

On December 10, 2024, the third public listening session in the series, “Making Your Dayton Metro Libraries Safe,” took place at the Southeast branch. [Notes from the series are available online.](#) Over 50 people attended this third event, which included a dozen teenagers. The program used insights harvested at the November 25 session to build on the momentum and creativity as the group worked to identify new modes of action.

Of the seven insights that emerged, facilitators selected five to structure the program:

1. A library may be a haven or sanctuary for students who feel marginalized, intimidated, or threatened elsewhere, for instance at school or even at home. That feeling of being unsafe prior to arrival can affect the environment inside the space, especially without the necessary tools for nonviolent conflict resolution.
2. Safety is a feeling based on the trust that others will have your back; a physical and emotional protection that we all need and deserve. Although, since we perceive safety differently depending on our own identity, position, and experience, we should provide ways for all people to explore what safety means to them.
3. As a geographic cornerstone, surrounding neighborhoods and populations have a role to play in the maintenance of a shared public space, like a library. Because patrons can use any library branch, their sense of belonging may shift and even wane as they travel.
4. Encountering a library full of hundreds of students can bring feelings of anxiety, chaos, and exclusion for adult patrons based on the sheer volume of students from throughout the city who appear unsupervised outside of formally structured time.
5. Students need access to “third spaces” to socialize and just be with friends after school, where they are not forced to spend money. Third spaces can build community with others in person and serve as unplugged social environments.

Seated at tables, participants developed team names and got to work on an action research exercise called, Rich Picture, which is designed to motivate creative and visual thinking about a messy situation. Teams began a discussion about the insight to which they were assigned and then set out to illustrate their exchange. The pictures served as summaries of the situation at hand by including the actors, groups, organizations, and institutions involved; their relationships to one another and to the dilemma; the connective processes and pathways; and their varied interests and motivations. The goal of the exercise was to capture and communicate complexity with as much clarity and detail as possible. Teams were then asked to walk through their final picture, responding to these questions in their report out to the whole group:

- *What questions does your image prompt?*
- *Who can answer those questions?*

- *What actions does your image compel?*
- *Who should take that responsibility?*
- *What's left unresolved?*

Looking back on all the material shared by the teams, the discussion converged around these questions: What after-school options currently exist for high school students, are they adequately resourced, are they being utilized, and are they accessible?

To address these questions, Library staff will be working with local providers on the creation of a map of after-school spaces across the city, seeking input from community members to flesh out the map with informal gathering spaces. Coding with colors and symbols could identify what spaces have what services for what students. Visualizing existing options will also presumably reveal gaps—geographic areas where options may be more limited or spaces that are difficult to access due to transportation or other issues. As gaps are made visible in this way, new proposals can emerge to fill them.

When a map is produced, it can be shared across the school district with educators, parents, and students with the hope that the more the information circulates, the more likely students are to find suitable places to be after school, thereby reducing dangerous congestion at and around the libraries. A dynamic approach to this plan could also include as much live data as is available to feed a mobile phone app that has program schedules, bus routes, and capacity levels at each space, among other useful information. Advertising and promotion of this initiative will be essential.

Two suggestions came out that the Library can take action on right away:

- Involve students as greeters and employees at the libraries; and
- Utilize third spaces to cultivate student leadership and management experience.

DML staff will work directly with Belmont High School to pilot these ideas in 2025.

Suggestions peripheral to this central direction and outside the scope of the Library are also worth documenting:

- Develop a corps of volunteer mentors of adults and student peers;
- Expand existing education around nonviolent conflict resolution for students;

A crucial theme throughout the sessions asserted the need for any solution to the dilemmas present in the incident at the Southeast branch must be collaborative and coordinated. These events have provided evidence of commitment by critical institutions that directly engaged over the course of these sessions: Dayton Public Schools, City Commission, and Police Department. Furthermore, participants identified organizations that should be involved in the future, including Dayton Mediation Center, Downtown Dayton Partnership, and neighborhood associations. Finally, facilitators connected with groups already working to address issues related to after-school time for high school students: Learn to Earn Dayton, The Collaboratory, Montgomery County Prevention Coalition, and National Conference for Community and Justice of Greater Dayton.

These events assembled an impressive range of individuals and organizations from across the Dayton community for constructive, action-oriented discussions based in compassion and a shared desire to address the root causes of the problems that led to the periodic closure of the Southeast branch. Participants generated thoughtful and strategic ideas that lay the groundwork for future collective efforts.

Immediate next steps include a January work session for Belmont students and families. After that session, the next public Community Listening Session will be planned for February.