

## **"How to Close the Digital Divide for Low-Income Children? Fund Public Libraries"**

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Tough times call for tough measures. And for the nation's public libraries, times could not be tougher. When it comes to balancing city budgets, local public libraries are often one of the first institutions to feel the heat. In Philadelphia last year, Mayor Michael Nutter was the center of controversy when he proposed closing 16 libraries, nearly all in the poor neighborhoods, in order to balance the budget. Over the past year, library budgets in Massachusetts, Ohio, Connecticut and New York, among others, have all faced the chopping block.

While closing libraries may seem a quick fix to a city's economic woes, it renders a crushing blow to our nation's poor children. Not only does it shut off a poor child's access to books and other printed materials that promote literacy, closing libraries nowadays has another serious side effect: widening the digital divide

Having studied children's book and computer use for a decade, we've long said that the library is often the only place a poor child could find a book outside of school. Now we argue that the library may be the only place outside of school where poor children can use a computer and the Internet. Although there is some evidence that gaps in school computer use in schools is closing for poor and middle-income children, computer use outside of school is nowhere close to being equal. U.S. Census figures show few poor children have internet access at home. While half of all children with family incomes of \$75,000 or above have Internet access at home, just 15% of those with incomes between \$20-25,000 do.

Sure, there are certain community agencies and recreation centers that offer access to computers and the Internet, but for most poor children, the local library is their most convenient alternative. The nation's public libraries have long filled a tremendous need by providing print, computers, and other materials to many underserved populations. With more than 95% of all public libraries now offering Internet access, about 10% of all Internet users now look to the library as their only source of Internet access.

Certainly, we, as a society think that technology is important for children, and many programs focus resources on insuring that all children have access to computers and the Internet, both at school and at home. The Federal Erate program subsidizes Internet service to the nation's libraries and schools. The "One Laptop, One Child" program spends millions to give children access to computers in their homes. School districts throughout the country have often chosen computers over books at budget time. It would be hard to argue that access to a computer is not critical for all children to gain knowledge and live a successful life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

But for most poor children, access to a computer outside of school remains a daunting task. In a nationwide survey of libraries, we found that there is roughly one library computer available to serve every 5400 Americans. In our visits to urban libraries, we found that users in poor areas often endure long waits just to get on a computer. Once there, they find that their time on the library computer is often limited, averaging between 30 and 60 minutes a day. What can you do in 30 minutes? Not much. It's not enough time to write up a book report or do a

research project. In later years, it won't be enough time to search for an apartment or fill out a job application.

The problem with cutting off poor children's access to computers outside of school time comes when you compare their out of school time with their middle-class peers' activities. Sure, middle-class children probably spend lots of this time outside of school watching videos on YouTube, playing online games and chatting with their friends. But they will also spend time completing homework assignments, doing research, and visiting school-related websites. They will be more familiar with Google, Yahoo and other search engines. Compared to poor children with little computer access, they will navigate their way around the Internet with ease. With assistance from their parents and caregivers, they will start using the computer at a younger age. As they grow, they will gain more knowledge than their peers from poor neighborhoods. In later years, they will be experts in certain knowledge areas while poor children will be left back, without a chance to succeed.

Ironically, the pressure to slash library budgets comes at a time when library use is at its highest. In hard economic times, libraries provide a safety net as the newly unemployed who have been shut off from Internet access at work come to use the libraries' computers and other resources. In "Libraries Connect Communities," the American Library Association shows that demand for library services is skyrocketing at the same that libraries face drastic moves to cut their budgets. According to the ALA, "81% of all libraries are not meeting the demands for workstations either some or all of the time." At the same time, most libraries are experiencing budget cuts. Libraries in high poverty areas were especially vulnerable. It is these libraries, those that serve our neediest children, that are most likely to close.

Libraries are aware of the crucial role they play today. Our survey revealed that librarians are aware of their role in closing the digital divide and are willing to help. But without funding, libraries cannot continue this work. They cannot provide print sources that can help enhance poor children's literacy skills, the first step to gaining knowledge. They cannot provide computers and Internet access so that poor children can continue to grow their knowledge base and succeed in our society. Even before budget cuts, libraries cannot fill their communities' current needs. Slashing budgets will only widen the divide for poor children. Cutting library funding may be the quick fix, but for nation's poor children, it is the wrong idea at the wrong time.