Although no two homework centers are completely alike, the motivation for developing such programs is strikingly similar throughout the country. Reasons for establishing formal homework help are either internally driven, such as the library’s need to control overwhelming numbers of unattended children, or motivated by external forces, such as a citywide mandate to offer after-school prevention programs. In all cases, the homework center is viewed as a solution to one or more problems involving youth. At the very least, the homework center offers kids a designated place to go after school where they can get help with their school assignments. At its best, the homework-assistance program offers positive human interaction and scholastic support that might otherwise be missing from the youngster’s life.

The need for community-based after-school programs is well established. In 1992, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development published a report revealing that the most dangerous time of day for youth are the three hours following school. During this period, kids are more susceptible to giving in to negative peer pressure and engaging in illegal activities. For this reason, the Carnegie group recommended that communities create support networks for young adolescents, including after-school programs where kids can acquire useful experiences to promote healthy growth and development. Any number of adult community leaders, including librarians, should serve as agents in this process.

In a 2000 study, the national offices of the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice found that children who are left alone after school have more difficulties with their class work than those who participate in after-school programs. Not only are the latter group of students more likely to succeed academically, but they are also much more self-confident. In addition, these children are more likely to develop stronger social skills and learn how to acceptably handle conflicts. To be effective, after-school programs must help develop relationships between youth and caring adults, as well as build partnerships with families, schools, and communities. Strong programs also provide enriching learning activities while offering a safe and healthy after-school environment.
Homework and the Public Library

Homework serves many purposes in a student's life. It reinforces classroom learning while allowing the youngster time for creativity and deeper exploration. School assignments also help build organizational and time-management skills, as well as subject expertise. Perhaps even more importantly, homework provides the opportunity for one to learn how to work independently.

Successfully completing school assignments can be extremely stressful, however, especially if the student lacks the resources to succeed. Academic excellence may allow one to attend the college of one's choice and may even lead to a high-paying job after graduation, but kids need help obtaining their scholastic goals. Unfortunately, today's parents do not always know what their children are studying, nor do they have the time, energy, or the skills to help their kids learn to read or do math. Low-income families may also lack the sophisticated resources required these days to compete academically in school. Combine this with a home environment where English is a second language, and the child has no alternative but to seek homework assistance elsewhere. No wonder then that public libraries target the homework needs of students, especially those from low-income and immigrant communities.

Although only one in seven public libraries currently offers formal after-school homework assistance, the American Library Association (ALA) anticipates, in a study conducted in 1999, that the need for homework-related library services will increase in the coming years. Indeed, the expansion of such programs seems only natural. The American people overwhelmingly believe in the educational role of the library, and, in fact, 60 percent of public library users are under the age of eighteen. In the Public Library Association's 1998 planning document, compiled by Ethel Himmel and William James Wilson, homework-assistance programs are included as a major component of the updated educational support role. Those libraries officially adopting this service agree to provide resources and personal assistance to facilitate students' educational progress. In addition, "formal learning support" libraries may provide Internet access, expert homework assistance and tutoring, group study rooms, and computer labs.

Besides staff, space, and a collection, homework-friendly public libraries also offer an educationally conducive, more flexible environment in which to study. Although on-campus after-school programs are often negatively associated with remedial learning or detention, public library homework centers are considered a “cool” place to go, where even kids tasked with babysitting their younger siblings are welcomed. At the Biblioteca Latinoamericana branch of the San Jose Public Library, adult volunteers conduct story times for toddlers while their older sisters and brothers receive homework assistance nearby. At another branch of the San Jose library, students are encouraged to make weekend appointments for homework help. Not only are public libraries open year-round, but they are also accessible during weekends and evenings. Where else can students find the information they need when they need it?

The Solution to Unattended Children
No one knows exactly how many kids nationwide visit their local public libraries after school. Of the 3,900 children who enter the County of Los Angeles Public Library between 2:00 and 5:00 P.M. everyday, 65 percent are unaccompanied by an adult and 20 percent are considered latchkey, that is, unattended. In public libraries across the country, staff use homework programs to help control otherwise-unsupervised mayhem. These programs may incorporate a combination of homework tasks and craft or story hours. At the Woodrow Wilson Community Library, in Fairfax County, Virginia, students from nearby elementary and middle schools occupy their afternoons by pairing up with volunteer tutors, who help them complete that day's homework. Once their homework is finished, the kids are then given a snack and educational games to play. A similar program, called Latchkey Enrichment, is so popular at the Queens Borough Public Library that several branches maintain lists of students waiting to enroll. According to staff, children who had previously presented disciplinary problems now are enthusiastically involved in library activities. Teachers also report improvement in students' reading ability.

By instituting formal after-school programs, librarians find that they can more readily focus their young patrons' energies on short-term projects, such as completing their homework. Rather than behaving in an unruly manner, the kids know they must exhibit constructive behavior if they are to continue participating in the library's after-school program. At the Woodrow Wilson Community Library, rules of conduct, including "No fighting" and "No running," are posted in the room where homework assistance is delivered. In East Palo Alto, California, inappropriate behavior earns kids demerits that may ultimately result in expulsion from the library's homework club. On the other hand, a consistent commitment to studying is rewarded through field trips to cultural and educational events. Likewise, at the Oakland Public Library's César E. Chávez branch, homework-center participants who demonstrate politeness and a willingness to help others are awarded a "Student of the Week" certificate and gift.

Librarians also find it much easier to discipline unattended children's conduct if the library provides a specific space for doing homework. At the Culver City Library, in California, the librarian notes a marked improvement in student behavior since the homework center was established. No matter how rowdy the kids are in other parts of the library, once they step through the center's archway they become serious students. The space itself defines the appropriate behaviors required to do homework, and so the library’s rules of conduct are more easily enforced.

**Benefits of Homework-Assistance Programs**

The immediate benefits of children and young adults using their public libraries after school are apparent. While investigators recently established a connection between library use and higher standardized test scores, other emergent research directly links improved study habits and grades to after-school homework assistance. The key ingredient to better school performance, John P. Bailey surmised, after studying public library homework centers in Los Angeles County, was that students received personalized assistance from someone who had the time to explain directions and assignments and define vocabulary. In fact, 72 percent of the parents surveyed...
by Bailey indicated that their children came home with more complete schoolwork after attending the library’s homework center. Elsewhere it was discovered that children read more as a result of their participation in the library’s homework-assistance program and that math grades also improved.

Teachers also notice increased self-esteem in kids who receive homework help at the public library. In New Rochelle, New York, the library’s after-school program, the Tall Tree Initiative, helps children grow scholastically and emotionally, inspiring a real can-do attitude. School librarian Bruce Seiden reports improved work quality among students and an increased desire to go to the library.

Students also learn how to cooperate with adults and each other by spending afternoons in their local public library. “I do my work on time and finish on time,” boasted one Oakland fourth-grader, adding that he also does not “get mad or hit anybody” while at the library. At the Riverside Public Library’s Cybrary, in California, staff provide basic behavior guidelines but allow the students to define their own after-school experience. While waiting to use the computers, Cybrary kids seek out activities and new responsibilities, such as being trained as tutor assistants, doing homework, and interacting positively with students from other schools they might never otherwise meet. Teamwork among the kids is also the key to success at A Place of Our Own, in Santa Cruz, California. There students learn from each other, exchanging hints on playing educational games, trading advice on word-processing software, and offering clues for creating wildly imaginative Web pages.

Library staff also notice improved English-language skills among their foreign-born patrons. In Castroville, California, homework-center staff work diligently with young Mexican immigrants to perfect new language skills. One student even completes assignments early so the homework helper can review her writing style and offer grammatical assistance. Likewise in Minneapolis, public library homework tutors have been instrumental in helping Somalian youngsters acclimate to their new home. “I couldn’t speak a word of English when I came here three years ago,” one young woman exclaimed. “And now look at me! I’ll be going to college in the fall, thanks to the library!”

Another major benefit resulting from the library homework experience is the bond that often develops between the students and their mentors. Not only do kids bring to the library their school assignments, but they also share their real-life problems. At one library, tutors and students often discuss contemporary issues such as gang violence and drugs. Because they are of the same ethnicity and are not much older than the kids themselves, the tutors’ advice is heeded. The homework helpers provide hope and encouragement in a neighborhood where few positive role models exist. In another example, mentors from a nearby university provide daily proof that succeeding in school is possible. For these students, going to college is now much less of an abstract idea and more of a concrete reality.

The kids are not the only ones who benefit from the various homework programs. At the Monterey Public Library, in California, one volunteer Homework Pal enthused that watching a child’s scholastic abilities grow week after week can be a great joy. A second volunteer decided to pursue a master’s degree in education as a result of being involved in the same program. Future teachers often play a critical role as homework facilitators. In Queens, for instance, two unattended-children program tutors regularly test the education concepts taught in their gradu-
ate courses; in Sacramento, one of the homework-center coordinators considers her daily work experience as a real-life “laboratory” for her master’s thesis.

As for library staff, developing a broader service perspective is just one reward for being involved in after-school programs. Employees who initially doubted the appropriateness of such service in the library soon become converts when they see kids quietly doing their homework instead of causing unbridled havoc. One branch manager even credited the library’s homework center with helping make her staff more culturally sensitive. Thanks to the richly diverse mixture of youngsters now using the facility after school, staff are less concerned with the students’ racial or ethnic backgrounds than they are about meeting the kids’ information needs.

Summary

Homework centers offer kids a designated place to go after school where they can get the scholastic support they need. Furthermore, unattended children are easier to discipline when the library provides a specific space for doing homework. Research has shown that children read more as a result of their participation in the library’s homework-assistance program and that their math grades also improve. In addition, their self-esteem grows and they learn how to better cooperate with adults and other kids. English-language skills may also develop as a result of regularly using the library’s homework center. Library staff and volunteers also gain from the homework experience, feeling joy at watching a student’s skills grow and developing a broader service philosophy for themselves.