Ramsey County Library, Minnesota
Digital Access Initiative: a ConnectED Experience

This is the full Q&A with Chuck Wettergren, Library IT Manager and Amy Boese, Teen Librarian, from Ramsey County Library referenced in the article Library Access for All Students: Stories from Five ConnectED Libraries.

1. Can you briefly describe the nature and scope of your program and how you established the partnership and program in your community?

Ramsey County Library has a history of working with the White Bear Lake Area Schools to showcase and provide instruction on using our resources including digital resources. After the school district began its 1:1 Chromebook program, offering access to a Chromebook for each student, it became apparent that students would greatly benefit from a single library card that could provide access to resources available through both institutions.

This resulted in the Digital Access Initiative, where students would be given the opportunity to receive a Ramsey County Library Student Access Card directly through their local school's media center. During the 2015-2016 school year, the initiative provided cards for grades six, seven and eight.

After distributing cards early in the 2015-2016 school year, Ramsey County Library staff visited the individual schools to provide an introduction to resources like e-books and Homework Rescue, emphasizing how these resources are available through the Chromebooks.

2. Where were points of push back (internally? schools? parents?) and how did you overcome them?

There really was not any pushback involved in this initiative. There were some challenges around sharing student information. Because of timing we were not able to provide an electronic application through the school portal and instead required a parents/guardian to sign application forms.

To keep this simple for the students, and because there were hundreds of applications to process, a procedure was created to exchange a signed library card application with a pre-activated Student Access library card. It is expected that some streamlining will occur in the next school year, starting with an electronic library application available on the school portal.

3. Was there immediate interest with the schools you worked with or did that take some nurturing?

Ramsey County Library had already developed a close working relationship around teen programming within the White Bear Lake Area School District. Once the value of library card ownership was related to the distribution of Chromebooks the program took off.

4. Were there many surprises as you planned and executed the initiative, good or bad?

The number of students applying for a Student Access Card when they already had a Ramsey County Library card was higher than expected. Early on it was agreed that existing library cards would work the same as the new Student Access Cards (media centers would scan the existing barcodes into their local media systems), but kids applied even though they had active accounts. Luckily, staff could swap out the barcodes of the new cards for the old and keep the existing accounts.

5. What was the response to the cards? Have you had increased usage/visits?

Students are excited to have the increased access to resources. Teachers have told us that the flexibility of the e-books is key in the school environment. Because much of the use is related to digital resources from multiple vendors, statistics are not readily available. The Student Access Cards do have unique identifiers so eventually we will be able to review statistics around their use.

6. Has this program led to any other school partnerships or programs?

Yes! This summer, the district asked if the library would make their Chromebooks and hotspots available to district students through the local library. This will expand opportunities for kids if they don't have Internet access at home or don't have their Chromebook when visiting the public library. We were also able to go into the classrooms and talk with students about our Summer Reading Program. We have already seen an increase in active teens in the White Bear Lake branch so far this summer!

7. If you had to do it all over again, what would you do differently?

The process worked well, but finding a way to share data electronically and reliably to prevent duplicate records from being created when students already have library accounts would save time. Initially there were enough questions around collecting and exchanging data that a more manual process was pursued. During the 2016-2017 school year, library applications will be made in electronic form on the school portal. We believe that will speed up the process.

8. Any advice for libraries thinking about doing something like this? Any resources you would point them to?

The biggest factor making this a success was the participation of the school district. They managed distribution of the cards and applications, and actively promoted this initiative to the students. This was key to making it a success. It also helped that the school district was forward thinking and had a 1:1 Chromebook initiative well under way.

The library side became more of a challenge because we needed to input registration information manually because the application information was not collected electronically. Even if it is collected electronically, duplicate records were representing close to 30% of the registrations. If libraries try to import electronic applications, they will have to decide the importance of preventing duplicate accounts vs keeping a clean database of users.

Using a batch load process for importing new barcodes was key. This allowed creating library accounts with immediate access to public library resources without the need to process applications before handing out cards. Library card vendors should be able to provide an electronic list of barcodes delivered that can be updated and loaded into an Integrated Library System.

Lastly, try to be flexible. This program is all about getting students access to library resources.