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Libraries play a key role in learning and development

Public libraries are engines of economic growth, studies show

(CHICAGO) — Libraries of all kinds continue to be engines of learning, literacy, and economic development in communities nationwide. Americans are acting on their conviction that school library media centers are a key element in delivering the kind of education the next generation needs in order to succeed in a global society, and public libraries are redoubling their efforts to serve linguistically isolated communities.

These are among the findings detailed in the 2008 State of America's Libraries report, released each year as part of National Library Week, observed this year from April 13-19.

Americans check out more than 2 billion items each year from their public libraries, according to the report. The average user takes out more than seven books a year, but patrons also go to their libraries to borrow DVDs, learn new computer skills, conduct job searches and participate in the activities of local community organizations. Average bill to the taxpayer for this remarkable range of public services: \$31 a year, about the cost of one hardcover book.

New studies provide solid evidence that the nation's public libraries are engines of economic growth, contributing to local development through programming in early literacy, employment services and small-business development. Other studies show that libraries provide an excellent return on investment, have a measurable positive impact on the local economy and contribute to the stability, safety and quality of life of their neighborhoods.

School library media centers are increasingly in the public eye, but even as their value is ever more widely acknowledged, funding for them continues to lag. Studies in 19 states have shown that a strong school library media program helps students learn more and score higher on standardized tests. In Washington state, a year-long grassroots campaign by three determined Spokane mothers culminated in an all-day summit conference and rally in February that helped produce a bill in the legislature to institute state funding for local school libraries.

But teenagers — far from confining themselves to their school library media centers — are also regular users of public library services. Almost all the nation's public libraries now offer programs tailored to the needs and interests of young adults, and more than

half employ at least one full-time staff equivalent in this area, a sharp increase in the past decade.

Computer and on-line games have also become part of the mix at many public libraries, and some use gaming to attract new patrons. “Libraries’ response to gaming is just another indication that the profession is alert to the needs and desires of its patrons and is aware of the ways in which this interest interconnects with more traditional services, now and in the future” said ALA President Loriene Roy.

In an ALA study of U.S. public library programs and services for non-English speakers, 78 percent of the respondents reported Spanish as the top-priority non-English language to which they devote services and programs; Asian languages ranked second (29 percent). The study also showed that most libraries serving non-English speakers are in communities with fewer than 100,000 residents. The ALA is using the study results to help public and other libraries develop new programming for linguistically underserved communities.

Other findings in the 2008 State of America's Libraries report:

- Ebooks continued to emerge as a regular feature of libraries of all types.
- Library supporters won an important victory in 2007 when the Environmental Protection Agency was ordered to re-open many of the libraries it had closed in the past year.
- College and research libraries continue to find innovative new ways to meet the rapidly evolving needs of the academy.
- Libraries and librarians of all stripes continue to stand up for the First Amendment rights of all Americans, responding in public discourse and in court to unconstitutional snooping and aspiring book-banners. The right to read — freely and in private — remains a core value of the profession.

The full text of the 2008 State of America's Libraries is available at www.ala.org/2008State.

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