The Future of Library Services for and with Teens: *A Call to Action*

INSTITUTE *of* **Museum** and **Library** SERVICES

yalsa
Young Adult Library
Services Association
a division of the
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Libraries provide a lifeline for teens, their families and communities across the nation by providing a safe and supervised space for adolescents to engage in creative, educational activities with caring adults and mentors. But a variety of significant developments point to a need for libraries to change in order to successfully meet the needs of today's teens.

The Future of Library Services for and with Teens: a Call to Action, is the result of a yearlong national forum conducted by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) in 2013, with funding provided by the Institute of Museum and Library services. The Call to Action lays out a new path for serving 21st century teens through libraries. This 2014 report shows that many libraries are continuing to grapple with diminishing resources while at the same time struggling to meet the needs of a changing teen population. Additionally, significant developments in technology have led to the need to rethink how services for and with teens are best created and delivered. The Call to Action provides recommendations on how libraries must address challenges and re-envision their teen services in order to meet the needs of their individual communities and to collectively ensure that the nation's 40+ million teens develop the skills they need to be productive citizens.

The Issues

Teens Make Up a Significant Portion of Library Users

There are over 40 million adolescents, aged 12–17, living in the United States today, and they use libraries. A 2013 Pew survey found that 72% of 16- to 17-year-olds had used a public library in 2012.

Library Services and Resources for Teens Are in Jeopardy

Library closures, reduced hours, lack of staff, and insufficient resources mean that teens in many communities no longer have access to the resources, knowledge, and services they need to support their academic, emotional, and social development, to master 21st-century skills, and to ensure that they become productive citizens.

There Has Been a Significant Shift in the Demographics of Teens

According to an analysis of the 2010 census data completed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, there are currently 74.2 million children under the age of eighteen in the United States; 46% of them are children of color. Additionally, more than one-fifth of America's children are immigrants or children of immigrants. Now is the time for the field of librarianship, the population of which is overwhelmingly Caucasian, to consider what these demographic changes mean to school and public library services and programs for and with teens.

Technology Continues to Impact Communication Methods, Teaching, and Learning

Teens' use of technology (smart phones, tablets, laptops, the Internet, etc.) is pervasive. However, ownership of technology devices continues to vary across socioeconomic and racial demographics. Now is the time for public and school libraries to

systematically determine how technology will affect the future of library services for and with teens, with special attention to the access gaps that continue to exist.

Teens Are Entering the Workforce without Critical Skills

In the last three decades, the skills required for young adults to succeed in the workforce have changed drastically, but the skills emphasized in schools have not kept up with these changes. Libraries need to create the kind of spaces, services, and opportunities that today's teens need in order to succeed in school and in life.

The Paradigm Shift and Libraries

Several important factors have come together in such a way that libraries are experiencing a seismic shift. Ever since computers entered library spaces, public and school libraries have been on a precipice of change. The library can no longer be viewed as a quiet place to connect to physical content. Instead it needs to evolve into a place, physical and virtual, where individuals can learn how to connect and use all types of resources, from physical books to apps to experts in a local, regional, or national community. Libraries must leverage new technologies and become kitchens for "mixing resources" in order to empower teens to build skills, develop understanding, create and share, and overcome adversity. In addition to the impact of new technologies, the definition of literacy has expanded beyond the cognitive ability to read and write, to a recognition that literacy is a social act that involves basic modes of participating in the world. New research also points to a concept of connected learning, in which studies show that young people learn best when that learning is connected to their passions, desires, and interests.

What Teens Need from Libraries

Bridge the growing digital and knowledge divide: School and public libraries must ensure that in addition to providing access to digital tools, that they also provide formal and informal opportunities for teens to learn to use them in meaningful and authentic ways.

Leverage Teens' Motivation to Learn: Too often teens' desire to learn is thwarted by an educational system too focused on testing, unwilling to adopt culturally relevant pedagogy, or so strapped for funding that only basic resources are available. Libraries live outside of a school's formal academic achievement sphere and offer a space where interest based learning can occur in a risk-free environment. Public and school libraries, therefore, need to embrace their role as both formal and informal learning spaces.

Provide Workforce Development Training: In order to address the growing need for a skilled workforce, school and public libraries have the responsibility to enable teens to learn in relevant, real world 21st century contexts.

Serve as the Connector between Teens and other Community Agencies: Libraries are only one of many organizations with a vision to build better futures for teens. Too often, however, teens are unaware of the services offered in their communities. As many of today's teens are faced with serious social and economic challenges, libraries must provide teens the assistance they need.

Implications for Libraries

In order to meet the needs of today's teens and to continue to provide value to their communities, libraries need to revisit their fundamental structure, including these components:

Audience: the focus is on serving all teens in the community, not just those who are regular users of the physical library space

Collections: are tailored to meet the unique needs of the teens in the particular community they serve, and are expanded to include digital resources as well as experts and mentors

Space: a flexible physical library space that allows for teens to work on a variety of projects with each other and adult mentors to create and share content. Virtual spaces also allow for teens to connect with each other and with experts. Libraries recognize that teens need and want to make use of the entire library space or site, not just a designated teen area.

Programming: programs occur year-round, leverage the unique attributes of libraries, allow for teens to gain skills through exploration of their interests and measure outcomes in terms of knowledge gained or skills learned.

Staffing: Degreed library professionals focus on developing and managing teen services at the programmatic level, while face-to-face encounters are made up of a hybrid of staff and skilled volunteers who act as mentors, coaches, and connectors

Youth participation: is integrated throughout the teen services program and enables teens to provide both on-the-fly and structured feedback for the library staff. Teen participation is not limited to formally organized groups

Outreach: is on-going and occurs in order to identify the needs of teens in the community and then work with partners to alleviate those needs.

Policy: focuses on serving teens no matter where they are. The policies are flexible and easy to update in order to reflect changing needs

Professional development: Takes a whole library/whole school approach to planning, delivering and evaluating teen services. Investigates attributes and resources unique to libraries and identifies means for leveraging those to achieve library goals.

Today's 40+ million adolescents face an increasing array of social issues, barriers, and challenges that many of them are unable to overcome on their own. With nearly 7,000 teens dropping out of high school per day, and approximately 40% of high school graduates not proficient in traditional literacy skills, the nation is in danger of losing an entire generation, which in turn will lead to a shortage of skilled workers and engaged citizens. Now is the time for public and school libraries to join with other key stakeholders and take action to help solve the issues and problems that negatively impact teens, and ultimately the future of the nation. These challenges are not insurmountable. It is a moral imperative for libraries to leverage their skills and resources to effect positive change and better the lives of millions of teens. In turn, libraries will be providing an invaluable service to their community and position themselves as an indispensable community resource.

"Our teens' interests and needs are as diverse as the teens themselves and extend far beyond what the Library can provide with existing resources and regular programming. They do share a desire to learn from and connect with experts who have turned their interests into careers and to improve our community. To meet these interests, we sought out and started partnering with various community agencies to provide programs ranging from Learning to DJ as taught by a teen DJ, to making spring rolls and sushi taught by a chef and entrepreneur, to building a better community with City Council members."

— Jennifer Korn, TeenSpot Manager at the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County

"The e-revolution is here. I've been purchasing digital resources to allow students to produce a variety of projects for school. One of my student aides is helping me compile top picks to download to the e-readers (we have twenty one of them now). Showing students how to access and utilize databases for their research has also become a major part of my teaching."

— Kyla M. Johnson,
Farmington (NM) High School Library

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