



## **Managing the Merger: Youth Services & Programming in Joint Libraries**

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### **Abstract:**

*In 2002, the Julia Hull District Library, located in the rural Stillman Valley, Illinois, USA, entered into a contractual agreement with the village School District to move the library from a small family home, to a new facility which was built on to the Village high school. Originally, the partnership, as is common with joint library endeavors, was created for economic reasons: the School and Library Districts would share costs, materials and resources for the benefit of local tax payers, including student and public patrons. However, since the merger, the community has benefited in unforeseen ways. Specifically, new opportunities for youth programming, intergenerational instruction, and other educational endeavors have arisen, as well as opportunities for the direct marketing of such programs to School District students and staff. This paper includes a discussion of these opportunities, as well as some of the potential challenges of serving youth in a joint library setting.*

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### **Introduction: Joint Use Libraries**

In 2002, the Julia Hull District Library (JHDL) formed a partnership with the Meridian Community Unit School District (CUSD) 223 to create a single library which would serve both the library community and the high school student body. Joint-use libraries like JHDL, where two or more library service providers form a partnership (Matthews, 2007),

are becoming increasingly popular throughout the world as stakeholders begin to see the value these partnerships can bring to their patrons.

Although joint-use libraries can come from partnerships between a diverse group of information service providers including private businesses and governmental agencies, it is most common for public schools, including primary schools, secondary schools and even universities, to merge with a public library (Bundey & Amey, 2006). According to Liu (2008), a typical partnership between a school and public library involves the sharing of a common building (usually within the school), yet the partnering organizations remain unique entities with individual budgets, as is the case with JHDL.

While interest in joint-use libraries grows, the concept of a joint library isn't novel. For almost one hundred years, partnerships have existed where educational institutions housed public libraries (Bundey & Amey, 2006). Today, although joint-use libraries are most common in North America, Australia and Sweden (McNicol, 2003), countries around the world, including the United Kingdom, Israel, Thailand and China are adopting the concept (Liu, 2008). This paper features a single example joint library in order to explore, in depth, not only some of the opportunities and challenges facing joint school-public libraries, but also the many specific ways in which these library partnerships can be leveraged to better serve their younger users.

### **Julia Hull District Library: A Brief History**

In the United States, specifically in the State of Illinois, public libraries are defined as either municipalities or districts. The differences between the two are numerous, impacting everything from the collection of taxes, to the filing of State reports, to the configuration of a library Board of Trustees (BOT). However, the primary difference between the two regards a library's taxing base. Simply put, municipal libraries collect property taxes from and serve a single city or village, while district libraries collect property taxes from and serve multiple cities or villages. Very often within communities, School and Library District boundaries are aligned.

Prior to its partnership with Meridian CUSD 223, the Julia Hull District Library was Stillman Valley's village library, serving a population of nearly 1,000 individuals. Because of its small tax base, its annual budget was also rather small, reaching a maximum of only \$35,000 US Dollars. Furthermore, the physical library was equally as insignificant: a collection of just under 15,000 items housed in a single family home which had been donated to the village in 1924 by a local woman named Julia E. Hull. That home served as the community library for 78 years.

However, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Village Library BOT attempted to pass a referendum that would alter Julia Hull from a Municipal to a District library, and which would also encompass the majority of the Meridian CUSD 223. In 2001, voters passed the referendum, thereby increasing the libraries tax base and patronage to nearly 7,000, and its annual budget to approximately \$140,000 within the first year. (Note: Today, the library serves a population of 7,908, houses approximately 36,000 items, and manages an annual budget of over \$260,000.)

Shortly after the referendum, the Meridian CUSD 223 approached the newly aligned Library District and proposed building a new facility on School District property and which would be physically attached to the School District's high school. This new facility, the Julia Hull District Library, would serve District Library patrons, as well as high school students and teachers. The proposition appealed to both the School and Library Districts predominately because of the various economic benefits of such a partnership. Ideally, the Districts would make better use of tax dollars by sharing costs in everything from the purchasing of materials and equipment, to paying the wages and benefits of staff, to covering operations costs (e.g. water, heating, air conditioning, maintenance). Thus convinced of such economic benefits, in 2002 the Julia Hull District Library and Meridian CUSD 223 entered into a contractual Intergovernmental Agreement—a common procedure for joint-use libraries. Since the merger, the community has benefited in unforeseen ways. Specifically, the partnership has created new opportunities for youth programming, student instruction and other educational opportunities. Though there exist other equally important opportunities and challenges to joint school-public libraries, the focus of this paper is the impact of partnerships on youth services and programming.

### **Joint Libraries: Opportunities for Youth Services & Programming**

The reasons for schools and public libraries partnering are just as diverse as the countries and organizations taking advantage of this type of partnership. According to Massis (2007) the broad reasons for creating joint-use library partnerships include sharing resources, increasing accessibility to materials, reaching new users and creating new services. Often, joint-use libraries are created in rural areas out of financial necessity, allowing for greater service where funding for public libraries to sustain themselves might be otherwise impossible (Matthews, 2007). McNicol (2006) adds that perhaps the greatest advantage of a joint-use school library is the tendency for these types of partnerships to have a community-centered focus. In addition to these benefits, the JHDL and Meridian CUSD 223 have experienced their own unique opportunities which have applied specifically to the benefit of youth services and programming.

### **Partnering to Support Student Curriculum**

One of the greatest advantages for this particular partnership has been what we define as *internal outreach*—that is outreach to teachers and families within the School District. On a small level, the Library District has accomplished this outreach via making impromptu visits and surveying teachers. For example, for the past two years, the Library District has sent out surveys to teachers at the elementary, junior high and high school levels, inquiring about their curriculum needs. The questions are broad and include a survey of what subjects they teach, specific units of study and research topics they plan to assign students. The Library District has taken such information to research its own collection of materials to determine its needs—whether the library has sufficient materials, and if they are current. The benefits are three-fold: by including teachers in the collection process, the Library District maximizes student use and enables library staff to better assist young patrons seeking library materials, while also filling collection gaps, which may serve general public interests as well. For example, two years ago, the Library District boosted its collection of biographies of African Americans to support an elementary-level unit on Black History Month (recognized in the USA annually in February).

In some cases, the Library District cannot financially support the curriculum needs of the student body. For example, the State of Illinois nominates annually a list of books for four levels of young readers, from toddlers through high schoolers. One of these lists, the Rebecca Caudill Young Readers' Book Award (named after an Illinois children's author), is utilized at the elementary level as part of a year-long reading incentive program. While the elementary schools have their own collection of these books (approximately 20 new titles annually), there simply aren't enough copies to meet student demand. The Library District would typically purchase a set of these titles annually, whether the school's reading incentive program existed or not. However, because of the interest and the demand for these titles, JHDL has sought assistance from its Friends of the Library group, who raises funds to purchase two sets of these titles each year. Because of recent heightened interest (Rebecca Caudill's circulated nearly 800 times during the past school year), the Friends group will purchase a third set of books for the 2010/2011 nominees.

The relationship between the School and Library District, however, extends beyond providing necessary materials to its young users. It also meets its social and lifelong learning needs. One of the most recent examples of this was demonstrated in working with a group of first grade students who visited the library in conjunction with an elementary class project. The theme of the project focused on introducing students to different organizations within their community. Thus, upon their visit, library staff read them a story, then gave them an interactive tour of the library and talked about topics such as how to attain a library card. The purpose of the introduction is to familiarize non-users with the library, as well as to create a fun initial library experience that will inspire these students to return (with their families) to utilize library materials and attend other non-school programs.

One of the most successful examples of internal outreach took place in conjunction with the 2009 summer reading program, the purpose of which is to encourage youth toward reading for enjoyment. At that time, the School District initiated its own summer school-based reading program—not so much for fun, but to remediate young struggling readers. In the Spring of 2009, the Superintendent of Meridian CUSD 223, Mr. Bob Prusator, contacted the Library Director to brainstorm how these two programs might work in tandem. Since many of the students enrolled in the school-based reading program were otherwise non-users of the library, in addition to being struggling readers, it was first important to introduce the families of these children to the library and register them for public library cards. To continue to build the relationship between these students and the public library, JHDL held a separate weekly story hour for students in grade levels 2 through 5 as part of their summer school curriculum. Summer school teachers brought students to the library on a routine basis, at which time they would return their old materials, listen to a story and have a chance to browse for new materials to check out. As Meridian CUSD 223 sought to supplement their curriculum, JHDL sought to build a new community of users, forming yet another partnership which ultimately enabled both sides to provide the best quality programming for its young users.

### **Intergenerational Instruction**

In the Fall of 2008, JHDL received a grant from the Institute of Museum & Library Services for \$21,700 to purchase a mobile computer lab for the purpose of providing computer technology training to older adults and senior citizens. While the public library continued to offer standalone courses for the target demographic throughout the grant year,

JHDL decided to expand the grant course offerings to include intergenerational instruction. McNicol (2006) illustrates that joint-use libraries, in particular, have the special capability to “encourage interaction and improve relations between different generations” (p. 524). In the case of JHDL, developing intergenerational programming proved equally beneficial to senior and teen users alike.

One example of a successful intergenerational program at the library included a series of courses on an Apple computer software program called iMovie. For the purposes of the class, local senior citizens were paired with students from a high school computer communications course. The groups worked cooperatively to plan, record, upload, edit and present an advertisement which they would design using the movie making software on the mobile computer lab. While seniors were part of the entire creative process, they also learned the basics of movie creation via computer software with the assistance of the more tech savvy students who thus lent to the grant's success. Conversely, the program enabled students to fulfill curriculum requirements using newer technologies that were not otherwise available within the school. Because of proximity, students and seniors were able to meet and utilize the library's facilities without hassle or spending money for travel.

### **Use of School Space Outside of the Library**

Upon entering into their Intergovernmental Agreement, both the School and Library Districts fully expected to utilize library space to meet their various youth services and programmatic needs. However, neither party could've imagined the potential for creative use of space afforded by the library's access to the rest of the high school facilities.

On several occasions, the library has needed space to hold programs that, due to the needs of performers and/or to accommodate a large audience, would not be possible at JHDL, let alone many large, urban libraries. For example, over the last three years, the JHDL has begun its summer reading program with a large program aiming to generate excitement among youth and their parents by showcasing a special entertainer. In 2008, the library invited a youth ensemble that performed African percussion music and traditional African dance. The group of approximately 50 children performed to a crowd of almost 200 patrons in the high school's cafeteria. With only 7,500 square feet—the majority of which is utilized for shelving, computers and circulation—the library building does not have the space needed to accommodate the performers, let alone the audience. Thus, similarly, in 2009, the summer reading kick-off event was moved to the high school gymnasium to accommodate over 225 patrons who came to watch a professional ballet company perform.

A public library could easily arrange an agreement to hold events in public school buildings; however, having the library attached to the school facilities is particularly advantageous. If a school and library were to otherwise partner for a school to host a public library event, users would most likely meet at the school facility. However, in a situation such as the one with JHDL, the adjoined buildings allows for more efficient organization of public events by allowing patrons to meet in the library facility. This set-up provides the public library with the advantage of exposing potential patrons to library services and collections.

### **Development of a Teen Advisory Council**

A recent development to attract more junior high and high school student users to the library after school hours has been the development of a Teen Advisory Council (TAC). Like many TACs in the United States, the group serves to give a voice to teenagers (ages 13-18), who assist with planning teen programming, contribute ideas for improving the library's collection, provide input for a teen library blog (beginning in May 2010), volunteer at library events and offer support for other library activities. Since, statistically, this age group utilizes the public library least during after-school hours, offering a specific invitation for their participation is essential to developing a long-standing user relationship with them. In return, participating teens receive community service letters from JHDL, which they may utilize to earn credit for school organizations such as National Honor Society, as well as enhance their college applications.

### **Promoting Youth Services & Programs In Joint Libraries**

One of the greatest advantages that joint-use libraries have over their stand-alone counterparts is the ability to easily and effectively promote youth services and programming. McNicol (2006) points out that school-public libraries sometimes promote services and programs effectively within the school, but fail to successfully promote to the general public. However, for the JHDL, leveraging the school-library relationship has proven successful for promoting to community youth, as well as to area adults.

Although, perhaps, the simplest of all JHDL promotional materials, printed copies of the library's calendar of events are easily the most effective. Students at both District elementary schools are given a condensed two-month calendar of children/family programming and special events every other month. The flyer lists and describes the library's regular and special youth events. Since beginning this promotion this past year, JHDL has seen an increase in program attendance and circulation from its younger patrons. The increase in exposure has increased the demand for youth programming so much that new programs, including an additional Saturday story hour each month, have been added to meet the needs of District patrons. An unforeseen benefit to this method of promotion has been an increase in overall library attendance, particularly among new library users. Many parents of primary school students who were once unaware of library offerings have now become regular patrons.

Promotion of JHDL youth services and programming is not limited to external communication channels. JHDL uses internal communications to build awareness among School District teachers and administrators. District employees are made aware of upcoming library offerings through regular e-mails from the library's Director. Additionally, the Director uses her joint position of public library Director and school administrator to inform teachers and administrators of upcoming library youth events and materials at faculty and administrative meetings.

The success of such simple promotions comes as no surprise and may be attributed to the important social role community schools play in rural America. Liu (2008) points out, one of the most significant advantages of joint school-public libraries is "increased use and awareness of library services and resources in a community as schools are more visible to the community" (p. 58). Since the JHDL is located approximately thirty minutes by car from a major metropolitan area, and there are limited community choices in terms of entertainment,

the District's schools serve as a major economic and social entity within the community. As a result, information and announcements from schools within the District are highly visible. Such visibility is especially important in an increasingly technological world which is why, for example, the School District provides a direct link to the Library District's website from their homepage.

### **Challenges Facing Youth Services & Programs In Joint Libraries**

Joint libraries face many challenges, not limited to balancing the needs of both entities, fulfilling the contractual obligations set forth in the partners' Intergovernmental Agreement and trying to follow two (often diverging) sets of State and Federal laws. However, for the purposes of this paper, the discussion of challenges facing joint libraries will be limited to those regarding youth services and programs.

At times, managing youth services and programs can be one of the more challenging aspects of a School-Library partnership. JHDL has faced four of these challenges in particular: 1) Overexposure, 2) Intimidation, 3) Location and 4) Potential Censorship.

#### **Overexposure**

In the case of JHDL, high school students have open access to library facilities. Whether visiting as part of a class, completing homework during a study hall, typing a paper on one of the library's computers or searching independently for leisure-reading materials, the library is open to meeting the various needs of its student body. Since the library is physically joined to the high school, students may (and often do) spend any portion of their school day, as well as immediately before and after school, in the library. While the library encourages such use of its facilities, it recognizes the implications of student access on library use during public evening hours and on weekends. Students' frequent (often mandatory) exposure to the library for school-related reasons often prevents them from returning to the library after they leave school. Simply put, programming offered at traditional public libraries which entices young adults to attend outside the normal school day has often failed at JHDL because of this truth: like many adults, some students don't want to play where they work. Thus, staff created organizations such as the Teen Advisory Council (described earlier) in the hope that by giving young adults a voice in the decision making process about youth services and programming, more youth would willingly, even enthusiastically, participate.

#### **Intimidation**

JHDL opens to the public at 9:00 AM each morning, six days a week. Thus, school and public hours overlap for a large portion of the day throughout the work week. And high school students, teachers, adults, small children and babies mingle throughout the day. Likewise, school and public library programs often overlap: *Pre-School Story Hour* or *Babies & Books*, for example, may run simultaneously with a student bibliographic instructional session. (Note: Because the library has no separate programming room, these programs must run, essentially, in the same space.) Thus, the noise level of JHDL is often louder than in more traditional public libraries.

Some adults and senior citizens have expressed complaint not only about the activity and noise level, but also about the simple fact that this is a library utilized predominately by high school aged students. This fact intimidates some older library users, as well as users with small children. McNicol (2006) explains, “some members of the local community may be reluctant to enter a school because they have bad memories of their own schooldays or because they are put off by the prospect of sharing the facility with a large number of teenagers” (p. 525). In any case, the challenge of intimidation must be addressed in order to best serve patrons (and tax payers) of a joint library.

In addition to creating an inviting, user friendly facility for all ages and utilizing appropriate marketing (discussed earlier), joint libraries can also attempt to remedy intimidation by bringing together multiple generations through programming such as the joint teen-senior technology instructional session described in the Services & Programming section. This latter point has been exemplified by joint libraries in the UK, according to McNicol (2006), whose users demonstrated greater levels of comfort with using joint library facilities and services, not to mention teen patrons, after becoming accustomed to them.

### **Location**

Research has supported one of the other primary challenges faced by JHDL: the challenge of location. McNicol (2006) describes that “secondary schools in particular are often not located close to other community facilities” (p. 525). JHDL is no exception. Stillman Valley High School is separate from the downtown area, or village center, where the majority of businesses and organizations in town are located. Additionally, the end of the building which houses the library is tucked behind a residential area and is nearly invisible from the main town roads. To further complicate things, the joint facility isn't centrally located within the District. These factors create challenges when it comes to promoting youth services and programs. While it's easy to promote teen programs internally, reaching younger children and their caregivers in outlying areas has proven problematic. Many library patrons do not subscribe to local newspapers in which the library advertises youth programming, and many patrons do not have Internet access in their homes, thus limiting their access to library information which may be provided on the library's website. However, it's possible to counter the challenge of location as the JHDL has demonstrated by its creation of program flyers to distribute to all elementary aged students.

### **Potential Censorship**

Censorship is one of the more insidious challenges faced by joint school-public libraries. Communities in the United States and around the world often challenge libraries to remove what they deem as “inappropriate” or controversial materials. While school libraries may have less will to battle such challenges, and school boards may cite a book's lack of educational value as means to remove it, public libraries less frequently cower in the face of such challenges. In fact, public libraries typically advocate patrons' freedom to read and the building of diverse collections.

McNicol (2006) sites one of the disadvantages of a joint library as having a potentially limited collection since school libraries tend to be “too school-focused” and often ignore the larger needs of the community (p. 525). However, JHDL utilizes its school and public budgets to equally meet the needs of both entities. School Library funds are used to



purchase materials that support school curriculum, while Public Library funds purchase anything and everything else. This includes not only books, but also movies, music cds and games—many of which may not support school curriculum, or may be deemed inappropriate to young users.

Reconciling such philosophical differences can be difficult. However, joint-use libraries can remedy potential censorship challenges without forsaking intellectual freedom. At JHDL, for example, student patrons have access to two different library cards: a School card and a Public card. School cards may be used during school hours only, and for books, magazines and audio books alone. To checkout audio visual materials such as movies, a student must have a Public Library card. This resolution aims to deter challenges to the School District, while maintaining the rights of public patrons (including youth) to access information.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

While joint libraries like JHDL can provide an array of opportunities for the community of users which they serve, such partnerships are not without challenges. Likewise, not all communities would benefit from joint school-public libraries, which work best in small towns or rural areas, rather than larger suburban or urban settings. For example, small or rural organizations lack the funding available to larger organizations which force them to look for creative cost savings; since they've smaller and arguably less diverse user groups, these organizations may be less likely to insist upon a traditional library model.

Nonetheless, it's important to note that most community schools and libraries can partner for the benefit of youth services and programs, even without becoming legally joined. Disregarding some of the more technical aspects of the relationship, many of the programs described previously are duplicable in even the most traditional of libraries. What's paramount to the success of any school-library partnership, joint or not, rest not so much in the details, but rather in the vision for creating a lifelong community of users who participate in the community sharing of ideas and resources.

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