BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS BY RETHINKING FINES

Two Libraries, Two Methods
Similar Results
**Syracuse (OCPL)**
Opportunity occurred during budget process

**Rochester (RPL)**
Grassroots movement initiated a formal study by staff team

**Outcome**
Both libraries initiated fine amnesty and elimination
July 1, 2016
OCPL Child Fine Amnesty Breakdown

- All fines and lost charges from before June 2016 were waived to give a fresh start to children 18 and under registered at city libraries.
- Children ages 18 and under will no longer accrue overdue fines. They will be charged for lost materials.
- Even with lost charges, children still can use their cards. If their fees total $50 or more, they will be limited to borrowing two items at a time.
Real World - The GOOD

- No longer creating a barrier to access. Almost 5,000 children were unable to use their library card, and some were “afraid to get in trouble” and so avoided the library.
- More books in the hands of children.
- Supports Early Literacy initiatives.
- Children feel more empowered at the library.
- Fewer times that we have to say “No.”
- We now can use their school information to give them cards.
Real World - The BAD

- Politics vs Publicity.
- City vs. Member Library - Different policies for each.
- Not all patrons are included. If you're over the age of 18 but have fines from when you were a kid? Out of luck.
Lessons Learned

- Staff buy in is crucial. Remember, staff has spent years enforcing old policy.
- Explaining to patrons overdue fines vs lost items. The simpler the rules, the better
- A less punitive relationship with the library leads to a more positive patron experience and a more sustainable relationship with the community.
Rochester Fines Elimination

- Began with branch staff exploring declining circulation, which resulted in pilot program at 2 branches in 2014-2015.
- Team convened in 2015 which examined multiple barriers to service and researched other programs in North America.
Real World - The GOOD

- Circulation & new borrower cards increased by 10% in the first year.
- Full support from Board, Staff, Mayor, and community.
- Library’s position as primary provider and supporter of early learning and literacy is stronger than ever.
- Effort acknowledged in community as step towards social equity and dismantling of structural racism.
- Staff more flexible in negotiating all fines.
Real World - The BAD

- Some negative public reaction. Some suburban residents particularly upset.
- Member libraries (suburban & rural) were not all on board due to revenue loss.
Lessons Learned

- Communication with system member libraries is crucial.
- Research & preparation paid off when answering questions from media and community. Data collected was invaluable.
- A light-hearted approach to fines has resulted in happy patrons and happy staff.
Wheel of Fines
Next Steps for RPL

- Exploring an Educator’s Card for teachers and homeschoolers.
- Two member libraries considering adopting the process.
- Considering a "Clean Slate" card for ex-offenders.
Other NYS Libraries

- Many NYS libraries have been fine-free for years.
- Small to large.
- Donation jars versus fines.
- All pointed to fines as a barrier to service.
Presenters

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