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What’s Happening with Libraries and Charter Schools?

By now most people have probably heard about charter schools and the related movement toward school choice that has been gaining momentum since the 1990s. Charter schools have been evolving as an alternative to traditional public schools and many are still relatively young. Unlike home schooling or private schools, these institutions are publicly funded and operate independent of local school districts, (and not without some controversy). For each child enrolled, a charter school receives a fixed dollar amount from the local school district. Laws and regulations vary in each state but generally charter school administrators are required to apply for and receive a charter from either the local school district or the state. Many educate students in the traditional setting of classrooms within a local school building. In other situations cyber charter schools provide computers to students who may be located all across the state. Learning takes place at home with teachers and students primarily communicating online.

Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2004-2005) show that charter schools serve a large percentage of the student population in Washington, D.C. (18.3%) and Arizona (8.4%). In most other states, this number falls below 5%—but charter schools are on the rise. According to the Center for Education Reform, in 2005-06 charter schools in the United States grew by thirteen percent to more than 3,600 in forty states, and educated over one million students. However, little is known about the role libraries play in these schools, and the issue is one rarely discussed in the media or professional literature. As academic librarians our interest in this topic came about because of the trend of school librarians and academic librarians increasingly working
together to prepare students for college. In 1998, a joint task force was formed between AASL (American Association of School Librarians) and ACRL (Association of College & Research Libraries) to encourage exploration of opportunities for collaboration. ACRL’s Library Instruction Roundtable (LIRT) also has a “Transitions to College” committee charged with building and supporting partnerships between libraries. Progress has been made to help students prepare for higher education, but there has not been much discussion of libraries, or library resources, in the charter schools and cyber charter schools that have been growing in popularity.

When asked about libraries and charter schools, Julie Walker, Executive Director of the AASL, explained that, “depending on their status, some charter schools have access to state and district funding for school libraries. In many cases, these students have access to a school library as well as any databases that are licensed by the district or the state. To me the primary question in terms of virtual schools is whether or not the students are receiving the types of assignments/instruction that develop the information literacy skills they need to access the resources wherever they reside.”

Joseph D’Amico, Director of Education Assessment & Charter School Accreditation at the American Academy for Liberal Education, also commented on the status of charter school libraries saying, “the presence of libraries in charter schools varies almost as much as there are types of charter schools. Although most recognize the importance of libraries, often the limits imposed on them by very modest facilities prevents them from developing the library they would like to. Additionally, many charter schools struggle financially and thus do not have the level of resources they would like to devote to a library.”
In Pennsylvania, during the 2005-06 school year, approximately one in forty school age children attended a charter school. Here’s what we learned from a thirteen item survey of representatives from Pennsylvania’s 115 charter schools (including twelve cyber charter schools) in late 2005, in an effort to determine what’s happening with libraries and charter schools: (based on 40% response)

- 85% of schools have 200 or more students; only 15% have 800 or more.
- 41% have been open for less than 5 years.
- About 75% report some form of library or collection of similar resources.
- In most cases (63%) materials are selected and maintained by someone other than a librarian (teachers, principals, or parents).
- Roughly one third employ a librarian or library media specialist. These tend to be the larger, more established schools. In most cases (78%) teachers are instructing students on information/library resources and their use.

When there is a need for information, not surprisingly, the Web is by far the most commonly used tool. While most do not subscribe to electronic research resources, a third do use online encyclopedias like World Book Online, or other tools such as Gale’s Student Resource Center or ProQuest’s Reading A-Z. Interestingly, the cyber charter schools did not appear to be using online products any more than the charters with a more traditional school building.

While some are developing their own libraries, existing local libraries appear to be a very important resource to charter schools. Nearly all encourage their students to use the local library. Some use class time for visits and a few collaborate with a
neighboring academic library. In several cases cooperative relationships have developed, with special programs at the library for charter school students.

The most shocking discovery revealed that for the most part, charter schools do not seem to be taking advantage of the research databases provided to schools and public libraries through the statewide POWER Library program. Through the POWER Library, students have access to numerous subscription databases to search age-appropriate encyclopedias, locate full-text news and magazine articles, find biographical information, and much more. Access to the POWER Library is a benefit of participation in the Access Pennsylvania union catalog. To meet the requirements for participation, schools must have a certified librarian, a cataloged collection, and pay a modest annual fee of $180. Though most were at least somewhat aware of this resource, over half of the schools we heard from reported never using it. We suspect the majority of charter schools are not participating in this program due to budget constraints. However, students are still free to access the available databases through their public library.

We also learned that only a small percentage of instruction on the information seeking process involves a librarian or library media specialist. We believe that students with the skills to use a variety of research tools and evaluate the information they find will do better in school and have greater success in their pursuits of higher education and lifelong learning. Charter schools could benefit greatly from partnering with existing libraries to learn more about available resources and how they can be used effectively. With this knowledge, teachers and administrators at charter schools can more easily ensure that high quality research materials are available to every student and can
encourage their use. Local libraries may also be able to play an important role by serving any cyber charter school students who reside in their region.

Nelson Smith, President of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, addressed some of the difficulties faced when it comes to libraries saying, "charter schools often have to create libraries from scratch because, unlike other public schools, they can’t simply draw on the budget and resources of larger systems. I’ve seen several fundraising efforts here in DC aimed at building charter school libraries and as your works shows, charters often team up with local public libraries. This is one of the many areas in which better data needs to be collected."

It is possible that as charter schools continue to evolve libraries will grow with them but D’Amico shared his opinion that “most charters will hire teachers before any other staff. After teachers they will hire counselors or academic coordinators. Librarians will probably be among the lowest staff position on charter schools’ list of hiring priorities.”

Most of Pennsylvania’s charter schools seem to indicate that they are clearly interested in working more closely with their local libraries [See <Table 1>]. D’Amico sees this type of collaboration as a challenge for many schools, “Trips to even nearby libraries require charters to take time away from what they consider their most important mission– packing the time they have with students with instructional activities. For a vast majority of charter schools, local libraries are just too far away.”

But if charter schools communicate with libraries about their curriculum, librarians can suggest appropriate electronic and print resources and perhaps offer training to teachers or students when needed. Here is another wonderful opportunity for
librarians to reach out to students, teachers, and parents in their communities. We hope this snapshot of Pennsylvania charter school libraries will encourage further research in this area.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Charter Schools Highly Interested or Somewhat Interested in Developing Further Relationships with:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Library</td>
<td>91%</td>
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<tr>
<td>College/University Library</td>
<td>80%</td>
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<tr>
<td>School District Library</td>
<td>63%</td>
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**Quotes from PA charter schools using local libraries**

“We have a good working relationship with the community public library. Teachers often take their classes to the library to conduct research. Additionally, we have students enrolled in the dual enrollment program at the [local community college]. These students have full access to the library at the college.”

“We have a dual enrollment program with [the local community college]. We take students to the public library to teach them how to utilize library resources.”

“We all have library cards! We also encourage students to all get a library card, and at times require them to go to the public library for research purposes.”

“[Librarian] from public library participates in book talks initiated by the school. [Librarian] attempts to secure the books on the school’s reading list and to make them available to the students.”

“Our students go on field trips to the library to learn about research skills and we notify all of the local librarians in the area about research paper topics or units of study.”

“We have an excellent, rich public library within walking distance of our school. The English Department is forging a relationship with these folks. At present, we make various trips to the library with English classes.”
“We are located on a college campus and share access to our high school students. Their education students utilize our elementary resources.”