

ConnectED Challenge aims to strengthen partnership between CMPL, school districts

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CLINTON TOWNSHIP — The Clinton-Macomb Public Library was selected by the White House to take the ConnectED Challenge, which encourages libraries and their directors to work hand in hand with local elected officials, school leaders and librarians to create or strengthen partnerships.

President Barack Obama, through the U.S. Department of Education, first introduced the challenge in June 2013 as a means of enriching K-12 education for every student in the nation. The trade-off is that teachers and educators will have the best materials and technology to enforce better learning habits, while students should feel more apt to learn and embrace digital content through self-learning.

“I am very pleased to announce that Clinton-Macomb Public Library was one of 30 libraries selected nationally to participate in the ConnectED Library Challenge,” stated Larry Neal, director of the Clinton-Macomb Public Library, in a press release. “The reality is that this initiative will take some work, but we have great support and cooperation with our township boards and local school superintendents.

“Ultimately, the young people in our community will benefit most from this.”

Besides focusing on getting every child in the area a library card, part of the challenge includes becoming acclimated with all the materials that libraries — and, more specifically, the Clinton-Macomb Public Library — have to offer.

Library Community Relations Specialist Jamie Morris said all three branches of the library, which include two sites in Clinton Township and one in Macomb Township, are part of this endeavor.

ConnectED sort of got a jump-start, Morris said, because Neal is the president of the Public Library Association. It has gotten the library more notoriety in recent years.

There was no application process.

As one of relative few libraries taking on this new venture, Morris said the group of about 30 is almost like a pilot test group that will lead a new age of learning.

“I think the biggest thing is the benefit to all the kids in the service area,” Morris said. “The goal is to get them all a library card and utilize all materials. Basically, they’ll have access to more than just books.”

That includes websites that provide students with homework help via virtual tutors, as well as supporting students through programs that improve language, reading and critical thinking. Providing digital resources such as eBooks and online collections of traditional media are on the docket, too.

The Clinton-Macomb Public Library will work with Chippewa Valley Schools and Clintondale Schools to reach 20,000 students this fall, with the goal of adding four other area school districts by early 2016.

The Rochester Hills Public Library is another local library that is working toward the same goal.

Ron Roberts, the superintendent of Chippewa Valley Schools, said Neal explained the positives of the program and found that ConnectED fits perfectly with the school district's overall mission.

"The goal is that by the end of the next school year, we will get library cards in the hands of all of our students, which will give them access to all of the library's materials," Roberts said. "But then, I think, what is to me even more important, or as equally important, is just the commitment by private companies to make their materials available through the library to our kids.

"And that's all for free. So, regardless of a student's income, they have access to excellent materials that can support them in their school work or just for pleasure."

By private companies, he means publishers like Penguin. They hope to hit 20,000 by the end of the 2015-16 school year.

"We participate with the library on other things, so anything we do with the library we think is a real benefit to our students and the community," Roberts said. "I think that in projects like these, the libraries have much of the same mission we have. And sometimes we're separate entities, so I think anytime we can team up, I think that helps get the information out, and it just creates avenues of access for our kids that they might not be aware of."

Morris added that ConnectED is still in its preliminary stages, but part of reaching all the students and educators has included setting up a task force to form a smoother rollout for the school districts.

In the next few months, library officials will hash out details with a small committee composed of representatives from the library and the school districts.

Other communities that are adopting the ConnectED Challenge include Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Denver, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Oakland, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Seattle and St. Louis.

Staff Writer Thomas Franz contributed to this story.