

Speaking Notes: Library Fines

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Speaking Notes:

The following are speaking notes addressing the VBCPS school board about a current issue regarding library fines in school libraries.

- *Fines are an issue for children, particularly those who are of low socioeconomic status.*

It has come to our attention that “libraries are fining children who cannot afford to be without books” (Dwyer, 2017). This has become problematic as a parent recently asked her school’s librarian to no longer allow her child to check out books because she cannot afford the fees.

- *It is every child’s right to use the library, regardless of economic status.*

The original Library Bill of Rights states that “A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views” (ALA, 2021). Imposing any barriers to access only serves to further disadvantage that child and hinders their right to those resources.

- *Eliminating or reducing fines can be complex.*

However, Daniel Sifton states in an article that “how libraries consider reducing or eliminating overdue fines is a complex question with numerous approaches” (2009). Budget, inventory loss and lack of responsibility are all considerations that must be taken into account. These issues can look different at each individual library and must be addressed with precision and care.

- *We must take steps to eliminate this financial barrier to the library.*

Virginia Public Libraries have already eliminated overdue fees for their youth. Their website states that “removing overdue fines from youth accounts is a first step in removing economic barriers to accessing library materials, especially for

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children who may need us the most.” While this is a first step, further action must be taken to eliminate fees altogether for the young people who would otherwise not have access to a reading collection.

Reference List:

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<https://www.vbgov.com/news/pages/selected.aspx?release=5368&title=fine+free+for+kids:+library+will+no+longer+charge+overdue+fines+on+youth+accounts>

Dwyer, J. (2017, May 4). *Libraries are fining children who can't afford to be without books*. NYTimes.com.

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1. American Library Council. (2019, January 27). *Resolution on monetary library fines as a form of social justice*. ALA.org.

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This article from the American Library Association website explains the resolutions that were passed in 2019 as a result of the issues surrounding monetary fines in the library. These resolutions are a step in the right direction and school libraries should follow suit, if they have not already done so. Some of the resolutions “urge libraries to scrutinize their practices of imposing fines on library patrons and actively move towards eliminating them” (ALA, 2019). The article goes on to say that the “imposition of monetary library fines creates a barrier to the provision of library and information services” (ALA, 2019). This article is important in order to understand the lengths at which the American Library Association has gone in order to reach those communities who are being affected by monetary fines the most. This helps readers to not only see the possibility of fines being eliminated altogether but to call those libraries and policy makers to action. The article reiterates that fines are not in line with the core values of the library and that libraries are called to make the case of eliminating these fines in their school district. This serves as a framework for the case that school libraries should be a place where monetary fines do not exist.

2. Byrne, D. (2021, January 25). *Libraries are going fine free*. Reasons to be Cheerful.

<https://reasonstobecheerful.world/libraries-eliminating-overdue-fines/>

As David Byrnes states in his article, “so fines are as much a social justice issue as a simple economic one. Library use fosters reading, and reading and literacy leads to better health outcomes. It’s a win-win for the whole community” (2021).

Byrnes starts by providing an interactive map of libraries that have eliminated fines. He also gives readers an idea of the stress that implementing library fines can have on the community. In some cases, tracking down library fines was just as costly as the fine itself. Most importantly, he tackles a lot of frequently asked questions about the possible effects of eliminating such fines. This helps readers understand the benefits of lifting these restrictions on library use. In his blog, Byrnes emphasizes the importance of eliminating barriers to the library and ensuring that it remains a place that all are welcome, regardless of their economic status. Noting that fines majorly impact students of lower socioeconomic status, Byrnes highlights the need for getting rid of such roadblocks. Byrnes also provides several links for readers to have the opportunity for further reading. Links about e-books and specific libraries fine policies help readers to round out their knowledge about this particular issue.

3. Johnson, M. (2018). *Rethinking school library fines*. Knowledge Quest: Journal of the American Association of School Librarians.

<https://knowledgequest.aasl.org/rethinking-school-library-fines/>

This blog by Mica Johnson is helpful in allowing readers to make up their own mind regarding the library fine issue. It also serves as a forum for other librarians to add in their two cents while trying to find a viable solution to this hot topic issue. While Johnson admits that in the beginning he was supportive of library fines, now he isn't so sure. He takes us on a journey of his thinking while asking himself some important questions regarding this issue in schools. His

questions invoke reflection as librarians grapple with the issue of fining their students. He offers alternative ideas to collecting monetary compensation for lost books. “We’ll accept used trades and paperbacks from Amazon for a library bound book, and we usually give students as long as they need to look for the book and come to terms with the fact that the book is truly lost” (Johnson, 2018). This is important for the reader to help understand that there are more ways to pay for books than with money. He also reiterates that librarians usually are not aware of a child’s financial situation and therefore, should not be responsible for collecting library fees.

4. Morehart, J. (2018, June 1). *An overdue discussion: Two takes on library fines debate*. American Libraries Magazine.

<https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2018/06/01/library-fines-overdue-discussion/>

In this article Morehart interviews two librarians with opposing viewpoints on library fines. Readers will find this very beneficial in order to see both sides of the issues on library fines. Both librarians share their library’s policies and ways they encourage responsibility within their community. They also share their feelings on the importance, or lack thereof, of library fines. Jenny Paxton, a librarian at the Webster Public Library in New York notes that her library still collects fines. In fact, they consider the \$71,000 that they collect each year to be essential in their budget. She feels that the fines do not deter most patrons from using the library and only affect those members who have large fines. She

mentions that they are willing to work with patrons with outstanding fines.

Paxton believes that the fines are a tool to promote responsible behavior within the library and encourage members to take care of their books and return them on time. On the opposing side, Sarah Houghton, the director of the San Rafael Public Library in California believes that there should not be fines on children's materials. In fact, they eliminated children and teen fines altogether two years ago. It has only resulted in a loss of \$7,000 annually which is a small price to pay in order to continue to provide books to the youth in their community.

Houghton's library is hoping that in the future they can also eliminate the need for fines for adult materials as well.

5. Mrs. Readerpants. (2020). Reading off library fines. *Mrs. Readerpants*.

<https://www.readerpants.net/2016/11/read-off-your-library-fine-printable.html>

Although this post focuses mainly on overdue fines, the Mrs. Readerpants blog gives a great alternative to "paying off" library fines. The author, Mrs. Readerpants, begins by mentioning how library fines can be troublesome for school librarians. Stuck with an unwanted task from their district, most librarians are less concerned with fees and more concerned with putting books into children's hands. She goes on to reiterate the ineffectiveness of library fines. Instead of monetary compensation, she introduces the idea of students paying back the fines by logging their reading time. Providing a free printable for students and teachers, Mrs. Readerpants suggests that students keep a log for the amount of time read. Minutes read would then equate to dollars paid off. The

librarian and/or teacher can edit the bookmark log to tailor it to their library's needs. For instance, 10 minutes read could equal \$1 paid in fines. Librarians can use this method of payment for overdue fines and lost book fines. A teacher or parent would be responsible for signing the book log to ensure that the student did, indeed, pay off their debt. Once the amount due is reached, the book log can be turned in. Since reading is free, this is a great way to not only encourage reading but to ensure that the library stays available for children from all economic backgrounds.

6. Woodworth, A. (2010, July 29). The library reloaded: Fines. *Agnostic, Maybe*.

<https://agnosticmaybe.wordpress.com/2010/07/29/the-library-reloaded-fines/>

In this blog post, Andy Woodworth, author of *Agnostic, Maybe* gives readers a list of ideas for alternatives to library fines. While not all ideas are compatible and/or possible for each library, the blog post gives alternative suggestions that even if not viable, can at the very least job the reader's mind and expand their conceptions about what is an acceptable alternative for a library fee. His alternative ideas are as follows: no fines, volunteer hours, pay what you want, bartering and other forms of payment such as reading time for children. While his idea of no fines goes against the library's old policy entirely, Woodworth points out the benefits of eliminating fines altogether. Librarians will get back time spent tracking fines and patrons will relish in a new less restrictive environment. Volunteering is a great alternative and will help staff free up time that might normally be spent stacking shelves. Woodworth also mentions that

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the pay what you want method would be beneficial for families who otherwise wouldn't be able to pay the full amount. Instead of billing for a set price, the library could ask for whatever was possible to pay. Another idea for alternative payment is bartering. Instead of paying a fee for a lost book, a patron could offer dry goods or participate in a blood drive. His last idea is one that children can tackle themselves. Instead of paying a fine for a lost book a child can pay with reading time. This is certainly a win-win situation for librarians whose mission is to get books into the hands of children. This blog post is important because it highlights the many different ways that libraries can not only acquire "compensation" for a lost book but also engage the community in a meaningful way.