

School Libraries Make Room to Learn

Multimillion-Dollar Investment Promises Better Books, Computers, Appearance

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The District's public school libraries are undergoing their most substantial upgrades in decades as the school system, federal government and private donors invest millions of dollars to add new books, update computer technology and redesign spaces to spruce up the aging media centers.

Last month, improvements to three public school libraries in the Capitol Hill area were completed as part of a \$2.4 million public-private initiative that ultimately will include eight schools. The Capitol Hill Community Foundation joined the school system and parent volunteers to raise money for the project.

So far, the libraries at Stuart-Hobson Middle School and Robert Brent and Ludlow-Taylor elementary schools have been redone. Work is scheduled to begin in the summer at Payne, Tyler, Maury and Watkins elementary schools and Peabody Early Childhood Center.

The Capitol Hill project coincides with a broader school system plan to spend \$12 million, including some federal funds, updating its elementary school libraries this year and in 2007.

Upgrades at 48 elementary schools were completed in October with the addition of new computers, digital cameras, shelving, carpeting, painting, electrical fixtures, furniture and access to electronic databases, said Philecia F. Harris, the school system's new director of library media services. An additional 37 elementary school libraries are scheduled for similar improvements next year.

Harris, who has worked for public libraries in Boston and Cambridge, Mass., and as a school librarian in Northwest D.C., said she has never seen such an expansive initiative to improve school libraries.

"I think it's very wonderful and important to bring back libraries," Harris said. "If schools don't achieve at anything else, they can achieve at getting kids to read."

The school system's focus on its libraries was a direct response to the results of a parental survey

conducted to help shape Superintendent Clifford B. Janey's Master Education Plan. More than 90 percent of the parents who responded said that putting libraries in public school buildings was a top priority.

Last school year, more than 70 schools did not have librarians, and many of the libraries were in poor condition -- old or outdated books, broken computers, dusty shelves and card catalogue systems that were not electronic, Harris said.

As part of his master plan, Janey mandated that every library have at least a part-time librarian/media specialist. The school system hired librarians in 70 new positions this year. Janey also hired Harris this past summer to lead the renovation effort, and the system is working with the University of Maryland to train 10 more library media specialists.

"I've always seen libraries as a destination of kids' discovery, and to the extent that we can shore up our libraries throughout the District, regardless of Zip code, we will accomplish a great feat," he said. "We're halfway there."

An additional \$1.3 million grant from the Toyota Motor Corp. will help to add 1,000 books and learning materials in 34 elementary school libraries in Southeast Washington and to establish a family literacy program in Southeast. School officials say they are seeking similar funding funds to upgrade high school libraries.

The Capitol Hill public-private partnership employed local architects who donated their time to redesign and renovate the three school libraries. The schools got close to 12,000 new books, wireless technology, new computers and printers.

"The school libraries project is not just about new paint and bookshelves," said Suzanne Wells, a co-chair of the project, in a statement. "We believe that the modern school library should be an extension of the classroom."

The shelves in the Veola M. Jackson Library at Stuart-Hobson were custommilled

by Catholic University students, who sought input from the middle school parents, teachers and students on how the library should look.

There are three main sections of the library, or “pods” -- the fiction pod, which can double as a juice bar with a serving area so students can sell drinks and snacks; the center circulation desk pod, with a book drop and a variety of storage options; and the non-fiction pod, which has low built-in benches and higher countertop surfaces.

For one group of eighth-grade students who recently poured into the library to research topics for their history project, the changes were apparent right away.

The students were tasked by their social studies teacher, Amy Trenkle, to use the library’s online card

catalogue to find at least one book. They peeled off in different directions across the brand-new carpet. All around them were new blond shelves holding books. They sat down in front of new computer terminals and typed in search terms for their research topics: Buffalo Soldiers; the Cultural Revolution in China; Saladin, the 12th-century Kurdish Muslim general and warrior.

Jevon William, 13, of Capitol Hill sat at a new computer terminal and considered the dramatic changes in his school library since last year.

“I like it now because it looks new, and I can use the computer,” he said. “That’s a big help.”

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