

The Civic Mission of School Libraries

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For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century.—Robert Putnam

Americans increasingly live disconnected lives from each other and from institutions of civic life. Over the last forty years, many citizens stopped voting, curtailed their work with political parties and service organizations, and attended fewer community meetings and political events. They have even diminished their pleasurable get-togethers, with fewer people entertaining friends at home. Americans are also less public-spirited, giving fewer dollars to charities. Without a sustained, broad-based social movement to restore civic virtue and democratic participation in our society, we will not reclaim our civic life (Putnam 2000).

In this country, we face a variety of economic, moral, and political dilemmas, such as improving our schools, expanding job opportunities, combating crime, reducing poverty, and determining our role in the world—dilemmas that require us to engage in democratic discourse in order to understand the issues, determine options for action, and choose among competing policy alternatives. But too often, we abrogate our democratic responsibility to participate in this

process, delegating this role to politicians and professionals, and relegating ourselves to passive spectators in the political process.

Concern about diminishing civic engagement must focus not only on today’s voters, but also tomorrow’s. The good news is that young people are now volunteering in record numbers and experimenting with new forms of civic engagement. Nevertheless, they know less about the workings of their government and politics than earlier generations. According to the National Alliance for Civic Education, “This lack of knowledge is a barrier to important kinds of civic and political engagement” (National Alliance for Civic Education 2005). While 25 percent of the nation’s students performed at proficient or advanced levels on civics tests, 75 percent scored at basic (39 to 48 percent) and below basic (30 to 35 percent) levels as reported by a 1998 study conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1999). A growing movement to beef up and revive civics education offers perfect opportunities for school libraries to fulfill their traditional roles of promoting civic literacy and ensure that apprentice citizens are well-informed.

For more than two centuries, libraries have served schools, colleges, and communities by preparing and promoting an informed citizenry and offering safe spaces for deliberation and exchange of a wide spectrum of ideas. For a democracy to flourish in the digital age, citizens need free and open access to ideas more than ever. Tomorrow’s citizens need to learn

about and experience civic concepts early. They must recognize their rights and responsibilities in the information age.

School librarians are well-versed in articulating the important role of school library media centers in teaching and learning. Throughout America they ensure access to a wide diversity of resources and teach children about their information rights under the First Amendment, copyright laws, and privacy protections. They collaborate with teachers, public and academic librarians, and community groups to enhance the curriculum and improve student learning. They motivate young people to read, an essential skill in both print and digital formats. Some even participate in communitywide reading programs that encourage everyone to read the same book and discuss it together. They also work closely with parents to encourage literacy, particularly in communities where residents speak a language other than English.

In this new century, school librarians have expanded their roles and now serve as chief information officers, knowledge navigators, and teacher-librarians, partnering in the learning process. Adopting many of the practices recommended in AASL's *Information Power* (1998, 4), school librarians are now well-positioned to foster good citizenship by collaborating "with students and other members of the learning community to analyze learning and information needs, and use resources that will meet those needs, and to understand and communicate the information the resources provide." Moreover, they are redesigning facilities so they are more conducive to inquiry and group study that both reflect and create community, and that bring people together through multicultural arts programming, issue forums, training opportunities, and intellectual dialogue and exchange.

Beyond designing facilities, collaborating with teachers, and developing resources, school librarians enhance civic participation by teaching students to employ the critical thinking skills needed to find, evaluate, and use information effectively, efficiently, and responsibly. Students need sophisticated information literacy skills to live, learn, and work in the digital age as well as to carry out the day-to-day activities of citizens in a developed, democratic

society (AASL and AECT 1998; ALA 1989; ACRL Instruction Task Force 2000; Marcoux 2001). Ever since the days of John Dewey, educators have recognized the vital role of education in teaching civic understanding and active citizenship (Sizer 1992; Gutmann 1987; Westbrook 1991; Burstyn 1996). When librarians facilitate the development of critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving, students learn "how to be consciously independent and, at the same time, interdependent and socially responsible" (Kelle 1996, 70). Furthermore, they develop the necessary skills to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship: ". . . if we don't afford students the opportunity within their schools to live in and be active members of a democratic community, they will not become active participatory citizens in the wider society" (Kelle 1996, 63).

An Overview of the Civic Engagement Movement

To Vaclav Havel (1997, 45), "Civil Society . . . means a society that makes room for the richest possible self-structuring and the richest possible participation in public life." Over the last two decades, civil society began to blossom in Havel's Czech Republic. But in America, the associations and activities that create the glue that strengthen civil society, notably described by Alexis de Tocqueville (1990) in *Democracy*

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in America in 1835, have ensured a structure and climate for more than two centuries of active citizen participation in this country's democratic system. However, by the late twentieth century, journalists, political scientists, philanthropists, and citizens alike were documenting a declining public sphere, diminishing civic engagement, and eroding social capital. In a widespread acknowledgement of the crisis, social scientists proposed new models to invigorate a weakened democracy

and to encourage more active citizen involvement with governance.

Among the leading voices proposing new models, Benjamin Barber (1984, 148) prescribes "strong democracy" as a remedy to incivility and apathy, where "active citizens govern themselves in "the only form that is genuinely and completely democratic." Barber claims that "community grows out of participation and at the same time makes participation possible," and that "strong democracy is the politics of amateurs, where every [person] is compelled to encounter every other [person] without the intermediary of expertise" (1984, 152). From his perspective, "citizens are neighbors bound together neither by blood nor by contract but by their common concerns and common participation in the search for common solutions to common conflicts" (1984, 219). In a later work, Barber calls for "a place for us in civil society, a place really for us, for what we share and who, in sharing we become. That place must be democratic: both public and free" (1998, 38).

Another proponent of citizen participation, David Mathews, has applied practical techniques to this active citizenship model, engaging lay citizens in deliberation about issues of common concern. As president of the Kettering Foundation, he has developed a national network for civic forums, teaching

citizens to frame issues, make choices, find common ground, and act in their community's best interest (Mathews 1984; 1994; 1999; 2003; Mathews and McAfee 2001). Others contributing to the civic renewal chorus include James Fishkin (1995; 1997), who has also helped pioneer this framework for citizen deliberation; Daniel Yankelovich (1991; 1999) and his colleagues at Public Agenda <www.publicagenda.org>, who have analyzed issues

and created choices for public deliberation; and political scientist Harry Boyte, who has advanced new models for reinvigorating communities by creating free spaces or commons for public discourse and deliberation (Boyte 1980; 1989; Boyte and Evans 1986; 1992; Boyte and Kari 1996; 1992). But not until Robert Putnam (2000) published his bestselling book *Bowling Alone* did the importance

and solve local problems (McCabe 2001). Recent books such as *Civic Space/Cyberspace: The American Public Library in the Digital Age* (Molz and Dain 1999), *A Place at the Table: Participating in Community Building* (McCook 2000), *Civic Librarianship: Renewing the Social Mission of the Public Library* (McCabe 2001), and *Libraries and Democracy: The Cornerstones of Liberty* (Kranich 2001) all

the Ohio-based Kettering Foundation <www.kettering.org>, develops discussion guides for deliberative forums hosted in community centers, libraries, and churches. Citizens use these NIFI guides <www.nifi.org> to tackle such topics as the environment, terrorism, immigration, public education, health care, and the Internet. More than thirty institutions across America conduct NIFI Public Policy Institutes to train citizens to convene and moderate forums and to frame issues of local concern (Missouri Debates 2003). A number of other organizations also sponsor forums to engage the public in issues of the day; among them are such national programs as Study Circles <www.studycircles.org> and the Choices Program at Brown University <www.choices.edu/index.cf>, as well as such local programs as Community Conversations in Owensboro, Kentucky; Texas Forums in Austin <www.texasforums.org>; and the Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center Civic Engagement Initiative in Northern California. In State College, Pennsylvania, social studies teacher David Dillon applies these methods of discourse to the curriculum. Dillon is now using his experiences to train teachers around the country in this valuable approach to skill building for civic discourse.

Like colleges, universities, and local communities, schools are undertaking major initiatives to teach students the skills for active citizenship. In the early 1990s, the Center for Civic Education (1991 and 1994) laid out a framework along with standards for teaching civics in schools. Shortly thereafter, various other education organizations, including the Education Commission of the States, the American Federation of Teachers, and National Council for Social Studies (NCSS), issued statements reinforcing the need for enhanced civics study. NCSS (2001) stated that “a primary goal of public education is to prepare students to be engaged and effective citizens. NCSS has defined an effective citizen as one who has the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to assume the ‘office of citizen’ in our democratic republic.” The council went on to commit the organization to “revitalizing citizenship education in our schools and to empowering all students with a positive vision of their role as

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of reviving community and increasing civic engagement transcend academic discourse and gain widespread public attention.

Many of the theorists who focus their scholarship on new forms of citizen participation recognize the central role of information to bolster civic engagement. Boyte (1989) devotes a chapter of his book on the return to citizen politics, *Commonwealth*, to the information age, elaborating the importance of schooling citizens in democracy by informing them about issues and utilizing public spaces to listen, negotiate, exchange, act, and hold officials accountable. Others, such as Lawrence Grossman (1995), Anthony G. Wilhelm (2000), Douglas Schuler and Peter Day (2004), Roza Tsagarousianou, Damian Tambini, and Cathy Bryan (1998), Peter Levine (2002b), and Bruce Bimber (2003), accentuate how access to cyberspace presents both promises and challenges for wider participation in a twenty-first-century democracy. More recently, Boyte has worked with colleagues Lewis Friedland and Peter Levine to test pilot projects that utilize new technologies for youth to build citizen spaces in partnership with community organizations, including the Prince George’s County Information Commons <www.stpaulcommons.org> and the St. Paul Community Information Corps <www.princegeorges.org> (Friedland and Boyte 2000; Levine 2001; Levine 2002a; Sirianni and Friedland 2001).

Echoing these theorists are a new cadre of librarians advocating a broader new “civic librarianship,” where libraries build commu-

advance the notion that libraries provide both real and virtual civic spaces that engage citizens and renew communities.

Civic Engagement Initiatives in Colleges, Communities, and Schools

Today, scholars, teachers, journalists, and foundation leaders are all exploring new opportunities to rekindle civil society in colleges and local communities as well as in schools. Colleges and universities that have rediscovered the once-vital tradition of civic education now actively promote public engagement as a critical part of their overall institutional mission—with faculty incorporating civic content into their curricula and students participating in socially responsible extracurricular activities. Eager to connect liberal learning more directly with service and civic responsibility, the Association of American Colleges and Universities and Campus Compact launched the Center for Liberal Education and Civic Engagement in 2003 <www.aacu.org/civic_engagement/objectives.cfm>. To date, 536 college presidents have committed their institutions to educating students as active and knowledgeable citizens (Campus Compact 2005). Recognizing that a robust democracy and the public welfare depend on an engaged and informed citizenry, colleges and universities are now willing and eager to strengthen both the study and practice of civic engagement in a diverse democracy and interdependent world.

For local communities, the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI), in conjunction with

citizens in a democracy.” About the same time, the National Alliance for Civic Education <www.cived.net> was formed to advocate for broadening the role of schools in civic engagement. But it took until 2003 for the education community to reach a consensus on the need for national action, sparked by publication of a report funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and produced by CIRCLE’s Cynthia Gibson and Peter Levine (2003). *The Civic Mission of Schools* recommends that schools help “young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives” (10). In addition to promoting civic engagement, the report also encourages communities and local institutions to collaborate to provide civic learning opportunities. After the report was released, more than forty organizations joined forces to launch the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools <www.civicmissionofschools.org>.

Another report that year issued by the Albert Shanker Institute promotes the adoption of state standards for civic education (Gagnon 2003). Also in 2003, the Kettering Foundation published a document demonstrating how public engagement can improve education and strengthen democratic participation in communities (Collaborative Communications Group 2003). A year later, Kathryn Montgomery and her colleagues (2004) completed a study of youth civic culture on the Internet and recommended models that nourish the Web for youth by increasing their access to civic information, teaching civic literacy skills, and reserving spaces for a youth voice. In the last few years, numerous advocacy organizations have begun civic engagements initiatives for youth, providing substantial opportunities for young people to participate in civic activities and learn skills for democratic deliberation (see sidebar).

Examples of Civic Engagement Programs in Libraries

Civic engagement initiatives underway in schools, academic institutions, and local communities offer perfect opportunities for libraries to fulfill their traditional roles of promoting

Advocacy Organizations with Civic Engagements Initiatives for Youth

Arsalyn’s Citizens, Not Spectators

<www.arsalyn.org>

Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools

<www.civicmissionofschools.org>

Campaign for Young Voters

<www.campaignyoungvoters.org>

CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement Website

<www.civicyouth.org>

Education Commission of the States/ National Center for Learning and Citizenship

<www.ecs.org/nclc>

First Amendment Schools

<www.firstamendmentschools.org>

Future of the First Amendment: Helping Young Americans Understand and Practice Their Basic Freedom

<www.firstamendmentfuture.org/start.html>

Project 540: Students Turn for a Change

<www.project540.org>

Student World Assembly

<www.studentworldassembly.org>

Teach the First Amendment

<www.teachfirstamendment.org>

civic literacy and ensuring an informed citizenry. Many libraries already present thoughtful, engaging programs about community concerns—programs that encourage more active citizenship. Librarians also help citizens learn how to identify, evaluate, and utilize information essential for making decisions about the way they live, work, learn, and govern. In short, libraries play a critical role in rekindling civic spirit by not only providing information, but also by expanding opportunities for dialogue and deliberation that are essential to making decisions about common concerns.

Today, libraries throughout the country undertake a vast array of innovative programs that bring citizens into a commons where they share interests, concerns, and decision making. In addition to hosting communitywide reading

programs, libraries are informing policy discourse; convening local forums; teaching civic skills; creating digital neighborhood resources and community information services; educating voters; serving as polling places; advocating for citizen’s information rights; and partnering on civic projects with local museums and public broadcasting stations. These collaborative efforts benefit individual citizens as well as increase the community’s social capital—the glue that bonds people together and builds bridges to a pluralistic and vibrant civil society. The challenge for libraries in the information age is to extend their reach well beyond educating and informing into a realm where they increase social capital, rekindle civil society, and expand public participation in democracy. To that end, libraries accomplish these goals not by working alone, but by building strong partnerships—partnerships that establish new constituencies, widen public support, broaden and diversify sources of funding, and strengthen public involvement with local affairs.

The Library As Civic Space

Libraries abet civic engagement by providing a space, or commons, where citizens can turn to solve personal and community problems. Over the past decade, communities, schools, colleges and universities have refurbished or built exciting new spaces for their libraries—spaces that also serve as public gathering spots. They anchor neighborhoods, downtowns, schools, and campuses. They provide inviting, comfortable, and attractive commons for residents to reflect and converse. They offer an exciting lineup of programs that increase the use of all their resources. More people come to the library when they perceive it as a desirable place that beckons them inside and glues their communities together. And partners depend on the library to offer a comfortable, neutral space conducive to civic activities.

The Library As Enabler of Civic Literacy

Children and adults alike must learn a broad range of twenty-first-century literacy skills if they are to become smart seekers, recipients, and creators of content as well as effective citizens. Reflecting the growing concern for such skill

development as early as 1989, a special ALA Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (1989) issued a report stating that, “to be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information.” Since that time, the American Association of School Librarians (1998), the Association of College and Research Libraries (2000), and the American Library Association (2000) have developed standards, showcased best practices, and promoted the development of partnerships to enhance twenty-first-century literacy in schools and colleges. Information literacy partnerships equip citizens for full participation in the digital age. Partnerships focusing on civic literacy instill political knowledge and skills necessary for an active informed citizenry. Libraries can join with other civic literacy institutions, including Study Circles, newspapers, and organizations such as the League of Women Voters, to extend their information literacy initiatives as well to elevate the competency of citizens and enhance civic engagement—for more background see Parsons and Lisman (1996), Milner (2002), and Marcoux (2001). School libraries are particularly well-suited to promote civic literacy by encouraging information and media literacy projects about contemporary issues so that students can gain critical thinking skills along with a better understanding of civic problems.

The Library As Public Forum

When libraries serve as public forums, they also encourage civic engagement. Many school, public, and academic libraries host public programs that facilitate the type of discourse that offers citizens a chance to frame issues of common concern, deliberate about choices for solving problems, create deeper understanding about other’s opinions, connect citizens across the spectrum of thought, and recommend appropriate action that reflects legitimate guidance from the whole community. Librarians moderate forums in conjunction with such groups as the Kettering Foundation’s National Issues Forums, Study Circles, Choices, and others that seek community sites and involvement in their promotion of participatory democracy. School and academic librarians can use Web-

based resources from the Democracy Lab of the Pennsylvania Center for Civic Life <www.teachingdemocracy.org> to integrate deliberative forum modules into course curricula as well as help schools train and mentor student leaders to participate in local politics.

The Library As Civic Information Center

When libraries provide civic and government information to the community, they build social capital and encourage civic involvement. Thanks to new technologies, libraries now deliver numerous local databases and Web sites to students and citizens eager to find and utilize vital services within their communities. Citizens can look at meeting agendas and actions of local board and commissions, locate reports and data, seek social services, and identify emergency contacts. Joan Durrance (2001) and her colleagues at the University of Michigan School of Information have identified and evaluated successful civic library projects in communities throughout the country that help immigrants and minorities, teach youth to participate in community problem solving, and pull together essential information and communication resources that might otherwise be difficult to identify or locate. All of these civic information projects require libraries to collaborate and build partnerships with the organizations that are listed in their databases if they are to foster civic education and community development.

The Library As Communitywide Reading Club

In a phenomenon sweeping the country, school, public, and academic libraries are hosting communitywide One Book/One Community reading clubs launched initially by the Seattle Public Library. Chicago went well beyond promoting reading by “giving a ‘public voice’ to what is usually considered a private activity . . . to discover or build unity in a diverse city” (Putnam and Feldstein 2003, 53). And in Kentucky, the state library linked up with Kentucky Educational Television (KET) to launch a highly successful statewide reading effort with outreach and engagement activities that took on a mix of partners that

numbered more than 130 educational institutions, bookstores, public and school libraries, businesses, media outlets, adult education centers and arts, civic and social service organizations (Pennsylvania State University Public Broadcasting 2002). Each of the many efforts nationwide has included numerous cosponsors, giving libraries the opportunity to spread involvement and interest throughout the community.

The Library As Partner in Public Service

After Pennsylvania State University hosted a conference on the importance of developing partnerships between public broadcasters and other public service organizations in 1999, it launched the Partners in Public Service (PIPS) initiative to demonstrate how collaborative projects between public broadcasting stations, libraries, museums, and educational institutions could enhance services to eight participating communities. With support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), PIPS produced a useful guide with case studies on how to undertake these institutional partnerships in order to help communities revitalize by reinventing themselves by utilizing digital technologies and fulfilling unmet needs (Pennsylvania State University Public Broadcasting 2002). Considered a vision for a “community as a learning campus,” IMLS built upon the PIPS idea by launching its 21st Century Learning Initiative, which included a conference, “Exploring Partnerships for 21st Century Learning”; *The 21st Century Learner* (IMLS 2001); the 21st Century Learner Resource Listing (IMLS n.d.); and the funding of numerous collaborative civic projects around the country.

The Library As a Service-Learning Center

Service-learning integrates meaningful public service with curricula- or project-based learning. Schools and organizations use service-learning to strengthen academic skills, foster civic responsibility, and develop leadership abilities. Many schools and universities now require students to participate in service-

learning. Libraries can contribute to these educational programs in various ways, such as participating in National Youth Service Day <www.ysa.org/nysd>, sponsoring such service projects as literacy training and community research, and creating Web sites and databases that support school-based service projects.

The Library As Champion and Advocate of Free Expression

Libraries represent some of the most fundamental democratic values embraced by the U.S. Constitution. To ensure that those freedoms are protected and promoted, librarians fight hard to fund programs, support intellectual freedom, and oppose policies that undermine the public's free expression rights. A valuable way to instill civic responsibility into young people is to involve them directly with these advocacy efforts. If students document problems, research issues, take positions, and speak out to safeguard precious freedoms, they will see themselves as participatory citizens and valuable voices of democratic discourse. To engage them with free expression issues, school libraries can involve students in legislative days at the state and national levels; mount displays and exhibits; host forums during Banned Books Week; celebrate Constitution Day, Bill of Rights Day, and Freedom of Information Day; and sponsor programs during National Library Week.

Building Civic Partnerships

Efforts abound that encourage more active citizenship. They offer libraries ideal opportunities to get more involved with promoting civic engagement in their communities and to join forces with the many organizations and institutions already committed to strengthening participation in democracy. School, public, academic, and special libraries can forge civic partnerships with other organizations and individuals that extend their reach and help them achieve their mission. They can benefit from new relationships that provide expertise, financial support, experience, and good public relations. Civic partnerships that establish new constituencies can widen public support, broaden and diversify sources of funding, and strengthen public involvement with local affairs.

School librarians can participate in rekindling civic engagement. They can team up with civic organizations cited in this article. They can join forces with college, university, and public librarians to sponsor forums and build local databases and Web sites. They can participate in the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools and apply for grants sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Knight Foundation to renew and elevate civic education in America's schools (Council for Excellence in Government 2004). First

workload and prevent burnout of committed volunteers. Libraries can recruit steering committee members for their civic efforts who can strengthen partnerships through their professional or civic involvement—individuals such as school administrators and teachers, faculty with subject or experience building civil society, and leaders of such local civic organizations as the League of Women Voters. One partner not to overlook is the media. Like librarians, journalists are deeply concerned with civic involvement, and they can add significant benefits by

School librarians need to identify individuals and groups with common concerns, looking far beyond the normal sources for allies.

Amendment Schools grants are yet another opportunity for helping teach students the rights and responsibilities of citizenship that frame civic life in a democracy, one in which librarians can showcase intellectual freedom concerns such as threats to banned books and digital censorship (First Amendment Center and Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development n.d.; Department of Public Policy at the University of Connecticut 2005). All libraries, including those in schools, should participate in the September Project <www.theseptemberproject.org>, a September 11 effort to bring people together in libraries for talks, roundtables, public forums, and performances in towns and cities across the country. In 2005, 631 libraries in 33 countries held programs to commemorate the terrorist attacks; an elementary school library in Binghamton, New York, held a peace day, while a school library in Huntsville, Alabama, displayed relevant books and aired the PBS documentary *Center of the World: New York City*.

Committing the library to forging civic partnerships requires political savvy. School librarians need to identify individuals and groups with common concerns, looking far beyond the normal sources for allies. Building a broad base of support for civic engagement not only ensures participation from many segments of a community, but also serves to spread the

covering activities and highlighting a positive image of libraries undertaking these endeavors. Furthermore, the library can extend its outreach efforts by encouraging partner organizations to showcase joint efforts through their newsletters, Web sites, and other public relations tools.

In the words of Robert Putnam, "Citizenship is not a spectator sport" (2000, 341). If libraries are to fulfill their civic mission in the information age, they must find active ways to engage citizens in order to encourage their involvement in democratic discourse and community renewal. Working closely with a rich and diverse array of partners, libraries of all types, including school libraries, must help rekindle civic engagement, promote greater citizen participation, and increase community problem solving and decision making. ●

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