

CASE STUDY: Detroit Public Library



The Detroit Public Library (DPL) is the largest library system in Michigan, with a collection of 7.1 million items at 21 full service branches across the city and Main library. The library has been providing Tutor.com to its community since 2009.

The Challenge: Providing help to students performing below expectations

According to Randy Call, DPL Assistant Director for Technical Services and Main Library, the Detroit community faces ongoing challenges of low educational attainment and low literacy rates. The library was not offering services to adequately meet these challenges, relying on the school system to provide remedial help to students performing below expectations.

“Providing remedial assistance solely through the schools did not fully address the problem,” Call says. “Teachers and students can bring perceptions which, coupled with realities of class size and behavior issues, get in the way of some students learning in the classroom.”

Call says the library was attracted to Tutor.com because it was anonymous. Students could get the help they needed without having to identify themselves, their school or their teacher. “My hope in adopting Tutor.com was that the element of anonymity would be attractive to the kids and getting them interacting one-on-one with educators outside the standard classroom would facilitate learning.”

The Solution: Guiding students to answers, teaching critical thinking

Call had seen Tutor.com demonstrations at ALA conferences and, upon investigation, found it was the dominant online tutoring service offered by libraries. “If large urban public libraries had an online tutoring presence, they had Tutor.com,” he says. Among the reasons DPL selected Tutor.com he highlights the following:

(see reverse)

Program Details

Location:	Detroit, MI
Partner Since:	2009
Population:	950,000
# of Sites:	24
Tutor.com Service:	Learning Suite

“When students need detailed, step-by-step help with a school assignment, that can be a challenge for us. Public service librarians point students to Tutor.com because they don’t have the time to teach detailed critical thinking skills.”

— Randolph Call, Assistant Director for Technical Services and Main Library, Detroit Public Library

Online Tutoring a Success for Detroit Public Library Patrons*

99%

are glad Detroit Public Library offers this service

98%

would recommend this service to a friend

97%

say Tutor.com helps them complete their homework assignments

98%

say Tutor.com helps them improve their grades

98%

say Tutor.com helps them be more confident about their school work



What Detroit Public Library Patrons Are Saying About Tutor.com*

“Alex was a great tutor very helpful and courteous I am glad that the Detroit Public Library is providing this service it will continue to provide a positive way of learning for students.”

- Parent of a 9th grade student DPL patron

“I’ve been moved to AP math thanks to all of your help. I’m a regular student here at tutor.com Thanks for giving me an opportunity to learn new techniques and studying habits”

- 10th grade student DPL patron

“AWESOME!! I love DPL for offering this!!!”

- 11th grade student DPL patron

“I love this web site so much! I will be graduating from HFCC in May, thanks in large part to the intelligent, patient and blessed tutors of this web site. I love the feeling of reassurance and confidence that the tutors give me whenever I seek help with my Math! The Detroit Public Library is a life saver for continuing to provide these services! Thank you, Thank you, Thank you! ^_^”

- College student DPL patron

- **Tutors guide students to solutions, don’t give answers.** Call says the Tutor.com tutors work with students to help them identify the solutions to their questions themselves. He sees this as promoting critical thinking specific to the level of each student. “When students need detailed, step-by-step help with a school assignment, that can be a challenge for us. Public service librarians point students to Tutor.com because they don’t have the time to teach detailed critical thinking skills.”
- **One-to-one help.** “Tutor.com operates within the general educational environment but isn’t tied to the school system or its educational philosophy,” says Call. “With its one teacher/one student model, Tutor.com offers a methodology that is close to the Socratic model of teaching described by Plato.”
- **Vetting process of tutors.** Call appreciates that Tutor.com is a major national player and is able to recruit from a large base of potential tutors. He says library staff were impressed by the selective process Tutor.com uses in choosing tutors, noting that fewer than one-third of applicants pass the thorough background checks, screening and testing to qualify to be a Tutor.com tutor.
- **Flexible pricing.** Call says Tutor.com offered a range of pricing options, including pricing based on the number of sessions. “This made the service affordable and made it possible for us to jump in.”
- **Functionality.** The Tutor.com whiteboard technology attracted Call because students could interact with tutors in a visual way as well as verbally through online chat. He says the ability to store sessions and review them later supports learning, especially with math equations. (Math questions dominate DPL usage.)

The Results: Reaching beyond in-library use

According to Call, when DPL launched the service they initially were reaching only those students who come into the library. Library staff realized they were missing the core audience, since about 90% of their usage is remote. When staff started making presentations to community groups with live demonstrations their usage doubled. “Every presentation was enthusiastically received by the audience. As we went to parent/teacher groups, community organizations and the school board our usage grew steadily and then exploded.”

As usage has increased Call monitors Tutor.com’s monthly reports closely, looking for trends. He says math questions dominate, especially middle school math. But physics and chemistry questions are increasing, as are those related to English and grammar.

Call says that the service is now engrained and routinely expected. “So many students are happy with the service. The word of mouth keeps usage growing. It’s a drumbeat.”