WHO’S IN CHARGE HERE?

HARNESSING THE POWER OF HOMESCHOOLERS

Gina Wilson, MLIS
Thomasville Public Library
Thomasville, Alabama

ARSL
Little Rock
#ARSL2015
Thomasville Public Library

ALABAMA

Service Pop.: 8,863
K-12 Pop.: ~2,325
Public (1,600) Private (600) Homeschooled (125)

Yearly Visitors: 46,000

Gina Wilson, Director since 2007. Homeschooler for 10 years prior to becoming a librarian, but very supportive of public and private schools.

#ARS2015 WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE? GINA WILSON, THOMASVILLE PUBLIC LIBRARY
1.77 M Home Educated Students in U.S. (2012)

nces.ed.gov/ National Center For Education Statistics
http://www.time4learning.com/homeschool/homeschoolstatistics.shtml
It’s refreshing and encouraging when ‘power users’ arrive, and I look forward to it.

Homeschoolers often arrive as a family, and can seem to take over every available space at the front desk. My nickname for this phenomena: the ‘kudzu effect’. 😊

Kudzu Quote: www.gagirl.com/southern/funny_southern_sayings.html

tipsfromashton.wordpress.com (image)
Are you on good terms with local schools? If not, evaluate which factors are prohibiting collaboration and work up a plan to improve things. Maybe you will need to get the input of other key stakeholders. Host a meeting and ask for help.

**Bottom line**: serve the K-12 population; their information needs are within your mission.

Avoid favoring one student population over another. All students need the library, and we need the support and trust of all students! Avoid special events during school hours for one group unless you can afford to do something similar for other groups. If you can’t afford this, I recommend that you schedule most of your events after regular school hours so that all students have the choice of attending.
Homeschoolers’ wants are similar to those of students in public and private school environments.
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Librarians love homeschoolers, who are huge supporters of libraries.

Studies reveal some common behaviors that are the root cause of negative perceptions. These can be addressed with proper planning, clear policies, and effective staff training, resulting in better engagement of the student population.
Are you a ‘glass half full’ kind of librarian? I hope so. Being busy is a great indication that your library is relevant in your community. That’s great!

Librarians are often overwhelmed by the robust interactions with homeschoolers. Families often come in together, and hit the front desk simultaneously with many requests. This is difficult for libraries with limited staff.

Talk with homeschooling parents and work out a routine.
Create a drop off area.
Put out slips for requests or reference help and a box to leave them.
Process all check ins together.
Process request slips while the family is browsing.
Note info directly on the slips and return them to the family during their visit.
Ask everyone to get all their checkouts ready before approaching the check out desk.
Students from public, private, and homeschools meet on the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Monday each month at Thomasville Public Library for the Middle School Book Club.
Librarians are often overwhelmed by the robust interactions with homeschoolers. Families often come in together, and hit the front desk simultaneously with many requests. This is difficult for libraries with limited staff.
Homeschoolers ask for a lot, but they understand the constraints of budgets and staff time. Their needs and requests are similar to those of other student/parent subgroups. **Communicate your policy with courtesy.** Keep the conversational ball bouncing. Do as much as you can, but remember that it’s not possible to say ‘yes’ to every request. **Catering to any of the student subgroups can alienate the others.** ‘When in doubt, think it out’. Always ask yourself, is this within our policies? If I do this for one group, can I offer something similar to others?
Homeschoolers as a general rule are comfortable asking librarians for programs, materials and services. Don’t fall into the trap of saying ‘yes’ to requests that don’t meet your library’s policy. Homeschoolers are very friendly and supportive of the library, and they understand and respect the constraints of budget and staff time. In a polar reaction, don’t automatically say ‘no’ to a request either. Consider the library’s policies and consistently apply them to all requests.
Some libraries do too much. Some may not do enough. **Remember to offer equitable access to materials and services to all.**
In this example, the homeschool and private school populations are quite small compared to the public subgroup. By providing activities and materials accessible to all, the smaller groups can reap larger services than would be possible using the budget allocation by # of students method. If you are spending too much time and money on activities for homeschoolers during school hours, ask yourself if you could spend similar time and money on programs at local school facilities. If you could not afford this, then you need to evaluate your allocation of resources and keep spending in balance.

It’s critical to include part time staff in training. They provide the ‘face’ of the library to customers at the front desk, and need to be fluent and skilled at communicating library policies.
Homeschooling families (pictured- families from Thomasville PL) love the library, and look forward to library activities. And we look forward to seeing them!
In addition to the tips listed, consider issuing a family card. It’s much easier to check to see what they have out, when things are due, what they forgot to bring, and renew items, check out items etc on one card. We have a 35 book check out limit, which is plenty for most families.
Public libraries are the cornerstone of a democratic society. It’s important to serve a diverse range of clientele and information needs.

Conclusion:
Cooperative Relationships in the Community & with the Library

Balance services among all student groups
Plan most group activities after regular school hours
Foster all students’ support & trust
Gain relevancy!

Pictured: 3rd Grade Class - Thomasville Elem. School
If you balance your services among the various student populations, you will notice that the students from all subgroups of the student population will support and volunteer for the library. This builds lasting cooperative relationships in the community and with the library.

**WIN-WIN.**
You are probably doing more than you realize. Write down the basic services that you provide and think about population groups that use them. Most services are accessible to all students; Events are approved that meet the policy and fairness rules of the library.
Most services are accessible to all students; Events are approved that meet the policy and fairness rules of the library. Occasional events are offered to a specific population, but most are accessible to all.
Developing Positive Perceptions of Home Educators

Homeschoolers have a varied and extensive need for information. Many articles advise them to request and expect much of their local public library. Librarians that are not prepared for such an interactive relationship can be caught off guard. Initial and ongoing planning and staff training may address the root causes of librarians' negative perceptions in order to give more effective library service to homeschoolers.

### Problem:

With such a clear affirmation of effective service to home educators, why do some librarians continue to report negative perceptions?

### What Home Educators Want:

- Group tours
- Events during school hrs
- Robust website & social media
- Free meeting space
- Free classes
- Online/phone reference
- Online reservations
- Extended due dates
- Special borrowing privileges
- Interlibrary loans

### Developing Positive Perceptions:

- Offer a clear policy to address expectations of homeschoolers.
- Evaluate patron needs annually; avoid reactive programming.
- Decide how much is fair; what your library can do, and communicate this consistently and courteously.
- Offer frequent staff development—include part-timers!
- Train staff to expect & embrace robust interactions.
- Protect broad mission of public libraries to serve many diverse populations and offer free access to information.
- Foster stellar communication skills for public assistance (eye contact, positive body language, neutral questions, assist)
- Avoid stereotyping; learn to recognize contentious literature.

### Reported Negative Perceptions:

- Concerns with excessive use
- Inadequate staffing/funding
- Attempted censorship
- Homeschool Stereotypes
- Negative literature
- Book challenges
- Complaints 'Just To Complain'

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**Conclusion:**

Public libraries currently provide substantial and invaluable services to homeschoolers. To improve perceptions of homeschoolers, libraries must conduct proactive, rather than reactive, planning and training. Library staff members should be prepared for robust interaction, and maintain open, positive communication, both verbal & non-verbal. Every patron request is not met with an automatic 'yes', and librarians should remain mindful of local budget and staff, and the need for services to a broad range of patrons.

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Gina Wilson, MLIS, Thomasville Public Library.
Q & A

Gina Wilson, MLIS
Thomasville Public Library
Thomasville, Alabama

tvillelibrary@gmail.com
thomasvillepubliclibrary.org

Look for Thomasville Alabama Public Library on Facebook.