COUNTER POINT

Public Libraries *Should* Be School Libraries

by Harry Tuchmayer, Column Editor

A ctually, I don't want students in the public library anymore than Dave does. That's right, I'm more than a little tired of trying to provide services to the schools when I can rarely meet their needs and when I have little or no say over what goes on in the first place. But don't confuse my discomfort with dislike.

I might not look forward to their visits, but it doesn't mean that students shouldn't come to the public library. They should. In fact, instead of demanding that school libraries expand their hours and find better ways to accommodate students, I think it's about time public libraries recognize that curriculum support is one of our missions, and we should be doing everything in our power to meet those needs.

I don't like it any more than the next reference librarian, but the fact of the matter is *the public expects* services to students, and we need to provide them. It's time we stop hiding behind the excuse that "it's not my job to be the school library," because, quite frankly, it is. That's right, like it or not, the public library is the library of choice for most parents and students of any age. And when they visit the library, they expect to find the information they need.

That doesn't mean that we don't need school libraries. We do, but they are no substitute for a good public library. And it's about time we seriously rethink the role of these facilities. School libraries are not open as often as the public library, and even if their hours were changed, they would still face the very real problem of servicing the high percentage of students who don't live nearby and are dependent upon buses for their transportation.

Now, you're probably saying "Well, don't they need transportation to the public library too? And, if mom or dad can drive them downtown, they could certainly pick them up from school." Well, they could, but it isn't going to happen. It's hard enough to get parents involved in middle school or high school, and having to fight rush hour traffic or delay dinner is no way to win friends.

But transportation is just one of the many factors that prevent school libraries from addressing and servicing homework needs. In many instances, their collections are already woefully inadequate to meet the varied demands that are currently placed upon them — yet school librarians are unable to convince their principals and central administrators to increase their funding to meet existing needs. What makes any of us believe that increasing this burden would result in increased funding?

And if they somehow were able to obtain the money necessary to staff the building after hours and purchase these materials, is there any assurance that they would be free to buy the wide range of books necessary to cover sensitive topics? Let's be realistic, school libraries have enough problems convincing some parents of the need to house the works of Mark Twain and J.D. Salinger without having to defend the purchase of a whole host of titles on abortion, AIDS, and alternative lifestyles that may be necessary to meet homework needs.

Yes, I too am tired of students who don't have the foggiest idea of what they're doing in the public library — and then blame us when they can't find what they're looking for. But at least they've come to the right place. And its our job to see that they don't walk away unsatisfied or frustrated.

Rather than make a case for an extended day, how about making one for a different school library? One that recognizes the need for well defined libraries run by good old fashioned librarians, not some amorphous media center staffed by coordinators (my kids watch enough TV already, without the schools adding to the problem). Let's let school librarians do what they do best; help foster a love of books, and assist kids in the use of the ever-expanding range of automated information sources and the Internet. Then maybe the next time a student visits the public library, he might know what he's doing when he gets there.