



Story time!

"It's not just about books anymore," Mulligan says. "This is the first time the Minneapolis system has had space and materials specifically for teens, and we figured that the best way to be successful in reaching teens was to ask them what they want and need."

With the right programming, a library can even be a Friday night destination. Last May, 300 teenagers attended a battle of the bands at Highland Park Branch Library. "It was the most successful teen program in St. Paul library history," says library associate Marcus Lowry. "It took us about four months to plan. It was really cool, especially for teenagers who don't equate libraries with interesting things. We'll do it again this [month], and we'll try to do it every year."

Lowry works with a teen council to stock the shelves with manga, zines, and the like; he even gives them enough responsibility for planning events to make the other adults a bit anxious. "It's hard sometimes," he says. "Planning with them takes more work than doing it alone. It means working by committee. But when librarians design programs for teenagers, they're hit or miss. When teenagers design them, at least those kids are guaranteed to come."

For Lowry, it's a matter of taking the time to build relationships. "Teenagers have always felt marginalized, like their interests are looked down on," he says. "They want, as much as anyone else, to have a place."

The Newest Patrons

But what about first-, second-, or third-generation immigrants who are not only new to the Twin Cities but to English itself? Kolb Peterson says one goal of all the Twin Cities library administrators she knows is "to be more inclusive when we hire," and to provide materials that simultaneously help non-English speakers learn English and show that libraries welcome diverse cultures.

"In the neighborhood around our Lexington outreach branch, something like eighty-seven languages and dialects are spoken," she says. "It's tough to keep up. It's important to show support for our patrons' cultural heritages by having stuff in kids' first languages."

Even simple gestures, such as "Welcome" signs on library doors written in other languages, can help libraries feel more inviting. "I once spoke with another librarian who said, 'Well, my grandparents were from Sweden, and they never got to see anything in their language on a door,'" Kolb Peterson recalls. "I said, 'Isn't it a good thing we know better than that now?'"

Just east of downtown St. Paul, the Dayton's Bluff Branch Library shares a new building with Metropolitan State University's library in one of the city's most culturally diverse neighborhoods. Many of the library's patrons are from Spanish-speaking or bilingual homes, so the branch has acquired a number of Spanish-language materials.

Library brochures are printed in English, Spanish, Somali, Hmong, and Russian, and the system-wide live, Web-based homework help available through tutor.com is

offered in Spanish five days a week. Having discovered that many kids also need a quiet place to study and get homework help outside of school and home, five St. Paul branches—Sun Ray, Lexington, Rice Street, Riverview, and Dayton's Bluff—offer drop-in homework centers. (Nine Minneapolis public libraries and many county branches have similar programs either online or in-person.)

Jen Connolly, a VISTA volunteer who staffs the homework center at the Sun Ray branch, graduated last spring from the University of Minnesota-Morris with a degree in English. She remembers how important the Hayden Heights library was during her own childhood growing up on the East Side.

"Places like this can definitely play a big role in literacy education," she says. "I'll have fifth graders come in who have never used the Internet before. We have kids who come for help who couldn't get it otherwise—their parents aren't there or they don't speak English. Sometimes kids just get dropped off here, which is sad, but it does mean they're here." ♦

