

# COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

Partnerships with public libraries extend the reach and expand the resources of school libraries

By Maya Muir

**J**ackie Partch of the Multnomah County Library stands before an expectant group of students clustered in the library at Portland's Ainsworth Elementary School. The topic is censorship, and Partch is tossing out clues about recently banned or challenged books. "This book has a serious tone of death, hate, lack of respect, and sheer evil," she says, quoting from an actual 1999 challenge in the South Carolina schools. "Can anyone guess what book this could have been?"

The kids are stumped.

After a dramatic pause, Partch lets them have it. "It's *Harry Potter*," she reveals. A gasp of surprise ripples through the room. Partch then passes around other books that have been challenged. Among them—yet another shock to the students—is *Where the Wild Things Are*, the hugely popular Maurice Sendak classic. A lively discussion ensues about the grounds for challenging these and other books that many readers—kids, parents, teachers, and literary critics alike—consider masterpieces of children's literature.

Partch gives her censorship presentation—playfully titled "Feasting on Forbidden Fruit"—in her role as the School Corps team leader for the county library at the invitation of school library personnel, such as Ainsworth's Jan Donahue. The program is just one of many thriving partnerships between public and school libraries, formed to encourage reading, improve access to information, and broaden students' understanding of resources. Because partnerships between public and school libraries are logical and fruitful, they have become plentiful around the region and across the nation. A 1997 U.S. Department of Education survey found that 60 percent of school libraries and media centers nationwide had engaged in some form of cooperative activity with their local public library within the last year, the *2001 Educational Media and Technology Yearbook* reports. Organizing summer reading programs, providing resources to teachers, and sharing databases are just a few of the ways public libraries enhance school library programs.

## TOUCHING CHILDREN'S HEARTS

On a mild May evening in Seattle, five teams of fourth- and fifth-graders sit on a stage at the Rainier Valley Cultural Center. Their feet shuffle nervously and their fore-

heads wrinkle worriedly as they mentally review every detail of the books they've read in preparation for this big moment. You can almost hear them thinking: What color *was* Paddington Bear's sweater when he kissed Aunt Lucy goodbye? The tension in the room is electric.

Finally—with the contestants' principals and school librarians looking on with rapt anticipation—the emcee rises. It's the final round of Seattle's Global Reading Challenge. Months of preparation have led up to this moment. Librarians in the public library system chose a diverse mix of 28 elementary schools to participate in the 10-book read-off, which culminates with a teleconferenced competition against the winning team from Kalamazoo, Michigan. School librarians served as coaches for their teams.

From a humble start seven years ago, the challenge program has expanded from four teams to more than 180, with many schools having more than one team. The public librarians select books that reflect the cultural diversity of the city, among other criteria. Then they disseminate the books among students and teachers, who might not otherwise know of, or have access to, those particular books. "Now, when there's so much pressure on the curriculum

to focus on standards, it's terrific to see teachers still participating," says Chance Hunt, coordinator of youth services for the Seattle Public Library. "Often you have to touch children's hearts to get them reading."

Seattle's school and public librarians are frequent and close collaborators—conducting joint planning, meeting together at least once a year, and encouraging communication at the administrative and branch levels. Each branch of the public library is responsible for working with the teachers at three to five of the local schools with summer reading programs, book talks or supportive material, and training in the use of the public library database.

The Young Readers Choice Award sponsored by the Pacific Northwest Library Association is another cooperative strategy to get kids charged up about reading. The award program was founded more than 60 years ago by a Seattle bookseller looking for ways to encourage young readers. "The hope was, and still is, that if school and public libraries work together to promote reading for pleasure, then the lifelong love of reading will be instilled in youth," the program Web site explains. Each year, the region's children—along with teachers,

librarians, and parents—nominate titles. Public and school librarians in Washington, Idaho, Oregon, Montana, Alaska, and the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Alberta, promote the nominated books during the school year. In the spring, fourth- through 12th-grade students who have read at least three of the books vote for their favorites. The winners for 2003 are *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo (fourth- through sixth-grade division); *No More Dead Dogs* by Gordon Korman (seventh- through ninth-grade division); and *Hope Was Here* by Joan Bauer (10th- through 12th-grade division).

“Here in Missoula, students are really excited to find out what books are on the list and to read them,” says Paxson Elementary School librarian Carole Manlux, the 2003 chair of the award. “Often, these are the books they revisit years later. And the program gets kids reading who wouldn’t otherwise.”

### KNEE SLAPPING IN THE STACKS

Public libraries and school libraries often team up to create summer reading programs. The Collaborative Summer Library Program is one of the largest such efforts, a 17-state consortium that includes Alaska, Idaho, Montana, and Washington

in the Northwest region. “The program develops regional themes, like this year’s Laugh It Up @ Your Library, which highlights comic art and funny books,” says Mary Dewalt, head of youth services at the Ada Community Library in Boise. “Schools receive promotional help from public libraries to support summer reading, which particularly helps in small towns.”

In even remoter areas—where entertainment is scarce and cultural opportunities are slim—summer reading can fill kids’ imaginations and keep boredom at bay. At Point Higgins

School some 20 miles outside Ketchikan, Alaska, the school library opens its doors two days a week for eight weeks during the summer for a collaborative program between school and public libraries. In eastern Washington, the summer reading program is a big event among small, isolated towns. “We have weekly gatherings with themes, like pirates or balloons, in 10 different sites,” says Reagan Robinson, director of the Stevens County Rural Library District. “We’re doing balloon releases there this year. Postcards will be attached, to be mailed back,

to see how far they go.”

The Seattle Public Library’s summer reading program, now more than 100 years old, also builds its activities around a yearly theme, such as 2003’s “Read Around the World.” With the assistance of school librarians, the public library promotes the theme with book talks and prizes in the schools. “Summer reading programs help maintain skill levels and improve students’ academic success,” Hunt notes.

One key way that public libraries support school libraries is by supplementing materials for teachers and students. In fact, this is the most common form of cooperation between the two agencies, according to the 1997 U.S. Department of Education survey.

Partch offers this example: “If a teacher is going to teach third-graders about frogs, we’ll collect the books on frogs in our catalog and pick out the best ones for third-graders. Then we make a bibliography for the teacher and send a copy of each title to the branch library closest to the school. We prepare about 40 of these per month.”

Librarian Catherine Carroll of Walt Morey Middle School in the community of Troutdale on the outskirts of Portland relies heavily on help from the Multnomah County School Corps. “I’m proud of our collection of books here at



Walt Morey,” she says, “but we have only 6,000 volumes for 700 students. I’ve got more than 200 books checked out through School Corps right now. It’s a wonderful program.”

Partch and her staff also have filled dozens of big, brightly colored buckets with fiction and nonfiction books on 15 topics, ranging from African American history to biomes and ecosystems—25 to 30 books per bucket. Of special significance to Northwest classrooms are the “Bucket of Books” collections on the Lewis and Clark expedition (examples of titles include *Off the Map: The Journals of Lewis and Clark*, *On the Trail of Sacagawea*, and *Animals on the Trail With Lewis and Clark*); the Oregon Trail (*Daily Life in a Covered*

research, and a “Webliography” of related Web sites.

Partch says the demand far exceeds the current resources. “We always have waiting lists on all the buckets,” she says. “We’ll expand the program next year.”

### LIBRARY BOOKS AT THE GROCERY STORE

Access to public libraries—or lack thereof—is another issue that spawns partnerships. In Multnomah County, anyone with a library card can plug into the public library system from any computer terminal with Internet service. To encourage kindergartners to get cards, the library conducts yearly campaigns aimed at these littlest readers.

In 1992, the city of Ketchikan pooled funds with the school district to jointly purchase a library information management system; now they share a mainframe and a database. The University of Alaska came on board a few years later. Users can place holds on books from any computer. A courier then delivers the books to “share sites”—convenient, accessible places like grocery stores—for pick-up. “Especially with tight budgets, this arrangement really helps teachers and students get what they need,” says Ketchikan High School librarian Ruth Woodruff.

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*Wagon, A Pioneer Woman’s Memoir*, and *Children of the Westward Trail*); and Pacific Northwest Native Americans (*Children of the Midnight Sun*, *Coyote in Love*, and *The Yakama*). Teachers check out the entire bucket, which also contains a teacher’s guide to classroom activities, instructions for doing further

Other noteworthy partnerships around the region include:

- **Battle of the Books.** An idea borrowed from an old Chicago radio quiz, Alaska’s Battle of the Books is sponsored by the Alaska Association of School Librarians. A committee of librarians and teachers compiles annual book lists for competitions at the school, district, and state levels. The public librarians stock plenty of copies during the summer, as general interest in those titles gets a boost from the statewide competition.
- **Gotta Read This.** Portland’s Multnomah County Library, in addition to its summer reading program, holds a summer workshop where school and library staff can preview new titles. Especially when budgets are shrinking, the workshop helps schools to make sound book investments.
- **Author Appearances.** Book talks and guest appearances by authors and illustrators are sponsored by the Youth Services staff at the Seattle Public Library. “We invite the teachers or librarians at local schools to bring the kids to us, or—more typically with high school students—we go to them,” says Hunt. “Either way, it’s a win-win for both institutions.”

School librarians all over the region voice appreciation for the support available from public libraries, wherever it falls on the continuum—from summer reading to continuous collaboration. Whatever the level of contact, many would agree with Hunt that these partnerships become even more important as budgets tighten and services in the schools become vulnerable. But they caution that the presence of a professional librarian at the school level remains an essential component of an effective partnership. As Carroll observes: “The services available through the Multnomah County library system are a great resource. But you need a librarian in the school to coordinate its use.”

The school librarian, she says, is the school’s linkage to the public library. When one goes, so does the other.

“I’m afraid that, sadly, the schools that really need these extra resources won’t have access in the future,” she laments.

At Point Higgins School, a decade-old summer reading program died abruptly last summer. “It only cost \$2,000, but we didn’t get funding this year because of budget cuts,” mourns Ketchikan public librarian Charlotte Glover. “It’s the kids who get hurt.” ■