TRANSFORMATIVE OUTCOMES THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

How Public Library Staff Foster Connected Learning Teen Services

Connected Learning ALLIANCE

Transforming and Scaling Teen Services for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (TS4EDI)

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INTRODUCTION

Teens in the U.S. today are the **most diverse**, **civically engaged**, and **well educated** cohort ever,[1] yet many struggle to maintain positive social connections, mental health, and wellbeing.[2]

Public libraries can be transformative influences in their lives, offering space, resources, and support for interest-driven learning and community connection not available in homes, schools, or other community based organizations. A growing body of research has demonstrated the unique and impactful role that library teen services can play in expanding access to **"connected learning"** – learning and literacy grounded in personal relevance, meaningful relationships, civic engagement, and a sense of purpose.[3]

The base of ... connected learning is how we work to relate to the youth and truly see them and see how we are able to connect to ultimately benefit them.

Jessica Cheney, former Teen Services Coordinator, Memphis Public Library

Despite this promise, **most public libraries struggle to engage teens**. Connecting with teens means re-imagining offerings to reflect the culture and needs of diverse teens and their communities beyond the more traditional canon libraries have historically represented.[4] Teens' interest in technology and social justice can also be at odds with the focus of some library staff.

INTRODUCTION

Authentically engaging teens also requires new partnerships with community organizations focused on offerings in areas such as the arts, athletics, media, technology, and youth organizing. All of this requires a cultural shift that goes beyond the implementation of specific programs – including:

- a **focus** on **relationship-building**
- a **tolerance** for **risk-taking**
- **flexibility** in **responsibilities and schedules**
- **re-envisioning** use of **community and library spaces**
- **involving youth and staff** in planning, decision-making, and implementation
- an **openness** to **experimentation**

Image: courtesy of East Providence Public Library

Libraries that have stepped up to meet these challenges have not only had a transformative impact on the lives of vulnerable teens, but have also benefited from **greater community engagement**.

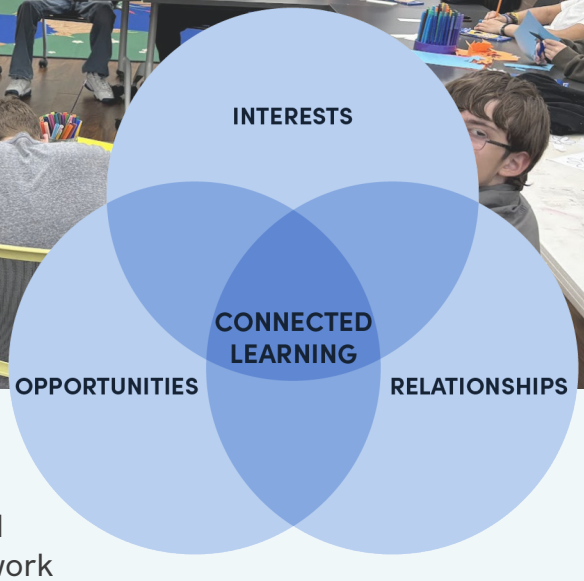
They have also made progress towards equity goals that go beyond quantitative measures of representation to ensure that teens from historically marginalized groups feel a genuine sense of belonging and connection. These **deeper equity goals** can include involvement of teens from marginalized groups in design and implementation, or programs that reflect the full cultural diversity of the community. In addition to being the adult patrons of the future, more importantly teens are strong and idealistic leaders for organizational causes, including community advocacy for the role of libraries and library materials. Guided by the connected learning framework for research and design, this report dives into both the challenges and opportunities for public libraries in serving diverse teens in socially and culturally connected ways, including concrete recommendations for public library staff.

INTRODUCTION

What Is Connected Learning Through Libraries?

Image: courtesy of East Providence Public Library

Connected Learning is learning that integrates personal interests, supportive relationships, and access to civic, academic, and career opportunities.



The framework was first outlined by the Connected Learning Research Network in 2013, and later updated at the conclusion of the research network activities in 2020. The framework grew from the recognition that in a digital world, teens are increasingly exercising their agency and voice to connect, create, and share.

Connected learning is both a description of a form of socially and culturally sustaining learning, as well as a design framework for how learning institutions can support this form of learning. Designers, educators, and teens support connected learning through four key elements: **(1) sponsorship of youth interests**, **(2) shared practices**, **(3) shared purpose**, and **(4) connections across settings**. At the center of the connected learning model is a commitment to equity, community connection, and youth agency and voice. Sponsoring youth interests and connecting across settings reflect an **"asset-based"** approach, recognizing the often overlooked cultural assets of minoritized teens and their communities.

The movement for connected learning through libraries originated with the 2009 launch of the first YOUmedia digital learning lab for teens at the Harold Washington Library in Chicago. In 2011-2012, the MacArthur Foundation and the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funded the design of YOUmedia learning labs in 24 libraries and museums across the country.[5] The YOUmedia network continues to grow with support of an online Community of Practice. IMLS funded projects such ConnectedLib and the Capturing Connected Learning in Libraries project have each developed additional resources for libraries seeking to take up connected learning approaches.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

A three-year project funded by IMLS, the aim of the **Transforming and Scaling Teen Services for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion project** was to investigate the challenges library staff face and the support they need for designing and sustaining connected teen learning experiences, including in rural and small libraries. Researchers engaged in:

- **A review** of published literature and materials from IMLS funded initiatives **Capturing Connected Learning in Libraries**, **Transforming Teen Services: A Train the Trainer Approach**, and **Future Ready with the Library**,
- **Partnership with 9 libraries** representing a mix of rural, suburban, and urban settings. Partner library staff participated in monthly Community of Practice meetings to foster adoption of connected learning, and
- **Interviews with 13 partner library staff and 12 additional library staff** to understand their experiences with connected learning in teen services. Interviewees were selected to include a range of background and experience in implementing connected learning approaches.

This material was analyzed through a thematic coding process to surface common challenges and barriers, conditions underlying successful adoption, and promising approaches. This report focuses on understanding the cultural and institutional conditions and dispositions required for successful adoption of connected learning approaches in teen services. The intent is to inform organizational policy and practices for achieving equity goals and engaging teens and community members.

About the Connected Learning Lab

The **Connected Learning Lab** (CLL) is an interdisciplinary research institute at the **University of California, Irvine**, dedicated to studying and mobilizing learning technologies and programs in equitable, innovative, and learner-centered ways. CLL's focus is defined by the *"connected"* in connected learning, which refers to both social relationships and emerging digital and networked technologies. Connected learning differs from institution centered approaches to learning and technology in being people-first; prioritizing student interests, cultural relevance, and the life of communities. CLL takes a uniquely interdisciplinary and cross-sector approach that brings together the learning sciences, social sciences, design, informatics, and computing to develop new research frameworks, engage in pressing real world problems, and develop and test breakthrough innovations.

Connected Learning Lab

FINDINGS OVERVIEW

1. Holistic relationships with staff and community partners are the foundation for teen engagement

Teens engage when they feel seen, heard, and connected to library staff. Moving from transactional and program specific relationships to more holistic ones means connecting to varied dimensions of teens' lives. This requires recognizing the power of social time before, during, and after programs, or in informal drop-in spaces designed for hanging out and socializing.

2. Community partnerships expand capacity to serve youth in all areas of connected learning

Community partners who embody teen interests and identities, such as artists or tech entrepreneurs, can be key brokers, connectors, and social network links for teens, expanding the range and depth of interests and identities that are supported through the library.

3. Storytelling about youth outcomes is a compelling way to demonstrate impact

Stories about social emotional learning, workforce development, and academic oriented connected learning outcomes present a powerful picture of the valuable role that libraries can play in the lives of teens.

4. Staff who are lifelong learners and innovators are effective champions of connected teen services

When library staff have opportunities for professional learning outside established areas such as teen literature and teen programming, they are invigorated and energized by new ideas.

1. Relationships With Teens

Holistic relationships with staff and community partners are the foundation for teen engagement.

Opportunities

Teens engage when they feel seen, heard, and connected to library staff. Moving from transactional and program specific relationships to more holistic ones means connecting to varied dimensions of teens' lives. This requires recognizing the power of social time before, during and after programs, or in informal drop-in spaces designed for hanging out and socializing. Authentic relationships grow over time through interaction across a spectrum of contexts and activities, fed by open curiosity about different cultures and interests, and developing into mutual respect and understanding.

It's providing opportunities for kids to fail and learn from their mistakes and it's okay, and everyone has a good time. I think those are the big things for me [related to] connected learning. Building those support systems for youth, either friend groups within these programs which may be different from their school environment or supportive adult environments so they have peers and mentors they can look up to and work with and bounce ideas off of and build lasting relationships with.

Kate Aubin, Head of Youth Services, Providence Public Library

FINDING #1

Challenges

All of the library staff in our community of practice described challenges in engaging with teens, despite extensive efforts to develop programs specifically for the age group. Staff described challenges in being allowed to move away from *"the desk"* to connect more informally with teens in the library and out in the community. They also spoke about challenges in moving beyond their own personal interests when designing teen services, a requirement for connected learning experiences. Challenges also include having relationships with teens outside of the library to recognize where library staff interests do and don't align with teen interests, and connecting with community members to bring in expertise outside of staff personal interests.

> *...We always have at least two other staff floating around, one who's kind of in charge of the focus area of the day. Podcasting, for example, and then another person who's just there to really just hang out and pop up where we need them and just chat with the kids and be really casual with the kids ... all those elements go into making our space inviting and ... facilitating a space for strong relationship building with our community.*
>
> **Niq Tognoni, Studio Coordinator, Nashville Public Library**

Recommendations

Library staff can build authentic relationships with teens and community members by engaging in informal, humanizing, and ongoing interactions.

- Spend work time hanging out with teens and community members outside of formal programs and in teen-friendly spaces outside of the library.
- Acknowledge that building relationships with teens is never done and is a continuous process requiring ongoing commitment.
- Foster authentic and holistic relationships with youth by sharing food and life experiences with each other, and engaging in activities for purely social reasons.
- Recognize that social time and hanging out is an essential part of service and space design.
- Meet young people where they are – be curious about their interests, and open to engaging with topics outside of your expertise and personal interest.
- Advocate with library leaders for the value of building informal relationships with teens.

In Practice

Building Relationships By Prioritizing Teen Voice at Kreutz Creek (PA) Library

The teen social justice work happening at the **Kreutz Creek Library** demonstrates how relationships among teen peers, teens, and library staff, and between teens and community partners, can result in better understanding of a locality's strengths and challenges. In 2020, the library's teen summer volunteer group – a group that had already built relationships the previous summer – spurred on by the civic unrest across the United States, decided to learn more about who lived in the local area. The experience is described this way:

Over the summer of 2020, a few teens met through a volunteer program at Kreutz Creek Library and realized that they wanted to make a difference in their community. They decided to conduct email interviews and hold Community Connector meetings to learn more about the community and the people involved; during these meetings, both teens and adults shared their experiences with stereotypes and issues seen within the community. The teens were surprised to learn that it is just as important to pay attention to the positive parts of the community as the issues, because by knowing both a community's weaknesses and strengths, they can use the strengths to overcome the weaknesses.

Through these Community Connector meetings, both adults and teens learned the importance of listening and keeping an open mind. They met with a teen who had organized a Black Lives Matter demonstration and talked about empowerment. They met with someone who explained how assumptions can be detrimental to good communication. No one knew what to expect when they began meeting together, but everyone soon learned more about their community, as well as more about each other. This group of volunteers learned not to excuse offensive jokes, and to call out when insensitive topics are downplayed for *"humor's sake"*. During all of these meetings, hosted by the library, these volunteers listened to people in their community and were able to make their voices heard.

Adapted from the unpublished article, "Not Your Usual Article On Teens and Social Justice" by **Jennifer Johnson, Kreutz Creek Library, Library Services Coordinator**

FINDING #2

2. Partnerships

Community partnerships expand capacity to serve youth in all areas of connected learning.

Opportunities

Community partners who embody teen interests and identities, such as artists or tech entrepreneurs, can be key brokers, connectors, and social network links for teens, expanding the range and depth of interests and identities that are supported through the library. Through partnerships, library staff can identify strengths in the community, explore ways to share resources, find the best partners for a particular activity or project, and expand knowledge of the local area.

Challenges

Library staff in our cohort spoke about colleagues and leaders not recognizing the value of diverse community partnerships, and as a result, not being able to support a full and equitable range of teen interests. While traditional partnerships with schools or parks and recreation departments align with many teen services and interests, restricting partnerships to these organizations limits possibilities in supporting teen culture, identity, and opportunity. For example, small business and arts organizations with staff and leaders of color are often overlooked as potential partners.

FINDING #2

First of all, working with people [from] our Youth Action Council [and] working with youth that come into our libraries every day we quickly learned that they're not going to come to our programs if they don't know you... Being able to develop those relationships and understand what they need [is crucial], and then working with different partnerships, that help provide or supplement or come alongside the library, to do the type of work that addresses their interests and further drives those relationships.

Jessica Chaney, former Teen Services Coordinator, Memphis Public Library

Recommendations

Library staff can build partnerships by taking time and initiative to go beyond the tried and true.

- Be open to engaging with a diversity of experts, locations, and types of programming outside of existing or traditional partnerships.
- Engage in conversations with partners to learn about each other's strengths and experiences working with youth.
- Advocate for job descriptions, at all levels, to enable varied staff and departments to engage in partnership development, collaborative service design, and analysis of community strengths.
- Create roles, policies, and staff support for those in the community with specific expertise to engage with teens, as volunteers and partners around mutual interests.
- Negotiate MOUs and other partner tools that highlight the value that community partners can bring to library teen services.
- Seek out and participate in events and meetings in support of building connections with small businesses, arts organizations, entrepreneurs, and so on.

In Practice

Youth-Driven Storytelling at the Memphis Public Library

The **CrewUp Youth Filmmaking Mentorship** grew out of a partnership between the **Indie Memphis Film Festival** and the **Memphis Public Libraries' Cloud 901 Teen Learning Lab**. Indie Memphis wanted to expand their youth programming. The libraries wanted to offer more varied youth programming that could show them new paths to potential careers. The two organizations partnered together to create the mentorship program and to build a pipeline for youth in the community to have professional opportunities.

In the program, youth between grades 7 and 12 work in teams of 3 under the mentorship of a professional filmmaker. They meet twice a month from February through June. They receive a $500 budget to make the film. The films are completed by August and screened at the **Youth Film Fest**. The Memphis Public Libraries provide the physical space for the meetings.

Read more about this initiative on **our blog**.

3. Outcomes

Storytelling about youth outcomes is a compelling way to demonstrate impact.

Opportunities

Through connected learning-based services, library staff are able to capture compelling outcomes related to social emotional learning, workforce development, and progress in academic achievement. Stories that highlight these outcomes present a powerful picture of the important role that libraries can play in the lives of teens.

> *The information that you gather is a really great opportunity to share the value of your program with others...When you're still in the planning stages sharing those project outcomes can be a ...way to gain buy-in whether you're trying to demonstrate the value to administrators or stakeholders to get that initial support for a program or you're trying to bring in a potential community partner and show what it is that you're trying to achieve... Our director presents occasionally to our city council just to keep them updated on what services and programming the library is offering and how we're serving the community. [Qualitative] assessment tools can also help add a little bit more personal aspect and really focus on those outcomes that we're achieving beyond just things like circulation numbers and participation numbers.*
>
> **Hillary Huggins, Central Skagit Library District, WA from the video Sharing the Value of Connected Learning Through Outcomes and Assessments**

FINDING #3

Challenges

Library staff talked about the difficulty of making a case for connected learning services because of the focus on numbers rather than impact or youth outcomes. They told us that teen services quality is often measured by the number of checkouts, the number of programs, and the number of participants at programs.

Recommendations

Library staff can expand impact and success frameworks by making connections between numbers and outcomes achieved.

- Work with leadership to map the library's strategic plan, vision, and mission to specific youth outcomes, and provide opportunities for staff to build teen services that align with that strategic mapping.
- Capture and communicate qualitative data and stories about youth outcomes in addition to quantitative data.
- Share stories about teen engagement and outcomes with leadership and partners.
- Seek out opportunities to learn about assessment tools, logic models, and data analysis to integrate outcomes and impact into all aspects of program and service planning.[6]
- Use positive impacts and outcomes as a north star for designing and offering services that are aligned with teen and community needs.
- Embrace outcome-oriented storytelling by highlighting teen outcomes in presentations and conversations with leadership, colleagues, supporters, and community partners.
- Share and promote stories on websites and social media that highlight teen impact and feature the voices of teens and community partners.

In Practice

Matching Desired Outcomes to Assessment Methods in Texas and IA

The **Pottsboro Public Library** (TX) and the **Cherokee Public Library** (IA) partnered with the **Capturing Connected Learning in Libraries** (CCLL) initiative to understand and put into practice tools that would help each library assess their esports programs.

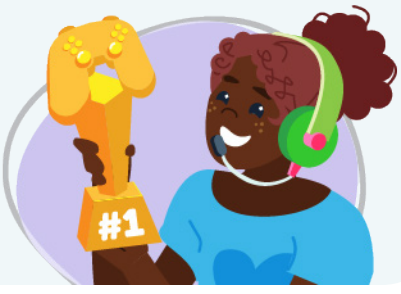
In Pottsboro, **Dianne Connery**, the library director, partnered with the local high school and liberal arts university, which already had an esports team. The idea was that the liberal arts college students could serve as mentors in a more informal esports program that fit the context of public libraries, with no try-outs and more tournament freestyle play in the library. In Cherokee, **Tyler Hahn**, at the time the Youth and Special Services library staff, initiated an esports program. Middle school-aged youth from the library program competed with the video game design students at the local community college.

Both Dianne and Tyler identified that they would like to know what youth learned as a result of their participation in the esports programs. With the CCLL Team they identified a potential benefit in using observation techniques to determine youth learning. Two techniques they explored with the CCLL team were:

- Observing esports sessions and taking notes on what teens were doing, as well as asking questions about whether the activity is something new for them, whether they are doing more designing or doing more leading, and asking how teens say it relates to other activities they like to do.
- Using a spreadsheet or survey to document when and how often during esports sessions it's possible to observe indicators of a particular outcome of interest, based on a connected learning framework: for example "interest development" or "deepening interest/leveling up."

By organizing observations in terms of key principles embedded in program design, and jotting down observed examples for these principles during programming, library staff members are able to generate evidence they could quantify, and/or develop illustrative stories to include in grant proposals or presentations to vested partners.

Learn more in the report, **Partnering with Future Ready with the Library**.



4. Professional Learning

Staff who are lifelong learners and innovators are effective champions of connected teen services.

Opportunities

When library staff have opportunities to learn together, especially outside established areas such as teen literature and teen programming, they are invigorated and energized by new ideas. These learning relationships and new ideas often help staff to overcome burn-out and feeling overwhelmed. Learning about new and innovative ideas from speakers and facilitators outside of the library profession help library staff to better understand local communities and can aid in expanding possibilities and shifting mindsets. Library staff we worked with told us that they valued our community of practice because it gave them the chance to talk about ideas outside of a traditional frame.

Challenges

Library staff in our cohort noted lack of support for ongoing peer-to-peer learning and professional learning that is not focused on traditional library services. They highlighted how funding is only available for library conferences and webinars and these are not always stimulating or rejuvenating. Attending conferences and webinars with the same kinds of speakers and topics year after year did not lead to new ideas or thinking.

FINDING #4

..along the way we partnered with ACN [All Course Network] which tied us to the Providence After School Alliance [PASA] who serves as our intermediary between us and Rhode Island Department of Education... PASA, they basically grabbed a bunch of different teen after school providers and said, we're going to form this little consortium [and] we'll be this little learning network, where we learn from one another and bounce ideas and act as a support group and do professional development together.

Kate Aubin, Head of Youth Services, Providence Public Library

Recommendations

By participating in conferences and learning events that move beyond traditional library topics and approaches, library staff can build innovative mindsets, re-imagining services, and providing opportunities better aligned to teen interests and the local community.

Library staff can pursue and support varied forms of professional, connected learning:

- Advocate for a professional learning budget that allows library staff to participate in conferences and other learning events that are not focused on libraries or on teen services specifically.
- Embrace and advocate for a culture of flexibility, risk-taking, and learning from mistakes.
- Embrace and advocate for an organizational culture of learning.
- Explore opportunities to engage in learning activities offered or recommended by community partners.
- Collaboratively develop professional learning plans with leadership that center on growth, innovation, and experimentation.

FINDING #4

In Practice

Transforming Teen Services: A Train-the-Trainer Approach (T3)

In 2018 the **Institute of Museum and Library Services** (IMLS) awarded the **Young Adult Library Services Association** (YALSA) funding to facilitate connected learning training across the United States. Teams, made up of a state library agency staff member, and staff from libraries in their states, took part in intensive train-the-trainer sessions to learn about connected learning, computational thinking, youth development, and facilitation. Following the intensive learning experiences, trained teams facilitated learning sessions in their states.

Over the five years of the initiative, **over 3800 people in 40 states** and U.S. territories participated in training offered by those in the train-the-trainer cohort. Staff that participated in the professional development reported increased confidence in: facilitating programs that connect teens to people, places, opportunities; facilitating programs that build and leverage relationships; and facilitating teen programs that connect with teen interests. One participant noted, *"As a new librarian I enjoyed everything I learned. It has made me more confident in planning programming, working with teens, and presenting ideas to leadership."*

Not only did library staff attending the training build confidence and skills, the professional learning experience brought the trainer facilitators together in unique ways. Public library and state library agency staff teams learned from and with each other and were able to leverage the strengths that each brought to the learning experience.

The T3 final report states:

> There are obvious patterns of benefit to both the [library and state library staff facilitators] and the collaborative sessions they implement together... Public library staff bring lived professional experience that allows them to understand challenges voiced by attendees... State library agency staff bring an aspirational/policy perspective, and were significantly more likely than library staff to say they had flexibility and autonomy in their work...

Excerpted from **Transforming Teen Services: A Train the Trainer Approach Final Report**, submitted by project evaluator **Caitlin K. Martin**

TEAM

This report was developed collaboratively with a research team, listed in alphabetical order, who contributed in unique and varied ways.

Linda Braun

Principal of The LEO Group

supported the community of practice, contributed to ongoing analysis, and led on the final drafting of this report.

Kimberly Hirsh

Postdoctoral Scholar

anchored the project as the one full time team member, stewarding the community of practice, conducting interviews, data analysis, and the drafting of this report.

Mizuko Ito

Director of the Connected Learning Lab and
Principal Investigator for the later stages of this project

contributed to the drafting and production of this report.

Vera Michalchik

Principal Investigator for the first stages of this project

leadership and design insights that guided the partnerships and data collection behind this report.

Amanda Wortman

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led on project management and contributed to the analysis behind this report.

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State Library Agency Partners

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Sara White, Youth Services Consultant, Washington State Library

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Raina Sedore, Youth Services Librarian, Timberland Regional Library (WA)
Kyera Shea, Librarian, Rogers Free Library, Warren, RI
Morgan Walsh, Youth Services Librarian, Island Free Library, Block Island (RI)

Interviewees

Megan Anderson, Youth Centers Manager, San Francisco Public Library
Marcus Brown, KCDML Manager, Kansas City Public Library
Jessica Chaney, Teen Services Coordinator, Memphis Public Library
Dianne Connery, Development Director, Pottsboro (TX) Public Library
Tyler Hahn, Director, Cherokee (IA) Public Library
Kelsey Hughes, Branch Manager, Howard County (MD) Library System
Jennifer Johnson, Library Manager, Kreutz Creek (PA) Library
Brian Kopetsky, Director, Elisha D. Smith Public Library, Menasha WI
Eric Reyes, Equity Officer, Chicago Public Library
Juan Rubio, Digital Media and Learning Program Manager, Seattle Public Library
Niq Tognoni, Studio NPL Director, Nashville, Public Library
Rachel West, Branch Manager, New Castle (DE) Public Library

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ENDNOTES

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6. See Partnering with Future Ready with the Library, Evaluating Library Programming, Capturing Connected Learning in Libraries, and the Impact Libraries Project for more evaluation and storytelling tools and resources.

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Connected Learning ALLIANCE

To access more resources and learn more about connected learning through libraries, visit:

clalliance.org/connected-learning-through-libraries/

To learn more about the Transforming and Scaling Teen Services for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Project, visit:

connectedlearning.news/transforming-teen-services

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imls.gov/

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