

MANAGERIAL IMAGINATION

The town librarian was concerned.¹ Each day, at about 3:00 P.M., eddies of schoolchildren washed into the library's reading rooms. At about 5:00 the tide of children began to ebb. By 6:00 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?

THE TOWN LIBRARIAN AND THE LATCHKEY CHILDREN

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 library tables, slid to the floor with spines cracking. Tired assistants faced mountains of reshelving 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 wasn't the town library's job to care for latchkey children. That task should be done by the parents, or perhaps other day-care providers, certainly not by 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.² She could argue that the new demands from latchkey children required additional resources. Additional staff would be needed to keep the children from disrupting other library users. Over-time 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 charging their parents for the costs of the new program.³ Some practical problems loomed, however. For example, how much should she charge for the service?⁴ She could fairly easily record the direct costs associated with providing the program and find a price that would cover these direct costs. But she was unsure how to account for indirect costs such as the managerial costs of 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 unwittingly 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?⁵ Similarly, would they see serving the latchkey children as a worthy cause or as a service to a narrow and not particularly deserving group? She would clearly have to go back to the Town Meeting for guidance.⁶

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.⁷ Maybe the parents of the children could be organized to assume some of the responsibilities of supervising and cleaning up after the children. Maybe they could even be enticed to help the librarian make the changes in the physical configuration of the library—to accommodate the new function more easily and to maintain

an appropriate separation between the elderly people who used the library for reading and meeting and the children who used the library for the same purposes but more actively and noisily. The community spirit evident in such activities might overwhelm public concerns about the propriety of using the library to care for latchkey children and the complaints of some that public resources were being used to subsidize 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 and unfamiliar since they involved her in outside political activity. Making a budget 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, 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 came 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 to talk with their friends, even the do-it-yourselfers who came in 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 also began seeing her organization in a new light.⁸ 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 to monitor

which citizens had borrowed which books, and to impose fines on those who kept books too long, had also been built. 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 changed a little to avoid competing with local commercial ventures.) The physical 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 those who wished to use the library. 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 and fairly, and with little cost to other functions of the library that had the sanction of tradition?