

## PROGRAMS

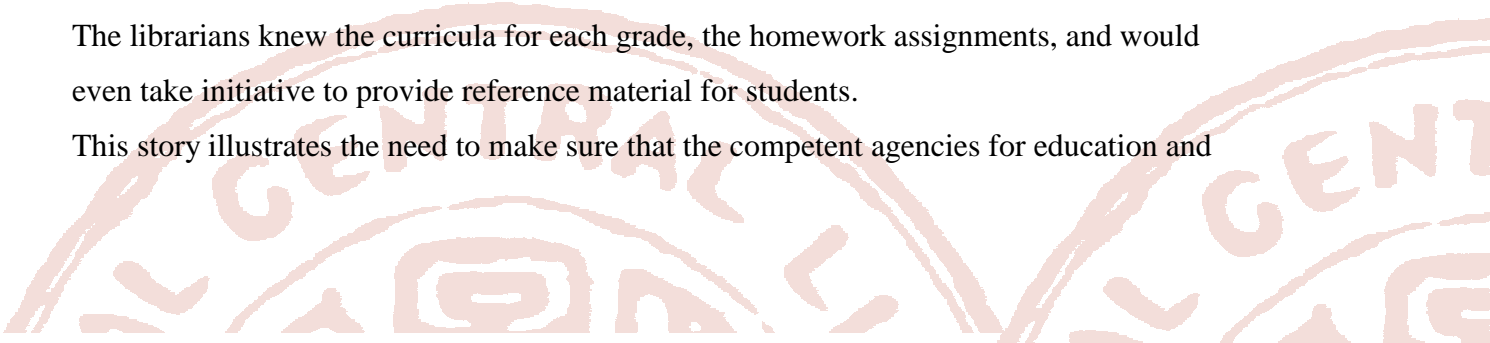
### ■ Reinventing the Public Library

By NCL Deputy Director Sung Chien-cheng

In the age of the knowledge economy, the success of public libraries as information providers depends on their ability to provide convenient service to the public. If libraries are seen as having an information function connected to the daily life and economic needs of the public, their importance will become even more apparent, and their cultural, educational, and recreational functions will benefit as well.

Public libraries have an important function in enhancing the quality and cultural level of life. At present, however, some township mayors devote only limited resources to public library development. There is often no budget for buying books, and many libraries lack professional staff. Since township libraries are currently administered by township governments, we must appeal to township mayors to understand and place importance on the function of public libraries and their influence on the public. Libraries are places where people can come together to gain knowledge and share ideas. They can also form a bridge between mayors and township residents, while also bringing them exposure and repute.

Former Minister of Education Tseng Chih-ming once illustrated the connection between libraries and daily life with a personal anecdote. When he was in the United States, he came across a child that was writing a school report. For a student, education is life and so naturally the student went to the library to look for reference material. The librarian knew right away what school the student went to, what grade he was in, and what book he needed to borrow. As it turned out, the library and the school had very close ties. The librarians knew the curricula for each grade, the homework assignments, and would even take initiative to provide reference material for students. This story illustrates the need to make sure that the competent agencies for education and



township mayors understand the role of public libraries, and to provide the long-term resources libraries need to truly become a part of the people's life.

Over the last three years, the National Central Library (NCL) has dispatched inspection teams to libraries across Taiwan to understand the needs of local libraries and to evaluate their performance as a basis for awarding outstanding libraries. This program has met with a tremendous response. With the impetus of mutual competition, township governments are starting to care about the proper function and role of libraries. From 2003 to 2004, the central government budgeted NT\$1.55 billion to improve public library facilities and services. Of that amount, NT\$1.1 billion was used to improve the facilities at 300 libraries approved from over 500 applications for assistance. The improved facilities have increased public use of the libraries, but they have also led to higher electricity costs for budget-strapped township government's due to increased lighting and air conditioning use. I therefore appeal to Taiwan Power to consider giving public libraries, as educational facilities, preferential electricity rates to reduce this burden.

Now that libraries have improved facilities, it is up to township mayors to put more resources behind buying books and budgeting money to recruit professional librarians. For a long time, the funding for such costs has traditionally been subsidized by the provincial government. Now, however, it is up to the township governments to carry this burden. Many township mayors accustomed to central government subsidies may neglect this task, so we must reiterate the importance of providing funding for books. The *Library Law* clearly stipulates that public libraries are required to have at least one or two professional librarians on their staff. The law is also quite clear on this point with regards to library establishment and operation standards. Township governments are bound to follow these rules. So I hope that the Ministry of Civil Service will closely monitor the basis on which librarians are employed. With professional staff, the long-term planning and development of public libraries will be less affected by mayoral changes.

At present, most of the public library personnel under the jurisdiction of township governments are not civil servants or are external staff, so they are not able to leave their posts

to take part in library training programs. The NCL has therefore taken initiative to form advisory teams to visit township libraries and provide on-site librarian training and guidance. More than 10 such teams are to be assembled from library and information science faculty and students, as well as professional librarians from national libraries (including the NCL) and city libraries. Under the program, advisory teams will be sent to public libraries that request assistance. The program was launched on a trial basis this year in Taipei County, where seven township libraries have asked for guidance. If we continue in this way, step by step, we are certain to achieve our goals.

While most public libraries have yet to fully develop their various potential functions, there are some outstanding public libraries that have made admirable progress in this area. For example, Gukeng Township Library in Yunlin County and Puli Township Library in Nantou County have, with the strong support of their township mayors, developed as places of learning, culture, and leisure. Library staff are able to grow to their full potential, enabling the public library to integrate with community life. Another example is the Shengang Township Library in Taichung County, which holds over 300 activities a year; and in Changhua County, Commissioner Wong Chin-chu takes time to read for children at the public library, resulting in increased usage of library resources. On September 4, the Cabinet-level Council for Cultural Affairs (CCA) held a book exchange activity in conjunction with public libraries. This event, like similar activities that were once held regularly held by public libraries, benefit students, libraries, and the image of the sponsoring agency, fulfilling the altruistic function of public libraries. I trust that if the township mayors show leadership by bringing together book clubs to use libraries as places of literary exchange, or by fostering a corps of bibliophile volunteers, libraries will become everyone's second, and bigger, study.

In recent years, public libraries have made progress in enhancing their functions, but there is much more work remaining that requires government attention and assistance. With the development of the Internet, public libraries should make their resources more readily available online to alleviate the problem of book shortages. However, since copyright issues are involved

in the establishment of digital resources, libraries need to spend a lot of time and effort to get authorization from individual copyright holders. Their job would be made much easier if the Ministry of Economic Affairs, which is in charge of copyright matters in Taiwan, could view library databases as fair usage of copyright materials by a non-profit entity, while also establishing a mechanism for fairly compensating copyright holders for the usage of their works. Such an arrangement would greatly facilitate the development of the information function of public libraries. I am confident that through the collective wisdom and appropriate measures of the relevant agencies, the metamorphosis of our public libraries can be achieved before long.

## ■ E-Learning Campus

In order to provide a convenient and free online resource for continuing education, the NCL launched the NCL E-Learning Campus (<http://cu.ncl.edu.tw>) in December 2000. Over the years, the library has steadily increased the site content to meet the self-education needs of the general public.

The more than 40 courses offered through the site are divided into three main categories: library utilization courses, courses for library and information science (LIS) professionals, and nine-year education system courses. There is also information on dozens of seminars and workshops related to library service and development. In addition to inviting scholars and experts to take part in designing online courses on various themes, the NCL has augmented the E-Learning Campus with the course content of the 2002 Library Association of China Symposium to provide an additional learning channel for LIS faculty and students. A total of eight such curricula have been posted on the site. In 2003, new courses were added on the topics of "Township Library Operations and Management ", "Elementary and Middle School Library Operations", and "Reading Strategies." Each course joins specialized and practical instructional content and boasts especially innovative web page designs to provide a user-friendly digital learning environment.