

LibraryCrunch

Service for the Next Generation Library: A Library 2.0 Perspective by Michael Casey

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Responding to Teens

The [New York Times article about the Maplewood Memorial library](#) depicts a problem that many libraries face – large numbers of teens congregating after school hours. Maplewood is not unique in having this “problem”. One of the lines that struck me was this one, “*Having as many as 50 young people with nothing to do creates an untenable situation*”. I do not know the size of the Maplewood library, but I do know that our own Dacula branch of the Gwinnett County Public Library, which is 20,000 square feet in size, routinely has many teens in the building every afternoon between 3PM and 5:30PM. Door counts of over 1,000 between those hours are not uncommon.

The Dacula library is situated within 500 yards of a middle and high school and about 1/2 mile from an elementary school. Shortly after opening the library began getting between 200 and 500 teens every afternoon. The library soon had a very real problem on their hands with disruptive behavior, noise, gang problems, you name it. The fact that it was a 20,000 square foot building open seven days a week and running on 14 full-time staff only served to complicate the picture. Management and administration worked very hard over the past few months to remedy the problem. Lots of community outreach took place with the schools and parents. The system's first security guard was hired and arrangements were made with the local police force for off-duty officers to patrol the parking lot area where numerous gang-related problems were developing. And staff began holding more and more teen programs to try to direct and mold their behavior. It's not over yet and there are still things to work out, but it is working. And all of this was done without closing the library – a tactic which I find amazing. .

The Dacula branch staff has responded admirably to the problems and in doing so they have made great strides in reaching more and more local teens. Recent events such as the Halloween party, Teen Game Night and the [Winter Masquerade party](#) have turned many teens into regular library users and some into members of the branch's Teen Advisory Board – a group that meets regularly to plan and promote teen outreach.

None of this has been easy or inexpensive. Security guards and off-duty police officers costs money, as do extra staff. The time to plan and present teen programs is also not without a cost. But the return on this investment has been remarkable. The numbers of incidents in the branch are down. Customer comments are far more positive and, perhaps most importantly, the community understands and approves of the library's efforts because the community has been made an integral part of the solution. While it is never possible to please everyone all of the time, the efforts being made in Dacula are showing very real and positive results. I hope other libraries facing such issues can find the resources to address their teen problems without resorting to closing their doors.

Posted by Michael on January 2, 2007 08:43 AM | [Permalink](#)

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