Supporting Learners
in U.S. Public Libraries

Education Is Job One for U.S. Public Libraries

The public library is a key agency in supporting the educational and learning needs of every person in the community. They are a vital resource for helping young children learn to read, for providing homework help for all levels of school, for a wealth of resources for homeschooling families, and for adult learners preparing to take the GED or continuing their education.

In fact, competitiveness in the 21st century demands that people not stop learning when they leave the classroom. Staying relevant in a rapidly changing workforce will require familiarity and facility with technology, as well as increased skills in successfully navigating information online. Libraries are part of a seamless web of educational opportunity that brings together trained information professionals and an array of resources that can be utilized inside the library or online 24/7.

While public libraries are known as great places to study and a complement to libraries in schools, universities, and colleges, the role of technology in our public libraries in supporting education is less well-known. This brief outlines many of the resources public libraries offer learners of all ages, some of the challenges libraries face in meeting growing demand for computer and Internet resources, and how increased funding would enable public libraries to offer increased assistance and resources to their communities.

Did you know ?

83% of public libraries offer online homework resources?

73% of libraries report they are the only source of free Internet access in their community?

About 50% of teens have gone online from a library?

More than three-quarters of parents of homeschool students use the public library to support their children's educations?

American adults report the most common purpose for using public library computers is to meet educational needs?
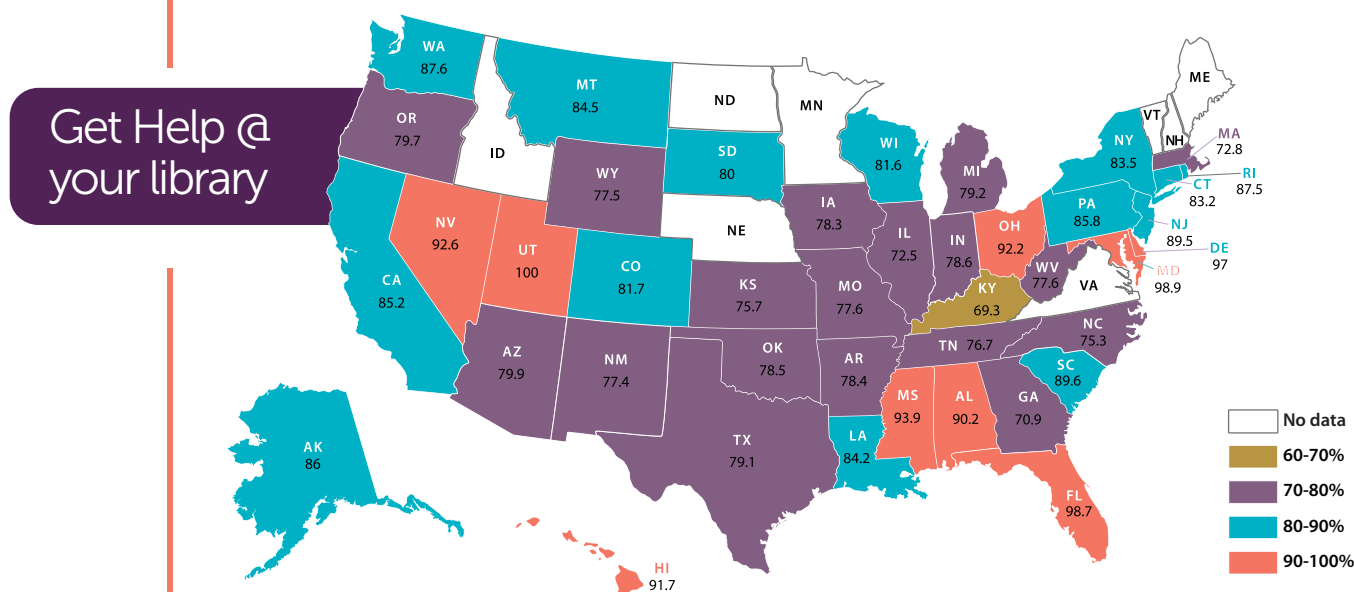
Visits to public libraries grow every year and now top 1.3 billion?

According to the Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study, the vast majority of public libraries (78.7%) report that providing education resources and databases for K-12 students is the Internet-based service most critical to the role of the library.

Providing a Wealth of Trustworthy Online Educational Resources

Just as there are millions of titles available in print in our libraries, the range of Internet-based services offered is also quite diverse. One area that saw double-digit growth in only one year was online homework resources. More than 83 percent of public libraries now offer online homework help – serving the educational needs of nearly 41 million school-age children.

Percentage of public libraries that offer online homework help, by state (2008)

Get Help @ your library

State	Value
WA	87.6
MT	84.5
ND	No data
MN	No data
OR	79.7
ID	No data
WI	81.6
SD	80
NY	83.5
MA	72.8
NH	No data
WY	77.5
MI	79.2
CT	83.2
RI	87.5
NV	92.6
IA	78.3
PA	85.8
NJ	89.5
UT	100
IL	72.5
IN	78.6
OH	92.2
DE	97
CO	81.7
WV	77.6
MD	98.9
CA	85.2
KS	75.7
MO	77.6
KY	69.3
VA	No data
AZ	79.9
NM	77.4
OK	78.5
AR	78.4
TN	76.7
NC	75.3
SC	89.6
AK	86
TX	79.1
MS	93.9
AL	90.2
GA	70.9
LA	84.2
FL	98.7
HI	91.7

Legend:
- No data
- 60-70%
- 70-80%
- 80-90%
- 90-100%

Samuel Mutch, who logged on to tutor.com's Live Homework Help® through the Natrona County Public Library Web site in Casper, Wyo., used the service to help with a major research paper due in his seventh-grade English class. A live tutor was able to help him with his grammar and organizing the paper. "I got my best grade ever on that paper, and I could chat with a real tutor online just like I do with my friends," he said.

The most common Internet-based service is licensed databases, which are available in 87 percent of all libraries and 98 percent of urban libraries. These online collections provide content in virtually every school subject - including history, literature and science. Popular resources include encyclopedias, the Oxford English Dictionary, Biography Resource Center, AccessScience, and the Literary Reference Center. For students, the resources available through the public library are ones that are not accessible through Internet search engines without paying a fee. Additional topics beyond traditional school

resources also are available, such as finance and investing, business research, certification and testing resources, and auto repair manuals.

Many state libraries use federal Library Services Technology Act (LSTA) and state funds to invest in these databases to ensure equitable access for all state residents, as well as provide significant savings over the cost of individual subscriptions. All South Dakota residents, for instance, can log in for free to the World Book Web in their school and public libraries, as well as at home using their public library card. If residents were to buy an individual World Book online subscription for one year, it would cost $49.95.

Students of all ages also can talk to librarians online, read full-text newspapers, browse e-books, research paper topics, and take practice exams ranging from the GED to the LSAT. Many of these services are available remotely via the local library Web site, as well as on library computers.

Public Library Internet Services Available to Users

Services	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Overall
Licensed databases	98.0%	93.3%	80.4%	87.7%
Homework resources	89.5%	86.1%	79.5%	83.4%
Audio content e.g., podcasts, audiobooks, other	80.9%	77.1%	63.9%	71.2%
Digital reference/virtual reference	79.9%	70.1%	51.4%	62.5%
e-books	80.0%	59.8%	36.5%	51.8%
Video content	63.1%	48.2%	44.3%	48.9%
Online instructional courses/tutorials	47.6%	43.0%	41.9%	43.3%
Digitized special collections (e.g., letters, postcards, documents, other)	57.9%	34.3%	25.0%	33.8%

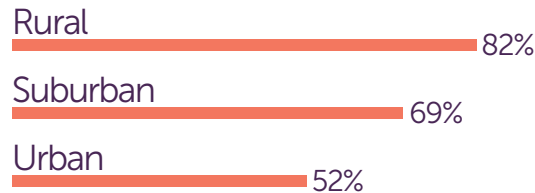### Ensuring Everyone Has Equal Access to Computers and the Internet

While more than 60 percent of U.S. households report using the Internet in the home, many people still lack high-speed Internet access in the home. Hispanics (43 percent) and African Americans (45 percent) are far less likely to have home Internet access than their white (67 percent) and Asian counterparts (76 percent). Only about half of households with a family income less than $35,000 have home Internet access.

Did you know ?

Just over 25 percent of adult users of library computers report they do not have home access to the Internet.

For those with limited access to online services, the public library is an important bridge to increasingly essential tools. U.S. public libraries serve a central role in providing free access to computers and the Internet. Virtually all of America's 16,543 public libraries provide public Internet access. Seventy-three percent of libraries report they are the only source of free Internet access in their community, which increases to 82 percent in rural communities.

Libraries that Report They Are the Only Provider of Free Public Internet Access in Their Community

Rural — 82%

Suburban — 69%

Urban — 52%

Students without high-speed Internet access are at a distinct disadvantage. Ninety-six percent of school districts polled by the National School Boards Association have at least some teachers who assign homework to students that required the Internet to complete. Thirty-five percent of school districts report that more than half their teachers assign homework that requires the Internet. About half of all teens have gone online from a library, and more than one-third of teen-agers who visited the public library in the last year said they went to the library to use the library Web site for information and research.

> ….contrary to what many believe, all students don't have home computers with Internet connections. Some students who have Internet connections only have dial-up connections. Public schools that operate educational programs available only through students' own computers are not truly accessible. *- North American Council for Online Learning*

Library staffs consistently report after-school hours are the busiest times for library services, especially computer and Internet use. One New York librarian described it this way: "Sometimes we have them stacked up like an air traffic controller."

At all points along the information and learning journey, public library staff members play a role in closing the digital divide by providing one-on-one and formal information literacy and technology training. From helping patrons open their first email accounts to teaching Internet search skills and computer applications, almost three-quarters of all public libraries offer information technology training.

Did you know?

73.4% of public libraries offer information technology training to library patrons.

Often when other public entities, such as school districts or government agencies, launch a program the public library is both access point and learning place. For example, the Miami-Dade Parent Academy distributes information through their website to keep parents informed and engaged. With a lower household income than much of the rest of the state of Florida, and a high poverty level in the community, the public library is a place for many of the residents to access these online school resources. The initiative also provides resources for parents online, and training at public libraries. The Las Vegas-Clark County Public Library also provides online access to posted school assignments, a "parents' corner" and a "teachers' lounge," in addition to online tutors and databases.

> *"The new Web education networks can open the door to broader changes. Parents become more engaged because they can monitor their children's attendance, punctuality, homework and performance, and can get tips for helping them at home. Teachers can share methods, lesson plans and online curriculum materials." - Steve Lohr, New York Times, 8-16-08*

Supporting Growing Number of Homeschooled and Distance Education Students

The number of people pursuing formal education outside a traditional classroom has grown significantly in the past decade. Outside of the traditional public or private school setting, the number of students learning in a homeschooled environment now tops 1.5 million (or 3 percent of all K-12 students), up 74 percent over an eight-year period. A vast majority of parents of homeschooled students (78 percent) turn to public libraries most frequently to support their children's education.

In addition to books, curricula, and electronic resources, U.S. public libraries may also proctor tests, offer a range of materials related to homeschooling, referrals for local or national support groups, youth programming, and educational software and games. The percentage of public libraries reporting that providing education resources and databases for homeschooling is critical to the role of the library more than doubled between 2006 and 2007.

> *"As a homeschooling mom of two boys, I am constantly using the resources that the York County (S.C.) Library offers. When the new computers (for children) were put in the libraries, my sons were very excited – and so was I. I was pleased to see the excellent educational software programs that are available. I don't know what we would do without local libraries."*

Another trend affecting public libraries across the United States is the growing number of people learning online. Three-quarters of public school districts are offering online or blended courses, and the overall number of K-12 students engaged in online courses in 2007-2008 is estimated to be just over 1 million.

Many postsecondary institutions also offer distance learning for classes as an alternative to traveling to in-person classes, especially at community colleges. In only five years, enrollment in postsecondary distance

learning has increased 400 percent. Sixty-one percent of two- and four-year institutions polled by the National Center for Education Statistics offered online courses of some type to students; that number jumps to 96 percent of polled two-year institutions.

> *"If it weren't for the library being here, I couldn't go to school. There's no way I could afford it. There is no other resource," said an Indiana community college student who is a single mom, working part-time and taking online classes in medical office management.*

Skills needed in all work environments change rapidly; and today's workforce requires lifelong learning and training, despite barriers of time and distance. Distance education is one way of overcoming those barriers by creating a more flexible schedule for those juggling responsibilities outside of school, such as children and work.

Did you know ?

Distance learning has grown 400 percent in five years.

These online classes demand high-speed Internet access, which can be hard to find for some students, especially in rural areas where barriers of distance are greatest. Such access can be hard to come by outside of a student's local library. In a recent article in the New York Times, Professor Stephen Katsinas stated, "the infrastructure doesn't exist to give all rural students clear online access…. Rural America is where the digital divide is most dramatic." In fact, in communities of all sizes, many patrons report using library computers and Wi-fi connections because of faster Internet speeds than can be achieved at home.

Challenges

> *"School district leaders noted that their biggest ed-tech challenge is securing funding for technology (50 percent). The struggling economy is also affecting school districts' technology programs: Sixty-four percent of districts said they've delayed hardware purchases or upgrades." - "School leaders: Focus on New-Age Skills," eSchool News, 11-4-08*

Like schools, libraries face challenges in obtaining funding for technology, providing adequate levels of service to students, and keeping up with changing technology. Even as 83 percent of libraries report that there are fewer public computers than patrons who want to use them at some point in a typical day, less than half plan to add computers in the coming year. The leading factors influencing whether or not the library would add computers are space limitations (78 percent) and cost (76 percent).

While 65 percent of public libraries report Internet access speeds of 1.5Mbps or higher, more than half report their current connection speed is insufficient to meet patron needs some or all of the time. Cost is the leading reason libraries report they are not able to increase bandwidth.

"Broadband is not only about speed. Rather it is an enabling tool that powers applications and can change people's lives." - Alliance for Public Technology

Demand already is high for fast connections and public access workstations, and likely will increase in coming months. Library usage is up, as patrons cut costs by borrowing books and other media, conduct job searches, and use the educational resources of the library. Unfortunately, declining city and state budgets threaten to reduce access when it is needed most. Increased foreclosures rates and fewer home sales are pulling down local property-tax revenues, which many public library systems depend on to pay for significant portions of their budgets.

A 2008 National League of Cities report on local fiscal conditions found a 3.6 percent decline in property tax revenues is likely to affect city budgets until 2010. The report also cited an expected decline in sales tax receipts and income tax revenues. As of December 2008, 22 states have cut their enacted FY09 budget by $12.1 billion, with another five forecasting cuts. Additionally, 31 states have reported budget gaps totaling $29.7 billion for fiscal 2009 since budget enactment, according to the National Association of State Budget Officers.

Did you know ?

The most common purpose for adult online visits to public libraries is to meet educational needs.

Conclusion

Public libraries help level the playing field for millions of American, children and adults, who rely on their libraries for learning resources over a lifetime. They are one of the few places where young and old, homeschool children and adult learners, can expand formal education and explore new interests. Public library staff ensure free access to computers and the Internet, select and provide trustworthy print and online research resources, and teach the searching and technology skills necessary to compete in the Digital Age. As technology evolves and new applications help link learners and educators across great geographical distances, public libraries serve as both an access point and a learning place.

In fact, the number of visits to U.S. public libraries grows every year and now tops 1.3 billion. Sixty-eight percent of American adults have library cards, and more than 76 percent of them visited their library in person last year. Forty-one percent visited their library online.

In a world in which knowledge is power, public libraries help make everyone more powerful. Investing in public libraries and high-quality technology resources is an investment in lifelong learning for all community residents.

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ALA Office for Research & Statistics, 800-545-2433

ALA American Library Association

The Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study is the largest and longest running study of its kind. Additional information is available online at www.ala.org/plinternetfunding