

Office of Commonwealth Libraries staff discuss the impact that community and school libraries have on the lives of all Pennsylvanians

Carrie Cleary is the Executive Assistant reporting to the Deputy Secretary for Libraries and State Librarian. **Corri Hines** is the School Age Services Advisor for the Bureau of Library Development at the Office of Commonwealth Libraries. **Heather Smith** is the Early Childhood Services Advisor for the Bureau of Library Development. This Q & A session discusses their work with community and school libraries across Pennsylvania, and the many resources that local libraries provide across the state.

Q1. For what is the Office of Commonwealth Libraries responsible, and what is your role?



Carrie Cleary: Within the Pennsylvania Department of Education ([PDE](#)), the Office of Commonwealth Libraries ([OCL](#)), through the Bureau of Library Development, is charged with coordinating library services and systems statewide and providing leadership in developing excellent and equitable libraries to support all learners. OCL also operates the [State Library of Pennsylvania](#), which collects, preserves, and connects state government, libraries, and residents to information and resources needed for education, enrichment, and advancement.

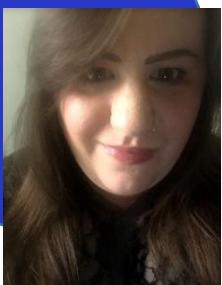
I am responsible for coordinating work done in collaboration with other PDE personnel and other agencies in the commonwealth, and handle administrative and managerial duties in finance, human resources, and planning and work on special projects as assigned. One of the special projects I am currently responsible for is ensuring success of the collaboration with the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education's Connected to Learning project that works with Pennsylvania PBS stations, as well as the Libraries Connect Communities with Broadband Resources project, both funded by the Governor's Emergency Education Relief.

“Libraries are a tremendous value, serving as a community anchor institution.”

– Carrie Cleary

My current focus is on broadband access and digital literacy for Pennsylvanians and am excited to represent PDE and libraries on a Pennsylvania team that received a grant from the [National Governor's Association Workforce Innovation Network](#).

Q2. Do you work with school libraries too?



Corri Hines: Yes. Certified school librarians are one of the most critical components to student success, and the Office of Commonwealth Libraries supports efforts to provide guidance, training, and collaboration to school libraries.

One of the special projects I am currently responsible for is working with a committee comprised of youth services consultants and school librarians to develop pathways to relationships and partnerships between public and school libraries. This group aims to develop resources and tools for both public and school library professionals to provide programs, resources, and services to community youth and students.

Many school and public libraries across the commonwealth already have great partnerships through shared resources, summer programming, and coordination of access. In addition, I have had the pleasure of working with Video Game Clubs of America ([VGCUSA](#)) to provide school libraries across the commonwealth with the ability to support social and emotional learning, college and career readiness skills, and civic and social engagement through the development of gaming and video game clubs.

“Connecting youth services library professionals across the commonwealth is so important to ensure consistent, equitable, and foundational library experiences for school age students and young adults.”

– Corri Hines

Q3. For what else are you responsible in your role?

Corri Hines: As the School Age Services Advisor for the Bureau of Library Development at the Office of Commonwealth Libraries, my primary responsibilities are to provide guidance, coordination, and opportunities for libraries serving youth ages 8-18. Both Heather Smith and I work with a network of statewide library leaders for youth services to plan initiatives, projects, and programs that support literacy, connected learning, STEM and computational thinking, and youth development.

Connecting youth services library professionals across the commonwealth is so important to ensure consistent, equitable, and foundational library experiences for school age students and young adults. I manage the Out of School Time grant project and oversee statewide grantee projects for the [Pennsylvania School Librarians Association](#) and the award-winning [Teen Reading Lounge](#) program of the [Pennsylvania Humanities Council](#).



Heather Smith: As the Early Childhood Services Advisor for the Bureau of Library Development, I develop, coordinate, and promote programs, projects, and professional development relating to library services for children ages 0 through 8, as well as their families and caregivers.

My main focus is early literacy and family engagement in libraries. Parents are a child's first teacher and libraries are a perfect place to provide opportunities and resources that can help develop behaviors that encourage children to become successful learners. My role is to help libraries across the state better serve their youngest patrons and their families.

Q4. Why are libraries important?

Carrie Cleary: Libraries are a community place that promotes resource sharing for all. Libraries are staffed by a team of caring people who create a public space full of curated resources for all people in a community to access. They are places where visitors can explore topics that interest them and find credible information and leisure reading as well.

Libraries are an equalizing force for the population—people of all ages and backgrounds who live anywhere in the world—can find and request books, audio, video, and resources at no direct cost. They can also access shared technology, internet access and computers, reference services (trained people to assist in finding answers and helping), and at many facilities makerspaces as well as events and topical programs. At a library, any person is empowered to pursue education, information, and recreation through literacy.

Libraries are a tremendous value, serving as a community anchor institution. In some communities, the library is the only public place a person can go to sit and use a computer or read a book, newspaper, or magazine without the expectation that they will purchase something. Most of all, library staff are special people who connect people with the resources they need.

Corri Hines: Fostering a culture of belonging is an essential component of library services and providing materials to help reflect the beautiful diversity of the commonwealth makes space for inclusion. It's important for youth to be able to see themselves, their experiences, and their feelings reflected in books so they can feel validated and supported. At the same time, books and library materials allow everyone the opportunity to cultivate empathy and care for others by

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– Heather Smith

Heather Smith: Libraries are a place of connection in so many ways. Individuals can connect to others through shared experiences at library programs. I've seen friendships form and support systems develop between adults attending story time with their toddlers, between teens attending afterschool events, and between people with shared passions at arts and crafts classes.

Library staff are skilled at connecting patrons with resources, be it information for a school report or a travel destination, information about local social services, or simply a good book recommendation. Libraries are a natural place for community groups to connect, often offering meeting room space and partnerships that promote local organizations.

By providing equitable access to technology, libraries help individuals connect outside their community as well, through public access computers and free Wi-Fi connections. At their heart, libraries are just as much about connections as they are about access to information and materials.

Q5. What are some ways that community and school libraries promote inclusivity and belonging?

"American public libraries are nonpartisan and have a core value of supporting intellectual freedom and access to information"
- Carrie Cleary

Carrie Cleary: Libraries purchase and curate diverse collections on topics of interest to all people. American public libraries are nonpartisan and have a core value of supporting intellectual freedom and access to information. Libraries offer displays and programs to engage with community members.

School libraries are often a place where children can find new entry points to a topic or explore other things that interest them as they pursue knowledge paths. Libraries supplement and go beyond what is happening in the classroom and offer new avenues for deeper or different exploration of a topic to give everyone a space to belong and direct their own education.

Corri Hines: Libraries are safe spaces that build equity while breaking down barriers for everyone in the community, especially for students and young learners. During the summer months when learners are out of school, public libraries across the commonwealth provide the community with dynamic programming that not only is a preventative measure against learning loss but also ensures that every child can engage in developmentally appropriate experiences.

During Summer 2021, libraries offered unique programs including baking and cooking classes, gardening and nature activities, robotics and coding clubs, and arts exploration projects. All of these programs are directly supported by the five [PA Forward](#) literacies (basic, information, civic and social, health, and financial) that serve to equip all Pennsylvanians with the skills needed to pursue lifelong learning.

School libraries and librarians are also essential to empowering every learner with library resources to engage curious minds, build bridges to achievement, and to meet ever-evolving educational needs. All libraries foster and promote belonging and allow for the pursuit of both knowledge and personal passion.

Heather Smith: Libraries honor and celebrate the diversity of their communities and strive to be a welcoming, safe place for everyone. In my experiences, people who love their library feel a sense of not only belonging, but also a sense of ownership in the library. Library staff work very hard to offer materials and programs for all members of their community.

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Q6. What do libraries offer young children (Pre-Kindergarten)?

Heather Smith: Nearly every public library offers some form of preschool story time, and these programs are so much more than just reading books to kids. Youth services staff develop story time curriculum that is designed to help children develop early literacy skills and foster a love of reading that starts at birth. In addition to traditional story times for the pre-K crowd, libraries offer baby lapsit programs, toddler move and groove classes, kindergarten readiness sessions, and sensory story times.

Preschool is not too early to be introduced to STEM in the most basic of forms. Libraries offer block play events that introduce math and engineering concepts, and many have STEM-specific story times that introduce science topics such as weather, bugs, planets, oceanography, and more. In Pennsylvania, approximately 100 public libraries are certified [Family Place Libraries](#) with staff trained in early child development and parent-child workshops—fun, informal, play-based events that offer a rich environment of toys, books, and art activities.

Family Place Libraries also have specially designed spaces with comfortable adult seating and developmentally appropriate toys that make the library a destination that is fun, but also an enriching learning experience every visit. In addition to programming, libraries have expertly curated collections that feature board books that allow babies and toddlers to handle the pages without fear of damage, picture books to be read aloud, early readers as preschoolers transition to learning to read on their own, and materials for parents, caregivers, and service providers.

Q7. What about school-age, Kindergarten-12?

Corri Hines: Both school and public libraries offer resources, programs, and services that support school age students. School librarians are a valuable resource to students, teachers, and administration by being a curriculum expert, demonstrating effective use of technology, and promoting social and emotional learning.

Many school librarians are club mentors and offer students the opportunity to bond over shared interests such as gaming, graphic novels, STEM, and creative arts.

Public libraries are also an essential component in K-12 growth and achievement by providing out-of-school opportunities. Youth services library professionals curate collections of physical and digital materials that address a diverse number of interests and learning styles. Through year-round programming, libraries provide free access to several experiential and hands-on learning opportunities that support literacy and growth.

Over the summer, public libraries plan exciting programs for community youth to engage in both learning and the pursuit of personal interest. Families love visiting libraries and taking part in activities like story walks, STEM experiments, book and graphic novel discussions, and take-home kits.

Q8. Anything special for those students and families doing virtual learning or homeschooling?

Carrie Cleary: Libraries helped to promote the resources made available by the PBS [Learning at Home](#) platform and many special events.

At the start of the pandemic, many libraries expanded their wireless signals to be available outside the building 24/7 and expanded service to cover parking lots. Local public libraries have stories about children doing homework in the parking lot using their wireless. As distance learning continued, many libraries saw expanded access to networked printers, scanners, and copiers be important as well, when students needed quality printing services and home equipment failed or ran out of ink.

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Librarians provide hours of service to [Chat with a Librarian](#)—a statewide service that employs real librarians to answer student questions via online chat, text, or email to provide help finding information and access to resources. Virtual reference and service by just making a phone call to your local library can help a lot of learners (even lifelong learners, like senior citizens who may have been learning to use computers during the pandemic) too.

Corri Hines: Many public libraries work with homeschool and non-traditional schooling communities by offering special programs and services to support their academic achievement. Collections and materials that support homeschool curriculum, out-of-school

programs and activities that meet academic standards, and library space for social interaction are all ways that public libraries meet the needs of this community. Some libraries also offer homeschool curriculum to families.

Heather Smith: In the first days of the pandemic in early 2020, youth services librarians were quick to adopt methods to reach their story time families in quarantine. Virtual story time events were offered via Facebook Live, YouTube, and Zoom. Youth services librarians also quickly developed story time kits that families could take home with activities that could accompany the online events, as well as enriching activities that encouraged time away from the screen.

Q9. What kinds of services or programs are available for adults?

Carrie Cleary: Libraries have never been just for kids. Libraries are a place for learning for people of all ages and have resources to meet the needs of all. Everyone is a lifelong learner and it's important to keep up with new skills, knowledge, and information in rapidly changing times to remain connected in society and competitive in the workforce.

Libraries also offer leisure reading and books and audiobooks of all kinds to suit many interests; reading supports mental health, brain development, and overall stress relief by keeping the mind active. Pennsylvania has well over 600 public library service locations, and each offers services and programs tailored to meet its community's needs, including and expressly the needs of adults.

A library's space is often used by many who just need a place to work with access to the internet, a computer, or printer. Many adults find great value in local library collections in print or downloadable format. Most libraries offer online apps where you can download borrowed books or audios directly to your connected devices. Adults can find reference service at any library to help answer questions with credible resources, and interlibrary loan service can be activated for times when your local library doesn't have a book, but it can be borrowed from another library in the state or beyond.

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Many libraries offer special programs and events in addition to traditional book clubs and author visits; examples include cooking classes, history programs, arts and crafts, board game nights, and social issue discussions. The best library programs reflect the needs of the community.

Some libraries offer community meeting room spaces—more and more are equipping community meeting rooms with technology tools that improve the ability to have accessible meeting spaces for hybrid meetings where some participants are online and some are in person.

Heather Smith: Parents are a child's first teacher and story time programs are developed just as much for the adult caregiver as they are for the child. Youth Services Professionals create enriching library programs for young children that also equip parents and caregivers with tips and best practices they can use to support early literacy development at home. Parents and caregivers can access early literacy information at the [Cruise into Kindergarten](#) website, which has an online game with early learning activities, book lists, and screen time guidelines.

Q10. Are library services available for those with exceptionalities or persons with disabilities?

Carrie Cleary: Public libraries aim to serve everyone with collections and services to meet a broad range of needs. Modern facilities are wheelchair compliant and accessible to all with collections that include materials to serve everyone. Libraries offer a selection of large print materials, audios, videos with closed captioning,

and more. If your library doesn't have something in stock to meet your special need, just ask and they can likely borrow from a neighboring library. Some libraries even offer homebound delivery services or special outreach programs.

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Pennsylvanians who have trouble reading traditional print materials due to vision impairments or disability can seek service from the [Library of Accessible Media for Pennsylvanians \(LAMP\)](#). The program is tax-supported by federal, state, and (where appropriate) local government or private agencies.

Corri Hines: Programs and services that support social and emotional learning experiences for all is critical for healthy youth development. By engaging with children and tweens over interests, hobbies, and passions, libraries act as a connector for strong community engagement and belonging. This is especially important for tweens and teens who are learning more about their own identities and looking to express themselves. Library professionals are well-suited in understanding these developmental needs and work to cultivate materials, programs, and services that are appealing and inclusive for all.

Heather Smith: Many libraries offer sensory story time programs that are appropriate for young children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. At [Family Place](#) parent-child workshops, resource professionals such as hearing specialists or staff from [Early Interventions](#) interact in an informal way with children and caregivers, opening doors for questions and concerns about the child's development.

Q11. What is the POWER Library?

Carrie Cleary: POWER Library is an online portal to library service for all Pennsylvania residents. POWER Library includes:

- [Pennsylvania Statewide Catalog](#): A shared catalog that libraries use for interlibrary loans.
- [PA Photos and Documents](#): An online repository showcasing the rich and varied history of Pennsylvania as preserved in photos, documents, and recordings.
- [POWER Library E-Resources](#): A collection of online databases for education containing millions of articles, abstracts, and citations, as well as E-books, reference materials, auto repair manuals, and online books for children too.

- [Chat With a Librarian](#): A portal where you can text, email, or have live online chat with a library professional, many working at libraries in Pennsylvania, to get answers to your questions and find citations and articles to support your research and education.

There is also a special link as a portal for [Kids](#) and for [Teens](#). Kids will enjoy BookFlix and TrueFlix, where they can read books, follow along while books are read, or watch videos of books read aloud with accompanying videos. Teens will be empowered to do research for school projects in educational databases such as Gale's One File High School Edition or Gale in Context Middle School.

You will need a local library card, be a connected school library, or [get an e-card](#) to access the subscription e-resources in POWER Library.

Q12. How can someone get a library card?

Find a library near you by using the [directory of public libraries by county](#) or by using the [Find a Library](#) tool.

Some libraries, like the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#), which also serves as a Statewide Resource Center, offer a card online.

When you visit your local library to get a card in person, it's a good idea to bring along a form of identification or a piece of official mail with your current address on it to receive full privileges provided to residents of your area. Children and teens may need an adult signature to get a card.

Statewide, all Pennsylvanians are eligible to receive an e-card to access the resources of POWER Library. Sign up [for an e-card here](#).

Q13. Who decides what books and resources a library has in their collection?

Carrie Cleary: The community the library serves determines what resources a library offers; the collections and services are selected and planned by trained librarians. Most locations have a collection development policy that helps to guide decisions for what is purchased or what donations may be added to the library's cataloged collection. Strong policies also cover processes for determining when titles are ready to be weeded, or removed, from the collection when the books become damaged, content becomes outdated, or information is found to be inaccurate.

Community members determine the financial success of their local libraries through their support. Libraries purchase or license collections that will meet the stated needs of their communities and individuals who request materials.

Corri Hines: The American Library Association also provides helpful information through its [Selection and Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, and Academic Libraries](#). School libraries are also encouraged to have a board or administrative approved policy or guideline that addresses procedures for handling material challenges.

Q14. What are some ways that people can support their local libraries?

Carrie Cleary: Almost all libraries host annual giving campaigns and offer ways for people to contribute financially to the library's operating expenses. Many of Pennsylvania's libraries rely on donations from community groups and members to really thrive. Some libraries have volunteer programs or Friends of the Library groups that offer opportunities to give funds, time, and expertise.

“...every \$1 spent for library services results in over \$5 in benefits – where else can you get a better return on an investment?”
- Carrie Cleary

People can learn about the amount of local and county dollars that support libraries. People can send a simple thank you to government officials that support nonpartisan libraries and encourage their local representation to do even more to fund libraries as a shared community resource to support information and education for all people. Local municipalities often dedicate small line items to libraries in counties where there is not a countywide tax. [Studies have shown](#) that every \$1 spent for library services results in over \$5 in benefits—where else can you get a better return on an investment?

Corri Hines: It's essential for every young Pennsylvanian to have a foundational library experience. Through positive exposure to libraries and the power of a library card, youth who grow up valuing libraries will be library supporters in the future. [Research](#) shows that school libraries have an incredible impact on students. Advocating for Certified School Librarians in every school district as well as a strong youth services staff presence in public libraries is essential in supporting students and creating opportunities for success.

Heather Smith: The easiest way to support your local public library is to use it regularly. Visit your local library and sign up for a library card, check out some materials, and take advantage of the free, fun, and educational programming. The more library resources are used, the better justification libraries have to expand their offerings.

Many libraries can check out digital items through their online catalogs and they want patrons to take advantage of free E-books and downloadable audiobooks that you can borrow from home. Follow your local library on social media and share their posts; you'll get the latest information on new materials and programs, plus it shows your support. Libraries thrive when people use them, and they would love you to visit.