

**PUBLIC LIBRARY USE IN PENNSYLVANIA:
IDENTIFYING USES, BENEFITS, AND IMPACTS**

FINAL REPORT

For:

Pennsylvania Department of Education
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is to identify users of Pennsylvania public libraries and determine their reasons for using the library. In addition, the study provides information describing the impacts and benefits resulting to those users as a result of their contact with the public library. More specifically, the study's objectives are to:

- Describe these users in terms of their education, age, sex, and household income;
- Determine the reasons for the use of the public library;
- Understand how use of the public library is valuable or beneficial to these users; and
- Describe the role of Pennsylvania public libraries in supporting economic development at both the local and statewide level.

A statewide survey of public library users, site visits to 10 libraries throughout the state, and logs of critical incidents of significant impacts provided data to accomplish these objectives. These objectives provide a basis for directing data collection activities that can then assist policymakers, residents of Pennsylvania, and the larger public library community to improve statewide and local public library planning and services development.

This study finds that there are numerous and important impacts and benefits that result from use of Pennsylvania public libraries. There is substantial agreement that many Pennsylvania public libraries:

- Contribute directly to the economic productivity of the local community and the state by encouraging the establishment of businesses, helping residents find jobs, attracting new businesses to locate in a community, and providing information and programs on being a successful entrepreneur;
- Provide services and programs to children, adults, and seniors that simply are not available elsewhere or, if available, would be too expensive for many residents;
- Enhance the overall quality of life and promote the cultural environment in the communities these libraries serve;
- Promote the well-being of individuals and assist them to become more productive in their jobs and in their personal lives;
- Contribute directly to the success of local social service agencies, literacy groups, home schoolers, writers, and others; and
- Provide individuals with customized information services tailored to their unique needs – services that often comprise a critical incident that made these individuals successful or otherwise helped them accomplish their personal goals.

These are but a few of the key impacts that respondents identified as critical to the success and importance of their communities – all as a result of services, collections, and programs from the public library. Indeed, the study suggests that this uniquely American institution, the public library, is often the very heart and fabric that defines a community and contributes to its overall success.

But by and large, the study also finds that many Pennsylvania public libraries provide these and other benefits for their users and communities with extremely limited resources. In a number of instances, the library relies on the good will and good graces of staff who give freely of themselves in providing *pro bono* time and resources to the library and on volunteer contributions from members of the local community.

During the study, library users often did not know or understand the range of impacts and benefits that the library provided the community. Nor did community residents understand that many of these impacts resulted from extremely dedicated and hard-working library staff or that the local and state resources supporting these libraries did not compensate staff for such extra work. There seems to be little understanding of the resources needed and the costs related to operating public libraries. Indeed, expectations of what public libraries *should* be doing are often quite unrealistic given the fiscal realities of these libraries.

Ultimately, however, state and local policymakers, local communities, as well as individual public libraries will need to determine the degree to which significant impacts, such as economic impacts, promote the role of the public library in *that* community and the degree to which the library should be funded to provide such impacts. Currently, as this study suggests, many significant impacts result from Pennsylvania public library services, programs, and resources. The extent to which this can continue in the current financial environment, however, is problematic at best.

A significant next step for enhancing the impacts that result from Pennsylvania public library services is to carefully review the roles and responsibilities of the state and local governments in funding public libraries. This assessment should consider the current funding mechanisms available to public libraries, the degree to which public libraries have adequate resources to accomplish their service roles and objectives, and the degree to which state and local governments have realistic expectations of how well libraries can operate in the current fiscal environment.

If Pennsylvania public libraries are to continue their efforts in providing an array of impacts and benefits – as discussed throughout this report – new initiatives will be needed to provide adequate resources to support public libraries.

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