

Virtual library cards expand access to learning

Shawn D. Lewis, *The Detroit News* 9:43 p.m. EST November 20, 2016



Students work in the Clinton-Macomb Public Library in Clinton Township. An online program also gives them access from home. (Photo: Steve Perez / The Detroit News)

Going online to research homework assignments, select a scary movie or read a book for pleasure now is a lot easier for students in some Macomb County school districts.

They can use virtual library cards to access online information at four libraries using their student ID numbers. Or, if they prefer, use a traditional library card.

The access to books and other information recently expanded to include students in the L'Anse Creuse Public School District. The program began last year in the Chippewa Valley School District, and Clintondale Community Schools joined this year, too.

"We are one of the first in the country with so many different, autonomous libraries to be able to work with individual school districts," said Larry Neal, director of the Clinton-Macomb Public Library. "There are four libraries used by students in the L'Anse Creuse district and we worked together to give students access to online resources by simply using a student ID number."

Roughly 30,000 students in the three school districts can access the libraries that are part of the Suburban Library Cooperative, which includes all libraries in Macomb County, Troy and Harper Woods. For example, there are four public libraries in the L'Anse Creuse district: Clinton-Macomb, Chesterfield Township Library, Harrison Township Public Library and the St. Clair Shores Public Library. It is one of the first multi-library/school partnerships of its kind, Neal said.

Neal said among the benefits is improvement in communication between the schools and the libraries, "so we have a better understanding of what each one offers."

Asked if this is a cost-saving effort, Neal said with electronic resources, the more they are used the better return on the library's investment.

“We are not charged on a per-use basis for our electronic resources,” he said. “The only exception is e-books, which could experience greater demand and which may require a need for the library to purchase more copies to avoid long waits.”

The only cost involved for the libraries and schools, he said, is staff time.

The program begins with the school staff notifying parents of the program, giving them the chance to opt out their children. Neal said they then can run a report with the data and give it to the libraries via a flash drive. The libraries then import the data into their systems.

“Promoting the service is what takes the most time and the libraries are actively engaged in educating administrators, teachers, parents and students in various ways,” he said.

If the student already has a public library card, nothing changes. If the student does not have a public library card then the student’s school ID is added to the library’s system, giving the student access to all of its electronic resources. If the student wants to check out traditional library materials such as books, a parent will need to sign for a full-access library card.

Students in the program can log in and access the library’s electronic resources 24 hours a day, seven days a week from anywhere in the world they have access to the internet.

“Our goal is for teachers to encourage their students’ use of the public library’s electronic resources because (s)he will know that every student in the classroom has access to those resources,” he said. “In the past, it depended on where the student lived and whether or not the parents had taken the student to the library to get a card.”

Neal said students can research papers, reserve study rooms or read for pleasure online using their student ID numbers or a traditional card. If they want to check materials out of the library, a parent must accompany them to the library to provide consent.

L’Anse Creuse junior Ruth Sytsma, 16, still prefers to study inside the Clinton-Macomb Public Library, the old-school way.

“I go to the library a lot to do homework in a quiet environment,” she said. “I study mostly for my pre-calculus and AP chemistry because I really need to focus and the library is a quiet place to do that.

Sytsma said she goes to the library every two or three weeks.

L’Anse Creuse Superintendent Jackie Johnston said she is excited about the program.

“It is making available so many more resources to students, whether it’s writing papers or preparing for examinations,” she said

But Johnston said it also raises expectations.

“With greater resources, we expect students to dig deeper and to be more thoughtful as they do their work,” she said. “It also provides an opportunity for students to find reading material that brings them pleasure.”

The initiative began when the Clinton-Macomb Public Library was invited to be a part of the ConnectED program through the White House.

“The White House staff contacted the Institute of Museum and Library Services for recommendations on leading libraries across the country to pilot the program,” Neal said. “At the time, I was the president of the Public Library Association and so through that connection the Clinton-Macomb Public Library was selected.”

Neal said each library was asked to implement the program in the way that worked best locally, enabling them to convene and share successes and challenges.

“The goal is for every student to have access to public library electronic resources and broadband via a library card,” he said. “Of particular note, studies have shown that students from lower income families are less likely to have library cards. This program also promotes closer collaboration between schools and libraries so that teachers better integrate the use of library resources into the curriculum and for completing homework assignments.”

Neal said the broadest goals are for “increased academic achievement and for students to become educated consumers of information for lifelong success.”

“The public library can play a key role and if students look to the library earlier in life the hope is that they will continue to do so whether it’s for research for a college paper or using a database to do research on starting a new business for example,” he said.

Neal said while they don’t have exact impact data, one measure used was the upgrading from a virtual library card to a full-access card.

“In the first year of the Chippewa Valley Schools project, (the Clinton-Macomb library) had over 1,000 students (out of 10,000 virtual cards issued) upgrade to full-access cards. This requires a parent or guardian to bring the child to the library to get a physical full-access card.”

He added that ConnectED has “really strengthened our relationships with the schools.” He attributed that in part to increases in attendance at the Clinton-Macomb library, a 42 percent increase for children; 212 percent increase for teens in 2015. Year-to-date in 2016 there has been an additional 20 percent increase in program attendance for children and teens, he said.

Neal said he believes every child deserves access to public library resources and the opportunity for a successful life.

The Clinton-Macomb library’s goal is to have the three remaining school districts in its service area join the program by the end of the school year.

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