

# How the Detroit Public Library is staying relevant to kids in the 21st century

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Brandan Pierce of 826Michigan leads a writing workshop at the Campbell Branch Library



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*From a teen hangout spot featuring a makerspace to creative writing workshops for pre-teens, the Detroit Public Library offers a variety of programs that are relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century kids.*

Stacks and stacks of books. Musty, winding corridors. The librarian, with watchful eye, shushing you.

All are common images associated with the library to be sure, but they are far from accurate these days. If you're a teen, the Detroit Public Library (DPL) can be a completely different, even liberating, experience.

Want to play the latest games on PS4, Xbox, or Wii? Make some beats on a Mac to share with friends? How about making a movie?

The HYPE (Helping Young People Excel) Teen Center nestled inside the library, is a haven, a gathering space for teens to hang out after school. They can recharge, relax, socialize, and if they so choose, find an outlet for their creativity.

It's one of the ways the DPL is working to engage youth in a digitally-steeped culture where physical books

sometimes serve as window dressing.

Amisha Harijan's job as assistant manager of the Children's Library and the HYPE Teen Center at DPL's Main Branch is to tap into what teens really want from a library.

"They aren't necessarily coming to my area to check out books," says Harijan, who has about 20 teens regularly coming by during the week. "The draw for them is being able to socialize with their friends and their classmates. It's a safe haven for them. It's a place where they aren't put on the spot to be someone that they're not. I think it's important they have a space to connect with each other."

The HYPE Teen Center has become a revolving door for teens ages 13 to 18. As such, Harijan sees the center as more than simply a hangout spot. True, most use it for that purpose, but an ambitious teen can also earn community service hours for high school.

"It just won't be recreational," Harijan says. "(It'll be) things they can actually use in their academic careers going forward. I want them to have leadership programs, I want to see them at the forefront."

The HYPE Teen Council meets the first Tuesday of each month from 4:30-5:30 p.m. to discuss ways to improve the program. "That's what I like about working with teens," Harijan says. "They're going to tell you ways it's not working, or to do it again."

The biggest challenge Harijan has placed on herself is constantly staying in-tune with her teens to provide relevant programming.

One such area is technology. HYPE's Makerspace gives teens hands-on experience with 3D printing and screen-printing – even filmmaking. Ideally, programs should evolve, either through recycling or phasing out less popular activities.

"A project I'm going to do later in the year is a teen film festival," Harijan says.

She has also got an "It's Complicated" Valentine's party scheduled in February, as well as Author Day, where "cool" authors are invited to the HYPE Center.

"I want people to know we're here and open to all teenagers," she says. "This is a space for them to hang out, for them to try something new, learn something new. HYPE is going to continue to be a place to socialize, make new friends, and be exposed to some new and different things. This is a place where they can grow."

Not old enough for the HYPE Teen Center? Not to worry. If you're under 13, the library still has plenty for you.

826michigan, a nonprofit that inspires school-aged students to write confidently and skillfully with the help of adult volunteers in their communities, hosts writing workshops (called Wee-bots) on Wednesdays from 6-7 p.m. at the Campbell Branch Library, 8733 Vernor HWY. The library has a storefront look with an inviting family

environment.

“It’s not as involved as the in-school projects that we do,” says Brandan Pierce, program coordinator for 826Michigan. “Originally, we would hold these workshops in our space in Ann Arbor. We partnered with the Campbell Branch to offer the workshops [in southwest Detroit], which turned out to be an amazing fit. We come in with a picture book for the day, read that together, and then (there’s) a prompt for the day.”

That prompt is the genesis for all types of creative flights of fancy from the children. They can bounce ideas off each other or the volunteers. Those who want to share their stories can do so without feeling self-conscious. It’s a very collaborative environment.

“You feel really empowered to write down whatever comes to mind,” Pierce says.

Pierce, an Eastern Michigan University graduate, isn’t a writer by profession (his degree is in education), but he loves sharing the writing process with students who range in age from 6 to 12 (826michigan’s in-school programs include ages up to 18).

“It’s a nice collective of writers that are excited about sharing the writing and helping each other,” Pierce says.

A big feature of the workshops is the opportunity to be published. Participants receive a chapbook with their story in it to share with others.

“We type everything up and make sure the families are okay with their students’ writing being published,” Pierce says.

The best of the best is published in the annual “826michigan OMNIBUS,” an anthology that includes work from students across all 826michigan programs. It’s professionally designed (by a volunteer) and goes through the usual editing and production channels to produce a quality product with “shelf life” appeal.

Subsequently, a release party is held with snacks, and a big unveiling where students are invited to read a selection from the book. This is another way that libraries are evolving in the 21st century – providing interactivity and room for creativity.

“It’s getting them into the library for something other than just using the computer,” Pierce says. “They’re often checking out books, and they’re hearing about other programs the library is offering. There are a lot of schools in that area [around the Campbell Branch], so a lot families are able to carpool or walk.”

Pierce has often seen families hanging outside looking at books while their kids were in the workshop.

“Sometimes you get students (ages 12-15) hanging out in this tiny alcove, but the librarians love it,” Pierce says. “They’re excited about reading and writing. When they leave, they’re checking out books or asking about books. It’s been a great way to get to know the communities we serve.”

The HYPE Teen Center is open to the public Tuesday and Wednesday, 2:30-7:45 p.m.; Thursday and Friday, 2:30-5:45 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; and closed on Sundays and Mondays. For more information, visit [www.detroitpubliclibrary.org/hype](http://www.detroitpubliclibrary.org/hype).

A new 826Michigan writing club for elementary students will launch on Monday, Feb. 22 from 6-7 p.m. at the Redford Branch Library. For more information about 826michigan and their Detroit programs, visit [www.826michigan.org](http://www.826michigan.org).

This story is part of a series of solutions-focused features and profiles about the programs and people that are positively impacting the lives of Michigan kids. The [series](#) is produced by Michigan Nightlight and is made possible with funding from the [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#).

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