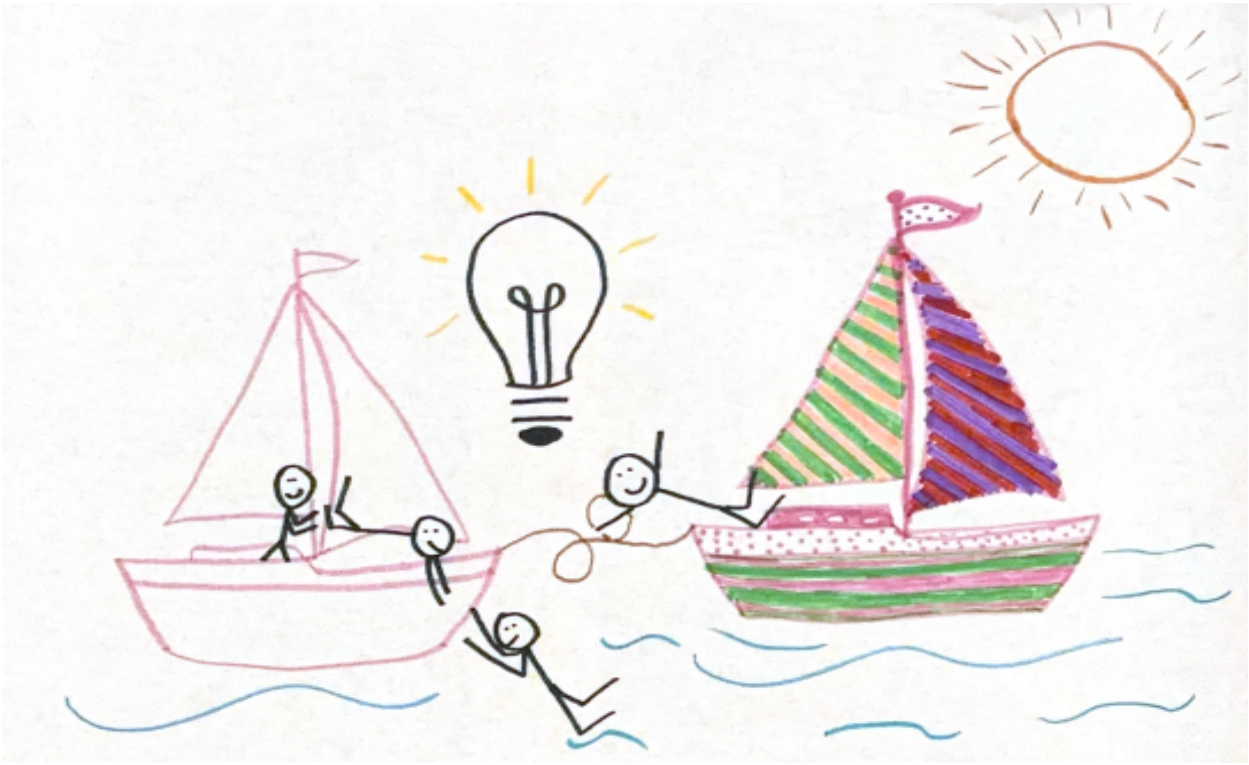
Sustainability & Resilience: Exploring Solutions

Indiana Public Library Leaders World Café Report



Midwest Collaborative for Library Services

Introduction & Background

In August and September 2026, the Midwest Collaborative for Library Services convened public library leaders from around Indiana in a series of World Café conversations around the topic of *Sustainability & Resilience: Exploring Solutions*. This multi-event engagement program was designed to bring together public library leaders in facilitated dialogue about the challenges and opportunities ahead, especially surrounding legislative and funding changes. Conversations centered around impacts on public libraries and staff.

Sixty-nine Indiana public library leaders from libraries of all sizes brought their experience, questions, and willingness to think boldly to the conversations – four in-person at sites around Indiana, and one virtually.

Thank you!

A huge thank you to everybody who participated in these conversations and helped them be a success!

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Background

The World Café Method

The World Café method is designed surface diverse perspectives, experiences, and insights, and imagine bold, impactful solutions. According to The World Café Community Foundation, "the World Café methodology is a simple, effective, and flexible format for hosting large group dialogue." There are five components of a World Café conversation[1]:



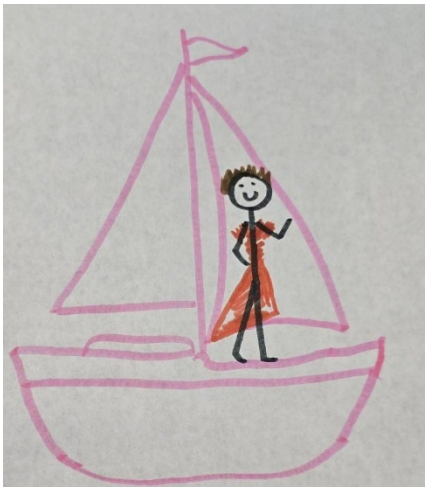
- Setting: Conversations are held in a special environment, modeled after a café. Each in-person café had participants sitting at small tables, covered in checkered tablecloths, with butcher paper and colored markers. Snacks and coffee were provided. At the virtual café, facilitators used a Mural workspace set up to resemble a café in the virtual space.
- Welcome & Introduction: The hosts began with a warm welcome, introduced the participants to the World Café process, set the context, and shared café etiquette and conversation agreements.
- Small Group Rounds: The conversation consisted of four rounds of conversation, all 20-45 minutes long. At the end of each round, participants moved to a new table to

[1] World Café method information and the World Café Guidelines image are from the World Café Community Foundation, www.theworldcafe.com, and used under a Creative Commons 4.0 license, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en.

"cross-pollinate" their ideas. During those rounds, participants wrote and drew on butcher paper, which was collected and displayed in the room. Between the third and fourth rounds, participants completed a "gallery walk" where they reviewed the information shared from each groups' conversations.

- Questions: The questions were crafted for the specific context and purpose of the World Café conversation. The first three questions built on each other, with the fourth round asking people to dig deeper.
- Harvest: After the small group rounds, individuals shared their insights and results from the conversation with the large group. The results were captured live on flip charts by MCLS staff.

Setting the Context



As we started our day of dialogue, we began by setting the context for our topic: Sustainability & Resilience. To create visual context, we encouraged participants to imagine that they were sailing on a body of water on a beautiful day. They imagined the warmth of the sun and the joy of putting up the sails on a sailboat and racing across the water. They were then asked to imagine that their boat had sprung a leak and they had to take down their sails and plug the holes. In the meantime, there are pirates on the horizon. This is where Indiana public libraries find themselves. Round one of the conversations asked: **"What steps have you taken to "keep the boat afloat"? How have you been working to create the conditions for resilience at your library?**

For round two, participants were asked to imagine that the pirates are gaining on them. Round two of the conversations asked, **"As a library leader, what are you most concerned about that's coming in the next 5 years for libraries? What's keeping you up at night?"**

For round three, participants were asked to imagine that they worked together to plug the holes in their boats, put up their sails again, and raced together into the future. Round three of the conversations asked, **"What becomes possible if we face this together? What moves us beyond just staying afloat to thriving together? BE BOLD."**

After a gallery walk, participants were asked to go deeper and build on what they had seen and discussed. Round four of the conversation asked, **"What sparked for you? Continue to brainstorm and build on bold solutions."**

Resilience



Resilience is defined as "An ability to recover or adjust easily to misfortune or change." In other words, resilience allows us to "keep the boat afloat." During the first round of conversation, participants shared how they have been working to create the conditions for resilience at their libraries in light of the challenges they face. Libraries are, largely, "still afloat," but many are "waiting for the water spout."

Indiana public library leaders feel they are in limbo. They find themselves serving in the midst of a crisis, dealing with the unknown. This makes it difficult to create the conditions for resilience. However, many shared that they have already started to adjust on the fly, aiming to be part of the solution. People acknowledged that you "can't control what you can't control," and many have started to pivot. They have asked for help, stayed flexible, and slowed down to reflect. By facing problems with honesty, humility, discipline, and thoughtfulness, Indiana library leaders have been able to embrace the good things, challenge the status quo, compromise where they need to, and carry on in the face of challenges.

Considering Funding

Funding changes are top of mind for Indiana public library leaders, and many of their tactics are related to budgets. This is important not only to keep the library running, but because leaders want to provide competitive living wages and good benefits to reduce turnover and entice good staff to stay at their libraries, while also ensuring that the library is staffed properly. Library leaders are watching their spending, learning to be frugal, and building reserves for future needs. They want spending to be purposeful, and library leaders are watching every penny and evaluating every subscription and contract. Many are exploring a multitude of funding sources, including private donations, fundraising, corporate sponsorships, and bonds. They have created foundations, reached out to philanthropists, and applied for grants. Some have added fees or are selling services to make a little more money. Others have taken a longer view, with financial forecasting and economic impact studies.

Evaluating Organizational Foundations & Services

Indiana public library leaders have spent a lot of time and energy evaluating, prioritizing, and restructuring the foundations of their libraries and the way they do business. This has been happening in multiple spheres. Library leaders have spent time considering how they can restructure their staff to "create a different approach to getting things done" and evaluating staff positions. Some have cross-trained staff in different areas, leading to more flexibility and versatility in the future. Similarly, they have been proactively looking at policies, procedures, operating hours, and strategic plans with an eye toward the future. Library leaders are working to modernize services, update technology infrastructure, and keep up with cutting-edge issues like AI, while also finding out the unique needs of their communities and filling the gaps they find. Some are also focusing on customer service and making people feel welcome at the library.

Library leaders have also been out in the community, attending meetings, creating partnerships, and building relationships. They have been developing relationships with their local county councils, municipalities, cities, and other stakeholders, and some are filling council meetings with supporters. Many have been sure to be part of MUST (Municipal Unit Strategic Taskforce) committee conversations in their counties in order to prepare for changes to LIT (local income taxes). People are working to communicate transparently about how money is spent and decisions are made at the library, including communicating about the projects they are saving money for. Some are focusing on making the library present in the community and reminding people that their libraries exist and are ready to serve them; others are bringing non-users into the library to show them that the library is important to the whole community.



People are also working to create and deepen partnerships throughout their communities and in the library world. Whether it's connecting with local schools, communicating with other libraries, contacting state legislators, joining committees, or having a seat at the table for important discussions, library staff are stepping out of their stacks and making connections. Then, they are taking what they learn to their boards, colleagues, and staff members.

Involving and Supporting Staff

Indiana public library leaders aren't doing their work alone. They are involving their staff as they work through the new realities and are supporting them during these uncertain times.



Leaders are working to dispel fears and limit rumors, while also being transparent about the challenges of the time. People are working to explain the "why" behind the decisions they make, and some are even involving staff in decision-making around spending money. This helps library staff to get on board with changes that must be made and prepares them to think more deeply about sustainability at the library.

Investing time and energy into training, conversations, and coaching has also helped with staff morale. Library leaders want to support their staff, not only through competitive wages and benefits, but also by giving them outlets for their creativity and passions, and recognizing when they do good work. They are also concerned with work/life balance and ensuring that staff feel comfortable and appreciated. Leaders are also looking toward the future, with plans to diversify library staff, encourage mentorships, and recruit directors with fresh ideas to Indiana libraries.

Communicating Statewide

This work isn't done in a vacuum, though. Indiana public library leaders are working to build awareness of the importance of libraries throughout the state through advocacy and marketing. They want to dispel the belief that libraries are irrelevant, are "just books," and aren't used anymore. Rather than simply focusing on their own libraries, many library leaders are proactively sharing talking points, increasing awareness, and explaining what public libraries do in the modern world, how they are funded, and how they positively impact their communities. They want to "write some of the narrative."

Using Data

Indiana public library leaders are doing this work, in part, by using data, and they are working to better collect data in order to understand "who we serve, what they want, and how well our services make an impact." Using data can help leaders make decisions as well as show the libraries' value. The data from the Indiana Library Federation's polling project is one way that library leaders see to tell the stories more effectively.

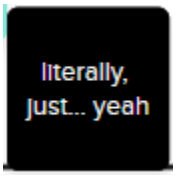
Concerns



Unsurprisingly, Indiana library leaders are concerned about the future of libraries in the Hoosier state. Part of the issue is simply the fact that the future is unclear and unknowable. Library leaders "can't plan for anything!" They are in limbo, worrying about funding, natural disasters, environmental impacts, the targeting of libraries, legislation, and more. For the second round of conversation, participants talked about the issues that are keeping them up at night.

Existential Threats

Library leaders expressed concern about threats to the very foundation and future of libraries, asking questions like, "Will people want to work in the library world?" A decrease in reading, increased censorship and book banning, the proliferation of misinformation, a lack of digital literacy, population decreases, and a rise in violence in libraries have left leaders wondering, "Can I do it?" Many people working in libraries are feeling anxious about the world in general, and libraries in particular, as they see libraries of all types under attack. Others see apathy and a lack of action in the library profession as a major threat. These threats are "stealing our professional joy."



Funding & Costs



Discussions around property tax reform; the loss of funding for e-rate, broadband, and state services; and uncertainty around funding is a major issue on Indiana library leaders' minds. The idea that "property tax is theft," a popular slogan in some circles, is concerning since libraries have traditionally been funded largely by property taxes. Changes to policies around gift funds are also causing worry among library leaders. People are considering how to diversify their funding and find new revenue streams to continue serving their communities. They are also focused on getting LIT funds and the possibility of going to their fiscal body for binding review of their budgets. Some are even afraid to spend money, and others are unsure about the best place to store funds when saving up for a

project. Inflation and the growing costs of utilities, freight, and products pinches library budgets even more.

Consolidation and Mergers

The possibility of consolidation is also on the minds of library leaders in Indiana.



Legislation requiring the merging of some townships in Indiana has brought this to the forefront. People worry about the potential loss of jobs due to consolidation; they do not want to see people laid off when libraries combine. They are also mindful about the potential loss of local control of libraries and libraries losing their identities if they consolidate with larger library systems. The complexity of consolidation and of running library districts also is overwhelming to many and some see it as unrealistic for their situations. Some also expressed concern about public libraries being privatized.

Libraries Being Targeted

Indiana library leaders are worried that libraries are "easy targets" for political attacks, and some are feeling an adversarial environment in their own libraries. Uninformed people and "Facebook warriors" are targeting and denigrating education and libraries publicly. Sometimes questions and attacks come from simple ignorance; other times, it's from "willfully uninformed" elected officials and "hyper-partisan" advocacy groups. Library staff and leaders feel that their work is being devalued and politicized in an environment of political extremism.

Statewide Issues

Indiana library leaders want to see everybody in the state served by a library with consistent service. Many worry about the future of small, rural libraries, especially those with librarians unaware or uneducated about the future of libraries in Indiana, and those with an uninformed or hostile board of trustees. There are also larger issues at play in Indiana that could impact libraries, including the possibility of additional legislation affecting libraries, changes to the interpretations of laws already on the books, the impact of upcoming elections, and changes to graduation requirements and diploma pathways in Indiana

public schools. The uncertainty around these issues is amplified for many by a lack of information and action coming from the Indiana State Library (ISL).

Day-to-Day Library Work

The day-to-day work of running a library in a time of uncertainty and reduced funding is also causing stress among Indiana library leaders. Sustaining operations is difficult. Facilities, maintenance, and infrastructure upgrades have gotten more expensive, and libraries must award contracts to the lowest bidder. Library staff have had to cut programs and slash hours. They must worry about salaries and benefits for their staff and money for collections. The increased need for cybersecurity and the proliferation of AI have added more to their plates. State-required audits take time and energy. Library leaders are also thinking about upcoming retirements, who will take over, and what skillsets they may or may not have.



Collaboration

Indiana library leaders are also concerned about a lack of collaboration and strong relationships in their communities and among library staff and leadership in the state. Many feel disconnected and siloed in their libraries. Many feel that they can't connect with others, even if they want to; some see a lack of willingness to even try to collaborate. Groups like the Friends of the Library and library foundations can help, but those organizations can also be difficult to set up and maintain.

Ideas



For the last two rounds of conversation, participants moved past worrying and staying afloat to imagine bold solutions that Indiana public libraries could pursue together. Library leaders explored how to move from resilience to sustainability, where we're thriving together. Throughout the conversations, Indiana public library leaders discussed the importance of being proactive, rather than reactive, as they move forward together.

Communication & Shared Messaging

Indiana library leaders would like to amplify positive messages about libraries throughout their individual regions and across the state. Just weeks before the World Café conversations, the Indiana Library Federation released polling data indicating strong support for libraries among Hoosiers[2]. Library leaders discussed how this data indicates that there is an appetite for sharing positive library stories and "library joys." People suggested targeting specific groups to build support across political parties, focusing on different age groups, seeking celebrity endorsements, and celebrating successes together. They also believe the polling data can be incorporated into local, regional, and state marketing of libraries, showing everyone that libraries are largely supported in the state. Library leaders hope that this messaging will help spark action and solidarity, as well as funding, that reflects the enthusiasm for libraries in the polling data.



Another place to target marketing is in the conversation around property taxes, and about what libraries do. People suggested reframing to a positive message about taxes – that taxes provide services – and ensuring that people are aware of the services libraries provide, how libraries are governed, and how libraries positively impact communities.

Strong Statewide Services & Resources

Library leaders are looking for a strong set of services and resources statewide, so that all Hoosiers have reliable, high-quality library services. They are looking for flexible, well-funded solutions to ensure that the entire population is served and all libraries are supported. Part of this is simply having a statewide mission and purpose for libraries that everybody can get behind, with a shared commitment to, and agreement on, standards for libraries in the state. Rather than only focusing on IREAD scores and standardized testing for schools, library leaders would like to see a focus on literacy in the state, and investment

[2] Polling information is available at https://www.ilfonline.org/2026-polling-project.

in the Indiana State Library, Dolly Parton Imagination Library, and universal library service for every resident in the state. At the very least, they are looking for better options to serve patrons, such as short-term (3-6 month) non-resident cards and digital access cards.

Indiana library leaders are looking to the Indiana State Library to "champion" libraries and share information, so that they better understand the library landscape in Indiana, including what it means to be part of the Department of Education. They also questioned what should be funded through the Indiana State Library and if there are other ways to share services among libraries at the state level.

Collaboration Among Libraries



On a smaller scale, library leaders expressed a deep desire to help each other but recognized that it will involve putting egos aside and being honest with each other, even when it's hard. People see opportunities to share the load, including combining with other libraries to offer staff training, share records, purchase health insurance together, and consolidate services at the county or regional level. Libraries could even have big sibling/little sibling relationships, where a larger system helps a smaller library, or task forces to help inform directors at smaller or less well-connected libraries about what is happening and how they might handle changes. Several people, however, did urge their colleagues not to be afraid of consolidation; after all, it's "better than closing," and there are benefits to joining together with other library systems. They also discussed how to collaborate and support other library types, recognizing that school and academic libraries are also an important part of the library ecosystem in Indiana. This only happens, however, if libraries avoid being insular and siloed.

Partnerships Outside of Libraries

Indiana library leaders also discussed the importance of stepping outside of libraries to create partnerships, with some even saying to go beyond waiting to be given a seat at the table. Instead, library leaders should "invite ourselves to the table" or even "host the table." They can involve library services in conversations, sharing what libraries can do for organizations throughout the community; invite people and organizations into the library for meetings and programming; and partner with organizations in the community for events big and small. They can start small with built-in supporters like friends, family, foundations, and Friends of the Library groups. Educators are also a natural ally, especially when

focusing on literacy. Library staff can also invite local government officials to the library, giving them a platform to talk about civic issues and help educate them about libraries and funding. They can also encourage elected officials to continue to visit the library and get a library card so they can "lead by example." This also could lead to coalition-building, with a focus on advocacy for libraries, funding, and freedom to read.

Avoiding Burnout & Stepping Up as Leaders

Burnout and fatigue are a big concern for library leaders right now, and participants discussed the importance of stepping up as leaders while also taking care of themselves and each other. Once again, being proactive is important. Indiana library leaders discussed being bold and changing the "culture of passivity," encouraging themselves and each other to "get going and take action, even baby steps," rather than waiting for someone else to help. After all, "nobody's coming to save us!" However, while making these changes, library staff will need safe spaces to talk about their fears and a willingness to talk about hard things together, as well as a place to share and celebrate their successes.



Library leaders also talked about what being bold looks like. They want to challenge perceptions and remove the "sacred cows," considering how to "surprise and delight" their communities by moving beyond expectations. Some discussed opening up libraries for more community services; others think libraries should focus in on literacy as the primary mission for the library or embrace the principles of the "slow living" movement. Regardless, they said that "being bold may need tweaking," and want to be open to new ideas. People saw this as an opportunity for a "revolution" of sorts. However, this revolution will need strong leaders at all levels and like-minded allies.

Pursue Stable Funding

Indiana library leaders also discussed the need for stable, sustainable funding of libraries. Ultimately, people would like to see library funding stabilized through legislative action, with funding "never questioned because our value is never questioned." However, they also discussed other ways of funding libraries and saving money, including LIT, city taxes, corporate sponsorships, and negotiated pricing. Library leaders also expressed concern about outsourcing services and putting "all of your eggs in someone else's basket."

Consider Changes to Services

The need to proactively consider the services libraries offer was also discussed. Library leaders want to “make it impossible for them to shut us down.” Some said that libraries could fulfill non-traditional needs, such as offering post office services or becoming more of a community center, while others wanted a focus on a shared mission of literacy. Several discussed the possibility of working with stores or organizations to offer hold pickup, book checkout lockers, collections, and services in convenient places or unserved areas. Creating services and talking about the impact libraries have on their communities and around the state will be more persuasive with meaningful data.

The Harvest

In a World Café Conversation, the Harvest is where participants share with the entire group the actionable ideas and recommendations. Indiana library leaders were asked, **"What connections or themes do you see? What solutions excite you? What solutions are feasible? Where do we want to go from here?"**

Identify the Core of Library Services and Capitalize on It

Indiana public library leaders want to see libraries capitalize on the strengths of libraries, rather than just thinking about how to get more people through the door. Libraries are an anchor that is "wrapped in the identity of the community." Most see the core shared mission of libraries as literacy, and several warned against mission creep. Library staff are strong when it comes to one-on-one interactions, and "AI is not as friendly as librarians," giving libraries an advantage when tackling the "loneliness epidemic." All of this can give libraries a distinct identity that public libraries in Indiana can use to promote their library, advocate for better funding and services for libraries, and encourage the best and brightest to stay in Indiana libraries.

Market the Benefits of Libraries

Library leaders are very interested in marketing the benefits of libraries throughout the state consistently and cohesively. Poll data from the Indiana Library Federation could help "change the conversation" around libraries and taxes by informing Hoosiers that "you get something for your taxes." Polling data shows that 71% of people "are confident public libraries use taxpayer dollars efficiently[3], so library leaders can capitalize on that and show the public how they're using that money to service the community; perhaps they can even talk about the return on investment on taxpayer money. One library leader compared it to a scene from the movie "It's a Wonderful Life," saying library leaders could explain to people that their tax money isn't sitting in an account, but "is in the fire department, and saved Patsy's house!" That reframes library staff as "stewards" of "the community's budget."

People also discussed educating the public about library issues more broadly and talked about how to think of it as sharing information and stories rather than advocacy. They would like to see more training in this area and discussed the possibility of bringing in an ad agency for regional or statewide marketing of public libraries as a whole. They also want to be sure that the stories show that libraries are "fun."

[3] https://inlf.memberclicks.net/2026-polling-project-key-data

Stay Open to What We Can Reimagine



Libraries aren't static, and library leaders discussed what could be reimagined or changed in a time of upheaval. It's easy to "get stuck" and become comfortable and compliant, but people expressed interest in auditing positions, reimagining jobs, evaluating costs, and considering new ways of doing things. Sometimes, this is seen as "taking away," but library staff can reframe their view to ask, "What do we gain from this change?"

One idea was "Librarians Without Borders," a way to share staff to cover positions when people are on leave or extra staff are needed, like a traveling nurse model. Library leaders also discussed consolidation, encouraging people to consider the benefits and efficiencies that consolidating libraries could bring, particularly to libraries that can't meet standards, including serving currently unserved areas and offering more consistent library service across the state. They also discussed why people may be against consolidation, including concerns about autonomy, local control, loss of jobs, and loss of power and identity for library directors.

People also discussed learning lessons from themselves and each other. They can look at "marks of resilience" from libraries in Indiana and around the country that have survived difficult times, from COVID to natural disasters to funding issues. They also discussed finding states where efforts are working; looking at library-focused campaigns in states with millages like Michigan and Ohio; and examining models like regional library offices and collaborative networks like Traverse Area District Library in Michigan.

Work With Other Libraries

Indiana library leaders see working together as one of the best ways to sustain and grow public libraries. Many would like to work toward universal library services in the state. In the meantime, they can see many places where libraries can help each other out, including having a central "database of excellence" where they look for libraries that have succeeded in certain areas; having shared or consortium pricing for things like snow removal, landscaping, etc.; and sharing staff, programming, and collections. This would require libraries to think about "we, not me," and to be a collaborative rather than territorial. Ultimately, people encouraged each other to "just ask," because many libraries are willing to share, "and others are just a Memorandum of Understanding away." In particular, larger libraries could "relay



information" to smaller libraries and "bring them along," in a sort of big sibling/little sibling relationship. People acknowledged that this can be intimidating and feel like a loss of control for smaller libraries, but the discussion wasn't about larger libraries "saving" smaller libraries, but about lending their help and expertise. It's important to Indiana library leaders that the Indiana State Library be involved in supporting this collaboration. They see ISL's role as "strong leadership," and want "open discussion" with ISL to help build collaboration.

Collaborate Outside of Your Library

Indiana library leaders have a strong appetite for collaboration with local and state entities. They see opportunities for coalition-building with a variety of groups, particularly as they see a gap between support for libraries at the local and state level, and support at the legislative level. People talked about how to get community members to speak to legislators about their support of libraries. They considered how to "speak their language" and work within the system, citing library impact on economic development and quality of life in communities. Library leaders also discussed the importance of being present at important meetings in their communities; joining groups outside of libraries that could be partners, such as the Indiana Chamber of Commerce; and partnering with schools. This has been happening in some places, but there isn't a lot of urgency in many communities because "they haven't felt the losses yet" that library leaders see coming in the next few years.

Involve Staff, Board, and the Community in Advocacy

Library leaders agreed that "library staff can't be the only ones fighting" for library funding and support. They discussed how to bring the entire staff and board along to be part of conversations in the community and state about libraries. Even just a few advocates can make a big impact when talking to legislators or county councils. A grassroots committee can also make a big dent. This requires training, however. People would also like to see libraries better prepared when the legislative session opens, rather than "playing whack-a-mole the whole time."

Look to the Future

Above everything, Indiana public library leaders encouraged each other to move past the feeling of "doom and gloom" and to tackle what is coming next "on our terms." They know that "nobody is coming to save us," but also said that there are things that they can control, even as many things feel out of control. Moving forward, rather than giving in to despair, is seen as a revolutionary act, and many library leaders stand ready.



Conclusion

This series of World Café conversations around the topic of *Sustainability & Resilience: Exploring Solutions* brought together public library leaders in facilitated dialogue around specific challenges and opportunities. This report represents a snapshot into the concerns, triumphs, questions, and ideas at the time and in the particular context of the conversations. The information in this report is intended to be used by libraries and library-supporting organizations, alongside other data and information, to further conversations and initiatives to support and champion libraries.