Connecting with Teens Through Esports

By Dianne Connery and Electra Coffman

Want to connect with teen passions and interests? Consider hosting an esports team.

Pottsboro is a small town (population. 2,351) in north Texas with low levels of home broadband adoption. The mission of the Pottsboro Library is to provide access to opportunities. We want our young people to have the same kinds of opportunities that their peers in larger cities have. Despite efforts to provide programming that adults thought would be appealing to teens, such as outdoor movies, stop motion video classes, and video editing classes, we had little success connecting to teens through library activities. About a year ago, the largest dedicated esports (esports are team sports that center on multiplayer video games played competitively) arena in North America opened in the Dallas area (about 80 miles from Pottsboro). As a result, stories about competitive video gaming popped up in the local media. At the same time, the library began participation in YALSA's Future Ready with the Library (FRwtL), an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)–funded project. FRwtL participation led library staff to reflect on the ways the library could help middle school students prepare for success after high school. Along with

that, a focus group at the high school provided a glimpse at the level of excitement a local esports program would generate.

When the Pottsboro Library received IMLS funding through an "Accelerating Promising Practices for Small Libraries" grant, we had the resources needed to launch a first-class library-based esports program. It should be said that esports programs are scalable to almost any size budget or library. It can be done with little more than a gaming console. In Pottsboro's case, we used grant funding to hire two college players as coaches. Hiring these students made it possible to launch the program faster than could have occurred with existing library staff. Mentorship provided by the college students is key to the impact of the program. Having a leader/mentor that is respected for their game knowledge, who is mature enough to handle internal game disputes when they occur, and who can be available outside of practice time to talk about game play provides youth with the supports needed for a successful esports program.

You don't have to be a gamer to be on the esports team. Team roles,

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other than players, that often need to be filled, include graphic artist, video editor, coach, technology aide, and event manager. There's no doubt that having an esports program at the library provides an extracurricular opportunity for teens who aren't participating at school sponsored clubs and on sports-focused teams. If these school activities fail to offer something a young person can be passionate about, an esports program can provide a chance to be a part of something else that is bigger than themselves. Don't forget, participation in esports can shed light on possible careers too—teen coders can design a website for the program or teen journalists can write content for the team. Those who are players on an esports team gain skills functioning in a fast-paced team setting and communicate while absorbing information, things that are crucial in future careers and for school projects.

How to Get Started

There are many questions to ask when thinking about starting an esports library program. One of them is "will anyone show up"—essentially, is this worth the effort? If you find yourself asking this question, the answer is "yes." When the Pottsboro Library surveyed high school students in the community, 100 percent of the students wanted to play competitively rather than casually. When library tryouts for the *Overwatch* video game team opened up, more than twice the number of required players of a standard team showed up to try out. What seemed even more extraordinary were the attitudes of all players. Everyone involved made productive callouts, encouraged those who they were competing against, and were still smiling and congratulating their teammates when they lost a round in the game. Providing a program that invokes a passion in

teens and is scarcely available at a school in a rural community like Pottsboro, will bring students with open minds, a positive attitude, and a strong work ethic to be a part of the team.

The only thing we are now worried about is figuring out how to include all of the prospective players. You can't put 14 people on a six-player team, after all. Now, the question becomes: "how are you going to make sure

that the students passionate about this program will feel included? "We know that teens who aren't chosen as players can still contribute as technology assistants or substitutes for the starter players. It is crucial that the starter players feel secure in their spot and that they are using their time in a productive manner. Since the teens you work with will most likely want to be a part of a competitive team, you need to make a competitive atmosphere. They need to feel like showing up to practice hours makes a difference. Otherwise, why are they even a part of a team? Why shouldn't they just go home and play *Overwatch* with their friends? The program is special because it encourages a team effort to win in a match of a favorite video game.

Since the Pottsboro Library is located in a rural area, one incentive to come to the library for esports is stable access to the internet. Teens looking for steady internet access to play an online game come to the library to practice and compete. No matter where a teen is—in a rural, suburban, or urban community—a library-based esports team provides access to a communicative group that a teen can depend on and an opportunity to compete in a national arena.

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The Impact

Our kickoff event was held on a Saturday afternoon in fall 2019. A *Super Smash Brothers Ultimate* tournament was organized by a local gamer. From a school with an enrollment of 400 students, 55 high school students signed up to compete in the tournament. That kind of turnout has never been seen at the Pottsboro Library. A few days before the event the local TV station ran a story that ended with an invitation for the community to attend. That was not part of the plan. The highlight of the day was when a 10-year-old boy with learning disabilities was cheered on by the high school students: "Pikachu! Pikachu!" The boy was crying afterwards because he was so overwhelmed. The father, who was comforting him,

mentioned that his son had "found his people."

Free resources made available through the North America Scholastic Esports Federation, esportsfed. org, were integral to designing the Pottsboro program. Everything from toolkits to training is provided at no cost. Early research shows strong evidence for the development of STEM, problem-solving, and social-emotional skills, such as self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making through participation in esports.

This program has so many possibilities. We can't wait to see where the teens lead us. ■

ELECTRA COFFMAN is from Fort Worth, TX. She is a sophomore at Austin College, double majoring in biology and Spanish, and is a photographer on campus, an ACCESS scholar, and a support player on her school's competitive *League of Legends* esports team.

DIANNE CONNERY is the accidental director of the Pottsboro (TX) Library. She has a passion for reimagining the role of the small library in a rural community.

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