

Library Services in Douglas County

Michael Lasher
Superintendent, Douglas Education Service District
February 10, 2017

The removal of library services from county budgets in 2017, followed by the recent failure of a ballot measure to create and fund a library district, puts Douglas County at a crossroads.

Some have described the library vote as the canary in the coal mine for the future of the county. Others have wondered whether the ballot failure will hamstring attempts at attracting new business to the area. “Who wants to invest in a place that can’t support a library?” is a refrain I’ve heard more than once.

These are important questions. Here’s another one we’re asking at Douglas Education Service District: To what extent will the closure of county libraries damage the educational structure of our county? We know that libraries are more than a repository for books. We are particularly concerned with the loss of children’s literacy initiatives and parent-children reading groups. The library has developed outreach programs for young readers from Head Start students to teens. In addition, tools and services are offered to help the children of parents who struggle with literacy themselves.

In a recent speech before the Oregon School Boards Association, Pedro Noguera, the child of immigrant parents and now a distinguished professor of Education at UCLA, said: “My father learned that in this country a free education could be had for all with a library card. My father sent all six of his children to college; we learned the love of learning in libraries.”

ESDs have a broad mission in Oregon. We provide services to children and school districts cooperatively, particularly in special education, instruction and information technology. We also furnish a variety of administrative services. Our board is supportive of Douglas ESD stepping forward to help preserve library services in Oregon. Clearly, we cannot reduce the direct services and support we provide to our 13 school districts in Douglas County. However, we believe that Douglas ESD could play a significant role. With nearly 200 employees in Douglas and Jackson counties, we have an organizational infrastructure and capacity that could serve as a base.

To use a model from business, we believe Douglas ESD could serve as an anchor-tenant that could provide the basis for operational support of a library in Roseburg, as well as a hub for other libraries supported by towns and cities in Douglas County. We already provide business, courier and other educational services as described above to our constituent school districts. If the ESD were to move to the library building in Roseburg, we could:

- Keep the building open at least during our hours of operation
- Organize a professional and volunteer base needed to operate the library during those hours and perhaps beyond
- Become the fiscal agent that seeks outside funding from foundations and other public entities to operate a revitalized library system

This work will not be easy and the ESD cannot do it alone. But we are willing to dedicate resources, time and resolve to maintain some semblance of library services in the short term. We also are willing to work with others to find a long-term solution that will preserve and expand the role of libraries, as many other communities around the country have done.