The level of educational achievement by the nation's residents remains a major public concern. Since 1983 when *A Nation at Risk* was published, the country has been engaged in deliberations about ways to improve education and to increase student learning so that the U.S. can remain competitive in the modern world. The deliberations culminated in September 1989 when President Bush held a summit meeting with the state governors and later established six national educational goals in the following areas of concern: readiness for school; high school completion; student achievement and citizenship; improved science and mathematics proficiency; adult literacy and lifelong learning; and safe, disciplined, and drug-free schools (National Governor's Association 1990).

Following the establishment of these goals, policy makers and educators at various levels have been developing strategies for achieving these goals. At the state level, various strategies have been recommended, depending on the extent and the nature of problems in the state. These strategies have been summarized in the report, *Educating America: State Strategies for Achieving the National Education Goals* (National Governor's Association 1990).

In developing state strategies, educators as well as policy makers agreed that the educational problem in this country lies primarily in the elementary and secondary school systems. Subsequently, most of the state strategies focus on school reform with emphases on curriculum changes, teacher training and certification, and school policies and practices. Educators and policy makers also agreed that excellence in education cannot be achieved by education systems alone. Excellence requires a strong commitment and concerted effort of school, home, and community services. Without a strong collaboration among these sectors in a society, the goals of achieving excellence in education "will remain nothing more than a distant, unattainable vision" (National Governor's Association 1990, 38).

Among the major community service organizations, the public library is the richest in educational resources and learning programs for children and parents. Unfortunately, the full potential of the public library as a resource for excellence in education has seldom been recognized and tapped by education policy makers. A review of the literature on achieving national education goals reveals only limited involvement of the public library. This lack of involvement of the public library may be partly due to the lack of an active campaign by public librarians. Thus, many educators and policy makers, as well as the general public, may have a narrow view about the public library as a major educational force in a community. They may still consider the public library merely as an information center, and are not fully aware of its expanded function in education and training. Such understanding of the public library function must be broadened so that the public library will receive appropriate community commitment and can effectively join forces with other educational establishments to improve American education.

It is therefore important for educators and policy makers to gain a broad perspective about the public library—its educational function, its services to parents and schools, and the full role it can play in the nation’s effort to achieve excellence in education. This article presents such a perspective, based on the experience in working with many librarians in the development of the Federal-State Cooperative System for public library data (Task Force 1989). It is hoped that this article will generate further discussion between education policy makers and public librarians.

The Public Library as a Major Education Center

First of all, the public library is not merely a depository of information; it is a major education center in a community. Next to home and school, the public library is often a community’s most organized learning resource. Over the years, the public library has proactively provided many services conducive to learning. It offers many educational programs to parents and children, and it works with day care centers, kindergartens, and schools. It has become an essential partner of schools and parents in educating young children. In fact, it is an institution where people of all ages can choose subjects of interest and study at their own pace, where children can be exposed to the wealth of knowledge, and where children can get help for their school work (see McClure, Owen, Zweizig, Lynch & Van House 1987).

Like public schools, the public library is generally well-equipped to contribute to learning of residents in a community. It has the essential learning materials for people of all ages—books, films, videos, recordings, computers, journals, magazines, CD-ROM and interactive multimedia. These rich resources are accessible to the general public. The public library also provides spaces for study and for organized meetings, lectures, and exhibitions. Thus, many self-initiated or organized learning activities can take place in the library. Moreover, the public library provides resources and reference staff to guide users.
The public library also offers learning/study programs. Many public libraries offer story hours for young children, summer reading programs, parent/child programs, and/or readers' advisory services. According to a national survey of services and resources for children in public libraries in 1988-89, the average number of group programs offered in a public library in that year for infants through 2-year-olds was 9; for 3-to-5 year-olds, 43; for school-age children, 25; and for unspecified or combined ages of children, 5 (Lewis & Farris 1990). The survey also found that most public libraries (83%) cooperated with schools enrolling children 14 years old and under; 62% of libraries cooperated with preschools or day care centers. Moreover, the federal government also provides grants to improve literacy services under the Library Services and Construction Act, Title VI, Library Literacy Program (Humes & Cameron 1990). Of these libraries receiving grants in FY 1989, 82% are acquiring instructional literacy materials, 78% are training tutors, and 75% are recruiting students and tutors. Although there are no official reports on the number of people served by these educational programs or services, it is reasonable to expect that the number is significant, particularly since these programs are open to the general public, and are usually free of charge. The public library is indeed a community learning center.

Furthermore, the public library is widely accessible. There are about 9,000 public libraries in this country serving 96% of the U.S. population (Podolsky 1990). Many of them have one or more branches and/or bookmobiles to provide services. Unlike public schools that are open only during the day for children, a large number of public libraries are open to the general public during evening and weekend hours, enabling people of all ages to make use of the resources at their convenience.

The public library is indeed "a school without walls," "admitting" anyone in their community interested in learning and seeking information. As Daniel J. Boorstin (former Librarian of Congress) once said, "Libraries remain the meccas of self-help, the most open of open universities...where there are no entrance examinations and no diplomas, and where one can enter at any age" (U.S. Department of Education 1984, 45). Thus, even though the number of public libraries is much smaller than that of public schools, the libraries nevertheless serve the population greater. The public library certainly has an important role in educating residents in this country.

Potential Roles in Achieving the Nation’s Education Goals

As an educational center in a community, the public library could contribute very significantly to the achievement of national education goals, if its program and service roles were properly supported and implemented. A few roles that the public library can play effectively are suggested below. These roles reflect only part of the overall library service emphases generally accepted by public librarians (See McClure, et al. 1987), and may have already been incorporated into the missions of many public libraries in this
country. The discussion herein merely exemplifies the relevance and potential of the public library in improving education.

**Collect and Effectively Disseminate Parenting and Career Information**

The first role that the public library can play in achieving the nation’s education goals is the collection and dissemination of parenting and career information. Several state strategies require the development of up-to-date parenting information and effective delivery of the information. For example, to achieve the goal of school readiness, one state strategy is to "equip parents to support their child’s development and learning...If parents are informed and confident in supporting their child’s early learning and development, they can powerfully enhance school readiness." Another state strategy requires a community to "provide better information to parents about available programs." (National Governor’s Association 1990, 14). These state strategies call on organizations and offices such as public libraries and pediatricians that have frequent contacts with parents to share the task. Logically, the public library can take a lead role in this task since it has the needed resources and expertise in information dissemination and is accessible to the general public.

As a part of the information dissemination task, the public library can effectively provide career information services. For example, to achieve the goal of life-long and adult education, one state strategy is to "support and strengthen the development of career counseling resources in libraries, employment service offices and other appropriate facilities to help youth and adult learners make these decisions at arm’s length from potential providers" (National Governors’ Association 1990, 25). The public library can certainly provide such services effectively since developing information resources is one of its basic missions, and it has the capability of providing on-site and telephone services to users in locating needed information. The potential has been well recognized by many organizations. For example, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation recognized the potential and has supported a project in the Public Library Association, a division of the American Library Association, to work with state and local Education Information Centers (EIC’s) in the public library to promote expansion and improvement of job and career information services.

**Assist Parents to Ready Their Children for School**

Another valuable role is to assist parents in preparing their children for formal schooling. The public library can effectively achieve this role through various parent/child reading programs and collaboration with day care centers. In particular, the public library can assist parents in undertaking the following challenges:

- Developing children’s reading skills and attitudes, and cultivating their love for learning prior to formal schooling. Research has found that "the best way for parents to help their children become better readers is to read to them—even when they are very young" (U.S. Department of
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Education 1986, 9). Many parents may not have the proper reading materials and skills to do so. The public library can help these parents by preparing and supplying appropriate books and by teaching them how to read to their children. The public library can also work with day care centers in its community to make effective use of its resources in developing children’s reading skills and attitudes at an early age.

This role is not new to many public libraries. In fact, many reading programs are being offered, including story hours for young children, summer reading programs for preschool and elementary school children (e.g., Sturdivant 1989; Medina 1984; Kennelly 1984; Jackson 1987; Kreigh 1986), reading clubs (Allison 1989), and special programs for children and parents (Locke 1988; Rigenberg 1988; Perkinson 1989). Although the intensity and the content of the programs may differ from library to library, the objectives are the same—get children to read. Results are favorable.

These reading programs for young children are extremely valuable. Study after study has shown that children who read more will achieve higher levels than those who don’t. Librarians often talk about how to get children “addicted” to books. (“Hooked on Books” was a library slogan of National Library Week; the more recent one has been “Kids Who Read Succeed.”) But to do so, one must start the work when children are young while they are still full of curiosity and eager to learn. Many library reading programs are designed on this premise. How encouraging it would be to hear a 5-year-old child say he or she has finished reading the entire collection of children’s books on dinosaurs, airplanes, or birds in a library! The public library can certainly work with parents and schools to achieve this goal.

Instilling in children the desire for knowledge. Curiosity is a trait native to humans and especially active in children. By providing access to the realms of knowledge which the public library can provide, one can foster the thirst for knowledge and curiosity in our children. Children who are deeply impressed by the amount of knowledge stored in the library are naturally motivated to explore their horizons through reading.

To foster children’s desire for knowledge, one must start early. Studies have found that an early imprint on children’s mind may have a long-lasting effect. Thus, public library programs for young children are extremely valuable, and could have significant impact on persons in later years. Dr. Glenn Seaborg, a Nobel Prize winner and a member of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, fondly recalls going to the public library, walking between snowdrifts over his head, to get his favorite books before others found them (U. S. Department of Education 1984). Many other famous persons may also have had some similar pleasant experience with the public library.

The public library is a natural place to foster children’s thirst for knowledge because it houses a variety of resources—books, journals, maps, records, etc.—that encourages children to explore human knowledge and experience. It would be exciting for young children to visit and explore the library. The public library could develop special programs to show children the value of knowledge and the importance of being an educated person.
The public library could also work with parents to cultivate children’s desire for knowledge. Many existing reading programs can certainly help to foster such desire.

The above functions and services of the public library would be particularly valuable to young children at risk, especially those in the inner-city and rural areas. These children can benefit from any educational opportunities provided by the public library, since many of their parents may not be able to provide them with adequate learning opportunities at home. The public library could provide valuable outreach services to these children. It could bring them to the library or take the library services to them. Such services would expose children to a proper learning environment and a wealth of learning materials both of which have been found to be significant factors for high achievement (e.g., Peng & Lee 1991).

Public libraries could take several approaches to reach out to these children. In addition to offering story hours and summer reading programs, some public libraries work closely with child care centers, nursery schools, kindergartens, and Sunday schools to bring books and services to children who are unlikely to go to public libraries (MacCurry 1989). Some libraries take a direct approach. For example, Pittsburgh’s Beginning with Books Project distributed free packets of children’s books to disadvantaged families, resulting in favorable effects on literacy activities and family reading patterns (Locke 1988). Furthermore, public libraries could provide bus service to pick up parents and children to attend special programs in the library, operate branch libraries in lower-income housing projects, and provide bookmobile services to reach young children and ready them for schooling.

Reinforce School Education

Another education role the public library could play well is to reinforce school education. In addition to cooperating with schools and teachers in supplementing learning materials and in motivating students to read, which many public libraries have been doing, the public library could provide the following services:

Assist children in doing their school work. The public library is a helpful place for many students to do their school work. There are books, journals, records, and many sources that students can use. Many libraries also have student tutors and adults who can help students to search for answers to their questions. Moreover, the public library has space for studying. Resources such as these would be particularly helpful to those with disadvantaged home backgrounds.

Enhance children’s skills to search, obtain, synthesize, and digest information for decision-making and problem-solving purposes. In a democratic and technology-rich society where more and more information is being provided each year, one must know how to find, evaluate, and use the information available for making decisions. While regular schools would teach students such skills, public libraries could further enhance them, especially among young children. The public library can foster such
skills effectively since its diverse sources of information will allow more thorough comparisons and evaluations. At an early age, children could be introduced to these diverse resources (e.g., books, journals), can carefully study and synthesize the information, and can then make decisions based on research. Public librarians can design special programs for teaching older children such research skills as finding needed information.

Promote Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning

Unlike the school and academic libraries that have distinct clienteles, the public library works for all members of a community, many of whom are independent adult learners. The public library could serve these people well by providing them with appropriate learning materials and linking them to resources from many places in the community.

Essentials for the Public Library to Perform Its Roles

In view of the public library's potential for promoting the achievement of the nation's education goals, one might ask whether the library is prepared for this important role. Undoubtedly some are; however, many will need improvement and additional resources. Following are a few suggestions for increasing the capacity of libraries to serve the diverse educational needs of those who use them. While additional support to the public library may be difficult in some communities, particularly in light of a great need of support for improving the public school system, the potential return of the support, particularly to those children with disadvantaged backgrounds, should nevertheless be a worthy consideration for setting community priorities.

Increase the Number of Children's Specialists and Storytellers in the Public Library

Presently, many public libraries are not adequately staffed, particularly in the area of children's services. For example, a national survey showed that over half (58%) of public libraries did not have any children's librarians on their staff; 34 percent had only one children's librarian, and only 8 percent had two or more (Lewis & Farris 1990). Thus, an agenda for improving the learning level of the nation's residents could be to increase the number of staff in public libraries that provide educational programs and services to children, parents, and schools. The effort may include the use of volunteer services of retired teachers and other professionals.

Upgrade the Training and Retraining Programs for Library Professionals

In addition to technology and information management, librarians for children, like school teachers, should have a good understanding of child development, reading theories, and children's literature. Librarians should also have a good understanding of educational program development and evaluation methods in order to improve the effectiveness of their programs. Such requirements may imply the need for changes in the curriculum of
The knowledge and skills in program development and evaluation will also be very useful to public librarians. For example, public libraries provide many story hours and summer reading programs, but there are no systematic evaluations of the relative effectiveness of these programs. Without evaluation, it is uncertain whether any particular program should be recommended for wide application. Thus, it is necessary for public librarians to have such knowledge and skills, so that any initiation and expansion of library programs and services can be based on the results of research and evaluation.

Support and Expand the Outreach Programs to Help Parents and Children with Disadvantaged Backgrounds

Study after study has shown that parents play the most important role in their children's learning. However, many disadvantaged parents may not know how to be effective in helping their children learn. The public library could expand its parent service program to reach those parents. It could also bring materials and reading programs to pre-school children with disadvantaged backgrounds. As mentioned earlier, this may imply a need for more bookmobiles, branches, and professional staff to serve these children and their parents.

Conclusion

The achievement of the national education goals requires a combined effort of family, school, and community. The public library is the community's richest information and learning resource center for parents, children, and in fact people of all ages. It could also help teachers to reinforce teaching at school. Its educational programs and services could greatly help parents to prepare young children for schooling and to enhance learning among students of all ages. The public library is undoubtedly an essential partner of parents and schools in achieving the national education goals. It should be adequately supported to perform its roles and be included as an integral part of the national force to improve education and life-long learning in our country.

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