

# The Town Librarian and the Latchkey Children

## *Understanding Opportunities for Value Creation in the Public Sector*

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The town librarian was concerned. Each day, at about three pm eddies of schoolchildren washed into the library's reading rooms. Around five the tide of children began to ebb. By six the library was quiet once again. An informal survey revealed what was happening: the library was being used as a day care center for latchkey children. How should the librarian respond?

Her first instinct was to discourage the emerging practice. After all, the influx disrupted the library. The reading rooms—quiet and spacious most of the day—became noisy and crowded. Books, particularly the fragile paperbacks, stacked after careless use in untidy heaps on tables, slid to the floor with spines cracking. Tired assistants faced mountains of re-shelving before they could leave for the day. The constant traffic to the bathrooms kept the janitor busy with special efforts to keep them neat, clean, and well stocked.

Besides, it just was not the town library's job to care for latchkey children. That task should be carried out by the parents, or perhaps other day care providers, certainly not the library. Perhaps a letter to the local newspaper reminding citizens about the proper use of a library would set things right. If that failed, new rules limiting children's access to the library would have to be established.

Then, she had a more entrepreneurial idea: perhaps the latchkey children could be used to claim more funds for the library from the town's tight budget. She could argue that the new demands from latchkey children required additional resources. More staff would be needed to keep the children from disrupting other library users. Overtime funds would be necessary to pay assistants and janitors for tidying the library at the end of the day. Perhaps the library itself would have to be redesigned to create elementary and junior high school reading rooms. Indeed, now that she thought of it, the reconstruction work might be used to justify repainting the interior of the entire library—an objective she had had for many years. But all this would cost money, and a statewide tax revolt had left the town with sharply limited funds.

As the forbidding prospect of seeking funds from the town's Budget Committee came clearly into view, the librarian had a different idea: perhaps a program for the latchkey children could be financed by

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charging their parents for the costs of the new program. Some practical problems loomed, however. For example, how much should she charge for the service? She could fairly easily record the direct costs associated with providing the program. But she was unsure how to account for indirect costs such as a managerial time spent organizing the activity, the depreciation of the building, and so on. If she included too few of these indirect costs in the price of the program, then the public as a whole would be unwittingly subsidizing the working parents. If she included too many, the town would be unintentionally taking advantage of working parents to help support their library.

She also thought that the town's citizens and their representatives might have views about whether it was appropriate for her to use the facilities of the library for a program of this type, and she could not be sure what those views would be. If she set up a fee-for-service program, would the town's residents admire her entrepreneurial energies or worry that she was becoming too independent? Similarly, would they see serving the latchkey children as a worthy cause or as a service for a narrow and not particularly deserving group? She would clearly have to go back to the town meeting for guidance.

Given the difficulties of charging clients for the service, the librarian had still another idea: perhaps the new service could be "financed" through volunteer effort. Maybe the parents of the children could be organized to assume some of the responsibilities of supervising and cleaning up after the children. Could they even be enticed to help the librarian change the physical configuration of the library, accommodating the new "function" with a separation between quiet reading areas and other spaces for more activity and volume? The community involvement might help to deflect public concerns about the propriety of using the library to care for latchkey children and that public resources were subsidizing relatively narrow and unworthy interests.

Mobilizing a volunteer effort would be a complex undertaking, however. The librarian was unfamiliar with such enterprises. Indeed, all the things she had so far considered seemed difficult since they involved her in outside political activity. Making a presentation to the town's budget committee and writing a letter about the problem to the newspaper were one thing; setting up a financially self-sustaining program and mobilizing a large group of volunteers were quite another.

Then, a last idea occurred to her: perhaps the problem could be solved by finding an answer within her own organization. A little rescheduling might ensure that there would be adequate staff to supervise the children, and perhaps even to provide reading enrichment programs. Maybe some things could be rearranged in the library to create a special room for the program. Perhaps movies could sometimes be shown in this special room as part of the after-school program.

In fact, the more the librarian thought about it, the more it seemed that caring for these children in the library might be well within the current mission of her organization. It might give her and her assistant librarians a chance to encourage reading and a love for books that would last all the children's lives. Moreover, it seemed to her that the claims that these children and their parents made on the library were as proper as those made by the many others who used the library in different ways: the high school students who arrived in the evenings to complete research projects and gossip with one another, the elderly people who came to read newspapers and magazines during the day and catch up

with their friends, even the do-it-yourselfers who showed up to learn how to complete the project on which they had embarked without a clear plan.

As the librarian began to think about how her organization might respond to the new demands presented by the latchkey children, she recalled its history and began seeing the library in a new light. Her professional training and that of her staff had prepared them to view the library as a place where books were kept and made available to the public. To fulfill this function, an elaborate system of inventorying and recording the location of books had been developed. An equally elaborate system had also been built to monitor which citizens had borrowed which books, and to impose fines on those who kept books too long. This was the core function of the library and the task with which the professional staff identified most strongly.

Over time, however, the functions of the library seemed to expand in response to citizen needs and the capacities of the library itself. Once the library had a system for inventorying books, it seemed entirely appropriate to use that system to manage a collection of records, compact discs, and videotapes as well. (Of course, the lending system for videos had to be modified slightly to avoid competing with local commercial ventures.) The facility in which the books were kept had been enlarged and made more attractive to encourage reading at the library as well as at home. Heat was provided in the winter and air conditioning in the summer for the comfort of the staff and patrons. Study carrels had been built for students. A children's room had been created with books and toys for toddlers. Increasingly, the library was being used to hold amateur chamber music concerts and meetings of craft societies as well as book review clubs.

As a result, the library had become something more than simply a place where books were kept. It was now a kind of indoor park used by many citizens for varied purposes. Who was to say that care for latchkey children was not a proper or valuable function for the library to provide if the librarian could think of a way to do so economically, effectively, and fairly, and with little cost to other functions of the library that had the sanction of tradition?