

# How Do You Connect with Your Community?

We recently asked school librarians across the country to tell us how they involved the community in their school library. The methods respondents reported for involving the community varied widely, but two answers came back as heavily favored methods across the board: volunteering and public library collaboration. Over 60% of respondents are using both of these methods of integrating their community into their school library programs.

## Volunteering

The benefits of using volunteers in a school library are well known: volunteers can provide extra hands for many physical tasks and help keep up with the "housekeeping" necessary to keep a space running smoothly. Even more beneficial is the likelihood that volunteers will become program advocates as they see and are a part of how the library impacts the school (McGown 2007).

Bringing in members of the community to create bulletin boards, check out materials, shelve books, read to students, greet students, and adopt sections or genres of the library can change the atmosphere of the space. While parents are a great resource, established librarians understand the wisdom in seeking out other members of the community who are looking for a place to provide service. Some districts can even attribute major improvements of their facilities and services to volunteer-run programs started to support the library. Friends of Oakland Public School Libraries (FOPSL) is such an organization that draws heavily on volunteers to support all aspects of the district's library program (Kaun 2014).

The use of volunteers can be strongly connected to other community partnerships. As school librarians practice the art of building bridges to individuals in the community, this act can begin to extend to other programs and organizations with which the library can have a mutually beneficial relationship.

## Public Library Collaboration

Another way to bring your community into the school library is to collaborate with your local public library. Survey results show this to be the most popular way to incorporate community into programming; 64% of responding librarians do this to some degree. For those not yet on board, the Association for Library Services to Children, a division of the American Library Association, offers comprehensive resources for getting a school-public library collaboration going.

For those who already do some collaboration, these resources can also provide examples of what is being done by other schools. Larger initiatives, like setting up delivery services or other solutions that allow students access to public library resources, can improve circulation and ease budgetary concerns. More importantly, they can help students see themselves as public library users as well. This could affect attitudes and actions as students' roles change when they graduate from school.

## Compassionate Makerspaces

According to survey data, compassionate makerspaces are not currently a common practice. Only around 14% of respondents acknowledged using them. However, the idea of compassionate makerspaces is relatively new and worth mentioning as a great way to bring a more global view within the walls of the school library. Gina Seymour, a leader in the movement, uses the makerspace in her library for more than STEM education: "Collaborating with service based clubs in her school and cultivating partnerships with outside agencies, students carry out hands-on service projects taking an active role in making a difference in their community and the world" (<https://ginaseymour.com/compassionatemaker/>).

The exciting thing about compassionate makerspaces is that they can meet so many different needs. There are projects, small and big, that focus on health and wellness, animal welfare, sustainability, patriotism, grief and bereavement, civic engagement, and projects with global impact. Often, our attempt to build bridges with our community results in our bringing things into the library: volunteers, guest speakers or readers, or special events. Compassionate making has an outward focus that can positively affect our students as they work to contribute meaningfully to their community.

Giving our students the opportunity to build connections within their communities as we model our own bridge building will only benefit our libraries, our students, our schools, and our communities.

## Works Cited

Kaun, Tom. "Friends of the Oakland Public School Libraries: Building Bridges to the Local Community." *CSLA Journal* 38, no. 11 (Spring 2014): 20–23.

McGown, Sue W. "Valuable Volunteers: How to Find, Use, and Keep Them." *Library Media Connection* 26, no. 2 (2007): 10–13.  
<https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Home/Display/2149810>

## Resources

ALSC. School/Public Library Cooperative Programs. <http://www.ala.org/alsc/aboutalsc/external-relationships/schoolplcoop>

Gina Seymour "Makers with a Cause" SLC webinar.

## About the Author

**Jen Gilbert**, MSLIS, is a K-12 teacher librarian at Eminence Independent Schools in Eminence, KY and part-time faculty at the University of Kentucky. She earned her bachelor's in English teaching from Brigham Young University and her master's in library and information science from the University of Kentucky.

Jen loves spending her days in her school library, the EDhub, and promises a VIP tour to any fellow school librarians who want to check out the EDhub's impressive maker space.

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## MLA Citation

Gilbert, Jen. "How Do You Connect with Your Community?" *School Library Connection*, March 2019, [schoollibraryconnection.com/Home/Survey/2192819](https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Home/Survey/2192819).

<https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Home/Survey/2192819?topicCenterId=1955261>

Entry ID: 2192819