

## Keep School Libraries Open After Hours

by David Fergusson

**S**chool libraries in North Carolina should be open after the regular school day is over and should not rely on public libraries to provide all the library support to their students outside of school hours. Let me explain why this is true.

I have been told that it seems unnecessary to keep school libraries open when public libraries are there, doing a good job. We appreciate such faith in our collections. Were school libraries open after hours, many of our young users would probably still show up at the public library, but I hope the beneficiaries of extended hours would also be the kids we are *not* seeing at the public library. The fact is that many young people do not use libraries, and they need to. A large number are being missed: they use their media centers sometimes; they do not use the public library at all; and, as time goes by, they join the large mass of young adults who never pick up the library habit. They are the ones we are all failing.

I suppose that Harry is going to tell you that students should learn to love public libraries and use them as their after-hours educational resource. Great, but in all honesty most public libraries are not set up to meet many of the student's specific needs. Their collections are not intended or funded to offer direct curriculum support. In fact, when public librarians feel obligated to concentrate on homework support first, they often feel that they are neglecting the conventional public library non-fiction collection.

Is it fair to deny busy students — fighting to summon the courage to approach some hunk in the hall or having to like, check a mirror seven times a day to make sure their extra baggy jeans are not going to, you know, actually *fall off* — access to the MOST IMPORTANT PART OF THEIR SCHOOLS beyond the seven or eight hours they are there?

On those (what is an antonym for the word "rare"?) occasions when a teacher assigns materials without checking with the media center or the public library ahead of time, the students suffer. Were they able to access the larger assortment of resources available in both the school and public libraries, I think that they would find what they need more frequently. Also, the school librarian, being that much more aware of yet another ill-prepared assignment, would be in a position to give the "crack educator" involved more effective and immediate feedback.

Where keeping school libraries open for longer hours has been tried, school librarians note that many of their after-school users just do homework. But in today's world with the many problems at home, don't students need such a place? I hope that librarians and parents would agree with the benefits of having school libraries open when students could use them, but the barriers are familiar: money and bureaucracy. I am well aware that media centers in many districts are last on the funding totem pole and that additional staff is a dream. In order to remain open, I assume that you'd need someone to work the library, and someone to keep the building secure, and student assistants who would love to get out of the house. We're talking four nights a week and most likely only high school media centers, that are geographically available to all. (During basketball season, isn't someone guarding the building on Tuesday nights anyway?) Let's think *really big*, and keep the media center open after school until 5:30 and then from 7:00-9:00 p.m. That is a total of about five hours a day, four days a week or 20 hours a week, tops.

Can we look at the big picture here? Do I see between three and ten coaches receiving stipends all the time to stay past supper so that from twelve to fifty kids can "hit the sleds" or learn the "pro-set" offense? If we had library booster clubs as powerful as the football booster clubs, our school libraries would be open till 11:00 pm six nights a week! Sure, these changes will cost time and money, but most worthwhile things do. We need to try.