Save the Libraries!

*They're an endangered species. And we need to protect them
because they can transform literacy development.*

Susan B. Neuman and Donna Celano

Andrew Carnegie certainly never pictured his dream ending like this. A century ago, Carnegie's vision and generosity helped give birth to U.S. libraries. For decades libraries flourished, providing books and information to many children and families who would otherwise have little access to them.

Difficult economic times, however, threaten to turn the dream of flourishing public libraries into a memory. Across the United States, both school and public libraries face the deepest budget cuts in their history. The New York Public Library system faces a $4 million shortfall this year, on top of a $16 million cut in 2003 (Whelan, 2003). In Minneapolis, Minnesota, library officials agreed to spare branches from closing but eliminated up to 80 full-time staff positions. In San Jose, California, the positions of 26 school media specialists were cut, due in part to an $11.6 million reduction in state aid to school libraries (Eberhart, 2003). Faced with the decision to either hire staff or buy equipment, many school libraries have chosen to stock their facilities with computers—and little else.

Although the library community is up in arms, the news of this crisis has generated little interest in other circles. In these days of computer wizardry and high-speed Internet connections, the public sees the library as a kind of dinosaur—a vast, dusty building filled with ponderous tomes, dimmed lights, and hushed voices. In schools, students and teachers alike see library visits as superfluous, a time of limited learning with limited return. The librarian, once the commander of the local library, seems to be fading away as well.

All this, despite the fact that library circulation is holding steady at an all-time high.

As libraries appear to teeter on the brink of extinction, one crucial fact remains: Libraries—and librarians—are vital to the development of children's literacy skills. We offer this argument on the basis of a study we conducted examining the influence of school and public libraries on young children's literacy development. Libraries can have a transformative effect, particularly on low-income, minority families living in urban communities. Rather than a dinosaur lumbering toward oblivion, libraries are vibrant and thriving centers—literacy playgrounds for children who flock there to do homework,

interact with books, and explore cyberspace. Libraries play a powerful role in both literacy development and lifelong learning.

Taking a Good Long Look

Our findings spring from a $50 million grant bestowed by the William Penn Foundation for the purpose of transforming urban libraries in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The transformation focused on creating a model urban library, one that shifted from a books-only environment to one that offered computers and Internet access as well. The grant also enabled us to look at how the revitalized library affects children's literacy development and reading achievement, particularly for children from low-income, minority families.

During our five-year study, we followed a different path than the typical methodological strategies calling for randomized, controlled clinical trials or experimental research. Instead, our study took us into the city's neighborhoods—both middle-class and low-income—to document how people use libraries, how public libraries connect with school libraries, and how the technological transformation influences reading development.

Our findings (Neuman & Celano, 2002) have led us to challenge common conceptions about library use for low-income and minority children. On the basis of a wide variety of methodological strategies—including ethnographies, interviews, and time-on-task studies—our research disputes the notion that library use is less important to some children than to others. This misconception has led some school officials to divert funds from books to computers under the pretense that low-income and minority children need to

Photos by Jeremy Spang

close the "digital divide" between them and their middle-income peers. In contrast, our research shows that the "digital divide" is actually a "literacy divide," one that a well-stocked library and well-trained, caring librarians can help close.

All children, rich and poor, need libraries to develop important literacy and critical thinking skills. But not all children have equal access to books and other reading materials. In a previous study, we found that book availability for children in middle-class areas was approximately 12 books per child; in low-income neighborhoods, approximately 1 book is available for every 335 children (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Even if resources were equal, however, the more advantaged children seem to benefit more readily from the use of a well-equipped library than do their low-income peers. The neediest children lack special supports that most affluent children enjoy to bolster their learning.

The Library As Magnet

Children from low-income homes supposedly use libraries less frequently than do their middle- and upper-income peers—a myth based, in part, on circulation figures. Libraries are often evaluated by their circulation figures, determined by the number of books checked out by local patrons. In many school and public library systems in the United States, the circulation figure is used to determine budget allocations for the following year or library branch closings.

Libraries serving low-income areas have dramatically lower circulation counts than do libraries in middle-income areas. In one six-hour period, the children whom we observed in middle-class neighborhoods checked out an average of six books each, whereas their lower-income peers checked out none. In fact, our interviews revealed that many families in low-income areas did not own a library card or, if they did, family members were reluctant to check out books because they feared having to pay overdue fines.

Despite poor circulation figures, however, many libraries in these neighborhoods were often crowded with patrons. We clocked the actual time that children in low-income and middle-income areas spent in the library: Across all libraries, in-building use was approximately the same for both groups. Over a four-hour period we clocked an average of 3,992 minutes for 75 patrons in libraries in low-income neighborhoods, compared with 3,255 minutes for 72 patrons in middle-class neighborhoods.

We then counted how much time children in both groups spent on reading activities. The differences were insignificant: Children in low-income areas spent an average of 3.75 minutes reading a given book or other material, whereas the average for children in middle-class areas was 4.5 minutes.

Our observations show that children in low-income areas use libraries and library resources just as much as children in middle-income areas do. What our numbers do *not* reveal, however, is the sheer drawing power that libraries have in some poor, urban neighborhoods. On many afternoons, our observers found standing room only at some libraries in these neighborhoods, with children spilling into aisles and hallways as they completed homework assignments, worked on research projects, or crowded around a good

in which children from different neighborhoods used the library. Children in higher-income areas spent more time engaged in literacy-related activity and less time milling around. Their primary reason for coming to the library was to use print materials. In low-income areas, where children often "hang out," they spent less time in literacy-related activity and more time milling around.

With new technology in the libraries, we found that all children began to read more. But whereas children from low-income families were reading *slightly*

computers, and activities, but they had something more: excellent librarians.

In our travels through the Philadelphia library system, we noticed a core group of children's librarians that we eventually labeled "excellent librarians." These librarians did more than create a safe haven for a group of needy children: They had a steady following and seemed to make a difference despite overwhelming odds.

We selected a group of 10 librarians, most of whom served in poverty-stricken and economically blighted neighborhoods. We interviewed each librarian extensively—all were women—about her job, the surrounding community, and her attitudes and goals. We then trailed each librarian for several days, taking note of her daily routines and interactions with staff and patrons. Our findings show that there is more to being an excellent librarian than picking out a good book.

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book or magazine. Security guards were often present for "crowd control," a situation rarely encountered in libraries in middle-income or upper-income areas.

Although this translates into good news, the not-so-good news is that the quality of the library experience is not equal for the two groups of children. We found that 93 percent of the materials that middle-income children read were at their grade level, and 7 percent were *above* grade level. Children in low-income communities, in contrast, were more likely to read materials either at or *below* their grade level; only 58 percent of materials were at grade level and 42 percent of the materials selected were below grade level.

The Literacy Divide
Even more troubling was the discrepancy caused by the introduction of computers to libraries in low-income neighborhoods. We found that computers in this setting might actually exacerbate the reading gap between low-income and higher-income children.

Before the introduction of technology into libraries, we noted a gap in the way

more, middle-class children began to read *substantially* more. Children from higher-income areas were more likely to spend computer time on applications with more print, such as online encyclopedias or Web sites containing information for research reports. Children in low-income areas, however, spent more time playing computer games that contained little print.

As we noted before, this "digital divide" actually reflects a "literacy divide." Children who feel confident in reading will read more challenging materials and for higher-level purposes. Less efficacious readers will do just the opposite. Technology, then, widens the gap by providing greater access to challenging materials for those who can handle them. The growing knowledge gap will continue to snowball, creating wider discrepancies in achievement.

Librarians Make the Difference
Libraries are more than books and computers. A number of libraries in deeply poor, troubled neighborhoods broke out of the patterns that we noted in similar neighborhoods. These libraries had similar access to books,

Audrey, a middle-aged African American who has worked for the Free Library of Philadelphia for 18 years, greets children by name as they arrive on a hot July day, giving them hugs and asking them about their day. She takes a few minutes to joke with some 12-year-olds about the hairstyles that they show her in a magazine. She shows a child with special needs how to play a game on the computer.

Audrey does not hesitate to give children a little push at times to encourage them to achieve more than they expect from themselves. She admonishes children watching a friend play on the computer to "take a book and read." At another point, three boys come looking for some sports books to fulfill their summer reading program requirement. "No sports," she tells them. "You've got to find something good to read," and she leads them to a shelf of classic books.

The excellent librarians we found spend little time behind their desks. Instead, they circulate through the room often, looking for children who might need help. These cruises through the library result in informal, yet effec-

tive, teaching opportunities. For example, Audrey notices two boys trying to play a science game on the computer. "Do you know how to play it?" she asks. When she doesn't get an answer, she sits down and shows them.

These librarians also believe in promoting the library's position within the community in an effort to attract patrons in some of the most difficult neighborhoods in the city. With few resources, they hold story hours, writing clubs, and chess clubs. Audrey runs community programs for children, such as a program on Civil War militia, three days a week. Patty, a librarian at a similar library, crams 35 preschool visits into her week. She also visits area elementary schools, encouraging students to get library cards and to sign up for summer reading programs. She organizes trips for her regular users, such as visits to area museums or to sporting events. Kim, another librarian in a low-income, largely immigrant neighborhood, runs a book club for school-age children on the "Goosebumps" books and on other popular fiction series.

In our analysis of excellent librarians, we found several qualities.

■ These librarians made an effort to know the children, call them by their first names, and develop a personal relationship that extended beyond the child to the family.

■ These librarians did not just point to materials; they taught children how to use the materials.

■ These librarians often did "over-the-shoulder" teaching, helping children as they learned how to use computers and as they worked on their homework.

■ In the most difficult circumstances, these librarians formed writing clubs, chess clubs, and reading groups. They planned field trips and other activities to attract and retain their child patrons.

These librarians pushed children to reach beyond their current abilities. In neighborhoods in which many children lacked the necessary support of parents and teachers, these librarians could often help close the gap caused by poor literacy environments. In addition, they often encouraged children to read beyond their current level; left on their own, these children would most likely not do so.

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School Libraries Struggle

Despite the integral role that books, computers, and librarians play for all students, libraries are receiving less and less support (Eberhart, 2003). U.S. public libraries struggle on increasingly limited budgets to meet their patrons' needs.

School libraries have also fallen on hard times—victims, like their public counterparts, of budget cuts and an increased emphasis on technology over books. In a previous study (Neuman & Celano, 2001), we analyzed school libraries in both low-income and middle-income neighborhoods, assessing them in three categories: resources (including quantity and condition of books and computers), staffing, and availability. Our current findings show a similar, but sharper, trajectory of inequality for the neediest students.

In middle-income neighborhoods, school libraries averaged 12 books per student, with nearly all the books in good to excellent condition. This situation contrasted sharply with school libraries in low-income neighborhoods, in which there were only two books— in either good or poor condition—per student. In addition, for every computer in the library in low-income schools, there were three in middle-income schools. Low-income schools had no trained school librarians; the typical school librarian in middle-income schools had a master's degree and 12 years of school experience. Finally, school libraries were open approximately three days a week for students in low-income neighborhoods compared with five days a week in the middle-income neighborhood schools (Neuman & Celano, 2001). The emerging portrait shows that students likely to benefit most from school libraries were offered the poorest services and resources and the least access.

As libraries await their uncertain fate, we need to remember the vital service they provide to the neediest children in our nation. Without libraries, many low-income, minority families will be left without access to books, technology, and the necessary support they need to learn to read and function in our society. If we let the libraries die, we let the dream of Andrew Carnegie, as well as the hopes of a young generation, slip away. ■

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