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Community Resources as Part of the School Library Collection

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"A collection...provides access to human and material resources in the local and global community." Phyllis Van Orden, *The Collection Program in Schools*, p. 11.

As school librarians and media specialists collaborate with classroom teachers and assist them in finding relevant materials for resource-based learning, the use of both material resources and human resources from the community can be invaluable. Accessing resources within the community can make learning more relevant to students and enable them to see a connection between the curriculum and the real world. Establishing community resource collections also results in stronger business and community partnerships with the school.

There are three things to consider when adding community resources to the library collection:

1. Determine which community resources would be most beneficial to the students and teachers and which resources are also accessible.

2. Organize the community resources for easiest access by the school community.

3. Publicize and promote the community resources to ensure full use by those who would benefit most.

Getting Started

Determining which community resources are the most beneficial can be a daunting task, especially in a large metropolitan area. The authors of A Guide to Promising Practices in Educational Partnerships, published by the U.S. Department of Education, recommend first conducting a needs assessment to determine which community resources would be of the most benefit to the school population. Rather than going overboard in accessing as many community resources as humanly possible, experiences from programs described in this volume show that it is more effective to begin in small increments, identifying key areas in the school curriculum where resources would be readily available and most useful. A school librarian can easily accomplish this through assessment surveys with teachers, administrators, students, and parents and through knowledge of the school's curriculum and student needs.

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1

Since library resources exist to meet the needs of students, it makes sense to begin this process with the students' needs.

Once the media specialist has used the surveys and other tools to create a list of the information needs of students and teachers, it is then possible to brainstorm resources beyond the walls of the school that could meet those needs. This another opportunity to ask for input from teachers, administrators, and parents.

Examples of Community Resources:

- Teleconferencing and e-mail can easily connect students to human resources in the community and expand the students' access to the world. More people may be willing to act as a resource to a student if they can do so from the office. Students could have e-mail mentors or interviews via chat. In telementoring, students are connected to experts or role models in various fields or areas to serve as resources. Mentors can be found in local communities or in global communities from web sites such as this one: www.telementor.org
- Ask-An-Expert database is a database of human resources who are experts in various areas of the curriculum and have volunteered to answer student questions via e-mail or telephone. (Note: this is different from telementoring, since it is merely a reference type of service, not a long-term relationship.)
- Local artists, actors, business leaders, researchers, professors, doctors, attorneys, veterinarians, community activists, reporters, athletes, and so on, can all serve as helpful resources for interviews, field trips, projects, etc.
- Local sites and organizations (museums, theaters, hospitals, universities, corporations, factories, etc.) can also be cataloged as resources for field trips, projects, and information resources.
- A unique suggestion from Van Orden is for the librarian to videotape a field trip to a local resource to share with students. It is not as effective as an actual field trip, but in this era of limited field trips, it is a feasible compromise.
- Community agencies resource directory (a list can be obtained from a local United Way office), a database of job or volunteer opportunities for students, a database of summer learning opportunities and activities are all community resources which would be valuable for students to access.
- Materials or equipment available for lending from various community organizations: zoos, museum exhibits, photographs, theater costume and prop departments, university laboratories, hospitals, historical societies, etc.
- Other schools, teachers, or classes in the city who would like to collaborate on a project.

This is by no means a complete list. The possibilities are endless, but these are examples of useful, easily accessed community resources.

Organizing Community Resources for Access

Once a list of community resources that are appropriate for the school community has been created, there is the problem of organizing these intangible resources for effective access by users. Van Orden recommends organized access to these resources through centralized bibliographic control as the most effective method for both student and staff use. Both human and material resources can be listed through the school's online public catalog (OPAC).

There should be an entry for each community resource the librarian locates. This may make for some creative cataloging, but for easiest access, adding these resources to the catalog is necessary. These listings in the OPAC can identify the participating institution or person, contact information, subject area correlation, services, location, intended audience, and any other relevant information. Each time a teacher goes on a field trip or uses a community resource, the librarian can collect information about the experience and input it into the system. When another teacher searches for materials on that subject, the field trip entry and information would be retrieved. If a local resident has Civil War memorabilia available for a teacher to borrow and share with the class, information about this resource would be listed in the catalog as well.

The Vermont Education Partnership Project, described in The Guide to Promising Educational Partnerships as one method for bringing together the resources of a community, involved developing a community resource collection containing profiles of various organizations, community members, and businesses who agreed to act as a resource for students and staff. The database of resources contained a description of the opportunity, job titles and background of the people involved, contact information, and any other relevant information. Other issues such as the amount of time and the extent of the commitment a human resource is willing to give and the preferred method of participation (e-mail, public speaking, chat, videoconferencing, time of the year he or she is willing to participate) could also be listed.

If the librarian is given brochures or other forms of information about the community resource being cataloged, it should somehow be bound or packaged (placing it in a folder would suffice) and labeled. The catalog entry about the community resource would alert the teacher or student that further information about the resource can be found and will inform the patron where that information is kept in the library. A shelf or filing cabinet drawer could be reserved for these materials.

An additional way of organizing the resources is to place a large map of the community on a wall in the library with the location of various resources labeled (public library, city hall, universities, zoos, etc.) and instructions for where to find more information on the resource (in the catalog). Transportation information, if available, could be posted as well.

Various online databases can be created as well to organize related resources and provide additional points of access.

Publicizing and Promoting the Use of Community Resources

Danzberger et al. state, "General exposure to the [resource] directory did not promote its use by teachers. However, teachers who attended workshops demonstrating the usefulness of the resource directories expressed enthusiasm and became motivated to use the directories." Any school library media specialist knows how true this is. We can provide a wealth of wonderful resources, but that does not mean they will be used. We must publicize and promote the community resources to ensure their use. Providing training to teachers to show them how, when, and why to use the resources is essential. If the librarian has a receptive principal, perhaps a portion of one of the inservice days before the start of the school year could be reserved for the librarian to conduct a workshop on the access and use of these unique resources. Otherwise, begin with a few receptive teachers. Once other teachers see the learning that is occurring through the use of these resources, they may want to learn more. When I have something new and exciting to share with teachers, I schedule a meeting with them during one of their planning periods. It is much easier to hold the attention and "sell" an idea to a group of six than to an entire staff.

Jones makes suggestions for distributing information, such as the school's daily announcements, eye-catching posters, and forming a marketing plan. These are all useful things to consider when promoting the new community resources. Libraries often fall short when it comes to promotion of the library's programs and services. Just as we have to "sell" our lessons to our students when we teach, we will have to "sell" our resources to our users, whether staff or students, as librarians.

Combining Jones' approach with my own experience as a librarian, I have developed the following suggestions for promoting and publicizing community resources in the library collection:

- Avoid mass distribution of memos to the entire staff or student body. As we all know, they end up in the trash or on the floor most of the time.
- E-mail staff with a short message about something "new" in the library.
- Include something about community resources in the school's daily announcements. Make it as intriguing and imaginative as you can!
- Create bright and eye-catching flyers or posters that merely give a hint or clue about something new and fabulous in the library--just enough to pique users' curiosity and make them want to ask for more information.
- Send press releases to local papers.
- Give demonstrations or workshops for accessing the resources within the curriculum.
- Approach a teacher who is a leader in the school and share a community resource that might be of interest. Once one teacher sees how wonderful the experience can be, others will follow.
- Post a list of available community resources (with their web addresses, if applicable) on the school's website.

Issues and Considerations

Because human resources are involved, the use of these resources will be obviously quite different from merely using a book or CD-ROM in the library. There are several things

a school library media specialist must consider when adding community resources to the library's collection.

NASA has been a leader in acting as an educational resource for students. NASA's K12 Internet Initiative connects K-12 students and teachers with science and engineering experts over the Internet. NASA experts working in various mission areas (space exploration, astronomy, biosciences) connect with students and teachers via e-mail, chat, and other forms of file transfer. Information about current missions and projects are posted online and frequently updated by the experts. Siegel and Hodas point out several issues that must be considered before using a community-based resource.

First, guidelines must be in place to keep students from overwhelming experts with e-mail and information requests. That is a sure-fire way to end an expert's willingness to act as a resource for students. We have to ensure that the limits experts have set on their time are respected. The librarian should be responsible for discussing this issue with the community member and making sure that teachers and students understand. It is appropriate to include any time or other limitations set by the expert in the catalog entry and perhaps include, "see media specialist before contacting this resource."

Along the same lines, a community resource may not be willing to donate his or her time year-round, as it can become fairly time-consuming. When arranging the services the community member is offering, discuss these limitation options with him or her and note in the catalog entry the dates and times he or she is available, as well as what forms of communication he or she prefers (public speaking, e-mail, chat, bulletin board). If the librarian is not vigilant in seeing that the resources are not over-used or misused, these resources can be lost, and the school could gain a reputation for not being "partnership-friendly."

If the resource is a material one, borrowed from a community member, business, or organization, guidelines should likewise be in place to ensure it is cared for and returned promptly and in good condition.

In section five of the NASA program paper, the authors suggest that, "Not all content area experts are created equal." The human resources with whom the library media specialist connects students should be enthusiastic, helpful, knowledgeable, and positive. Additionally, each district has safety guidelines in place, such as background checks, for community members wishing to volunteer their time. The school library media specialist should ensure that materials accessed from the community are appropriate, safe, and useful. Plan to evaluate potential community resources in the same way that one would evaluate other resources in for the collection. Professional judgment must be used to determine if the expert's knowledge and interpersonal communication/interaction are appropriate, applicable, easy to understand, easily accessible, and accurate.

One final lesson and consideration pointed out by the NASA resource project designers: "Simplicity is the catchword." One could easily get in over one's head in an effort to incorporate as many community resources as possible into the school's collection and

trying to meet every single informational need all at once. The addition of community resources to a collection is a process that must be approached carefully, thoughtfully, and with specific goals in mind. It is more effective to add a few resources that meet specific needs, promote them to the school community, and assist in their use. Then evaluate the success of those resources and use the experience to determine how to add additional resources.

Closing Thought

An excerpt from "Student-Focused School Library Media Centers Help Create Life-Long Learners," published by the Illinois School Library Media Association, accurately describes our role in using community resources:

A school library media specialist should be "…reaching beyond the walls of the school to develop a community of learners…Library media professionals are reaching out to their local communities and beyond…Helping to create life-long learners…School library media professionals join their colleagues in public, academic and special libraries to help create a statewide environment that supports learning and knowledge."

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