

Open and Accessible: The Relationship between Closures and Circulation in School Library Media Centers

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A hallmark of school library media best practice is for the library media center to be open and accessible to patron use before, during, and after the school day and throughout the entire school year. Anecdotal evidence and informal discussion among school library media specialists indicate that library media facilities are sometimes used for activities unrelated to the mission of the school library media program in the school. These activities may close the library media center to regular patron use for all or part of the school day. This study surveyed school library media specialists in two states and examined the reasons that school library media centers are closed as well as the effect of the closure on circulation. Results indicate that the three most commonly reported reasons for closure of the school library media center were preparation for the end of the school year, book fairs, and standardized testing. The only predictor of school library media center closures was the poverty level of the school. No effect was found on the number of materials circulated.

A hallmark of school library service throughout the last century has been for school library media centers to be open and accessible before, during, and after the school day and throughout the entire school year. As stated in the American Association of School Librarians' *Position Statement on the Value of Library Media Programs in Education*, "In today's information age, an individual's success, even existence, depends largely on the ability to access, evaluate, and utilize information" (AASL 2007). *Information Power* (AASL/AECT 1998) notes that the focus of the school library media center is learning, and that it has to take precedence over schedules, school hours, and other logistical elements of the school library media program. In order to fully understand the structure of the library program that can best support learning, the profession needs to understand how current structure elements are affecting output measures in the library program. Circulation of materials is probably one of the most often used output elements, yet there is little research on how structural logistics such as library hours impact circulation as well as the extent to which changes in educational programs affect library hours. Recent anecdotal reports indicate that closing the library for standardized testing and other nonlibrary school functions has become a problem impacting the operation of the school library media program. This study investigates the reasons that school library media centers report being closed and the affect of occasional closure on library circulation.

Review of the Literature

The theoretical framework for this research study is drawn from concepts of equitable access to library resources and services. Wiegand has noted that libraries do three things very well: (1) they make information accessible, (2) they provide a meeting place for both social and instructional programming, and (3) they provide materials for leisure and information reading (Wiegand 2003). As early as 1928, access to the library as a physical place was seen as vital to the success of library media centers (Wilson 1929). This emphasis has been institutionalized in seminal library documents such as *Access to Resources and Services in the School Library Media Program, an Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights* (AASL 2005). It is articulated in national guidelines such as *Information Power* (AASL/AECT 1998). Access to school library media programs has been further outlined in studies of flexible access, the impact of access on achievement, and access to resources.

Access through Scheduling

Circulation data is the most common method of measuring library usage (Everhart 1998). Thanks to automated circulation systems, schools can easily gather data on-site; however, there have been few studies that examine the affect of access to resources on circulation. The importance of doing so, however, is reiterated by manuals for the practitioner on the evaluation of school library media programs such as Bradburn's *Output Measures for School Library Media Programs* (1999). The relationship between the numbers of days that the library is open and the effect on circulation during the school year has not been studied. Before intellectual access to information can occur, physical access must be addressed (*Impact* 2005).

In his book *Taxonomies of the School Library Media Program* (1988), Loertscher addresses the importance of access to facilities, materials, and equipment, stressing that access is a vital component of an efficient school library media center. He points out th-2(on c)4n

In several of his studies, Lance addresses access issues when referring to the correlation between longer library media center hours and higher student usage and, consequently, test scores (Lance 1994; Lance 2002a and 2002b; Lance, Wellburn, and Hamilton-Pennell 1993). For example, in the Michigan study, he found that higher numbers of weekly hours of librarian and staff resulted in a rise in seventh grade reading scores. The Michigan and New Mexico studies offer further evidence that an increase in school librarian hours results in an increase in reading achievement (Lance, Rodney, and Hamilton-Pennell 2003a and 2003b). Furthermore, in the North Carolina study, a statistically significant correlation ($p = .008$) was found between the number of school library hours open in a typical week and student achievement. Student achievement tended to increase as the number of hours that the school library was open increased. High-performing schools were open an average of 36.3 hours per week whereas

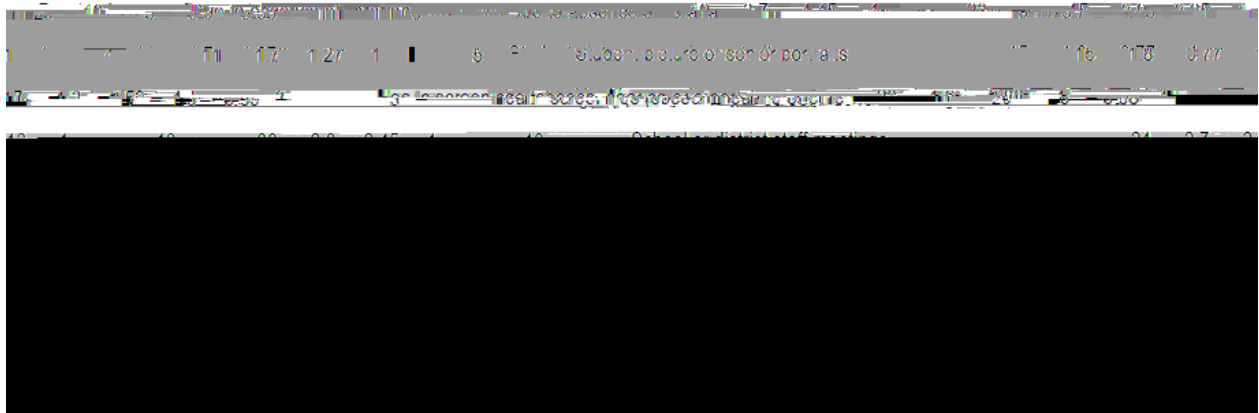
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higher-income families. There is cause for concern when marginalized students, who use the

Participants

The population for this study consisted of public school library media centers in North Carolina and Virginia. We selected participants from these two states because of our collegial relationships with the states' school library media organizations. In fact, partial funding for the study was provided by the North Carolina School Library Media Association (NCSLMA) and the Virginia Educational Media Association (VEMA). NCSLMA and VEMA have

note that this study does not attempt to expose causal linkages between closures and circulation,



Overall, reasons to close school library media centers for either full or partial days added up. On average, school library media centers were closed almost 15 full and 9 partial days (table 2). If one prorates a partial day as a half day, then the total time school library media centers are closed to circulation, on average, is 17 full days in a year. An academic year is typically 185 days, thus, on average, libraries are likely to be closed 9 percent of the time students are in school.

This is not to say that all schools close their media centers 9 percent of the academic year. The amount of closures varies. Eight schools reported no full or partial day closures. Of the 168 who did report closures, they ranged from one to forty-eight full days. Similarly, schools reported closing for partial days for anywhere from one to thirty-two days.

Table 3 provides data on the reasons that school library media centers are closed by whether the school is elementary, middle, or high school level. In general, there is little difference for the numbers of days closed, although in some categories high schools appear to be closed for fewer days. This is especially apparent in days closed due to the absence of the school library media specialist. No school library media specialist reported any full or part-day closures due to PTA/PTO meetings.

Table 3. Description of Full and Partial Days School Libraries are Closed by Type of School

Are the following conditions correlated with the number of days of school library media center closures: Type of school: Elementary, middle, or high school, Number of Full Time Library Media Specialists, Amount of clerical assistance, Proportion of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch?

Tables 4 through 7 present the analysis of covariance on the above factors. Table 4 presents the findings on the differences between elementary, middle, and high schools. This statistical test

Table 4. ANCOVA of School Type on Total Days Closed

Table 5.

Free and reduced lunch (FRL) percentage is commonly used as an indicator of socioeconomic level of the school. In table 7, an ANCOVA was performed to find out if schools with differing levels of FRLs reported differing numbers of days closed. Table 7 indicates that there is a significant difference in the amount of school library media center closures in schools with differing FRL percentages ($F(1513,5) = 2.580, p = .028$). As the FRL percentages increased, indicating more students who lived in poverty and attended that school, the number of days reported closed increased as well. This indicates that the poorest schools closed their school library media centers the most days.

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Table 9. ANCOVA of Days Closed on Books Per Pupil for North Carolina

Discussion

In this survey, library media specialists were asked to report the number of days that school library media centers were

Although this study provides important research into the challenges facing school library media specialists in the day-to-day operation of the building-level school library media program, there are limitations. The sample size was small and covered only two states. Even though the two states are similar in size and policy regulations, it is conceivable that a similar study performed in only one state may have other findings. Also, this is the first study of its kind. Further research that replicates this study in other states will provide more definitive answers as to how and why school library media centers are closed to circulation.

The use of circulation data as a measure of program outcomes also needs much further study. Although this study indicates that closing the library has no impact on circulation, further analysis is needed to determine how students retrieve materials when the library is closed. We don't know if school library media specialists are mitigating the impact of the library being closed, or if that finding speaks to the persistence of students as readers who will return when the library is open and find reading material. Regardless, further study is needed before definitive conclusions can be reached.

This research also only examines the statistical dimension of school library closures. There are important research questions beyond the scope of this study, such as whether the principal, the library media specialist, or the school board decides when a school library media center should be closed. Factors pertaining to usage are also not included in this study. For example, it was not determined whether or not the school library media center uses student selfcheckout at times when school library media staff is otherwise occupied, the number and was that students used the library facility, and the degree to which the facility is used if the school library media specialist is called to other parts of the building or on other assignments.

This study

_____.

- rural
- urban
- suburban

10. What is your school enrollment?

11. What is your school Free and Reduced Lunch percentage (FRL)?

12. How many full

- Other

18. How many entire school days was the library closed for circulation due to the following reasons?

- Beginning of the school year
- End of the school year
- Due to absence of librarian
- Student pictures or senior portraits
- Health screenings (speech, hearing, or other)
- School or district staff meetings
- PTA meetings
- Book fairs or other special events
- Testing

19. How many partial days was the library closed to circulation for the following reasons?

- Beginning of school year
- End of school year
- Absence of librarian
- Student pictures/senior portraits
- Hearing tests
- Book Fairs
- Other

20. Is the library for student book checkout for the following reasons?

- Library class in session
- Librarian at lunch
- Other

21. Is the library open before and after school?

- Before school
- After school

22. Would you like to comment further on any issues relating to circulation, loss of materials, scheduling, facility use, or other topics we have not asked in this survey?

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