

# How North Carolina's School and Public Libraries Tackled the Challenge of Providing Excellent Library Service during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is believed to have originated in the fall of 2019 in Wuhan, China, at a so-called "wet market" where domesticated as well as wild and exotic animals were slaughtered for sale. In December 2019, COVID-19 spread like wildfire into neighboring Asian countries, Europe, and eventually the United States and other parts of the globe. The United States was aware of the danger posed as early as January 2020 but there was no official response to the pandemic by the Trump administration, which stifled the public health community from further action. As information about the seriousness of COVID-19 became apparent, information and non-information began to make the national news. The states were left to their own devices without any financial help from the federal government.

It was not until late April 2020 that North Carolina's Governor Roy Cooper issued an executive order closing in-person instruction in public schools for the remainder of the year. This also affected school, public, and academic libraries. The only advice given was to wear masks, wash your hands frequently, and maintain social distancing by maintaining at least six feet of separation.<sup>1</sup>

Teachers were called on instantly to teach remotely, for many a new and challenging experience. Teachers and librarians were required to develop new teaching skills, tools, and strategies to

meet needs and support their students and the general public as they moved through the COVID-19 pandemic. It was plainly obvious that teachers, even the most experienced, needed to be taught how to utilize online resources in order to teach students to find and access learning materials.<sup>2</sup>

Teachers needed in-depth instruction on how to evaluate the contents and validity of certain digital tools and websites and to promote digital reading. Teachers who receive the proper training will be able to introduce students to an expansive online library of information and reading for students, including new books, special collections, audiobooks, books in other languages, eBooks, audiobooks, large print, braille, and other reference materials.

Public libraries, in most cases, found their doors closed to the public as COVID-19 interrupted their services too. In many cases, due to lack of funding, this resulted in the loss of jobs for those working in public libraries. Public librarians were challenged to find new ways to serve the community.

Cooperation between school media coordinators and public librarians was needed to share limited resources. The advent of the pandemic was an opportunity to reevaluate their roles and find new ways to present a unified front to important stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, and the community at large.

With the advent of COVID-19 the concept of providing excellent library

service took precedence. The new concept of online learning required tech-savvy school media coordinators and public librarians to teach students remotely through Google Classroom, while simultaneously utilizing technology tools to keep students excited and engaged, to support faculty with virtual resources to supplement the curriculum, and to garner the support of parents, now expected to be home-schooling experts.

A sampling of school and public library programs throughout North Carolina demonstrates the creativity and resourcefulness of libraries. With the leadership and funding provided by the State Library of North Carolina, all public and school libraries in North Carolina have been provided a toolbox of skills and resources to help students and the public at large to navigate the unfamiliar waters of remote learning as well as to foster the joy of reading to all students learning in their new virtual classrooms. Cooperation between and among public and private school systems and public libraries is essential.

## Beaufort County Schools & Beaufort-Hyde-Martin Regional Library

The Beaufort-Hyde-Martin Regional Library (BHM) and the Beaufort County Schools play a critical role in providing digital materials for library users in the eight libraries located in Beaufort, Hyde, and Martin Counties

1 N.C. Dept. of Health & Human Services, COVID-19 Response. (2021, January 7). *COVID-19 North Carolina Dashboard*. Retrieved from <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/dashboard>

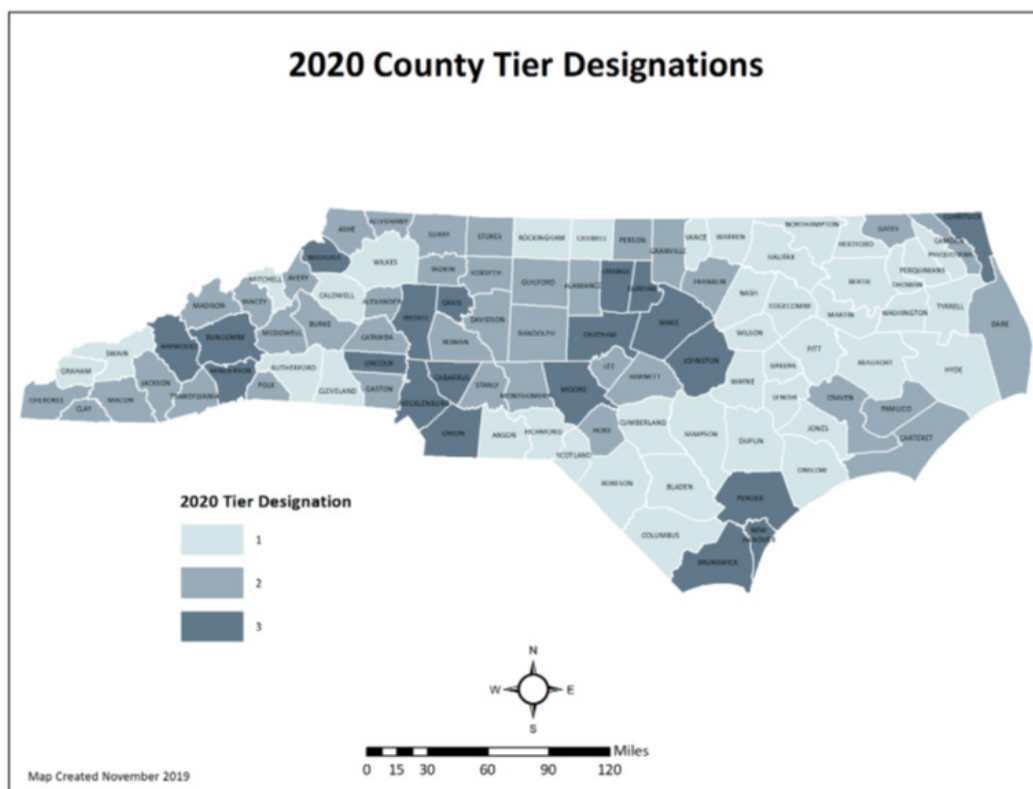
2 R. Halverson, C. Kelley, & J. Shaw, J. (2014). A Call for Improved School Leadership. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 95(6), 57-60.

in Eastern North Carolina. These counties are ranked in the lowest tier of county-distress rankings (see Figure 1) by the North Carolina Department of Commerce, with the exception of Beaufort County, that moved to a less distressed tier ranking in the 2021 scale.<sup>3</sup> These counties are affected more adversely than other more prosperous counties by the COVID-19 pandemic, causing greater hardships, especially for children. This rural, more socioeconomically distressed area can gain resources, support, and expand collections, supporting those children without additional finances when schools make use of public libraries.

With the leadership and funding of the State Library of North Carolina, one innovative new tool available to a statewide eBook consortium of all public, school, and regional libraries throughout North Carolina is the NC Kids' Digital Library. Targeting pre-K through 4th grade students, NC Kids' Digital Library is an online collection of eBooks, audiobooks, and videos that can be checked out using the OverDrive reading platform.<sup>4</sup>

In Beaufort County, for example, a public school student can tap into this digital library simply by choosing the BHM Regional Library as their library of choice from a drop-down menu and

then entering their student IDs as their card numbers. According to school media coordinator Emily Davis of John Small Elementary School in Washington, Beaufort County, North Carolina, the NC Kids' Digital Library collection has been an obvious hit with the students, especially since March 2020 and the inception of the remote learning experience. One parent reported that her fifth-grade son "is a real reader. He really liked all the selections and that if a book was checked out, he could enter a request and the book would be his upon return. It gave constant selection availability."<sup>5</sup> This highly satisfied parent had not taken advantage of the



**Figure 1: Distressed County Rankings - The 40 most distressed counties are designated as Tier 1, the next 40 as Tier 2 and the 20 least distressed as Tier 3. Source: N.C. Dept. of Commerce.**

3 Kaye B. Dotson, Mary E. Yontz and Plummer Alston Jones, Jr. (2018). Public Libraries and School Libraries: Partnerships to Support Truth in History. *North Carolina Libraries*, 76(2018): 2

4 State Library of North Carolina, N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. (2020). *North Carolina Public Library Directory 2020; NCKidsDigitalLibrary* (<https://nckids.overdrive.com/>)

5 *North Carolina Department of Commerce*. (2020, December 28). Retrieved from <https://www.nccommerce.com/news/press-releases/commerce-issues-2021-economic-development-tier-rankings>; N.C. Dept. of Commerce. (2021, January 11). *N. C. Commerce Issue 2021: Economic Development Tier Rankings: 22 Counties Will Change Tiers Next Year*. Retrieved from <https://nccommerce.com/grants-incentives/county-distress-rankings-tiers>

public library prior to COVID-19 restrictions, but will continue to build this relationship, based on what she has seen her child achieve.

Checking out books to read is a valuable part of the school library experience. Parents appreciate the ready supply of reading materials available through the public library over the often-barren summer months. Another parent reported about her son's experience. "Since he has been using the online public library, I have not seen a huge gap in his reading comprehension. We all know about the summer gap, but this year has certainly been extremely different. He has enjoyed being able to continue to check out books on his reading and interest level.

*“An immediate favorite of the remote students in Beaufort County is the digital library's highlighted collection of materials that appears front and center...”*

He has started reading a new series and looks forward to finishing one book so he can check out the next. He also has been excited to know that since he can check out a book virtually that he doesn't have to wait for someone to return it to the library before he can read it! I hope that many other students across our county are taking advantage of this awesome resource!"<sup>6</sup>

Comments like these from engaged parents let librarians, both school and public, know that both parents and students have "discovered" the new virtual public library. This expanded call for materials from the public library will have a positive impact as users continue to take advantage of the public library that has been there all along.

An immediate favorite of the remote students in Beaufort County is the digital library's highlighted collection of materials that appears front and center upon signing in to the BHM Regional Library. This collection reflects a variety of seasonal books relevant to any specific occasion, including Constitution Day, Hispanic Heritage Month, and Halloween. Conveniently there is a collection of books for students participating in Battle of the Books, a perennial favorite competition.

When students are ready to check out a book, they simply click on the book and choose the borrow option where they can also dictate the time period to have the book checked out.

A total of five books may be checked out per student with an option to keep the books for up to three weeks. Once the time has expired, a book is automatically returned to the digital collection, another feature the students really appreciate. The whole experience of using the BHM digital library method is user-friendly, allowing students to navigate the library collection completely on their own, a feature appreciated by librarians, teachers, and parents.

Teachers are enjoying the NC Kids' Digital Library as much as their students. Teachers can assign reading materials and keep up with student comprehension through Reading Counts, an independent reading program used to monitor student reading and

progress. In addition, students are encouraged to check out books related to the subjects being taught in their virtual classrooms. Over the months since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, students have frequently searched for reading materials based on North Carolina lighthouses, the Wright brothers, Blackbeard, and amphibians. The digital library has been an incredible resource for supplementing reading materials to students while learning from their virtual classrooms at home.<sup>7</sup>

The partnerships between the State Library of North Carolina, the BHM Regional Library, and Beaufort County Schools have been invaluable in not only providing an alternative to searching for and checking out books in person, but in presenting a fun online experience for today's remote learners. Its availability and accessibility to all students in the Beaufort County Schools has made a difference in establishing a smooth changeover to full remote learning. Another enthusiastic parent explained, "once my son learned how to navigate the online library on his own, he has been completely interested in books he would never think of reading before. He enjoys the self-paced aspect of the online library and the feeling of being able to take his time to find quality and age-appropriate reading materials."<sup>8</sup>

These partnerships have enabled both teachers and students to access a wide array of library materials. Teachers and school and public library administrators now agree that instructional presentation and student engagement are more important than ever before, and the support the public library is affording them is invaluable. As students transition to a hybrid model or full face-to-face instruction

6 BHM Regional Library, Servicing Beaufort, Hyde, and Martin Counties. (2021, January 7). Retrieved from <https://bhmlib.org/>;

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

in the future, the NC Kids Digital Library will be there every step of the way ensuring student success.

## Wake County Schools

Although there is a clear need in these distressed counties it is important to note that less distressed counties may also find great benefit in the developing partnerships that have emerged since COVID-19. Many of the services, that in some cases were already in place, are now finding a broader reception during this time of restricted activity. Just a few of these other avenues throughout the state that support students in accessing library materials for children include the Book Club Kits provided through Wake County Schools. These kits include the following:

- 15 copies of a book title, a sturdy bag, and a book discussion guide
- 30 titles from which to choose (with five kits available for each title and titles that target kindergarteners through 5th graders and up)
- The online software, KitKeeper, allows members to request kits up to a year in advance, as well as place multiple requests and kits may be checked out for six weeks
- The Book Club Kits for Kids booklet includes a short synopsis and book review of each title
- Members may suggest titles to be considered for addition to the service<sup>9</sup>

## Greensboro Public Library

The Greensboro Public Library offers curbside pickup for holds. Customers could place up to ten items on hold and pick them up at their neighborhood branches. Library Director Brigitte Blanton shared that much of what customers appreciate about libraries can now be found on the website.

One public librarian was invited to record Google Handouts for students on how to access online resources and to record several short videos to show students how to get an online library card, how to search for available titles in Overdrive, and how to take advantage of other online resources. School librarians encourage their students to access these videos.<sup>10</sup>

## Gaston County Schools, Gaston Day School, and Gaston County Public Library

The partnership in place between Gaston County Schools, Gaston Day School, and the Gaston County Public Library, allowed for the implementation of the WOW (Without Walls) Card. This virtual library card gives public and private school students access to online resources via the Gaston County Public Library. Partnerships among private and public schools and the public library have proved beneficial to teachers, students, parents, and the community at large.<sup>11</sup>

## Carteret County Public Library

Lesley Mason, Carteret County Library Director shared a new development that helps broaden access to library materials online. Students are permitted to use their student ID numbers as their library cards. According to the new partnership between the Carteret County Schools and the Carteret County Public Library a wealth of public library literature is available at students' fingertips. Mason maintained that "In addition to what they have in the school system, they can now have access to all of the resources of the public library."<sup>12</sup>

Carteret County has done away with overdue fines, and has implemented a courtesy checkout, a feature that renews items automatically. These efforts help both students and parents, making it possible for everyone to have access with as little stress as possible.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

School and public library leaders have worked hard and creatively to make virtual learning beneficial. Providing broad access to library materials will help students, teachers, and parents with virtual learning during the pandemic and beyond. Although the now approved Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson vaccines are readily available, the vaccination rate is way behind what was anticipated.

Although schools in some areas are preparing for full opening, the future

9 Wake County Public Library. (2020, October 11). *Book Club Kits for Kids*. Retrieved from

<http://www.wakegov.com/libraries/kitsforkids/Pages/default.aspx>

10 Greensboro Public Library. (2020, September 30). *COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Updates*. Retrieved from <https://library.greensboro-nc.gov/about-us/covid-19-updates>; ALSC (Association for Library Service to Children) Blog. (2020, April 4). *Building Public and School Library Partnerships during COVID-19*, Retrieved from <https://www.alsc.org/blog/author/alsc-building-partnerships/>

11 Gaston County Public Library. (2020, October 13). *About the WOW (WithOutWalls) Card*. Retrieved from <http://gastonlibrary.org/wow/about-the-wow-card/>

12 WITN.com. (2020, October 23). *Carteret County Schools and County Library Partner for Student Virtual Resources*. Retrieved from <https://www.witn.com/2020/10/24/carteret-county-schools-and-county-library-partner-for-student-virtual-resources/>

13 Ibid.

is far from certain. Regardless of what has transpired with remote learning efforts, much has been learned through the provision of virtual library materials and learning experiences, even in this unprecedented time of global pandemic. There can be no doubt that this pandemic has brought an increase in the use of electronic and digital resources and increased reliance on cooperation among libraries of all types.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it imperative that school and public libraries provide more widespread use of online resources and e-learning experiences, and as a direct result there has been increased virtual checkouts in most countries. The increased awareness among students of

the tools available to them online is a very positive outcome. Increased awareness of the availability and accessibility of virtual library materials has had a positive impact on demonstrating to the general public that school and public libraries continue to provide educational support, promote reading for pleasure, and make the community at large aware of the benefits libraries offer.

If school and public librarians continue cooperating, collaborating, and supporting each other, while promoting the diversity of resources provided by each, there will be renewed confidence in the ability of school and public libraries to make lives better in this time of global pandemic. The shift

to virtual librarianship will continue to provide more access to more people.

As we look ahead to the future of library service, librarians must continue to develop partnerships between public and school communities to serve students and educators across the state. State and federal funds are essential to providing excellent library services to the citizens of North Carolina, especially as libraries continue to tackle the challenge of providing excellent library service during the lingering COVID-19 pandemic, especially with the emergence of the even more transmissible Delta variant, until herd immunity can be achieved through vaccinations.

## Submission Requirements for North Carolina Libraries

Electronic articles can be submitted online at: <http://www.ncl.ecu.edu>

- » To submit you must login; if needed you can register using the link in the header.
- » We use the *Chicago Manual of Style* (16th edition, 2010).
- » We have a rolling deadline; articles are juried when received.
- » Publication of approved articles is in about 3-9 months depending on space available.
- » For additional information, contact Ralph Scott at: [scottr@ecu.edu](mailto:scottr@ecu.edu)