

Gathering Strength to Combat Access Inequality

How a Small Rural Public Library Supported Virtual Access for Public School Students, Staff, and their Families

Julie Lane

Prince Edward County (PEC) is located east of Toronto and covers approximately 1,050 square kilometers. PEC is a part of the Hastings Prince Edward District School Board (HPEDSB) and have a total of 6 public schools, one Catholic school, and one private school. The other county serviced by our school board is Hastings County. The County of Prince Edward Public Library (CPEPL) system of 6 branches services just under 25,000 residents and countless seasonal visitors during the tourism season. Our public school board services approximately 15,000 students across 7,220 square kilometers and 39 in-person schools and a K-10 virtual school across the two counties. Starting off a technology column with a bunch of statistics is not exactly how I figured I would write this. However, context is key when discussing equity and access; and in this piece, I intend to highlight how both of those are made significantly easier to achieve for community stakeholders, with the presence of technology and education.

When the stay-at-home orders were announced in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we knew that we would not be able to hold our scheduled and planned public library programs. We turned to live streaming story times, maker programs, and author visits, all using what equipment we had on hand—tablets, laptops, and the internet.

Once it became clear that students in the public schools would not return to in-person learning within any short amount of time, all school boards in Ontario ensured that enough Chromebooks were purchased so that every student had their own dedicated device, with the assumption that providing a device meant all students could participate in remote learning. Teachers rushed to transition their teaching plans to an online format; school administrators scrambled to schedule safe device pick-ups for students; and parents were not only juggling professional responsibilities and parenthood, but now teaching and tech support. Although school boards provided tools to meet the “classroom” requirements, they could not ensure that every single student had access to a high-speed internet connection, nor could they offer school library access remotely. This is where the CPEPL was able to offer support.

The global shut down had a significant impact on the relationship that the CPEPL had with the schools in our County. A large focus of mine was to rebuild those working relationships to support students, staff, and families, and ultimately demonstrate in actionable ways how the local public library system was there for them. One immediate way I thought we could demonstrate support was through lending our Wi-Fi hotspots. Hotspot lending programs through public libraries have gained popularity over the last few years. Although our program had been in place for nearly 5 years, I am always surprised at the number of people that do not realize it is an available resource. With that in mind, I persistently reached out to the school administrators in our area and set up meetings to discuss how our Borrow the Internet program could benefit those working remotely without reliable internet. Wait lists for our 9 available hotspot devices drastically increased, but

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our patron community was incredibly supportive of our students and would frequently request that their loan, which is at maximum 7 days in length, be passed to a student. Though connecting families with internet hotspots was helpful for the required online learning, we could not fill the gap completely. If we had an unlimited communications budget, the situation would have been easily remedied, but, as we all know in the Library world, budgets can be *very* tight. This fact pushed us to find creative ways to bring as many resources as possible to the students, staff, and families in our community.

To broaden the reach to individual schools (and staying persistent with that outreach), I focused on not only ensuring that school communities knew what physical resources the library had, but also what electronic resources were available. These conversations and emails with school administrators led me to get in contact with the curriculum coordinator at the board office. This connection was a complete game changer. Instead of us, as a public entity outside of the school community, contacting individual schools and trying to build relationships with teachers, librarians, and administrators, we had the person who oversaw *all* of the school librarians, library technicians, and curriculum development for the K-8 grades on our side. The coordinator was on board to help us make the desired connections with the schools in a number of ways. She put us in contact with the curriculum coordinator for the secondary grades (9-12) and our program and service list was sent from the board office to *every* teacher, principal, school librarian, and library technician in Prince Edward County. We were then able to set up a meeting with the coordinator of assistive technologies for the board, which set us on a track to completely revamp how we marketed and allocated our resources to schools.

It became clear in our first conversation that we needed to get students connected with their public libraries as quickly and efficiently as possible. With students split between in-person learning, virtual learning, or a combination of the two, with still minimal to no access to school library borrowing, the online resources of the public library system seemed like the perfect solution. Not only would connecting students, staff, and their families with their local public library be a way to get everyone reading, but we were fulfilling the opportunity to ensure that *everyone* had genuine and equitable access. What the school board had observed was that the required shift to remote learning made the inequality of literature access glaringly obvious. Students who relied on their school library for reading were not getting that opportunity and students who had individual education plans were jumping through hoops to get digital copies of material. So though everyone had a school supplied Chromebook, not everyone had the same access. This is where public library subscriptions to Hoopla and Libby came to the rescue for providing current and popular literature in a variety of electronic formats for students to immediately access for both course reading and leisure enjoyment.

Connecting with like-minded, growth- and education-oriented people is incredibly empowering. The curriculum coordinators at the board office were so enthusiastic about connecting students, staff, and families in our school board with their public library that it made the next parts of the process not only successful, but fun as well!

The curriculum coordinators and I created a presentation that we brought first to school administrators in Prince Edward County. Having public library advocacy come from the school board was incredibly influential and a big step toward issuing library cards to students. Once we had buy-in from the school administrators, we circulated registration forms for families to fill out and get everyone in their household public library access. We found that the easiest way to do this

was using Google Forms. It was simple for parents to fill out and easy for library staff to glean the required information for card registration. Since the library was also working with the virtual school, we needed to be able to issue library cards even if some students were not in our catchment area. It was common for virtual classes to consist of students from the smallest village in PEC and all the way up to the northern most part of Hastings County, a full 3 hours' drive away. CPEPL was able to accommodate this need. PEC is a tourist destination and frequently issues cards for visitors staying in the area for an extended period of time under the rule of if you "work, live, or play" in PEC, you are eligible for a public library card. Once library cards were set up or renewed for all families who requested them through the Google Form, I got to work teaching students and staff how to access library resources.

After communicating with the curriculum staff and public school administrators, it was decided that creating an information presentation on getting started with Hoopla was the best course of action. Hoopla is an incredibly intuitive application in regards to the format possibilities (eBooks and Audiobooks) as well as adjustable features within each format. The available settings and adjustment options make the reading experience comfortable and accessible as possible for users. Also, since there is no wait time to borrow materials, this allowed entire classes learning remotely to all check out the same title and read together. The material presented to students was easy to understand and interactive. The session provided ample time for students to follow along and test each feature in the Hoopla App with their own individual book selections. The best part? This presentation was just the starting point.

While we were only able to schedule and virtually deliver this presentation at two in-person schools, the other five schools in PEC and a number of primary classes in the virtual school still participated in the Google Form for library card registration.

Teachers started asking what *else* the public library had to offer to enhance the curriculum delivery with additional resources. Many community teachers were reminded of the Public Library's services and resources (beyond just Hoopla) and reached out for class visits or access to materials. Other schools outside of our Prince Edward County catchment reached out and connected with their local public libraries, or vice versa.

We are still working to develop ways to meet the needs of students, staff, and their families through the public library. Some schools in the northern area of the region have students coming from multiple, different public library catchment areas, and most of these libraries do not have the same resources as others, especially in the case of smaller systems. This posed an issue of equitable access for students: Why should some students in the class have access to library online resources, and some not because they come from different/smaller communities? We were able to mitigate this issue with the virtual school, but for students attending in-person learning, we could not give library cards to *every* student in the school board. Thankfully, another public library system in our area stepped up their access to offer virtual library access to any student or teacher in Hastings County (so everywhere except Prince Edward County).

This recognition of the importance of equitable access enabled students to not only regain access to a public library system, but it also ensured that *all* students could access books in the way that best suited them. When I ask a class if listening to an audiobook counts as reading, it amazes me that the majority of the class say "no." Or if I ask students if they had ever read an eBook, some would say it was not a "real" book. These comments and notions are not only untrue, but they are

also exclusionary. Countless students need other formats than just printed materials. How many would benefit from listening to an audiobook along with reading a printed version? How many students dislike reading because it is just hard to *see* the words, but if the text was more spaced out, or a different font, it would make all the difference? How many times is a student not able to access a book they want because all available copies are already checked out at their school library? These are issues students in the classes I work with face. Having a public library card can significantly ease these barriers to access.

All in all, we processed hundreds of card requests and renewals and were able to powerfully illustrate to teachers how they could meaningfully integrate public library resources into their classrooms, either virtually or physically. Our requests for library visits came back up to pre-pandemic levels, but we were working with *more* schools than we had previously. Teachers were, and still are, reaching out and asking if we can get extra copies of books, or if we can lead virtual novel studies. One of our more popular pieces of progress is the integration of our coding programs with other subjects. Currently, I am running a ukulele program where students are writing group arrangements using binary code as the basis for composition. We have classes doing art projects with robotics and integrating math learning objectives. We have done virtual story time and connected the story to creating Scratch programs. The possibilities are endless, and now that we once again have the interest from teachers, we are working with them to support their students and all the learning that comes with incorporating technology and maker-thinking into a classroom environment. The momentum has not let up, and we are beyond thrilled.

Our communities and local school board have embraced the reality that public libraries are more than just books. Public libraries are a critical part of any community and have the power to be a meaningful component to education at all levels. Having schools and all educational stakeholders using public library services not only broadens the reach of a public library, but also broadens our advocacy potential. We know there is still a long way to go in terms of genuine equitable access, especially when it comes to technology. Internet connectivity and technology literacy are just the tip of the iceberg, but when organizations support each other to truly serve their community, collectively, that is how you make change.