



# The Public Library System Program In New York State

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IF THERE WERE such a thing as a "typical" library system in New York State, it might look something like this: It would be an organization created under Education Law by vote of the trustees of about thirty community libraries, who would have elected at the same time a board of trustees of the system. It would later have received a charter from the Board of Regents as an autonomous library agency, and its plan of service would have been approved by the Commissioner of Education in order for it to receive state aid averaging about 62½¢ per capita. Its member libraries would still derive their main support from local sources, and they would retain their own boards of trustees, staffs, buildings, and endowment funds, and their complete autonomy in all other respects. The member libraries would receive no grants directly from the state, and whatever cash they might receive from the system would be quite small in comparison to the cost of services and materials which the system would make available to them. The number of persons served by the system and its member libraries would be about 300,000, and in area it would cover the best part of three counties.

There would be a system staff consisting of a director (who might also be director of the major community library in the area), five professional librarians, and other supporting staff, totaling about fifteen in all. The system staff would probably operate bookmobile service in areas where library service did not previously exist and where it would not be feasible to establish community libraries; otherwise, its efforts and resources would be directed towards cooperative services to the member libraries, such as centralized ordering and processing of books, a wide variety of consultant services, pick-up and delivery service, ro-

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tating collections, interlibrary loan and reference assistance, and other services (see Table I). The system would be financed almost exclusively from state funds, supplemented by modest county support for some specific purpose such as bookmobile service. Finally, there would be a central library collection, based on the largest library in the system, whose adult non-fiction acquisitions would be matched, four volumes to one volume, from state funds until the collection reached 100,000 volumes.

There is, of course, no system in New York State which would exactly fit this description, but there are fifteen *cooperative* systems of nearly identical basic structure, though varying considerably in size, support, services offered, and other characteristics. The four *federated* systems are similar in every way to the cooperative type, except that they were started, and their trustees are thereafter appointed, by county boards of supervisors. The remaining three systems are the New York, Brooklyn, and Queens Borough Public Libraries in New York City, serving nearly one-half of the state's population. They are examples of the *consolidated* type of system, wherein one board of trustees operates and controls the entire program for the system, and the units making up the system are branches rather than autonomous member libraries.

The statewide picture, as of January 1, 1964, showed a total of twenty-two systems serving directly and through 638 member libraries 97 per cent of the state's population and 95 per cent of its area. Seventy-three community libraries have not yet joined systems. The state aid for library systems, which is beginning to level off at around \$10 million a year, amounted to about one-fifth of the total spent for public library service in the state in 1963.

Given a statewide library system program of this general description, what successes and what strengths seem to be emerging from the several years of experience that have now accumulated? The most meaningful basis for this kind of judgment would, of course, be a careful study and evaluation of actual library use, compared with the situation prior to systems in New York and compared with what is happening in other places which are similar but where another pattern exists. New York State is presently launching, with Lowell Martin's guidance, what it hopes will be such an evaluation of its library systems, but it will be at least a year before anything decisive comes from this project. In the meantime, it is worth noting that many of what appear to be the program's strengths are features which were deliberately designed into the state plan in order to meet specific needs and to overcome specific

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obstacles encountered in nearly twenty years of active experimentation with the system concept.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the greatest strength is the principle upon which the federated or cooperative type of system is built and by which are gained the necessary advantages of size, at the same time preserving the great advantages that attend local interest, local initiative, and to a considerable extent local support. This type of organization is probably as good a way as has yet been devised in any segment of government to obtain a maximum of democratic control with a fair share of the range and quality of services that customarily proceed from a large centralized agency. The following are other features of the plan which seem to have been successful.

A. In terms of founding library systems, it is of critical importance that their establishment is not dependent on the action of county boards of supervisors. The device for getting the cooperative systems started, whereby the trustees of the participating libraries are given power to take the required action, was incorporated into the 1958 statute as a result of eight frustrating years of intensive effort to get county boards of supervisors in adjoining counties to take such action.

B. A high degree of flexibility is one of the important strengths of the New York plan. It is a flexibility of organization that accommodates both New York City with its nearly eight million people in only 314 square miles and Hamilton County with a population of only about 4,000 in nearly 2,000 square miles; and it is a flexibility of plan which encourages ingenuity and diversity in practically every aspect of system operation.

C. The principle of gradualism, both in respect to achieving system participation by all libraries in a county and in respect to meeting minimum standards for approval, was introduced into the 1958 law because of earlier experience in which a few libraries could block a substantial majority from forming a system.

D. A state-aid formula which makes it possible to initiate basic system programs on state funds alone and which does not require matching funds or contain major *quid pro quo* provisions is a basic feature which, good or bad, helped dramatically to accelerate the formation and growth of systems. At the same time, by incorporating the community libraries in their present form into the system organization, support is drawn from all types of local governmental units that exist in the state.

E. The obvious principle that the strength of a system tends to

equate with the best library in the system, or, conversely, that simply combining a group of weak libraries does not automatically produce a strong library system, was recognized clearly only after careful study of some early system efforts, and resulted in a provision in the present formula for building a strong central library collection in every system where one does not exist.

F. A legal base which allows for the free use of contracts, both within and among systems, has been immensely helpful in providing systems with almost unlimited flexibility.

These are a few of the features which are characteristic of New York State's library system program, and which have resulted, in a relatively short time, in coverage of most of the state. Perhaps the most important of their implications is the simple fact that 97 per cent of the residents of the state now have a point of access, legally and formally, to the chain of public library resources which exists in the state.

Turning from the strengths to the weaknesses in New York's system program, one can again wish for more careful investigations and firmer evidence, particularly from the user point of view. Some definite impressions are emerging, however, from the problems that recur and from reports and observations. The following are features of the plan which have caused difficulties.

1. One of the great advantages in getting systems established was that the state-aid formula was sufficient to operate a system, and that the plan did not require the locality to match funds or to increase its support of the local library as a condition of state-aid funds; therefore, since the localities have not been required to increase the support of their libraries, more facts than are now available will be needed to establish a causal relationship between system development and increased local support of community libraries. The indications are that over a sufficiently long period of time and with strong system leadership, local support is increased in even the smaller community libraries. The problem, then, becomes not so much whether local library support will fail to keep up with the rate of state support, but that inequities of support and service will be created by a natural tendency of the systems to do more for those who have done less for themselves.

2. The question of equity has become apparent in densely populated suburban areas where strongly supported libraries are often adjacent to communities with poor libraries or with no locally supported public library service at all. In meeting the statutory requirement that every library in the system give direct, free service to every resident

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of the system area, there is some feeling that the strong libraries will be penalized for their progressiveness and that the development of good libraries in the neighboring communities which do not have them will be deterred. Fortunately, this seems to be a problem mainly of the transitional period.

3. There are indications that, although a "sparsity" factor was built into the state-aid formula, the state-aid income of some of the systems—usually those serving a relatively small population—may be below the level at which even a minimally effective system program can be operated.

4. A problem which is especially trying during the beginning years of a system is directly related to the high degree of autonomy that member libraries enjoy. Everyone concerned with a new system occasionally becomes disappointed and frustrated by the considerable length of time that usually precedes any discernible progress. In an organization of completely autonomous community libraries, progress occurs as the result of persuasion and example. The trustees, the staff, and the community itself must be educated to a new point of view and to new methods, and this takes time.

5. As the central library collections develop, it is apparent that some better provision should have been made for processing and housing the books and staffing the services. (The central library is in most cases the largest community library in the system, but often is not the location of the system headquarters.) These libraries are supported by the municipalities they serve, and their traditions and patterns of service are usually oriented to their own communities rather than to the entire area served by the system. They need more support and help in adjusting to their new role as the central libraries for multi-county regions.

6. A number of the systems appear to be too small to carry on efficient centralized processing units. This should not be a serious problem, however, as systems are already exploring the possibilities of inter-system contracts under which one system will purchase processing from another. (It is interesting to note in this connection that it has been only a relatively short time since the 638 member libraries were operating approximately the same number of separate processing units; now twenty-two separate processing units suggest much unnecessary duplication.)

7. It is clear from the experience in New York State that a library system program will inevitably place sharply augmented demands on the state library or other state level backstopping agency. The state-aid

formula should, therefore, carry some kind of escalator provision geared to this function. Otherwise, for reasons which are completely unrelated to library systems, the support of the backstopping agency probably will not keep up and may even be lowered at the very time that the systems are creating legitimate and unprecedented increases in the demands made on that agency. The state's backstopping function definitely should be extended to include the development of vastly more complete bibliographic resources than are presently available in New York, especially in respect to resources within the state. The state should assist the systems by handling interlibrary loan requests which are not available in the state library.

8. Although New York State has been most fortunate in the caliber of its library system trustees, who have been one of the greatest strengths of the systems, the importance of good trustees is so essential that probably more attention should be given to exploring the best means of assuring an effective and responsive governing body for every system.

9. Finally, there are the usual and expected problems of staff recruitment, communication, new techniques, and new relationships, and of adjusting a new program to meet rapidly changing conditions.

In trying to look at what is ahead for library system development in New York State, it is certainly to be hoped that solutions—legislative, fiscal, and other—will be found and action taken to correct some of the problems that have been suggested here. The anticipated evaluation studies should help further to illuminate and clarify these and other difficult questions as, for example, whether the systems' structure is absorbing more than a reasonable portion of effort and funds in non-productive overhead items.

There are, however, some guide posts to the future which stand out fairly clearly now, and for which we do not need to await further study and documentation. For example, there will certainly be more contracts between and among systems for specific services such as processing, bookkeeping, specialized consultant services, bookmobile service, and others. The greater use of intersystem contracts seems to be an especially promising possibility.

It is too early to predict that contracts between small communities and systems for the operation of library service outlets will become the pattern of service to small communities, but this seems to be a solution to the perennial problem of the community which is too small to maintain its own chartered library.

Another area where dramatic changes will surely occur is in the ap-

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plication of new technological developments to library system management and to the organization, retrieval, and transmission of information. Although the library systems are in many respects a "natural" for the use of machines, New York's library systems have thus far been largely preoccupied with organizational matters, and exploration and a few applications are just now appearing.

Finally, any reference to the future of library system development in New York State would be seriously incomplete if it did not take into consideration the growing interrelatedness of all types of libraries. The increasingly complex informational needs of the academic, research, business, and professional communities and the sheer volume of informational materials require that all types of libraries—public, school, college, university, and special—define their separate roles and at the same time combine their strengths in formal and systematic relationships, so that each can concentrate on its specialty knowing that it can turn to the full resources of other libraries in the state when it is necessary to go beyond that specialty.

New York State regards its public library system program as both an end in itself and as a base upon which the apex of the library service pyramid can be erected. A plan for the cooperative development and use of reference and research library resources throughout the state has, in fact, been developed and legislation is being sought to carry it out.<sup>2</sup>

Every library extension worker eventually learns that there is no poorer argument for library service than a feeble public library. The converse is equally true. As libraries are strengthened by planned and systematic cooperation, their potential for service becomes greater and their failures fewer; their successes become in themselves a reason for more use and for greater support. It does not seem too unreasonable, then, to predict that a point may eventually be reached in library development—the point of mobilization of all library resources into a total library effort—when libraries will actually make the kind of impact on individuals and society which all librarians have always hoped for them.

That day is a long, long way off in New York State, but one could do worse than to hope that it is in this direction that library development in the state is headed.

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TABLE I

*Services Offered by Public Library Systems in New York State*  
(Data Compiled for 19 Systems Outside of New York City)

<i>Services</i>	<i>No. of Systems Offering</i>
Interlibrary loan (including reference assistance) <sup>1</sup>	19
Direct loans by all libraries to all residents <sup>2</sup>	15
Return of books to any library	11
Uniform borrowers card	7
Location file of current acquisitions <sup>1</sup>	19
General consultant service	19
Special consultant service	12
Adult	12
Young adult	7
Childrens	12
Audio-Visual	6
Public relations	7
Reference	4
Other	6
Aid in book selection	19
Central purchasing	17
Books	17
Supplies	10
Equipment and furniture	4
Central processing	18
Rotating collections	13
Pool collection of books	17
Central storage of little used books	7
Films loaned	15
Phonograph record or tape collection	12
In-service training for community librarians	16
Delivery service	18
Public relations and publicity <sup>1</sup>	19
Public relations director	6
Display artist	13
Posters and signs	18
Exhibits	16
Newsletters	18
Other	19
Bookmobile service	11
Stations in unserved areas	9
Cash grants to member libraries	17
For books	14
Other	8
Unallocated	12

Source: 1963 annual reports of library systems on file in Library Extension Division of the New York State Library.

1. Required for provisional and full approval.
2. Required for full approval (within five years from establishment).

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