

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Library Power in Philadelphia: Final Report from Seven Case Studies

**Elizabeth Useem
Philadelphia Education Fund**

**Cati Coe
University of Pennsylvania**

Library Power seeks to activate an underutilized resource--a school's library program--in ways that promote schoolwide changes in curriculum and instruction. This three-year initiative of the DeWitt Wallace-Readers' Digest Fund, located in 19 sites across the country, connects elementary and middle-school libraries more directly to classroom learning. It does this by promoting collaborative planning between teachers and the librarian, by building a collection of materials that dovetail with teachers' instructional units, and by making the library a much more attractive and accessible space. In Library Power schools, librarians are key partners in teaching and in developing connections to parents and community groups.

Library Power in Philadelphia, a joint effort of the Philadelphia Education Fund and the School District of Philadelphia, began with a cohort of 11 schools midway through the 1994-95 academic year and added a second cohort of 19 schools the following year. An earlier report of six of these schools documented the initiative's progress through the summer of 1996. This report adds a seventh case study site and documents program impact through the summer of 1997. An external program evaluation of the entire effort, commissioned by DeWitt Wallace-Readers' Digest and conducted by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, will be available in 1998.

The case study sites were chosen to represent differing levels of program implementation. Multiple methods of data collection were employed at schools deemed to be at high, medium, and comparatively low levels of implementation. These methods include focus groups of participating librarians, ethnographic observations, personal interviews with librarians and principals over a two-year period, program documents, library records of book circulation, and logs of teacher collaboration.

Program Impact

All of the seven subject schools had implemented at least some of the key components of the Library Power initiative. Three of the schools achieved most of the program's objectives, another two had made important strides in that direction, and two were

classified as relatively low in their level of implementation. Overall, accomplishments included the following:

- The collections of books and other materials have been updated and expanded in ways that match the units taught by teachers in the school. Outdated books have been discarded;
- Teachers and librarians have begun to work collaboratively in planning and teaching specific units that require students to conduct research;
- Librarians have participated in sustained and intensive professional development that resulted in observable changes in their daily practice;
- The schools' libraries have been redesigned and refurbished in ways that make them much more inviting and useful;
- Students in five out of the seven schools now check out books on their own, unaided by the librarian;
- The practice of having whole classes visit the library on a weekly or biweekly fixed schedule has been abandoned and replaced by flexible use of the library as needed by individuals, small groups, or whole classes;
- Library Power librarians have formed a new professional network now available to provide training elsewhere in the School District.
- Partnerships between school libraries and community and parent organizations have increased.

Evidence on changes in the frequency of student visits to the library and changes in book circulation rates reveals a mixed picture. Under the old system of inflexible but regular whole-class trips to the library in elementary schools, the great majority of students came to the library weekly or biweekly. In Library Power schools, students come on an as-needed basis for research, book checkout, browsing and the like. Thus, those students who come to the library use it more productively than was the case in the past, but a certain percentage of other students visit the library less frequently than in the past. The same is true for book circulation. While circulation appears to have increased in two of the seven schools, in others it is about the same or a little higher. It appears that students who are library consumers are more enthusiastic about book selection and reading than in the past, but some no longer come to the library now that scheduled class visits have ended.

Factors Explaining Variations in Program Implementation

Four factors explain the degree and speed with which Library Power was implemented in a school. High levels of implementation were reached when:

- The principal actively supported the initiative;
- The librarian embraced the effort with energy and skill;
- The school's student enrollment was small or medium-sized;
- The school had a pre-existing collegial culture focused on improved student learning.

Policy Issues

Library Power ran up against many of the barriers commonly found in complex school change projects in urban districts. Budget shortfalls in the District limited its ability to fully support Library Power's implementation and institutionalization. Personnel issues posed problems as well: frequent turnover of school administrators; the presence of large numbers of new teachers; and, when schools could not attract substitute teachers, the tendency to pressure librarians to cover the classes of absent teachers. The lack of time for collegial interaction and planning during the school day, a perennial issue for change efforts, also interfered with team building and collaboration in the schools. Finally, until its final months, the initiative struggled to gain visibility in a large district with scores of reform programs.

The Future of Library Power

The initiative will continue in Philadelphia beyond the original grant period. The DeWitt Wallace-Readers' Digest Fund has awarded a \$40,000 grant to the Philadelphia Education Fund for 1997-98 to pay for continued professional development activities for the Library Power librarians. In 28 of the 30 Library Power schools, sufficient school funds were allocated to maintain a full time librarian and to allow for participation in continued professional development activities. Moreover, thirteen additional schools are joining the initiative, funding the effort with their own school budgets or with other money available through the District. This spontaneous dissemination is a testament to the effectiveness of the Library Power model.

Library Power's success can be attributed, in part, to the requirements of the grant imposed by the funder on the participating schools, strictures that required schools to comply with key features of the effort. Its appeal can also be attributed to its common-sense focus on student learning and on people's desire to work and learn in an attractive space with materials that support classroom assignments.