Services and Activities Assessment:

Contra Costa County Library, El Cerrito Library

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**Introduction**

Though public libraries in the United States historically began with a majority of its services and activities directed towards adults, its evolution over time eventually led to an expansion of these services to meet the unique needs of children and young adults. In addition to specialized collections, library personnel, and programs, public libraries also offer many services for the benefit of the youth populations they serve. No matter the community, no matter the locale, these services are crucial to the variety of personal, recreational, educational, and informational needs of this younger demographic, and it is both the mission and responsibility of community-based public libraries to develop, implement, and evaluate appropriate services to meet these varied needs.

Kathleen de la Peña McCook and Alicia K. Long (2011) organize the diverse number of services available to youth into four categories which encompass the 18 services responses of public libraries as outlined by Sandra Nelson in *Strategic Planning for Results*. These four categories are: 1) Public Sphere, 2) Cultural heritage, 3) Education, and 4) Information. In this service assessment report, I will evaluate various services both offered and not offered by the El Cerrito Public Library to meet the various needs of children and teens of the community, based on my observations and through assessment of the library in terms of the categories outlined by de la Peña McCook and Long. Additionally, I will compare both the quantity and quality of these services in relationship to both the demographics of the community, and best practices as outlined by scholars in order to give a fuller picture as to the strengths and weakness of these services. It is my hope with this assessment that services to youth by the El Cerrito Library can be implemented, expanded, and enhanced.

**Description of Community and Youth Population**

El Cerrito is a small city, located in the eastern part of the San Francisco Bay Area in California. The El Cerrito Library, founded in 1913, is a small neighborhood public library part of the Contra Costa County Library, and works to fulfill its mission of, “Bringing People and Ideas Together.” The El Cerrito Library, having outgrown its current location, is in need of a new facility. Despite the formation of the El Cerrito New Library Committee in 2011 by a group of concerned El Cerrito residents, the library does not have the funds for a new library facility.

The population of the City of El Cerrito is 23,549 people, which is made up of a majority of Whites (non-Hispanic) and Asians and smaller numbers of Hispanic and Black populations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Due to its unique geographical location, residents of the nearby cities of Albany, Kensington, and Richmond may also make use of the library, though each of those cities has their own public libraries. According to library statistics, only 42% of cardholders are El Cerrito residents, which indicates that many from outside the city use this library (Contra Costa County Library, 2013). Of this population 17.4% are persons under 18 years old, which is significantly lower than the overall state percentage of 25% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). I am interested in assessing services for this demographic because during my visit to this library I observed many children and teens utilizing the library, despite the fact that most of the services and resources offered seemed to be directed towards adults.

According to the American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2011), there are 4,873 people currently enrolled in schools in El Cerrito. The majority of this population attends elementary school and middle school (grades 1-8) at 30.5%, followed by preschool which accounts for 11.6% and high school (grades 9-12) at 11.5%, with those in kindergarten falling last with 8.4% of the school population. Public schools in El Cerrito are part of the West Contra Costa Unified School District. There are three public elementary schools located in the city: Fairmont Elementary, Harding Elementary, and Madera Elementary. There is one middle school, Portola Middle School, and one high school, El Cerrito High School.

According to data from the Education Data Partnership (2013), the total number of students enrolled in El Cerrito elementary schools is 1,490; in the middle school, 525; and in the high school, 1,297. In total, this accounts for 3,312 students enrolled in public schools located in El Cerrito. Also, while most of the public schools in El Cerrito have met their growth targets for their Academic Performance Index scores (API), which are based on standardized testing scores, many have *not* met their growth targets for subgroups of ethnic and economically disadvantaged students (Education Data Partnership, 2013). These numbers do not account for students enrolled in the eight private or independent schools located in El Cerrito or students that are homeschooled. The Education Data Partnership (2013) estimates that 8% of all California students attend private schools. The National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) estimated that in 2007, 2.9% of the school-age population in the United States was homeschooled, though this population has been steadily increasing since 1999. Though the number of students in El Cerrito and enrolled in schools in El Cerrito are slightly lower than overall state percentages, the population is significant enough that services for this diverse group should be carefully considered, implemented, and evaluated.

**Description of Youth Services at the El Cerrito Library**

Youth services at the El Cerrito Library are segmented into two broad groups, services for children and services for teens. It is also important to point out that in our digital age, services are provided to these groups both physically, in the library itself, and virtually, through the library website. A discussion of the services for children and teens at the El Cerrito Library in the categories of public sphere, education, and information follows.

One of the broad functions of the library is as a component of the community’s public sphere. This encompasses not only supporting the “community’s links to the daily reality and discourse of those it serves” (Long & de la Peña McCook, 2011, p. 252) but also providing spaces (physical and virtual) where the community can come together. The El Cerrito Library dedicated almost half of its facility for use by children and for their collections. The library also has many tables in the area for children to gather with their families or for studying. Virtually, the library provides a Just for Kids site (<http://ccclib.org/youth/>), which is colorful and caters to the needs of children with links to databases, games, and podcasts. The physical area provided for teens is the smallest dedicated area in the El Cerrito Library, with only enough space for three chairs. This section has a teen comment board, where teens can ask questions or make suggestions to the library, and is a good place for active discourse. There is also Just for Teens site (<http://ccclib.org/teen/>), separate from the main Contra Costa County Library website, which provides links to book lists, college information, and homework help.

Another important function of the public library is its educational role in the community. There are many ways the library can fulfill this function for youth, for example, through early, teen, and family literacy, career development, and homework help. The library can also provide learning support for students enrolled in formal education or homeschooling in the community. The library provides a series of specially complied subject guides for children and teens ranging in areas such as social studies, math, science, biography, and language. These subject guides, accessible through the library website, serve as pathfinders to outside links that support the learning of children and teens. The library also provides educational support through access to materials in different formats, including eBooks, audiobooks, and test guides. The library also offers a holds service for cardholders on items from any of the 26 CCC Library branches, in addition to a newer format of interlibrary loans called Link+, a cooperative project among over 60 public and academic libraries located in California and Nevada. The CCC Library was also an innovator with its Discover & Go service, which provides passes to museums and other cultural institutions for children and families, often for free or at a discounted price.

Lastly, the public library plays an important role in providing information to the community. The El Cerrito library has a separate children’s reference desk to provide access to the specialized information children and their parents need. The library also provides reference materials for children and teens both in the library, and through the library website. On the website, these reference materials are offered in the form of pathfinders, subject guides, and databases. There are also several forms of ready reference available to children and teens. These include texting a librarian, chatting with a librarian via the library website, or e-mailing a librarian. The former of these two services are only available Monday-Friday from 8:30am to 5:00pm. The library also provides several public use computers, access to the internet through Wi-Fi, and online computer catalogs. The library also offers Contra Costa County residents immediate use of its databases and some library services with a special e-card, which patrons can sign up for and receive on the library website.

As it can be seen, there are numerous services offered by the El Cerrito Library to meet the varied and diverse needs of both children and teens in the community. These services fall into the broad categories of public sphere, education, and information; and access to these by youth will help ensure lasting relevance by the public library in the future. In the next section we will take a closer look at one specific service, that of homework help, which is offered by the library to children and teens.

**Description of Homework Help**

As mentioned in the previous section, homework help falls into the educational realm of the public library. I was particularly drawn to this service for children and teens at the El Cerrito Library based on my visit and observations, and because of my personal experience with after-school mentoring and tutoring programs. During my afternoon visit, I witnessed many youth using the services, collections, and physical spaces of the library. Based on the number of youth present in the library during this after school time, I was surprised that there was no formal homework assistance provided to these students. I have personally volunteered as a mentor and tutor in community programs located in Berkeley, CA and Oakland, CA, and recognize how important these type of programs can be for students, especially educationally at-risk youth. These observations led to an investigation of the library website, upon which I was surprised to see links to homework help both on the children and teen specific pages of the Contra Costa County Library website.

Homework help for children is provided by the El Cerrito Library primarily through the Contra Costa County Library website (<http://www.ccclib.org/>), which is the main site for all branches in the library system. This virtual homework help is provided through the Kids’ Homework Help Subject Guide, a pathfinder, which is divided into different subjects, and complied by Contra Costa County librarians. The different sections of the subject guide include social studies, math & science, biography, homework help, great reads, language, parents & teachers, and play to learn. Within each of these sections are relevant links to outside resources related to the various topics. For example, the social studies section is divided into local history, California history, United State history, and homework links.

Homework help is similarly provided for middle and high schoolers on the library website, but accessible from the education subject guide. This guide is filled with less information and is not segmented the same way as the homework help guide for children. In this education guide, information for middle/high schoolers is in one section, and contains all information on one page. This information is broken down into three areas: databases, homework help, and school options and information for upcoming high school graduates. Similar to the children’s homework subject guide, the information on the page consists solely of links to outside resources, websites, and library databases. According to personal correspondence with a Contra Costa County librarian, students who ask for homework help through the chat service are usually referred to the homework help subject guide, to relevant materials at their local library, or to outside sources where they can find help. That is to say that homework help is not directly given on say, how to solve a math problem, because the reference chat librarians are not trained as tutors. Instead, they can only provide information to help students solve the problem on their own, or with help from outside resources. I also learned through personal correspondence with the library that it is does not keep track of where these subject guides are assessed, so cannot know for sure: 1) how many patrons use these guides, 2) where patrons are accessing these guides (inside the library vs. outside the library), and 3) which branches the guides are being access from (if from on library computers, or Wi-Fi).

**Literature Review of Homework Help in Libraries**

There are many excellent examples from the literature of how public libraries and youth service librarians around the county have created, marketed, expanded, and evaluated both in-person and virtual homework help centers. Many of these libraries have suffered from several of the same problems facing the El Cerrito Library, namely a lack of resources such as funding, staff, space, and computers. Though the library at the moment provides a minimum level of homework help resources for children and teens, the literature demonstrates how creative use of resources and partnerships can make homework help a part of any public library, and illustrates why these resources are so crucial to youth.

One of the main roles of the public library is as a support to the educational system, but this key responsibility hasn’t always been embraced by all. The 1950s baby boom led to more children visiting libraries than before. In the 1960s, the increased usage by this younger population led to a “student problem”, and public librarians responded to it by limiting use of facilities and services to youth, creating what was known as the “blackboard curtain” that lasted until the 1980s (Mediavilla, 2001). Key pieces of research in the 1990s and 2000s revealed that the most dangerous time for youth is the three hours following the end of school, and those children who are left alone when school ends have more trouble completing their homework (Mediavilla, 2001). The library as community center, serves as a solution to this problem by offering after-school homework help centers. Beyond the scholastic benefits for youth from these programs, such as higher standardized tests and grades, they can also gain from the opportunity to strengthen their social skills with adults and peers, and improved study skills (Mediavilla, 2001). These improvements would be welcome at schools in El Cerrito to help meet growth target API scores set by the school district. Librarians also found benefit to hosting homework help in their libraries, because the conduct of latchkey patrons was found to be easier to control and discipline than through otherwise unsupervised use of library facilities (Mediavilla, 2001).

A concern arises for libraries like the El Cerrito Library, which in addition to limited funding also possess limited space and staff for an in-person homework center. While many libraries facing similar challenges in creating in-person afterschool homework help centers have made creative use of limited resources through partnerships through schools, state libraries, and outside organizations, of grants and outside funding, and volunteers, some libraries have opted for virtual, web-based homework help (Cofer et al., 2007). This service, dubbed live homework help, is provided from an outside online tutoring company, such as Tutor.com. The library provides access to this resource, directly from the library website. With this service, students can connect with tutors, often until midnight on most school days, to ask questions and get help in a multitude of subjects (Cofer et al., 2007). The benefit of using these programs are that youth can connect with specially trained and competent tutors, and in a format that they are generally much more comfortable with (Cofer et al., 2007). Some libraries elect to offer this virtual service to youth in addition to in-person homework help in order to provide services to users with different preferred formats (Cofer et al., 2007).

As mentioned previously the El Cerrito Library does not keep track of how or where users are accessing their current homework help materials. If the library elects to offer homework help in either format, the issues it faces are: 1) how will it effectively market this service?, and 2) how will the service be evaluated to ensure continued growth, relevancy, and avoid stagnation? Libraries who currently offer both of these types of homework help services (in-person and virtual) employee a variety of techniques to successfully market them. First and foremost, librarians make visits to all schools in the area to inform students directly about the services (Cofer et al., 2007). In the case of virtual homework help, librarians also perform sample on-line sessions to give kids a taste of how they work (Cofer et al., 2007). Both traditional publicity techniques (flyers, brochures, press releases, etc.) and nontraditional means (e-mail lists, Web pages, blogs, social networking) can be used to market these services (Adams, 2010). What is vital to consider when determining what type of technique to utilize is to “weigh the time and cost against the impact it will have on reaching our customers” (Adams, 2010, p. 12). Evaluation is a key part of the process of providing homework help services in public libraries. Today, more than ever, accountability to all stakeholders of public library services is needed to ensure continued funding, support, and can even help to secure future funding (Huffman & Rua, 2008). Additionally, evaluation is key to understanding the views of users, providing them a forum for active input in what the services provided should and will be (Huffman & Rua, 2008). Lastly, evaluation is important to determine what is working and what isn’t in order to make necessary changes to the service to benefit users and attract non-users. Celia Huffman and Robert Rua (2008), specifically discuss the mixed method data collection technique they developed. This methodology was born out of trial and error in evaluating the Homework…Y.E.S. program that they established at the Cuyahoga County Public Library (Huffman & Rua, 2008). Their evaluation methodologies can be used and modified to meet the documentation needs of other libraries for their homework help centers (Huffman & Rua, 2008). The El Cerrito Library and the Contra Costa County Library system can benefit in many ways if they chose an appropriate evaluation method to determine the strengths and weaknesses of current and future service offerings.

**Summary**

Public libraries are valuable to the communities that they are part of in a multitude of ways. The El Cerrito Library, a small public library, is faced with many challenges that affect both the quantity and quality of services that it offers to users and nonusers alike. Services to youth are especially crucial in this day and age, because they not only support the many personal, informational, and recreational needs of this demographic, but I believe that these will play a key role in the future of public libraries. The El Cerrito Library currently offers a variety of services to children and teens which fall into categories of public sphere, education, and information in order to fulfill its mission of “Bringing People and Ideas Together.” Due to the aforementioned challenges, the number of services it can offer to this group is quite limited and practically nonexistent in the homework help area. A review of the current literature highlights similar public libraries across the county facing problems similar to the El Cerrito Library, but who have utilized resources in a creative way, have formed community partnerships, and have offered non-traditional web-based homework help to meet the needs of the youth in their communities. Key in offering this homework help service is marketing to youth, using both traditional and nontraditional means. Lastly, evaluation plays a crucial role in accountability to all library stakeholders, in gathering the input of targeted users, and in determining the areas where improvement is needed. The El Cerrito Library should look to these public libraries for guidance in establishing, expanding, and evaluating their own homework help services for the benefit of all youth in the community.

**Service Recommendations**

* Establishment of web based homework help (via Tutor.com), available through library website.
* Establishment of a twice a week afterschool homework center at the EC Library. Volunteer tutors from local universities and high schools can be used.
* Two computer terminals with exclusive usage by children and teens. Highlighted links to Tutor.com service, and relevant databases and subject guides provided by the library.
* Establish more seating and study space for teens, furnished with outlets to plug in devices. Establish group such as Teen Advisory Board to gather input of stakeholders.

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**Appendix**

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|  | **Services** | **Currently** | | **Offered** | |  |  | |  |
| **Services Provided** | **Physical Spaces in library.**  **Equipped with tables and seating.** | **Virtual Spaces for Children and Teens.** | | **Homework Help for Children and Teens.** | | **Link+, Interlibrary Loan cooperative.** | **Discover & Go.**  **Free and discounted museum passes.** | | **Ready Reference.** |
| **Qualifications / Eligibility** | Any patron can use these library facilities. Library card is not necessary. | Any patron with Internet access can use these websites. | | Any patron can use the homework help subject guides. Library databases require library card. | | Must be cardholder or e-cardholder to request items from other libraries. | Must be cardholder. Must enter card number to use service. Only one pass allowed per card/per year. | | Must have Internet access, does not require log-in or use of library card. |
| **Delivery of Service** | Available only at Library. | Through the Contra Costa County Library main website. | | Provided on the Library website through subject guides /pathfinders. | | Accessible from library catalog. Can request items from any computer, either from library or home. | Accessible from Contra Costa County Library main website. | | Reference by a CCC Librarian offered in 3 formats: texting, instant messaging, and e-mail. All available through library website. |
| **Method of Evaluation** | Metrics on number of library visits are recorded by the Library. | Number of visitors to website are recorded by the Library | | Numbers of visitors to website are recorded. Visits to subject guides are not recorded. | | Number of requested items recorded by library. | Number of passes and to where are recorded by library. | | Question format recorded. Number of reference questions recorded. |
|  | **Services** | | **That Should Be Offered** | |  | | |  | | |
| **Services that Should be Provided** | **Physical Space for Teens.** | | **Homework Help Center.** | | **Virtual Homework Help Center** | | | **Computer Terminals** | | |
| **Qualifications / Eligibility** | Any patron can use these library facilities. Library card is not necessary. | | Any student can use this service, but must be studying or working on assignments while in the Homework Help Center. Pre-registration offered, but not required to use this service. | | Any student with a valid library card or library e-card can use this service. | | | Must have a valid library card to log into library computers. Cards must be coded (though library system) as child or teen to log onto these computed. | | |
| **Delivery of Service** | Available only at Library. More comfortable seating, addition of tables, and addition of electrical outlets. | | Available at the EC Library twice a week (Monday & Thursday), during afterschool hours. Volunteer tutors will assist with assignment and study skills. One dedicated laptop for homework help use only will be available for online resources. | | Provided through the library website through an outside tutoring company, such as Tutor.com. Requires computer and Internet access. Available in English and Spanish. Requires use of a library card. | | | Addition of two dedicated computer terminals in the library. One for exclusive use by children, and one for exclusive use by teens. Will be located in the respective children and teen areas in the library. Will contain student relevant programs. | | |
| **Method of Evaluation** | Metrics on number of library visits by teen should recorded by the Library. | | Tally of attendees and number of questions asked recorded. Intake survey of all participants. Written, online, and telephone exit surveys with students and parents at the end of the year. | | Metrics to be recorded: number of visits, number of questions asked and answered, grade level and age of student, subject of visit. Exit survey of quality of service each homework help session. | | | Number of logins, reservations, and average time of use should be recorded and collected by the library. Surveys on computer use for children and teens to determine programs for computers. | | |