

Benefits of Accreditation for Ontario Libraries

“Our public library is really busy.” “Administratively, our library does not seem to be very well-run.” “The library simply does not have enough books.”

Comments such as these have been spoken from time to time across Ontario, but often such comments have no context. Is the library really that busy, by comparison to other public libraries serving a similar population? Perhaps the library does not have policies and procedures in place to properly run the library? How many books should be in the library?

To help create that context, the Ontario Public Library Guidelines Monitoring and Accreditation Council has developed a set of guidelines which represent “best practice” for Ontario public libraries. First published in 1987, the *Ontario Public Library Guidelines* is now in its sixth edition. The guidelines can be used for self-evaluation or as a developmental tool, but the library could also choose to participate in a more formal accreditation process. In the accreditation process, a team of two auditors visits the library to evaluate it against the specific guidelines. If the audit measures are reached, the library would then be recommended to the council and, once approved, become an accredited library, a recognized achievement within the Ontario public library community.

Accreditation Process

The *Ontario Public Library Guidelines* contains 166 separate statements, each of which requires a “yes” or “no” response. The library must review each

statement and decide whether it meets that guideline. If the library was using the tool for self-evaluation, the library would want to have as many “yes” responses as possible. However, if a library wishes to be considered for the formal accreditation process, a library must have an overall score of 90 percent of responses being “yes.” In addition, of the 166 guidelines, 76 are mandatory, in that the library must have answered a “yes” to each of those mandatory guidelines.

The topic of “planning” provides an example of the statements. The preamble to this section is, “Planning ensures that: the library responds to the legitimate needs of the community; continuity of service is maintained regardless of changes in personnel; the library is able to respond effectively to change; community funds are spent in an effective and responsible manner; and the library board and staff share a common understanding of what the library is trying to achieve.” Following the preamble, there are eight statements to which the library would answer “yes” or “no,” including these four statements, all of which are mandatory:

- ▶ 1.3.1 – **Planning policy** – The library board has established and adopted written policy which defines its role and responsibilities with respect to planning.
- ▶ 1.3.3 – **Consultation of users** – Library users are consulted regularly concerning library service (e.g., by means of surveys, focus groups, formal and informal interviews, open houses, suggestion box, website,

etc.). An analysis of public comments and suggestions is carried out at least once a year and the results used in the planning of library service.

- ▶ 1.3.4 – **Planning document** – The board has developed a formal planning document, which includes at least some of the following items as: mission and vision statements, values, goals and objectives, strategic directions, and action plans.
- ▶ 1.3.8 – **Performance measurement indicators and statistics** – Data is systematically gathered, electronically or otherwise, to provide real-time information about how well the library is meeting its mission, goals, and objectives in both the framework of traditional library services and programs, as well as new, innovative, technologically-centred approaches. This information is used in developing, implementing and assessing the library’s plans, and in reports to the community, council, and government (e.g., for the completion of grant or funding requests, working strategic, business or operational planning activities, typical week survey, or the annual survey of public libraries, etc.).



PEGGY MALCOLM has worked for the Southern Ontario Library Service since 1991, both as a Library Consultant and Writer for EXCEL, their library education program. She is the SOLS representative on the Ontario Public Library Guidelines Monitoring and Accreditation Council. She can be reached at 1-866-380-9767 or <pmalcolm@sols.org>.

In the formal process, if the library is able to demonstrate that they fulfill 90 percent of the guidelines, and all of the mandatory ones, then they are eligible for accreditation for a five-year period.

Benefits of Accreditation

Using the *Ontario Public Library Guidelines* is one way of indicating to the community, and to the funding bodies, that the library is meeting province-wide norms. The preamble to the guidelines provides the most powerful benefit of accreditation; that is, “All Ontarians, regardless of where in Ontario they live and work, have a right to public library service that meets basic, widely accepted norms of library practice and service. The guidelines offer a method for libraries throughout the province to meet basic service levels and to continue to grow to meet the ever-changing needs of their communities.”

Within this context, other benefits of using the guidelines, and of the accreditation process, include the following:

Evaluation of local library service and direction for development

The guidelines facilitate an organized, objective approach to the evaluation of local library service. The guidelines ensure that a local evaluation process is fair and comprehensive, concentrating unduly neither on strengths nor weaknesses, but giving direction to and assistance with a review of the whole spectrum of services and operations.

Improved accountability

As a result of implementing the guidelines process, the library is assisted in demonstrating the quality and value of library service currently being offered to the public, and so improves accountability to the taxpayer. By adhering to a province-wide set of service expectations, the individual library is in a better

position to benefit from cooperation and sharing arrangements with other libraries in a province-wide library system, thereby demonstrating a commitment to maximizing the local tax dollar.

Assistance in the planning process

By using the guidelines, the library gains an understanding of those matters that require attention and upgrading, and those that are considered appropriately developed or superior in their function. From this assessment of the adequacy of current service delivery, the board and administration are able to consider appropriate directions for development of the library and formalize these into an organized plan.

Consistency of service across Ontario

Regardless of geographic location or size, a public library that meets the requirements of the guidelines is assured that it is equipped to contribute to the Ontario-wide public library infrastructure, to the greater benefit of its users and community.

Enhancement of the library's position in the community and with funding bodies

The guidelines, and the plans developed as a result of their application, assist boards in providing justification for securing municipal and other funding to implement the plans. Libraries achieving accreditation through the program reap the benefits of an enhanced profile and reputation in their communities and demonstrate to their funding bodies that tax dollars invested in the public library are dollars well-spent.

Accreditation in Ontario

While many Ontario public libraries have used the tool for self-assessment, 35 public libraries have completed the formal accreditation process, ranging

from the small community of Terrace Bay to Barrie, and from Six Nations Public Library to the County of Prince Edward and County of Brant.

Jennifer LaChappelle of Clearview Public Library, who used the *Ontario Public Library Guidelines* as a planning tool while reviewing facilities, acknowledged the following: “The data that these guidelines provided have proven invaluable. The board particularly appreciated the fact that the guidelines relate to ‘Ontario’ public libraries. I would not hesitate to recommend the guidelines as a sound resource for public libraries in Ontario, not only for the purpose of accreditation, but for ongoing planning for services and space.”

Haldimand County Library, with six branches, has completed the accreditation process twice. Of the experience, CEO Deb Jackson noted, “I would encourage every public library to make use of the accreditation guidelines. At the very least, they provide a solid foundation for the process of internal quality review. For us, especially as a system that experienced the usual post-amalgamation upheavals, the accreditation process has been a morale boosting opportunity to highlight capabilities and accomplishments. After a successful audit, we are able to talk credibly about teamwork and perseverance and vision.”

The *Ontario Public Library Guidelines* provide a voluntary, self-regulated process, designed to analyze the state of development of a public library and enable it to plan for, attain, and maintain consistently strong levels of service. Accreditation can demonstrate that the library is using public money effectively and is a good place to invest, and ultimately allows the library to be recognized by fellow libraries as a leader in the field. Further information is available at <www.ontariopubliclibraryguidelines.ca>. MW

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