

A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE - OR NECESSITY?  
The Combined School-Public Library

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Cooperation between school libraries and public libraries has been a concern among librarians for nearly as long as the two institutions have existed. The issue causing the most debate is the ultimate form of cooperation between the two: combining the school library and the public library into one institution, equally serving the traditional clientele of each from a single facility.

The concept of a combined school/public library instantly raises emotions ranging from abhorrence to enthusiasm in librarians. Thus it is tempting to dismiss the concept as either "bad" or "good," based on little or no experience or merely on an article or two in the professional literature. Since employed in a combined facility in Pennsylvania, this author has read widely in the professional literature and modified her initial ideas based on this research as well as on experience. An attempt has been made on this writer's part to examine this issue with both openmindedness and professionalism.

This paper will examine the combined school/public library in the United States with the additional insight of one influential study done in Canada. However, the concept has been attempted and researched throughout the world. This paper will begin with a survey of the literature which discusses the benefits and weaknesses of combined libraries. After a subsequent examination of actual research and specific examples, the final section of this paper will present general conclusions and considerations.

As noted above, the concept of combined school/public libraries is not new, and while many professionals consider the concept totally unacceptable, the idea simply will not die. Shirley L. Aaron has noted in her study of Florida's combined libraries that five major factors contribute to the resurgence of interest today:

1. There is increasing pressure on public institutions to make better use of tax monies.
2. The concept of a community school which serves as the central educational agency for all community members has received broader acceptance. Expanded school library programs and hours are frequently viewed as a means of efficiently using existing educational facilities.
3. School and public libraries have been forced to examine new methods of offering adequate service with less money due to the cutbacks of fiscal resources which had funded library programs in the past.
4. Because the public increasingly sees the library as the learning center for lifelong education, the educational roles of both school and public libraries are tending to parallel each other more closely.
5. There is a growing trend among libraries of all types to provide access to information regardless of format. For example, while school libraries have invested in audiovisual materials and equipment for several years, many public libraries are just becoming aware of the importance of these items.<sup>1</sup>

An additional reason for this resurgence of interest is pointed out by William G. Asp, Director of the Minnesota Department of Education's Office of Public Libraries and Interlibrary Cooperation. He states that today's advanced technology has become feasible for all types of libraries, and that the possibility of shared cataloging and remote access to bibliographic information will affect the services of public and school libraries.<sup>2</sup> These factors could alter the public's conception of both.

At this point it behooves us to look briefly at the largest body of the professional literature concerning combined libraries: the general "pro" and "con" arguments which are central to the library profession's views on this subject.

#### "PROS"

The benefits of a combined facility can be divided into three categories: Financial Resources, Collection, and Service and Personnel.

##### Financial Resources

Not only is it more economical to operate one good facility rather than two unsatisfactory ones (e.g., costs of utilities and maintenance), it is also possible to avoid duplicating expensive reference sources or periodicals. Media services such as meeting rooms, exhibits, production and videotape facilities, and specialized programs are available to everyone in the community. Depending upon state law, it may also be possible to share salary expenses; increase the likelihood of grants; and use the collection and facility during holidays, summers, weekends, and evenings.

##### Collection

Not only do combined facilities have children's collections, they tend to have stronger fiction collections and wider selections of reference materials than school libraries would provide. Conversely, public patrons would have available wider and more varied non-fiction collections and more non-print materials than small public libraries could provide alone. Because of a community's educational resources are located in one place, utilization of these materials may increase.

### Service and Personnel

In small communities which may be unable to support two libraries, a combined facility can enable these communities to have library services that otherwise would not be available, or would be so meager as to be ineffective.<sup>3</sup> Such communities could also hire more and better-trained staff by creating a combined facility. School groups might be able to aid the community by providing special services to senior citizens, shut-ins, and others. In turn, students and teachers could have direct access to the interlibrary loan systems available largely to public libraries.

Some school administrators and city officials have noted better school/community relations as well. For example, Dale R. Horncastle, principal of the Alexander Gibson Memorial School in Marysville, New Brunswick, notes that Marysville's combined library:

"Offers to school officials another vehicle for personal contact in the development of a community minded school or a school minded community. The more naturalness that comes by visiting a school the easier the task in communication is between teacher and parent. .  
."4

"CONS"

On the other hand, problems and weaknesses of combined school/public libraries comprise the larger segment of the "pro" and "con" literature. These objections may also be roughly grouped into five categories: Finance, Management, Location, Collection/Circulation and Staffing.

### Finance

Because community leaders and school officials are seeking ways to economize, frequently combined facilities are inadequately funded. Not content to economize merely on building, maintenance and utility costs, governing bodies tend to provide inadequate funding for a suitable physical

facility or for sufficient staff, materials, and equipment. Consequently, the combined library is unable to serve either school or public clients adequately, creating a costly facility which fails to serve either group.

#### Management

According to Wilma Lee Broughton Woolard in her master's study completed at Illinois State University, the most common problem in a combined facility is administration. Specific problems include:

failure of boards concerned to define areas of responsibilities; failure to include all parties concerned with the operation of the library in the planning of the facility; failure of school authorities to recognize the authority of the public library staff; misunderstanding by citizens and the public library board of the professional librarian's role in the library; failure of governing board to appoint a chief administrator; interference by the school in public functions; and "dual administration" (classified and certified personnel having different salary and work schedules).<sup>5</sup>

State laws can sometimes pose problems as well. In certain states, school districts are forbidden to pay public employees' salaries. In states such as Pennsylvania, a combined facility is denied state aid and may not apply for LSCA grants.

#### Location

While most, but not all, combined facilities are located in or very near a school, this is usually not in the best interests of the public library clientele. Kevin Hegarty observes:

The site location criteria for schools and public libraries are generally almost totally alien. Briefly, public libraries should be located at or near the intersection of major thoroughfares. . . Schools are normally located in traffic-free residential areas, . . .<sup>6</sup>  
. . . with the library placed in the center of the instructional area.

Ken Haycock elaborates further on this problem:

Since the use of the public library is voluntary and informal, it must have a prominent location in a densely populated area. . . The building must be inviting and highly visible if the library is

to compete successfully with private and public recreational pursuits. An open view of books and people reading and enjoying themselves enhances the public library situation; it is essential that the public library be on the ground floor. . .

The school media center also needs to be at the center of its population base. Current trends in education place the media center in the middle of the school . . . making a separate outside entrance almost impossible . . . The school itself does not have to attract clients . . . Most of the students in elementary and secondary schools are obligated to attend by legislation . . . There is no need for a conspicuous location or main street display windows.

Woolard's survey identifies several other problems related to location, including the reluctance of adults to use the facility during the school day for "psychological" reasons or because of students' presence; cramped or otherwise inadequate physical facilities; inadequate parking for public patrons; limited hours for adult use; and the inability to communicate to the public that the school library is also the public library.<sup>8</sup>

#### Collection/Circulation

An obvious problem concerning a combined facility's collection is censorship. If the facility were located in a school, the temptation to censor public materials (at least unconsciously) would be always present.

Not only might students be restricted in their borrowing, adult patrons may also be limited in the quantity or types of materials they may borrow from a combined library. Haycock also examines the circulation problem:

Teachers often find it necessary to put blocks of books on short term loan such as three days or overnight or even on reserve for use in the media center only. To interfere with this policy and procedure would be detrimental to the education of students. However, what are the rights of the public during those days, weeks or even months? . . . It is reasonable to demand returns from adults before nine o'clock in the morning as we do from students because the materials are needed during the day? . . .

The problems of circulating non-print materials are obvious at even a cursory glance. Since we lend filmstrips, tapes, loops, records, and other non-book materials to students in most schools,

do we lend them to the general public? In addition, we lend the necessary equipment for home listening and viewing if this is necessary . . . . Is there enough equipment in the schools to include loans to the community? Again, can we demand immediate early morning return so that teachers can use it during the day?

#### Staffing

Ila Keddy has noted that:

The school librarian, by virtue of her training and experience, is familiar with school problems, teaching aids and materials. The public librarian is conversant with public library administration and service and does not have the specialized training of the school librarians.<sup>10</sup>

Because of the dichotomy which exists in the training of librarians, it may indeed be difficult to find one person with expertise in working with both students and public patrons. If there are several librarians whose duties are designated either "school" or "public," the governing board(s) must carefully consider status and salary. Problems can arise because school personnel are generally better paid than their public counterparts, even though they may work fewer week in the year (but not necessarily fewer hours).<sup>11</sup>

#### STUDIES AND RESEARCH

As municipal bodies, school administrators, teachers, and librarians grappled with the problems of libraries, it became apparent that there was a need for research, experiments, and discussions about combined libraries. A number of individuals have attempted to fulfill this need. We will examine some of the most important research here.

In 1937, James E. Wert published an early study of public library branches housed in schools serving both children and adults. His method of evaluating the effectiveness of a combined library was to survey the adults in the area to determine how many held library cards as well as the source of a

book they had read in the last two weeks. Wert reported that the branch library in the school was more economical and just as effective as the separate branch library and the library patronage decreases as distance increases; therefore, he advocated "further expansion of library facilities by establishing more branches."<sup>12</sup> Though the survey was limited to two libraries in St. Louis, Missouri and would not be called "scientific" by today's standards, it was an attempt to actually measure the phenomenon and to publish the results.

The next significant and still widely quoted study was done by Ruth M. White and published by the American Library Association in 1963. The results were obtained from the questionnaire which she sent to 154 public libraries located in schools. While she concluded with no recommendations, White did summarize the replies of librarians who worked in combined facilities. She found that:

1. Nearly three quarters of the people questioned opposed combined facilities, while the remainder were either uncertain or cautiously optimistic
2. Professional literature of the previous twenty years was almost unanimously opposed to the combinations
3. Combined school/public libraries had been tried more than one hundred years before and were outmoded. The trend was away from such combinations.<sup>13</sup>

In 1975 Carol Unger resurveyed the libraries identified by White to determine if any had ceased to exist as combined facilities. She found that twenty-five had relocated and were no longer operating as combined libraries, though she found no particular trends to be responsible for the changes. However, Unger did find that the inconvenience of a public library located within a school accounted for lower adult usage, and that the primary library patrons were the students who attended classes in that school.<sup>14</sup>



In 1977 Wilma Lee Broughton Woolard attempted to identify as many combined school/public libraries in the United States as possible. Further, she sought to determine the feasibility and effects on service of such mergers. A final total of about 150 libraries was obtained, though fifty-five were actually used in the survey.

Woolard concluded that under certain conditions and circumstances, school libraries and public libraries were able to combine to offer viable library programs. The optimum environment seems to be in communities with ten thousand residents or less, and which need either a school or public library and/or professional staff.<sup>15</sup>

One noteworthy research team consists of Canadians L. J. Amey and R. J. Smith. Their 1976 study sought to "investigate whether substantial differences exist in the attitudes of school libraries and public librarians toward combining school and public libraries."<sup>16</sup>

One hundred and twelve librarians in the Toronto area who had worked in either a school or public library (but not a combined facility) responded to the questionnaire. Amey and Smith concluded that the two groups had substantial differences of opinion concerning circulation, sharing tasks, and role perception. Areas of agreement included economy, provision of controversial material and the basic purpose of their libraries. Contrary to professional literature, geographic location of a combined library in the community was not found to be a source of concern to either group.

In another interesting attitude study, Esther R. Dyer analyzed panelists' predictions for the next fifteen years about possibilities relating to children's services in school and public libraries. Dyer's most penetrating and disturbing finding was that:

The highest priorities for both institutions [school and public libraries] are self-preservation and protection of territory, and cooperation is an implicit threat to autonomy. Long a sacred cow of librarianship, cooperation will not be overtly resisted, but neither will it be actively pursued unless external forces such as the community or other funding agencies foist such a requirement upon these traditionalist institutions.<sup>17</sup>

Today, not only are individuals responding to the need for further research on combined libraries, government agencies are also becoming involved. Rather than discussing each state's activities, Wisconsin will serve as an example.

In Wisconsin, a position paper designed to serve as a guideline was developed jointly by the Bureau of Public and Cooperative Library Services and the Bureau of School Library Media Programs. The bureaus do not generally advocate combined libraries, but they acknowledge that these facilities may offer temporary solutions in some cases. In addition to making recommendations which address typical library problems (including finances, staff, collections, and others), these bureaus add the unusual admonition to provide means for later dividing materials and equipment in the event that the combined library can be separated.<sup>18</sup>

While some states write proposals and conduct original research, other states try to implement the ideas which others have expressed on paper. Two examples will illustrate this point.

Elsie Brumback, Director of the Division of Educational Media of North Carolina, reports that in 1978 a combined school/public library was opened in very remote Bayboro, North Carolina. A one-room public library, staffed by volunteers, had been in existence since 1972, and there did not seem to be any way to improve library service except for a bookmobile which stopped in Bayboro every two weeks. As the high school was getting a new addition, the school's

superintendent suggested that the new library be built to provide service to both school and public patrons. A children's room and community auditorium were among the physical facilities provided. A director with experience in school, public, and combined facilities was hired, along with several other professional librarians. While combined libraries are not advocated in North Carolina, Brumback admits that in this particular situation, dedicated local people have vastly improved the educational, informational and cultural possibilities in their community.<sup>24</sup>

The state of Hawaii has a highly developed and sophisticated combined school/public library system. Organized in 1965 and administered by the Department of Education, the system's emphasis is on providing equal information access to all residents of the state. Resources are divided equally between school-oriented and public-oriented services and programs. Several professional and paraprofessional staff members are employed at the libraries, each with expertise in a particular area such as graphics, school, or public services.

Ramachandran notes that unlike many combined facilities, this system was designed not to save money, but to spend it wisely. Hawaii's facilities do not try to do two jobs with insufficient money and personnel. Each facility is essentially a new entity designed for two purposes, rather than simply a merger of two standard institutions.<sup>20</sup>

After an examination of the literature detailing actual or supposed benefits and weaknesses of combined libraries, research studies, policy statements, and editorials, some conclusions will be drawn about combined school/public libraries in America today and suggestions made for the future.

Like all others seriously concerned with combined school/public libraries, this author recognizes the intense need for more research and less theorizing. There is finally some cause for hope in this area, as the important studies by Woolard, Amey/Smith and other have all been done since about 1975. Additional topics for further study might include the evaluation of existing combined programs and the opinions of interested groups such as students, teachers and the general public who are patrons of combined facilities.

From the research which has been done, a body of literature is beginning to develop which could be described as practical guidelines for communities considering a combined facility. Woolard's study contains lengthy recommendations, and Shirley Aaron has developed a checklist to be used by local planners. Although a wide range of problems must always remain: would a combined library provide services equal to or better than those provided by separate libraries without sacrificing either the public or the school clientele?

Something which the library profession does not need is more "doom and gloom" literature listing the many faults and insurmountable problems inherent in combined facilities. While it may be true that there are few, if any, ideal combined libraries in existence, it is this author's opinion that there are also few ideal school or public libraries. This fact, however, does not discourage librarians from striving for perfection in all libraries.

It must also be noted that critics all too frequently evaluate combined facilities using the national, state or professional guidelines for both school and public libraries which do not take into account the unique problems and capabilities of these facilities. These guidelines were often written by urban professionals who do not understand the special rural problems combined libraries seek to alleviate. Since combined libraries are not necessarily

intended to meet the same goals in the same ways as traditional libraries, combined libraries are considered substandard.

It is unlikely that anyone would advocate merging all school and public libraries, but as we seek to provide library service to areas, usually rural, which are still totally lacking in library service, a combined facility is a viable option. One state consultant challenged critics by asking,

"Are you, then, saying that in our small towns which will never be big enough to support two good libraries, or get two good librarians, and which are too spread out for effective system coordination, are to be doomed to having two poor libraries, forever?"<sup>21</sup>

This author predicts that creative people who are earnestly trying to provide library service to rural populations are on the verge of creating an entirely new type of library. A combined school/public library should not be seen merely as two separate libraries sharing a building, resources, and possibly staff members, but should be considered as one information center seeking to meet the educational, recreational, and cultural need of all community members. This marriage between the various facets of both libraries enables the two formerly individual entities to function as one whole. Ian MacSween, head librarian at the Centennial combined facility in Coquitlam, British Columbia sums up this concept well when he states:

In some ways, the world cohabitation does fit the situation of some school-housed public libraries. Just as people sometimes "shack up" to avoid the commitments and responsibilities of legitimate marriage, the school-housed public library, in many cases, especially our own, has been a sort of trial marriage. Like other trial marriages, Centennial, and other situations have been entered into lightly without any long range plans being made. In our case, the only real obligation is that neither partner may walk out without first serving a one year notice of termination.<sup>22</sup>

The emergence of this entirely new library makes demands upon agencies not directly involved in actually planning or operating the facility. National,

state, and professional groups must develop new guidelines designed specifically to apply to combined facilities. Individuals with expertise in combined facilities should be identified for consulting purposes, and relevant information should be disseminated in highly visible form to those who need it. The curriculum of library schools should be expanded to include training for those who wish to work in combined libraries; courses must provide instruction in legal matters pertaining to public institutions as well as information relevant to school environments. Certification requirements should recognize the skills and training needed for managing these special facilities. Architects must be sensitive to the needs of combined facilities in order to design flexible, useful structures while benefitting from the mistakes discovered in previous building attempts. States may need to change legislation relating to grants and political boundaries in cases where these problems inhibit combined facilities.<sup>23</sup>

Late in 1964, the Advisory Council on Library Development commissioned Frederic Wezeman, Associate Professor of the Library School at the University of Minnesota to conduct a survey of the state's combined libraries. Mr. Wezeman visited twenty of the twenty-two combined facilities he could identify, compiling a few descriptive statistics based on his visit. All of his data was used to make extremely negative comments about the combination libraries in general.<sup>24</sup> The "study" appears so totally negative and so strongly biased that this author believes the "study" was designed to support the Advisory Council's position, rather than to make any real contribution to the body of knowledge concerning combined libraries.

It is high time that the library profession and related agencies accept the existence of combined school/public libraries and acknowledge that under

certain circumstances these facilities provide a viable option for rural communities which can not support two libraries. Regardless of how determined some people might be to eliminate all such libraries, interest is still high, especially in small rural communities. It would be far better to urge the marriage of both facilities creating one worthwhile and entirely new entity than to ostracize those facilities which have been simply cohabitating and thus providing relatively poor service. Good combined school/public library programs are not easy to plan, implement, study or evaluate, but not all marriages are made in heaven.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Shirley L. Aaron, A Study of Combined School-Public Libraries (Chicago: American Library Association, 1980), pp. ix-x.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Stick, "Public Library/School Library Cooperation Eyed in Iowa," Library Journal 103 (May 1, 1978): 923.

<sup>3</sup> Wilma Lee Broughton Woolard, Combined School/Public Libraries: A Survey with Conclusions and Recommendations (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1980), p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> Dale R. Horncastle, "Public Library Within a School: Can It Work?" Atlantic Provinces Library Association Bulletin 37 (Winter 1973): 106.

<sup>5</sup> Woolard, Combined School/Public Libraries, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Hegarty, "The Fall and Subsequent Rise of a White Elephant: The School-Housed Public Library," Virginia Libraries 18 (Summer 1971): 13.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth R. Haycock, "To Combine or Not to Combine: The School Media Center and the Public Library," NASSP Bulletin 59 (September 1975): 68-69.

<sup>8</sup> Woolard, Combined School/Public Libraries, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> Haycock, "To Combine or Not to Combine," p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> Ida Reddy, "The School Housed Public Library -- An Evaluation," Ontario Library Review 52 (June 1968): 83.

<sup>11</sup> Haycock, "To Combine or Not to Combine," p. 72.

<sup>12</sup> James E. Wert, "The Effectiveness of the Public-School-Housed Library Branch," Library Quarterly 7 (October 1937): 545.

<sup>13</sup> Ruth M. White, The School-Housed Public Library -- A Survey (Chicago: American Library Association, 1963): 1-4.

<sup>14</sup> "The School-Housed Public Library, Revisited," cited by Shirley L. Aaron, A Study of Combined School-Public Libraries (Chicago: American Library Association, 1980), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Wilma Lee Woolard, "The Combined School and Public Library: Can It Work?" Library Journal 103 (February 15, 1978): 438.

<sup>16</sup> L. J. Amey and R. J. Smith, "Combination School and Public Libraries: An Attitudinal Study," Canadian Library Journal 33 (June 1976): 252.

<sup>17</sup> Esther R. Dyer, Cooperation in Library Service to Children (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1978), p. 94.



<sup>18</sup> Woolard, Combined School/Public Libraries, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Elsie L. Brumback, "Public-School Library Cooperation in Rural America -- A View from the State Level," Rural Libraries 1 (Spring 1980): 42-44.

<sup>20</sup> Rasu Ramachandran, "Community/School Library Concept in Hawaii," UNESCO Bulletin for Libraries 28 (July 1974): 201.

<sup>21</sup> Peggy Sullivan, "Problem: To Find the Problem," Illinois Libraries 52 (April 1970): 327.

<sup>22</sup> Ian MacSween, "Centennial Library," BCLA Reporter 19 (January 1976): 29; (March 1976): 8-16.

<sup>23</sup> Woolard, Combined School/Public Libraries, pp. 80-81.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick Wezeman, Combination School and Public Libraries in Pennsylvania: A Study with Recommendations (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania State Library, 1965), pp. 1-5.

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\*denotes articles describing Centennial Library, Coquitlam, British Columbia.