



Hartford Public Library, Connecticut Boundless, a ConnectED Experience

This is the full Q&A with Mary Billings, Chief Public Services Officer, from [Hartford Public 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?

Boundless is a partnership between Hartford Public Library and the 21,000 students of the Hartford Public School system that is a formalized extension of the library/school collaboration that began in 2003 with the integration of school holdings into the library's catalog, enabling district wide searching and circulation. Students now have seamless access to the Library's many resources, including print, databases and digital media.

Librarians and teachers collaborate on programming, school literacy events and summer reading materials. All services have been expanded with enhanced communication between the school library media specialists or teacher contacts and the library branch managers and youth librarians, reducing duplication of materials and allowing expansion of collections in the face of tight collection budgets. The program was publicized in February, 2014, but was formalized in December, 2016 as Boundless.

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

The biggest concern came from school media specialists who were concerned about losing control of their collections and possibly losing their jobs with a public library "takeover." One successful strategy was to identify some supporters among the media specialists who helped mitigate their fears by promoting the reduction of daily tasks and the ability to easily generate reports. The lead contact at the library participated in quarterly in-service meetings with the school staff, offered training on the ILS software and fielded some pretty hostile questions in the early stages. Eventually a greater understanding and an enhanced level of trust convinced a majority that the collaboration would ultimately elevate the importance of school libraries, not the opposite.

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

Youth staff at all branches of the Library has a long history of supporting the schools through homework clubs, library card sign up drives, purchasing summer reading materials and One Book Hartford programs; it's just much easier now. Because of this, along with the points addressed in the previous question, the response to the formal initiative has been positive from the start.

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

The biggest—and best—surprise has been the level of interest and support for Boundless, among both library and school staff. We expect this to grow with the launch of the website and formal promotion made possible through a Nellie Mae Education Foundation grant supporting student-centered learning that was awarded to the schools. The primary focus of Boundless has been equity and access. The collective level of concern and commitment to level the playing field for Hartford students is amazing.

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

We have had student and teacher patron data loaded into our ILS since 2003, which allowed the school libraries to circulate their materials internally. Since then the Library has used that information as a basis for a public library card along with some additional information we require, including a parental signature acknowledging responsibility for materials. We have seen a marked increase both in attendance and circulation at the branches participating in the collaboration. Activity spiked initially, and continues to be sustained at a higher level than prior to the initiative.

This fall we will launch a Boundless card at two community elementary schools. These cards will have the Boundless logo on the front along with that of Hartford Public Schools and Hartford Public Library. Library card applications will be included in the parents' registration packet for signature, and recorded in the students' school record, which will generate the issue of the single full service card attached to a Boundless lanyard that can be used in both the schools and any library location.

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

Hartford is a portfolio school district, with a complicated process and lottery for choosing and applying for a school due to state mandated guidelines to integrate public schools following a lawsuit. The library now has a state-funded part-time staff person dedicated to assisting parents navigate the system. Three years ago, when the city dropped its support of providing summer lunches to youth in our branches, we were able to reach out successfully to the schools, which have a separate budget, allowing the program to continue. This year we have broadened our reach to the ELL students in some of the neighborhoods, with branch staff trained to use online resources for families such as Middlebury Interactive Languages and ESL Reading Smart.

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

This has been a very long process; it would have taken off faster if we had promoted our early success and leveraged the school/library collaboration for grant or donor funding sooner. The demand and need far outpaces our capacity to provide with existing staff and resources.

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

It's important to bring decision making parties together to develop a clear vision and strategies for the collaboration. Create an action plan. In Hartford, school principals are critical to success. Use the school superintendent's strategy as a guide. In challenging economic times community engagement and collaboration are critical to student success, and we have found that most educators are willing to leverage resources to enhance student success.