The Partnership between Public Libraries and Public Education

by Edwin S. Clay III

Note: *This article is adapted from an October 18, 2008, presentation to the Potomac Chapter of Alpha Delta Kappa, an international honorary society for women educators.*

The issue of transformation, I believe, is the common ground between public libraries and public education. However, it is important to clarify what the word means. While my day job is head of the Fairfax County Public Library, I am also an adjunct professor at Catholic University's School of Library and Information Science. As such, I am genetically programmed to be sure my students and I understand the word in question before we are able to initiate a productive discussion.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides this definition of "transform," a verb from Old French: "to change or alter in form, appearance or nature; to metamorphose; to change in nature, disposition, heart, or the like; to convert." I suspect this is not a new idea or concept for you, but I also suspect that a lot of folks don't think of the educational system as a system designed to change (or transform) the individual—in hundreds of ways. But this concept, often in other guises, is at the heart of the development of public education and libraries.

Parallel Histories—Public Education and Public Libraries

Let's begin with a brief examination of the history of public education and public libraries to expose the similar roots these two institutions share. The first known public education system was established in ancient Israel around 63–64 CE. The high priest insisted that a unified system of teaching—a consolidation of all the existing independent schools—was required.

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Jump forward many centuries. In the American colonies, the first public school was authorized on January 2, 1643, by the town of Dedham in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Moreover, since institutions of learning need to be accredited, the Regents of the University of the State of New York, established on May 1, 1784, became the first educational accrediting agency in the U.S.

Education became an important focus for leaders after the American Revolution. In fact, Virginia's own Thomas Jefferson is credited as the first American leader to suggest creating a public school system. He believed education should be under the control of the government, free from religious biases, and available to all people regardless of their status in society.

It took a while, however, to translate Jefferson's concept into practice due to political and economic upheavals, as well as the vast waves of immigration encountered in the nineteenth century. After Jefferson, the public education movement owes much to Horace Mann. When he served as secretary of education for Massachusetts beginning in 1837, he became an advocate for setting up common schools. The Massachusetts model eventually spread throughout the nation. By 1870, all states offered free elementary schooling.

To compress the content of many doctoral dissertations, the establishment of a free, national system of public education in the U.S. developed for one major purpose—to endow children with the necessary skills, analytical abilities, and technical competencies required to *transform* them into productive members of society. In

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other words, the rationale—the *raison d'être*—of the public school system is to provide the environment and the grounding to support and encourage a child in the discovery of self.

Paralleling the history and development of public education is the creation of the public library. As we in the information profession know, the collection of written knowledge in some sort of repository has existed since the dawn of civilization. Among the earliest repositories were the 30,000 clay tablets found in ancient Mesopotamia dating back more than 5,000 years. Collections such as these—and the places where they resided—eventually became known as libraries.

In the U.S., public education and public libraries have a common benefactor—Thomas Jefferson. There's that name, again. After the British burned the Library of Congress's initial collection during the War of 1812, the institution bought Jefferson's personal library in 1815 to rebuild the lost collection. While Jefferson's sale was for personal reasons—he needed the money because he was on the verge of bankruptcy—his love of books and his early advocacy for libraries open to the public are well-known. All public librarians worth their salt are able to quote Jefferson, who wrote to John Adams in 1815, "I cannot live without books."

It was the concept of free public education championed by Jefferson, Mann, and others, as well as the literacy needs of waves of nineteenth-century immigrants, that fostered the spread of public libraries in the U.S. The first public library opened in Peterborough, New Hampshire, in 1833. Fifty years later, philanthropist Andrew Carnegie would begin his project to put public libraries in every community. By 1919, there were 1,700 "Carnegie" libraries scattered across the nation.

Why did the town of Peterborough believe public tax dollars should be spent on a library? Why did Carnegie value the spread of public libraries throughout the country? Again, I believe the answer is found in the concept of transformation. The city fathers of Peterborough and Carnegie valued the change that libraries fostered in their users. They viewed the library as an essential part of a city's total educational network. They saw how reading transformed an individual—how this transformation brought ever-increasing benefits to the community.

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Certainly these common roots between public education and public libraries are evident in the history of the Fairfax County Public Library, which I direct. With a $200 grant from the Board of Supervisors and several boxes of books from the Library of Virginia, FCPL came into existence. From the beginning the library was connected to the public school system. The initial library board consisted of three individuals—the county executive, the superintendent of schools, and a third person they jointly selected.

Today there are twelve members on the Fairfax County Library's Board of Trustees. While eleven are nominated by county supervisors and the City of Fairfax, one is nominated by the school board and appointed by the county. The current board member representing the schools is the coordinator of Fairfax County Public Schools media services.

Obviously, public schools and the public library are separate and distinct entities, but they share a common heritage, mandate, and concept of "public good."

Partners in Transformation

Earlier I indicated that public schools and public libraries were partners in education as they developed in the nineteenth century. I hope they still are today and certainly think they should be. But what does such a partnership mean? Again, here is a definition. A partnership is "the state or condition of being a partner; participation; joint interest." I might add that in a partnership the participants are equals. Each brings to the table an equal array of assets and resources.

One source of collaboration is a partnership between public and school libraries. In recent years there has been renewed interest in the importance of this partnership. The 1991 White House Conference on Libraries and Information Services emphasized the need for cooperative ventures. For example, current research demonstrates the strong connection between early literacy investments and the improved outcomes for young children. Researchers are showing that children who begin kindergarten with greater literacy skills are more likely to test well in reading and basic mathematics.

Public libraries are about education, but are not exclusively educational institutions. Here is how the Fairfax County Public Library states its vision: "The Fairfax County Public Library is the dynamic link connecting customers to local and global resources for lifelong learning and self-enrichment." We define our mission as follows: "The

mission of the Fairfax County Public Library is to enrich individual and community life by providing and encouraging the use of library resources and services to meet the evolving educational, recreational, and informational needs of the residents of Fairfax County and the City of Fairfax." I am sure many public library systems in Virginia have similar vision and/or mission statements.

Public Libraries: Educational Support Centers

We, and other library systems, are about lifelong learning, as well as responding to the evolving educational needs of our customers. Such a broad educational role for the public library has always existed—even at the beginning of the public library movement. On a regular basis the American Library Association has issued position papers calling for an ever-expanding educational role for public libraries, based on the changing needs and trends in education and in the community.

Some of the basic public library approaches to partnering with school systems include:

- Collaborating with agencies serving hard-to-reach youth, such as child-care agencies, by providing books and other materials and offering training for staff and volunteers. For example, my library system has a full-time early literacy outreach specialist on staff. She visits preschools, Head Start centers, classes for pregnant teens, and other community outlets to train teachers and parents in the principles of early literacy. At the same time, she explains the various resources the library offers to help children get ready to read.
- Providing opportunities for youth to practice reading and improve communication skills through summer reading programs, storytimes, book discussion groups for younger readers, and contests.
- Creating intergenerational experiences using library resources that help youth and older adults better understand and value each other. The Fairfax library's extensive volunteer program brings volunteers of all ages together in such projects as Adopt-a-Shelf or landscaping.
- Providing safe, welcoming places for children and young adults outside of school hours. These are places they can gather with peers to enjoy library resources or be alone to pursue personal interests. Here in Fairfax, we have specifically marketed to young adults by offering gaming nights in branches; creating a presence on MySpace, Flickr, and YouTube; and creating podcasts and offering a virtual reference service that will respond to questions that are submitted as text messages. Our virtual reference service has seen an extensive growth in usage by both young boys and girls.
- Offering 24-7 service anywhere with library websites. Students don't need to come physically to a library to use its resources outside of school hours. There are educational databases for students at all grade levels, which provide biographies, science, and geography and science resources, as well as access to newspaper and magazine articles, current affairs, literary criticism, and more. FCPL offers access to Tutor.com, which lets students interact with actual subject-matter experts online—again, outside of school hours.

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Basically, public libraries are educational support centers and offer an incredible array of materials and services that support and supplement school libraries. But there are also opportunities for teachers and library professionals to partner and share their specific expertise. For example, here in Fairfax, one of our regional libraries partnered with a nearby middle school last summer to help summer school students finish reading and math assignments. At five specific "Poe Nights," named for Poe Middle School, students and their families came to the library, applied for library cards, and found appropriate books and resources to help with their assignments. They also met with teachers from the middle school who volunteered to be at the library branch on those five nights. Library staff were happy to help guide the students around the library, suggest titles, and introduce students to all aspects of the library's resources. It was an exceptionally successful endeavor.

As many of us are aware, partnerships are not always easy. A partnership between the public school and the public library is most successful when certain local conditions are in place:

1. A shared vision and common goals;
2. A process of formal planning and adoption of policies and procedures;
3. Ongoing evaluation processes as part of the planning process;
4. Commitment on the part of educators and librarians;
5. Channels of communication to facilitate ongoing interaction;

6. Adequate funding; and
7. Adequate staff.

The current budget crunch for most public schools and libraries will most definitely affect partnering. But there are behind-the-scenes actions that can help even during this economic downturn. Schools and libraries can partner in the joint purchase of online databases. A homework alert process between school and library staff can be established and schools can offer their students access to public library catalogs.

I have written primarily about partnerships between K-12 public schools and public libraries, but there are certainly opportunities for partnerships to develop between public colleges and libraries as well. In Fairfax, many students in nearby colleges, universities, and vocational schools use our resources, and we partner with institutions of higher learning. For example, we offer a proctoring service for online course exams.

I began this article talking about transformation. The question both public libraries and public schools need to keep asking is, "Who will we change today?" The collective history of the two institutions is based on it—as is our future.

Indeed, there is strength in numbers and strength in partnerships. We in the library profession are honored to be at the same table with our public school colleagues. VL

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