

Reactive Strategies for Maintaining School Library Programs, Part 2

by DEBRA E. KACHEL

SUDDENLY, WITHOUT WARNING, you hear rumors that a librarian who is retiring in your district will not be replaced, or that a librarian is being moved to a classroom and the remaining district librarians will serve multiple schools. Although you may be shocked and unprepared, you know you need to respond and act quickly, but what can you do?

The good news is that even though some librarians feel intimidated or not up to the task, the skill set needed to take action against staffing cuts is one that librarians are uniquely trained for—organization, collaboration, research, and communication. In this article, successful strategies are discussed that have worked in several Pennsylvania districts and may work elsewhere.

ORGANIZATION AND COLLABORATION

It is imperative to get all the district librarians together. A staffing change in one school is likely to impact the schedules of other librarians. In addition, when districts are able to reduce librarian positions without public objection, it is likely to happen again in subsequent years. A meeting of district librarians and some strong teacher advocates needs to be organized quickly in a private setting during non-school hours to assess the situation. It is important to designate a person for fact-finding because perpetuating a rumor could cause more harm.

During this meeting, a contact list of potential library supporters who could influence district administrators and school board members needs to be created. Consider other librarians, teachers, college professors, and authors or writers who live in the school district. Check websites for members of the Chamber of Commerce, the local American Business Women's Association, American Association of University Women, friends/trustees

of the public library, museum directors, PTA/PTO leaders, and others. Do some research on local media outlets, such as newspapers, radio talk shows, TV, and, possibly, a local cable/Internet company. As the list builds, decide which librarian will be responsible for contacting each potential advocate. Enter emails and phone numbers in a private Google Doc or Web tool so that additions and changes can be made by the librarians as data is gathered.

After details about the proposed cut are verified, reach out to PTA/PTO presidents, community leaders, and those on your contact list (during non-school hours with personal phone and email systems). Usually, the public only learns about library cuts AFTER they have been finalized by the school board. Librarians need to be preemptive to have a chance at turning the tide of thinking. Inform those on the contact list of the facts as they currently stand and ask if you can count on their support to ensure that all students and schools will have school librarians to teach and work with their children or teens. Ask permission to add them to an email distribution list to keep them informed. Ask if they personally know any



of the school board members or top school administrators (have names available). Verify phone numbers and emails. During this process, librarians should determine which stakeholders seem most invested and capable of becoming library champions—advocates who will publicly speak out to protest school library cuts.

RESEARCH

As initial contacts are being made, some librarians should gather the following information to be used in talking points or for publicity:

- ▶ State requirements/guidelines/standards for school libraries and librarians. Check the state's department of education and school library association websites. Find out if other state institutions require libraries and certified librarians. For example, in Pennsylvania, it was discovered that prison libraries are required to have libraries and certified librarians, but not public schools. This developed into a persuasive talking point.
- ▶ If the proposed cut is at the elementary level where there is a fixed schedule, calculate the contact hours that the librarian will have with students compared to past years. Compare this to the schedules of art, music, or physical education teachers, or others who instruct all the school's students. In a district where this strategy was employed, elementary students saw the school librarian less than 14 hours out of the 900 instructional hours (or 1.5 percent) of the entire school year.
- ▶ In a secondary situation, compare the number of librarians per students to that of teachers who meet with all students or to neighboring or rival districts. If data is unavailable, use state or national statistics.
- ▶ Identify Common Core or academic standards taught by librarians so that it is clear what students will not learn without the librarian's instruction. (If your state has not done this work, look at Pennsylvania's website: <http://www.pdesas.org/module/sas/curriculumframework/librarymodelcurriculum.aspx>.)
- ▶ Locate and select articles, brochures, or infographics that articulate the role of librarians in teaching and learning, especially those that are short, free of library jargon, and available on the Internet. Links can be added to emails and websites. See Additional Resources.
- ▶ Gather the dates, times, and places for school board meetings and rules for publicly speaking at them (often published on the district's website), including the names, emails, and addresses of school board members.
- ▶ Gather guidelines for submitting letters to the editor in local papers (length, email/address, etc.).

COMMUNICATION

At a second organizational meeting, the core planning

group should develop talking points from the collected research and data. School librarians should develop talking points for community advocates to make the case to save library programs because they know and have the information. Talking points are succinct, memorable statements without jargon designed to convince or persuade. Here are two examples:

- ▶ Our elementary libraries represent conservatively \$1.8 million dollars of print, media, and digital resources purchased with taxpayer dollars. We want those resources made available to our children every student day, every student hour.
- ▶ In a national study it was discovered that states that gained school librarians showed significantly greater improvements in fourth-grade reading scores than states that lost school librarians (Lance and Hofschire 2011, 29).

Librarians should forward talking points and other information such as videos, infographics, and short research articles or brochures to parent leaders and advocates, especially those creating a website or FaceBook page. Resources, as well as talking points, should be focused on the local situation and targeted to influence local school decision makers.

As parent and advocacy leaders naturally emerge, they can begin to organize the community in the following activities:

- ▶ Creation of an online petition at change.org or a similar website. Hundreds of signatures will show broad-based support and impress school decision-makers.
- ▶ Creation of a website or FaceBook page. An effective example is "Support School Libraries" (<https://www.facebook.com/SupportSchoolLibraries>).
- ▶ Submission of letters to the editor using provided research and talking points.
- ▶ Calls, emails, or written letters to school board members.
- ▶ Identification of speakers for school board meetings representing different segments of the population (parent, student, retiree, business person, etc.) who present specific points or perspectives. Creation of supportive buttons for attendees to wear at board meeting (i.e., "Students Need Librarians"). Recruitment of meeting attendees. Numbers matter and a large attendance shows broad community support.
- ▶ Printed articles and brochures about school library programs and staffing placed in a publicly available spots, such as the public library, for distribution.
- ▶ Invitation to a local reporter to cover the school board meeting or to do a story on school library programs.

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN

These activities may seem like librarians are taking a

“back seat” but their leadership role is evident. It is true that some librarians fear retribution in terms of their jobs, work schedules, or library budgets for participation in opposing staff cuts; other librarians feel that they must handle the situation by themselves internally. However, in cases where school librarian positions have been saved or reinstated, it has been the voices of vocal parent and community leaders that have made the difference. The opinions of teachers and librarians employed by the district, no matter how eloquent and how focused on students the messages may be, are not heard through the self-serving, job-protecting filter. Teachers and librarians can certainly add to the cacophony of protests, but will be ineffective if they try to do this alone and without broad-based community support.

School librarians can and should take a public stand if they feel that doing so will help. The U.S. Constitution guarantees all of us the right to free speech. Librarians, however, should always be professional, respectful, and honest—presenting the facts and “lobbying” outside the work place. The librarian’s stance needs to be: “I care about our students and the library services they receive. I believe parents as taxpayers have a right to know and should weigh in on decisions that are being made about the education their kids receive. I only share the facts and I do it on my own time, not during school or with school resources.” Although administrators may not like librarians discussing perceived sensitive topics in public, they will ultimately respect them for taking a stand to represent what is best for students.

Another sensitive issue is asking students to be library advocates. An articulate student speaking up at a school board meeting in defense of school library programs is impressive and memorable. However, school librarians should not ask, coach, or coerce students to speak out. Informing students of the facts is fine, but let parent leaders ask students to participate.

Remember when this is all over, you (hopefully) will still be employed by the district as a librarian or teacher. You will have to continue to work with community and school officials. Keep to the high ground; do not get involved in slanderous behaviors. If others try to engage you in topics like, “Yes, but that librarian doesn’t do anything anyway!” don’t go there, ignore it! Stick to the prepared talking points and stay on message.

CONCLUSION

This article suggests some successful strategies, so that you can react immediately to a proposal to cut school librarian positions. Not all will work in every situation and, perhaps, none will work where school officials have no other options for balancing a school’s budget. However, this situation presents a unique opportunity for school librarians to show their mettle, as well as their unique qualities in organiza-

tion, collaboration, research, and communication—skills for which they are well trained. This situation also forces librarians to develop long-term library advocates and nurture a few indispensable library champions willing to defend students’ right to quality library programs. In Pennsylvania, where the parents and community, supported by the leadership and information from the school librarians, have united against school librarian cuts, decisions have been reversed or positions reinstated.

In December and January, most districts are planning their budgets for the next school year. All retirements and nonmandated programs will be examined for potential elimination. It is time for librarians to assess how well they have fostered parent and community support for school library programs. Are you prepared?

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- American Association of School Librarians. *AASL Advocacy Brochures*. <http://www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/tools/brochures> (accessed September 5, 2014).
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