youth development and employment programs that include training in specific job skills and general personal and social skills. Because of their universal presence in communities and their function as providers of information, libraries may play a special role in the web of support communities provide for youth.

Working with youth requires time, financial resources, dedicated staff, consistent leadership, and the integration of youth programming with the library's core mission and goals. Public libraries need to start by assessing their capacity for youth programs and services and then build their capacity in a systematic way. This suggests that the role of the public library in meeting the developmental needs of youth—and which needs—depends largely on its capacity and resources as well as the strength of other community resources like schools, parks, and other youth-serving organizations.

Not all libraries have the resources to provide large-scale programs without additional public or private funding. However, this does not mean that libraries cannot improve their youth services or interactions with youth. With supportive leadership, staff can develop knowledge and skills to work more intensively with

youth and develop relationships with community organizations that might lead to the sharing of resources. As the PLPYD Initiative demonstrated, improved youth services and relationships with teens can benefit libraries as well as youth and communities.

One key recommendation for policymakers and funders is to invest in public libraries that serve low-income communities and have some institutional capacity to expand services for youth. There is a shortage of library staff who know about adolescent development and are experienced in working with youth, and the current professional educational system does not provide an incentive to work with youth or improve services for them. Staffing and staff development are critical elements of building capacity, which requires efforts to encourage library schools to devote more time to training professionals for public service in general and youth services in particular. It also requires libraries to provide more opportunities for their current staff to enhance their skills in working with youth.

In addition, non-library professionals represent an important source of potential staffing for youth programs. In the PLPYD Initiative, outside professionals with experience in education, youth development, and youth employment brought knowledge, experience, and community resources that library staff did not have. If non-library professionals are hired to run important youth programs, it is critical that they have the time and support necessary to learn the fundamentals of the library system.

Another recommendation is for public libraries to explore ways to better work with schools and other youth-serving organizations in their communities. Developing effective relations with other community organizations can help to strengthen the organizational infrastructure of a community. Although libraries have no mandated connection with children and youth as schools do, they have the potential to provide a neutral and accessible site for program delivery, are a valuable community resource for information and exchange, and can be a key partner in developing supportive communities for youth.

In the PLPYD Initiative, schools remained challenging to communicate with (especially when teacher turnover was high), but many local branch libraries discovered ways to connect on an individual staff level. Community arts organizations, youth

media programs, and community health and counseling centers emerged as promising resources for libraries implementing new youth initiatives. Community development organizations and youth employment organizations were other natural partners for library teen employment programs. However, successful collaborations depended on mutual understanding of the needs, resources, and capacity of both the library and the community organization. As in all relationships, establishing clear goals and responsibilities and communicating regularly were critical to success.

## Chapin Hall Center for Children

Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago was established in 1985 as a research and development center dedicated to bringing sound information, rigorous analyses, innovative ideas, and an independent perspective to the ongoing public debate about the needs of children and the ways in which those needs can best be met.

The Center focuses its work on all children, while devoting special attention to children facing special risks or challenges, such as poverty, abuse and neglect, and mental and physical illness. The contexts in which children are supported—primarily their families and communities—are of particular interest.

Chapin Hall's work is shaped by a dual commitment to the worlds of research and policy. This requires that our work meet both the exacting standards of university research and the practical needs of policy and program development, and that we work to advance knowledge and to disseminate it.

Chapin Hall is committed to diversity not only of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and physical ability, but also of experience, discipline, and viewpoint. Chapin Hall's commitment to all children, with special attention to those experiencing or at risk of serious problems, is reflected in the range of the Center's research projects and publications. The following represent the Center's major areas of endeavor:

- Children's services, covering the problems that threaten children and the services designed to address them, including child welfare, mental health, and the juvenile court.
- Community building, focusing on the development, documentation, and evaluating of community-building initiatives designed to make communities more supportive of children and families, and the resources in communities that support the development and well-being of all children.
- Schools and learning, examining the relationship between schools and the other settings in which children learn.
- International projects, covering Chapin Hall's involvement with children's policy researchers and research centers in other countries.
- Special activities and consultations, covering a range of projects, often undertaken in collaboration or consultation with other organizations.





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