Serving at-risk teens: Proven strategies and programs for bridging the gap, by Angela Craig and Chantell L. McDowell, Chicago, American Library Association/Neal-Schuman, 2013, 220 pp., US$60.00 (US$ 54.00 ALA members) (soft cover), ISBN 978-1-55570-760-6 (available from Inbooks)

The authors adopt a broad definition of the term ‘at-risk teens’: ‘adolescents whose potential of becoming healthy and productive adults is reduced because they are at high risk of encountering serious problems at home, in school, or in their communities’ (p. 1). While adolescence is a challenging time for all young people, all too many lack the human and physical resources to overcome obstacles to their successful transition to adulthood. Based on their experience and research, Craig and McDowell explain why and how libraries can help by providing an inclusive environment, information, computer access and a diverse, accessible resource collection in spite of dwindling budgets, especially through programmes in partnership with other youth facilities. Chapter 3 discusses bullying, disabilities, dropping out of school, foster care, gang affiliation, homelessness, actual or perceived sexual orientation, mental health, immigration, poverty, teen pregnancy or parenthood, running away from or being dismissed from home and substance abuse as the most significant current problems.

The practicalities of working with other organisations and the appropriate qualities and roles of library staff are examined with insight in Chapters 3 and 4. The value of library services for a diverse range of adolescents is argued and exemplified. Issues such as the need for some staff development, the potentially troubling behaviour of some young clients, the ability to provide support and referral services without undertaking counselling and the relative merits of librarians and para-professionals in best relating to at-risk teens are acknowledged, and solutions to relevant problems are suggested. The chapter on collection development outlines principles and American selection aids familiar to most young people’s librarians, with emphasis on genres and topics which have proved popular with or well attuned to the special needs of the target groups. An annotated bibliography of core titles for youth at risk (pp. 191-205) usefully complements the chapter, though Australian and New Zealand selection aids, fiction and non-fiction would be better suited for local programmes.

Eight programmes designed to engage at-risk teenagers are described (Chapter 8), including some working in partnership with other organisations. Details of the rationale, activities and lessons learned would be of interest to all young people’s librarians keen to implement similar approaches. The authors rightly point out the need for adjustments according to the goals and protocols of partner organisations and the particular tastes and characteristics of local youth. The authors communicate their commitment, energy and joy of achievement throughout the text. Logically sequenced instructions, sample forms, headings for writing proposals and recording programme evaluations, sensible advice on plans and implementation – all combine to encourage readers to extend their services to young people at risk. References after each chapter and a sound index facilitate further in-depth study of the topic.

This is recommended as a source of programme ideas for young people’s librarians.
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