

Fine Relief for Children and Teens: An Overview and Summary

Fine Relief for young library patrons is a trend in libraries. Nationally, Los Angeles County Public Library and New York Public Library, as well as many libraries of various sizes in Colorado and Arizona, have programs that offer waivers of fines for young users. In Virginia, a number of libraries have also implemented fine relief for youth, including Jefferson-Madison Regional Library, Caroline County, Staunton, Augusta County, Waynesboro, Central Rappahannock Regional, and Chesterfield County. Most Virginia libraries who have a fine relief program take the additional step of adjusting policy so that young users will not incur fines in the future.

In 2012, the American Library Association's policy statement "Library Services to the Poor" encouraged libraries to work towards "the removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges." Although Library fines may represent a "slap on the wrist" to middle-class families, they disproportionately impact children and youth in poverty. In San Jose, they determined that one-third of residents of poor communities were barred from using the library because of unpaid fines; our experience working with schools in Eastern Montgomery reveals a similar level of blocks preventing library use.

Libraries have taken different approaches. While most have targeted their programs at persons under 18, Los Angeles' "Great Read Away" is open to persons up to age 21. Some have simply wiped off fines for children. Some have removed fines when the child visits the library, or associated the waiving of fines with events such as Back to School Night, Summer Reading, or National Library Week. Many have followed a model similar to Los Angeles and New York, where children are encouraged to "read off their fines," or to participate in programming, use of e-resources, and creative activities to reduce fines in set increments. No library in this research has extended the fine relief to the point where children are not required to return borrowed materials. However, the Colorado State Library has encouraged libraries to explore forgiving young users for lost material also.

The "reading rate" for fine relief also varies. Some libraries grant \$1.00 of fine relief for every 15 minutes of reading. Others have granted \$5.00 for every hour of reading. Chesterfield gives children a \$20.00 fine relief coupon for participating in their Back to School library orientations. A simplified "Bingo" card has also been used to broaden the possible activities beyond reading.

At MFRL, fine revenue for youth materials for each of the last 5 years has been less than \$8,000. This represents 13% of total fine revenue, or 0.35% of our 2017 allocated budget request. New York Public Library supported their fine relief program by tapping charitable/grant support to make up for the lost revenue. Central Rappahannock Library increased their adult fines from 10 cents to 20 cents per day to offset costs. While every dollar is important to our operations, the percentage of our budget represented by children's fines is small.

Most libraries report increases in active patrons and in circulation once a fine relief program is implemented. Fine relief programs also appear to generate positive goodwill among parents and children alike. The library invests over \$250,000 a year on material. Removing barriers to children's

access to this material leverages this investment by letting more people access the knowledge in the books and develop their reading skills.

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Prepared by Karim Khan, Library Director, Montgomery-Floyd Regional Library, February 2018.