

INTRODUCTION:

As part of its strategic planning process, **Somerville Public Library (SPL)** conducted a Teen Empowerment Focus Group with **15 students from Somerville Public Schools and Full Circle**. Participants responded to **nine library-related questions**, sharing candid feedback about SPL's spaces, programs, collections, resources, and overall teen experience.

The discussion yielded thoughtful, creative, and practical ideas. Teens emphasized the importance of **welcoming spaces, comfort, mental health support, meaningful engagement, and clear communication**. Their feedback offers valuable insight into how SPL can strengthen its role as a trusted, inclusive, and engaging place for teens.

1. What are the first two words you think of when you think about Somerville Public Library?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Participants described SPL using a mix of **positive, neutral, and critical descriptors**, reflecting both comfort and frustration with the current teen experience.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Welcoming and Familiar:** "Warm," "familiar," "everybody be there."
- **Teen Space Concerns:** Teen room feels **too small**.
- **Comfort Issues:** Loss of couches mentioned repeatedly.
- **Environmental Challenges:** Harsh lighting, noise, too many fights.
- **Mixed Emotional Tone:** "Education" and "accessibility" alongside "boring."

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Teens associate SPL with **belonging and learning**, but physical comfort and teen-specific spaces strongly shape their overall perception of SPL. Seating and lighting have an outsized impact on whether the Library feels inviting or institutional.

2. What works for you about our local libraries (e.g., hours, space, programs, collections, staff, etc.)?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Participants identified several strengths related to **space design, seating, collections, and flexibility of use**.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Second-floor layout** with open space and ample seating.
- **Behavior-based zoning**, allowing both social and quiet use.
- **Comfortable seating**, especially the red chair in the teen room.

- **Teen room is a social hub.**
- **Non-book collections** valued.
- **Seating near CDs** is appreciated.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Teens recognize and value SPL's **intentional space planning**. When spaces align with how teens behave and gather, the Library succeeds as a social and academic environment.

3. What could we do to make our libraries more welcoming to teens? How can we make our libraries places where you and your friends will want to spend time?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Participants offered extensive ideas focused on **comfort, access, lighting, outreach, and creative expression**.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Comfortable group seating**, including couches and shared spaces.
- Desire for the space to feel **less like school**.
- **Improved access to teen collections** when the teen room is closed.
- **Softer lighting** using lamps, LEDs, string lights, or natural light.
- **Expanded outreach** via posters, QR codes, and feedback tools.
- **Animal-assisted programming**, such as therapy animals.
- **Creative outlets**, including art supplies, coloring books, and sand trays.
- **Playful elements**, such as a fish tank.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Teens want SPL to feel **calm, expressive, and distinctly different from school**. Small environmental changes could significantly improve how welcoming the Library feels to teen users.

4. What types of resources should be offered to teens at our libraries?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Requested resources focused on **academic support, entertainment, daily needs, and hands-on tools**.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Tutoring and homework help**, especially STEM and math support.
- **Stronger Manga collections**.
- **Teen-specific DVDs**, including newer releases.
- **Free snacks and water access**.
- **Basic kitchen tools**, such as a crockpot and utensils.
- **Creative tools**, including a button maker.
- **Simpler printer access**.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Teens see the Library as a place for **practical support**, not just materials. Resources that reduce everyday barriers would increase teen use and engagement.

5. What kinds of Library programs would you go to? In person/virtual?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Participants expressed interest in **hands-on, social, and academically relevant programs**, primarily in person.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Homework help and tutoring.**
- **Career and college course exploration**, with guest speakers from the community (e.g., a professor in psychology).
- **Gaming programs**, especially console-based.
- **Friendly competition**, such as regularly scheduled Mario Kart events.
- **Community building through shared activities.**

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Programs that combine **learning, fun, and peer interaction** are most appealing. Consistency and relevance are key drivers of participation.

6. What current issues are important to you?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Participants highlighted concerns related to **well-being and equity**.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Mental health.**
- **Substance abuse.**
- Interest in **free clothing access** rather than resale models (e.g., healthier alternatives to Planet Aid free clothing bins, which resells clothes).

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Teens view the Library as a potential **supportive community resource** that can respond to real-life challenges beyond academics.

7. What advice do you have for us?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Feedback focused on **outreach, infrastructure, accountability, and youth voice**.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- Stronger **collaboration with the high school**.
- **Input mechanisms**, such as QR codes and suggestion boxes.
- More **teen-only activities**.
- **Facility concerns**, including elevators, bathrooms, and Central branch stairwell repairs (e.g., a place to store a bag/backpack in bathrooms).

- Desire for **root-cause solutions** to behavior-related closures.
- Recommendation to **partner with trusted school connectors**.
- **Interactive outreach** during school lunch periods.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Teens want to be **heard, respected, and involved**. Addressing facilities and communication gaps would signal that teen needs matter.

8. Who should we contact regarding promoting teen events?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Participants clearly identified **trusted communication channels** within their schools.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- Morning announcements.
- School counselors' social media and bulletin boards.
- All-school emails.
- Student-produced weekly videos (Communications Club).
- School TV screens.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Effective promotion requires meeting teens **where they already get information**, rather than expecting them to search for it.

9. Why don't teens go to events?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Barriers were primarily **awareness and energy**, not lack of interest.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- Events are **not well-advertised**.
- Information is **hard to find**.
- **After-school fatigue**.
- Interest in **weekend programming**.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Improved communication and scheduling flexibility could significantly increase teen participation.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS:

- Invest in **comfort-focused space upgrades**, especially seating and lighting.
- Expand **teen voice and feedback mechanisms**.
- Strengthen **school-based outreach partnerships**.
- Increase **academic and mental health supports**.
- Prioritize **teen-centered programming and weekend options**.
- Address **facility and accessibility issues** affecting teen use.

- Ensure teen behavior challenges are addressed with **restorative, not punitive, approaches**.

CONCLUSION:

The Teen Empowerment Focus Group demonstrated that Somerville teens **care deeply about their Library** and see it as a place with strong potential. Their feedback emphasizes the importance of **comfort, inclusion, trust, and relevance**. By making targeted improvements to spaces, resources, outreach, and engagement strategies, SPL can strengthen its role as a **welcoming, supportive, and vibrant destination for teens** and ensure their voices meaningfully shape the Library's future.

NOTE: See the supplemental *Somerville Public Library Community Ideas Report 2026* for details regarding participants' specific ideas.