What Did You Want to Achieve?

At the Hennepin County Library we set out to offer persistent programming opportunities for youth to increase their ability to express themselves using technology, and to explore and engage in connected learning with their peers. With the Teen Tech Squad we also wanted to provide meaningful employment opportunities for older teens to increase their leadership skills (including communication, problem solving, and resilience) as they prepare for their post-secondary pursuits.

Overview of the Program/Project

Hennepin County Library’s Teen Tech Squad program currently employs 30 teens across seven branch tech squads. The teens research, design, and lead interactive experiences for youth who learn STEAM skills through tinkering and making. While each squad has taken a slightly different focus for their community, workshops range from making bubblegum to creating cities out of cardboard, and from recording and mixing music to 3D modeling and printing. Participants and teen leaders alike create original digital and artistic content and innovate in supportive and flexible programming after school and on the weekends.

What Challenges Did You Face and How Did You Overcome Them?

Growing and clarifying our internal systems of support (from human resources, to IT support, to learning and development needs for staff) alongside this new model of programming has been the biggest challenge in building and sustaining this work. For example, the role of the librarians who facilitate tech squads has shifted to include more management and supervisory tasks while the job classification (and associated access to training, and management conversations) has not evolved at the same pace. Additionally, more staff and supervisors (not just the youth services librarians!) are involved in supervising, leading, evaluating, and supporting this work than in the past. Creating clear expectations, roles, and paths for communication has been essential to growing our capacity as an organization.
What Did You Learn?

We have long known that you can’t wait for an idea to be fully baked before getting started – but we learned that it takes a whole-library approach (and teen voice and leadership) to build, sustain, and integrate this model of programming into the way we make programming decisions, delegate responsibilities, and reframe our definitions of expectations and success. We are continuously learning how to talk about trying something new, taking risks, and learning in public as we grow new roles for our staff.

How Does This Work Connect to YALSA’s Futures Report and Vision?

This project intersects with envisioned definitions of literacy, with the learning ecosystem for youth today, with the importance of connected learning, and opportunities to learn in different ways. However, the area of the Futures Report that resonates most with this project has to do with how we shift our mindset to grow with our young people. As the Future Report states:

“In a society in which some young people are succeeding and others are being left behind, libraries play a critical role in preparing ALL teens to be productive, engaged citizens in both their work and personal lives. For libraries to make this needed shift, however, five fundamental elements must change, including:

1. Embracing our role as facilitator rather than expert.
2. Refocusing beyond our traditional roles and traditional measurements of success
3. Partnering strategically to reach beyond the library’s walls
4. Creating a whole-library and whole-school approach to serving teens in physical spaces and online
5. Supporting library staff in gaining new skills.”

Our teen tech squad work brings all of these to life in our libraries.