



The State-Supported Regional Library Center In Tennessee

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THE MULTI-COUNTY library systems in Tennessee are built around state-supported regional library centers, a type of development particularly suited to the geographic and economic conditions in Tennessee, which is predominantly rural with a few areas of urban concentration. The four metropolitan counties contain 42.5 per cent of the state's population, with the remaining 57.5 per cent spread among ninety-one counties. Of these counties, sixty-three have a population of less than 25,000 each, and five have less than 5,000 people. Since the medium-sized towns are clustered in certain areas, it is possible to drive for miles without passing through a town of any size. In fact, fifty-six counties have no town as large as 5,000, and seventy-four counties have no town as large as 10,000.

There is also a wide disparity in the distribution of wealth. As measured by the equalizing formula which was adopted by the Tennessee State Legislature, 51 per cent of the taxpaying ability of the state is concentrated in the four metropolitan counties, leaving less than half in the other ninety-one counties. In considering the fact that the median family income in the wealthiest county of the state is less than the national median family income figure, it can readily be seen that the smaller counties must indeed be classified as poor.

In this situation multi-county library systems are a necessity. Such a system must have a strong central library. As Lowell A. Martin has pointed out, "Adding rooms to the house will improve it only if the foundation is strong. Whenever I hear of a multicounty library—which is a library like any other library except that it has the added load of distance and a more complicated governmental structure—I ask first to see the central unit, the foundation, the core of strength."¹ In the rural areas of Tennessee, state-supported regional library centers provide

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the core of strength. In the rural counties, there are no local libraries which can fulfill this role.

Presently the library systems in Tennessee have a long way to go in order to reach the American Library Association (ALA) standards. But progress has been made and the organization provides the framework for growth and development. Achievement of ALA standards is a goal which can be reached within this framework. It is a cooperative program in which the counties and the state each have well-defined responsibilities.

Each county is responsible for the operation of its local library or libraries. In order to join the state system, a county must meet certain requirements: (1) It must have a seven-member library board appointed in accordance with state law, which is responsible for public library service within the county. (2) It must operate at least one local library which provides library facilities to all the people of the county without charge. (3) It must appropriate funds for the operation of its local libraries at a level which meets the state financial requirements. Local funds are used for the expenses of the local libraries including salaries of local library personnel, books and other materials, equipment, supplies, and other operating expenses. In many counties the cities share in the support of a joint city-county library.

The county library board retains complete control over library affairs in the county and over the expenditure of local funds. Responsibility for local affairs encourages pride in local accomplishment and develops active, interested library trustees who strengthen the whole library system.

The responsibility of the state in the cooperative program includes the support of eleven regional library centers, each of which serves a group of counties. Expenses of the center are paid with state funds. Each center is administered by a regional library board composed of two representatives from each county in the region. This board receives and expends state funds and conducts the program of the regional center under terms of a contract with the State Library and Archives. The Public Libraries Division of the State Library and Archives exercises overall supervision of the state-wide program and provides consultant services to trustees and librarians.

The regional center coordinates library activities in the region and provides materials and services which the local libraries cannot furnish for themselves. Perhaps the most important contribution of the center is the professional help offered by the regional staff to library trustees

and librarians. The regional librarians are identified with the region and provide the leadership needed to develop improved library service. They meet regularly with the county library boards, offering advice and guidance. The local librarians depend on them for help in setting up routines, selecting books, answering reference questions, filling requests, organizing the book collection, planning special activities, and dealing with all the problems of a small library.

The regional centers are also developing centralized ordering and processing of books. The regional librarians conduct an in-service training program for local librarians, most of whom have not had professional library training. This program includes group meetings and individual instruction. A consultant in the Public Libraries Division assists this program by preparing the course of study, complete with lesson plans and supplementary materials, and by teaching many of the classes. Plans for the future include stationing an adult services consultant and a children's services consultant at each regional center.

Another vital function of the regional center is the provision of a large and diversified book collection which is available for use anywhere in the region. The small libraries can buy the titles most in demand. But in any community, no matter how small, people have a wide range of interests which cannot be satisfied by a small stock of books. The regional center, because of the large area it serves, can buy the variety of titles needed and can insure that the small stock of each library and bookmobile station is changed frequently.

The regional center also furnishes bookmobile service to the local libraries and small rural communities. In communities which do not have a library, deposit stations are set up in stores, banks, homes, post offices, and other accessible locations. The stations consist of from 100 to 500 books deposited by the bookmobile and changed regularly, usually every eight weeks. The stations are important because they place attractive books within the reach of rural residents in their own communities and make available to them the entire resources of the region. A reader in a small community can meet the bookmobile and select the books he wants. He can also make requests on printed cards supplied for the purpose, and the books he wants will be mailed to him; thus, those who are unable to meet the bookmobile still have books available to them. One value of the book station is that it brings books to the attention of people who might never go to the county library, but many people use the station in their community and also use the county library.

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Through the regional library centers, the state has become a constructive partner, not an outsider, in a network of library systems. The keynote of the program is voluntary cooperation. The regional center and its local libraries operate as a unified system in which limited resources are used to the best advantage.

The organization of the regional library systems is not outlined in detail in state legislation. The act establishing the State Library and Archives Commission includes as one of the functions of the Commission "The encouragement of library development throughout the state by means of advice, guidance, and library extension services, in the course of which the Commission is empowered to enter into local, regional or interstate contracts with competent agencies in the furtherance of library services."² This section gives the Commission authority to execute contracts with regional library boards for the administration of the regional library centers.

The law further provides for the establishment and operation of regional library boards.³ Two or more counties which have qualified for participation in the state's multi-county regional library program may execute contracts with each other to create a regional library board. The county court of each county elects two members of the regional board, except that if a city within the county is furnishing as much as one-fourth of the public funds available for the operation of a joint city-county library, the city governing body may appoint one of the members and the county court the other. The regional library board has the power to execute contracts with any and all agencies for the purpose of administering a public library service within the region. It may receive and expend funds, employ personnel, accept donations and bequests, and lease property.

This legislation makes it possible for the cities and counties of a region to transfer all their library funds to the regional board for regional operation of the library system if they wish to do so. Some of them do transfer their book funds to the regional board, and the books are purchased and processed by the regional staff. Except for these book purchases, all funds spent by the regional boards come from the state. The boards are required by the contract with the State Library and Archives to observe state regulations in regard to personnel, travel, purchasing, and financial records. One fourth of the annual allotment is transferred to each regional library board at the beginning of each quarter. The expenditure of these funds and the maintenance of the financial records are closely supervised by the state comptroller's office.

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The requirements for participation by a county in the regional library program are not provided for in state legislation but instead are set up in the rules and regulations established by the State Library and Archives Commission and approved by the Commissioner of Education.⁴ These requirements are:

1. Appointment of a county library board of seven members as provided in the Tennessee Code.

2. Provision of local funds from public appropriation or tax levy for the administration of a local library or libraries, giving free public library service to all residents of the county. These funds shall be administered by the library board responsible for county-wide public library service. Local funds shall not be less than the minimum amount fixed by the State Library and Archives Commission and approved by the Commissioner of Education.

3. Operation of a local library or libraries, including qualified personnel in charge of library, suitable library quarters, county-wide service, free of charge, to all residents, an adequate system of records and reports, cooperation with the regional library staff, willingness to make locally-owned books available on interlibrary loan to other libraries and bookmobile stations in the region, and participation by the local librarian or librarians in such in-service training programs as may be offered by the regional library center.

City and county libraries are established under Public Acts of Tennessee, 1963, Chapter 370. This legislation permits a city or county to operate an independent library, to give support to any public library in the county, to contract with another city or county for library service, or to enter into contracts with other cities or counties for joint operation of public library service.⁵ It provides for the appointment of a library board and for provision of funds to support a library. The law places no limitation on the amount of taxes which may be levied for support of a public library. It permits a library board to expend funds for the training of personnel. Library legislation in Tennessee is broad and general, leaving details to be handled by administrative action. Under this legislation, many different patterns of library organization could be developed.

The pattern of state-supported regional library centers serving a group of rural counties has been successful in Tennessee. In fact, it is doubtful if any other type of library system could have prospered in the prevailing climate of opinion. Tennessee counties have a strong

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feeling of local identification. The task of persuading a group of adjoining counties to turn over local funds to a regional authority would have been well-nigh impossible. Oliver Garceau calls this problem “. . . the bitter struggle to destroy or to swallow up village, city, and county libraries.”⁶ Instead of trying to remove local authority and the control of local funds, the regional center offers to provide materials and services in return for cooperation.

The regional library board, which administers the regional library center in each region, has a profound influence in coordinating public library service within the region. Although it has no authority over the county library boards, it can make recommendations to them. By the terms of its contract with the State Library and Archives Commission, the regional library board agrees to “cooperate with appropriate county and town officials of the area concerned to develop a unified system of public library service for all people of each county.”⁷ The *Handbook for Regional Library Boards in Multi-County Regions* states that “Planning and developing good public library service in the region is a responsibility which a regional board is uniquely fitted to perform. Each region is different from all other regions and has its peculiar problems. Members of the regional board understand these problems and can plan a program which is fitted to the needs of their region. No other agency can provide this type of leadership. Interested and capable trustees on the regional library boards are an indispensable ingredient of public library progress.”⁸ The administrative responsibility of the regional board, on which all the counties of the region are represented, tends to make the activities of the regional center an integral part of the total library program of that region.

Members of the regional staff are accepted as part of the local library program, not as outsiders representing the state. This close relationship has been developed during years of experience. A questionnaire answered by the county library boards in 1960 brought forth some surprising opinions. A large number of the boards wanted more extensive supervision of their local librarians by the regional staff. Ten years earlier they would have resisted the idea of supervision. The great majority of library boards rejected the proposal of state grants of funds to the local libraries, stating firmly that they would prefer any additional funds to be used to expand the services of the regional library center.

The lack of authority by the regional board and staff over the local library boards and personnel has never been a problem, although there

may have been occasions when the regional librarian would have wished for some authority over a local librarian. Robert D. Leigh points out that the differences between regions constituted by state action and those brought about by concurrent action of several counties are more of a legal than of a functional nature. It is his observation that in actual operation, there is very little difference between the two types of library systems.⁹

The regional library board has a contractual relationship with the State Library and Archives. Because it receives and expends state funds, it is subject to the same rules and regulations in regard to purchasing, financial procedures, records, and personnel policies which apply to other state departments and agencies. The State Library and Archives is responsible for insuring that such rules and regulations are observed. Members of the staff of the Public Libraries Division frequently attend regional library board meetings. The regional library boards participate in planning for state-wide development of public library service.

The regional librarians have a very close relationship with the State Library and Archives. Through quarterly staff meetings, which usually last two days, the regional librarians have an opportunity to discuss problems and express their ideas. Committees work on various projects, such as preparation of manuals, job descriptions, etc. Planning for special projects, such as the Home Demonstration Club Reading Program, is done at staff meetings. Between staff meetings, there is frequent communication between the regional librarians and the State Library and Archives by means of telephone calls, letters, and visits.

The multi-county regional library systems in Tennessee have many deficiencies, including the low level of local support, insufficient professional personnel, inadequate quarters for local libraries, and others. At the local, regional, and state levels, efforts are being made to overcome these problems, which are not inherent in the organizational structure.

The following advantages may be cited for a library system consisting of local libraries and a state-supported regional library center:

1. It avoids the struggle to persuade a group of counties to part with local funds and local authority.
2. It encourages local pride in accomplishment.
3. It provides a professional staff which is accepted as part of the local library program.

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4. It provides a wider range of materials and services than small libraries can furnish for themselves.

5. It provides flexibility in program and in organization. A county can be transferred from one region to another with little difficulty. This has sometimes been necessary as the program expanded and additional regional library centers were established.

6. It provides a strong basis for requesting state appropriations. State officials accept responsibility for state-supported regional library centers which they consider as agencies of the state government. They do not accept equal responsibility for providing help to local public libraries.

7. It avoids the difficulties of administering grants-in-aid to local libraries.

References

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