

Exercise #2 Teens Take Over

In this group exercise you will work through a very common problem in branch libraries!

The Southwood Branch is having a serious problem. Every school day the area's junior high and high school students fill up the library and the surrounding grounds. All the seats are full; students sit in the aisles and fill the front lobby. The wait for a computer stretches to two hours or more, despite the half-hour time limit, and arguments often erupt over whose turn is next. The staff cannot keep the students quiet, and all staff are required to be on patrol for three hours per day telling students not to eat or drink, to keep feet off tables and backpacks out of aisles, resolve disputes, find lost belongings, and enforce the library's behavior policy. At 6:00 p.m., the crowd begins to thin out, but junior high students can be left as late as 8:00 p.m. – five hours in the library after school.

Adult library users complain often to the branch staff and to library administration that the students are rowdy, swear, throw things, take all the space, and block the entrance as well as access to the aisles. They take all the seats and all the computers. Some specific complaints include:

- “Staff won't answer questions, they are too busy being babysitters.”
- “I can't think in there after school, and the staff does nothing about it.”
- “Kids should not be allowed in the library if they don't have any business there.”
- “I'm a taxpayer and they are not, so I should get a computer while they wait.”
- “The language they use is revolting, and all the staff does is laugh.”
- “The head librarian says she can't do anything about them.”

Enough complaints reached the Board of Trustees that they announced at a recent meeting that they would close the Southwood Branch from 3:00 – 5:00 p.m. every school day. Staff would stay in the building and get work done, but the branch would not be open to the public. Students would be cleared from the grounds by police, under a City ordinance that prohibits loitering at closed city facilities. This has been announced publicly and, needless to say, reaction is strong and mixed.

The Library Director and Library Administration have told the branch manager that they would take any recommendation of alternate action to the Board of Trustees for consideration, and the Board is open to an alternative course of action that addresses the citizen concerns.

Divide into three groups for discussion. Playing the part of your group, answer the following questions. Then, be prepared to present your recommendation and convince the other two groups of your position.

- Group 1 – the staff at that branch (not including the manager)
- Group 2 – library administration (but they don't work at that branch)
- Group 3 – library users (including the teens)

1. What caused this situation? Is someone or some group at fault?

2. What does your group have at stake here? What would a good outcome for your group be?

3. What should happen now? What would you recommend to the branch manager?