

A FANTASTIC TEAM

schools and public libraries

Public librarians know how challenging and frustrating it can be to plan and execute effective programming and outreach to teens. School librarians know a similar frustration when dealing with how to bring wider programs and experiences into their often small and resource-strained libraries.

Of course public librarians and school librarians are aware of each other, but how many of us are able to form ongoing alliances to help meet the needs of teens? As Teen Services Librarians in two different branches of the King County Library System (KCLS) just east of Seattle, we have enjoyed a satisfying experience bringing our public libraries and the Bellevue Public Schools together to serve teens. We hope that sharing our process and projects will help **VOYA** readers strengthen their own links between these two institutions, benefiting the teens that we all serve. A strong cooperative relationship can be immensely gratifying. Tillicum Middle School's librarian, Robin Price, recently remarked, "I don't know a public library system that does as much to support the schools as KCLS. I really appreciate all you're doing."

Why Libraries and Schools Work Better Together

The foundation of King County Library System's relationship with local schools is an Education Initiative whose mission is: *To establish the King County Library System as an integral partner with schools in helping students achieve academic success.* The message to the community and staff is Libraries Raise Student Achievement. Bringing the message of libraries to the schools is of high importance. Sharing resources such as databases and programs with the students, both in school and in public library settings, can help achieve these goals.

In these times of tightened budgets and depleted attention spans, librarians need allies. School librarians are feeling pressure to increase services to teens with less budget and staff to do so. Public librarians often find themselves competing with a mind-boggling plethora of after-school and weekend activities. Both want to do more for teens, but developing cooperation is not universally

accepted as a solution. School librarians don't want administrations to get the idea that public libraries can replace their services. Public librarians don't want to step on toes. But there are many complementary projects that can be done together once good communication has been established.

Getting Started

A good way to open communication is through use of a questionnaire. At Chicago Public Library, where Dawn worked before coming to KCLS, all youth librarians were asked to take part in an inventory of the schools in their areas. A questionnaire of required information was provided by the CPL administration for librarians to take to the schools. It created a great opportunity to go beyond just introducing yourself and offering services by allowing public librarians to gain better understanding of the school, staff, and their needs and interests regarding collaboration. Once this groundwork has been established, a relationship can be developed. Although KCLS has no formalized questionnaire, all Teen Services Librarians are expected to initiate communication with their schools and many use introductory letters or visits to establish contacts. Dawn continues to use a variation of the CPL method.

After initial contacts are made, KCLS librarians communicate with their schools through a bimonthly e-mail newsletter in which we highlight programs, events, and databases. Once communication has started, a good way to begin collaborating is to find out about the school's current projects. Is the school doing a major weeding of the library for which you could offer your expert skills? Are they starting a reading challenge with which you could help? Are they having a writing contest that you could volunteer to judge? Do they celebrate

Black History Month or other events for which you could provide a specialized booktalk, booklist, or display ideas? Is there an open house at which you could have a table for the public library? Find a way that you can be helpful, using your librarian skills while building up a collaborative relationship. Although you don't want to establish yourself as free on-call labor, a little back-scratching can go a long way to getting things started.

After a successful channel of communication is established, schools and public libraries will discover a wide variety of partnership opportunities. The following projects and services are working well for KCLS and our local schools.

Booktalking in the Schools

Booktalking is an excellent service to offer schools. Teachers and school librarians, focused on curriculum demands, often can't stay on top of current titles as well as public librarians do. Booktalking in schools is a time-honored technique for getting students excited about reading and reminding them of what public libraries have to offer. You also can help teachers bring more enthusiasm to a subject by booktalking interesting related titles. Teaming up with school librarians to booktalk can be a great way to get to know each other better. And nothing is quite as satisfying as having new teens come to your library, seeking out a book that you talked about at their school.

When scheduling booktalks, flexibility is helpful, but also be sure to set reasonable limits on the number of talks you can do in a given time. It can be flattering to find that a school librarian has scheduled you for a large number of booktalks, but even the most enthusiastic booktalker will find herself waning if faced with doing five or more presentations in a day—especially if scheduled for consecutive days. Good communication can prevent overscheduling from becoming an issue.

Demonstrating Databases

If your system subscribes to databases for the public to use, it is frustrating to find that students frequently turn to the Internet for answers when the library offers a much more solid set of resources. One of the best ways to get students to use your database collection is to make teachers aware of it. Let them know what you have

available, and how those databases can be useful for specific types of assignments. Then follow up by sending teachers an e-mail when a new database is added to your collection.

A great option, if your time allows, is to arrange a demonstration or mini-workshop. At our Newport Way branch, librarian Jeani Littrell-Kwik has offered workshops for groups of Bellevue teachers for the last three years. What works best is to schedule a two-hour session containing a thirty-minute presentation followed by time for everyone to explore the databases independently, using worksheets and receiving individual help from her and the school's librarian. She begins the presentation by defining databases for teachers, to help them understand how information found within them is different from that found on the Internet. Then she explains how to access databases through King County Library System's Web site, gives general searching tips, and highlights resources useful for school assignments. The feedback from the

program is very positive, and teachers have expressed their appreciation by sharing what they have learned with colleagues and students. Once the teachers are aware of the resources, database demonstrations can be taken into the classrooms and computer labs for the students.

Take Programs to Schools

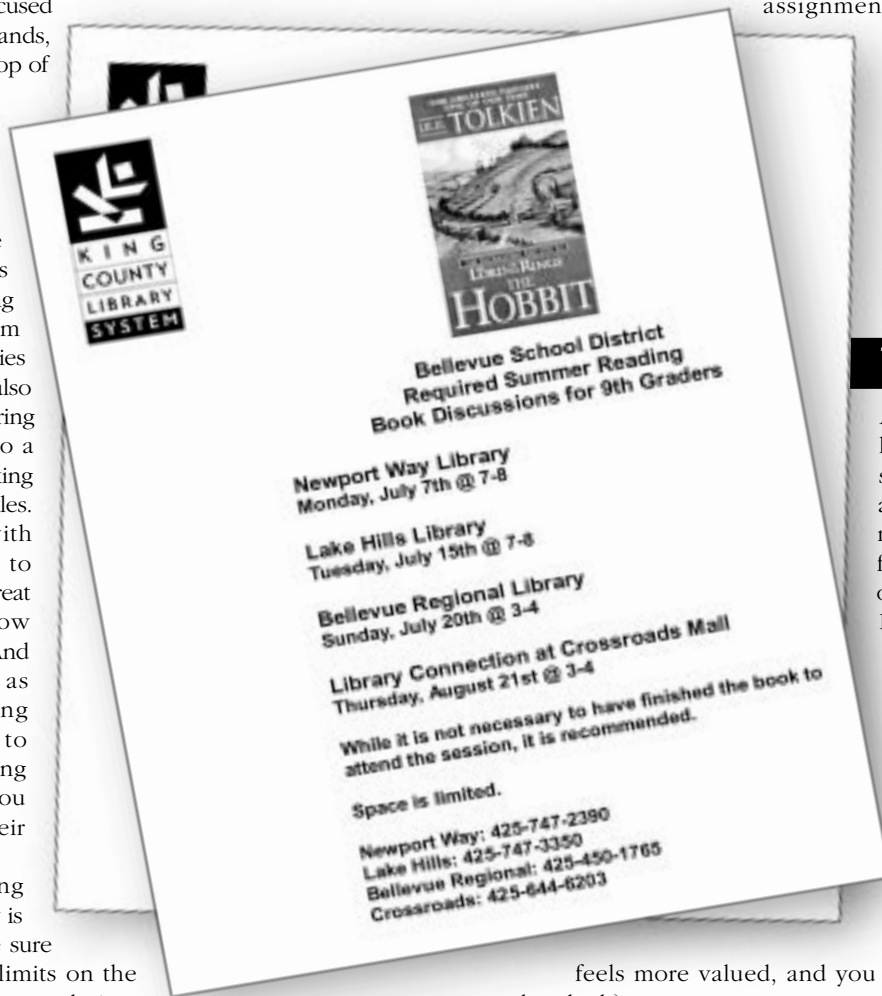
Another perk that public libraries can offer schools is to schedule outside performers at schools. Although some might find hiring performers for schools a questionable use of the public library budget, at KCLS we view it as a wise use of funds. (Programs are also a great way for your Friends groups to contribute to the library!) It can be heartbreaking to host a great program at your branch, to do all the publicity, and then have a poor turnout. When you bring the program to schools, you are guaranteed an audience, the performer

feels more valued, and you have reached dozens (if not hundreds) more teens.

Co-produce Programs

Besides bringing programs to the schools, working directly with school librarians can be an especially satisfying experience. A great example of a simple, successful cooperative program that we started with the Bellevue Schools is the Teen-Parent Book Group at Tillicum Middle School. Both school librarian Sandy Koehn and public librarian Dawn Rutherford had heard from parents who were interested in having a book group that both parents and their teens could attend. They decided to work together to fulfill this community need.

Book group meetings are planned on weekday evenings at the school library throughout the school year. The planning librarians



choose all the titles up front (except for the final one, to be decided by the group). For each meeting, two students volunteer to do an author presentation and provide refreshments. In preparation, the students come to the public library and meet with the librarian there, who teaches them how to research the author and the book, as well as brainstorm ideas for related refreshments. The group meeting begins with the student presentation, followed by a discussion started by participants selecting questions from a grab bag that travels around the circle. After the discussion, everyone enjoys refreshments that have varied from chocolate cake with holes cut in it—for Louis Sachar's **Holes** (Farrar, 1998/**VOYA** December 1998)—to deviled eggs—for **Flipped** by Wendelin Van Draanen (Knopf, 2001/**VOYA** December 2001).



By running the group jointly, the strengths of both types of libraries are used to best advantage. The school librarian sees teens frequently enough to know good readers who might be interested in the group, and can promote the group within the school as well as buy sets of books for discussions. The public librarian facilitates the use of database resources and helps lead discussions. Having two librarians involved makes for greater flexibility, so that there is always someone to host the group regardless of occasional conflicts or illness. Having students do author presentations gives them a sense of ownership over the program while developing research and public speaking skills in a safe environment. Both parents and teens appreciate having a place where they can do something fun together, at an age when teens are hesitant to be seen in public with their folks.

A Joint Summer Reading Project

Of course reading doesn't begin and end with the school year. The Bellevue School District requires students from grades six through twelve to read one title over the summer, fill out several sheets of questions, and be prepared to discuss the book when fall rolls around. The first year they instituted the program, the school district approached the Bellevue Regional Library and asked us to help. They had no specific guidelines for what they wanted, so it has been up to our librarians to define and implement the program. The district's only wish was for some sort of guidance for the students, who would otherwise lack support or discussion while reading the title over the summer.

That first year, Brenna Shanks, the Teen Services Librarian at Bellevue Regional, designed several book discussions which took place at her library. By our third summer in 2004, our support of the school reading list has expanded from one library to involve all three librarians—Brenna, Dawn, and Jeani—leading discussions and a session at each public library in the school district. For each book, a discussion with a PowerPoint guide is offered to the students over

the summer. They can bring their homework packets and ask questions, but the material covered during discussion programs is not derived directly from the packet. We focus on the broader literary scope of the book, discussing the author's life and times, touching on key plot and thematic points, and leading students into a deeper look at the book.

Books are provided by the school district. Each year, the few students who lose their book visit the public library for a new copy. We also see a marked increase in the circulation of audio versions of the school titles, but demand on the public library's collection is minor.

This summer book discussion program is still growing and changing to meet the needs of the district and the libraries. The first year, all books were chosen by the school district. The second year, they asked for our revision suggestions—a great sign of the growing relationship between the district and the library system. Now the titles not only tie in with the curriculum, but they also are books that students can get excited about. These teen-friendly reading choices, including young adult fiction as well as classics, are particularly important for younger students who are not accustomed to reading critically without classroom support. (See the flyer illustration for an example of a title on the school reading list.)

Naturally it takes time and effort to build a positive relationship with a school district. Communication is the most difficult part. Publicity information must match. Channels of communication for parents and students must be clear. The biggest ongoing problem of the joint required summer reading project is that students and parents who don't realize that the school district is open over the summer come to the public library with questions better addressed to the district. Many local private schools also have adopted the program, further increasing the need for clear communication. The program continues to flourish as more students become aware of the service.

Becoming Allies

No matter what size your library system is, you can find new ways to work with your local schools as long as they are willing. If your school librarians are resistant, try to find out why. In times of shrinking budgets, they might feel threatened, worried that school boards will not perceive them as necessary and that receiving assistance from public librarians will reaffirm that false perception. You can encourage your school librarians to start with a small cooperative project so that you can prove to be a strong ally. Joint programs often generate positive publicity, which can lead to the public's better understanding of what school librarians provide and how essential they are to student's education. Most importantly, together school and public librarians can better serve the students whom we both care about so much. Isn't that the best reason of all to start any library project for teens?

Until recently, Brenna Shanks, a native to Washington and graduate of the University of Washington Information School, was the Teen Services Librarian at the Bellevue Regional Library in Bellevue, Washington. She is now the Teen Materials Selector for the King County Library System.

Dawn Rutherford is also a Washington native, who ventured east to get her library degree at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She worked two years at the Chicago Public Library before coming home to Washington five years ago to join the staff at the King County Library System as a Teen Services Librarian. She works at the Lake Hills Branch. She is a committed member of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), currently serving on the 2005 Margaret A. Edwards Committee.