

Proactive Strategies for Maintaining School Library Programs, Part 1

by DEBRA E. KACHEL

SCHOOL LIBRARIANS NEED to be aware of and prepared for any threats to school library programs. These threats can be in the form of such issues as budget cuts; restrictive schedules; non-library, assigned duties or teaching responsibilities; and, most destructive, reductions to library staff. Not only can these threats impact a librarian personally and financially, but in the bigger picture, they can impede every student's right to school libraries, including access to resources, guidance to reading choices, and instruction from a certified school librarian. Who will stand up and speak for students' rights to a quality school library program—an essential building block of education—if not the school librarian? And how does the librarian build support that ensures a strong library program?

TWO STRATEGIES

There are basically two sets of strategies that school librarians need in their advocacy toolboxes—proactive strategies and reactive strategies. Proactive strategies,

such as identifying and nurturing library advocates, are utilized before threats or cuts to library services occur. Reactive strategies are rapidly put into play when disaster strikes. This often takes place in the final days of the school year so that public outrage and push back can be minimized by school officials. In this article, part one of two parts, proactive strategies will be presented. In the next issue, reactive strategies will be examined.



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OWNING AND COMMUNICATING

Librarians should step back for a moment and visually examine the school library program and how information about it is communicated. For example, what does the website look like to an outsider? Does it convey enthusiasm and dedication in educating students? Is it helpful and friendly? Look at the library's written documents (reports, lessons, handouts, etc.). Is the librarian clearly credited as the author? Or is the "invisible librarian" perpetuated, allowing others to take credit for the librarian's good work?

Following are some basic strategies to improve ownership and recognition of the school librarian and the program:

- ▶ Create an email "signature" that includes name, followed by earned degrees, professional title, email address, and work phone number. Personalize by adding a quote or "currently reading..." "author of..." or "presenting at..." On the library's website, add photos of the library staff so they are recognized in the community. Not only does this help new students and parents, but it's much harder to reduce positions when names and faces are associated with jobs.
- ▶ Claim ownership for work. On all handouts, lesson plans, bibliographies, annual reports, and other written work, add the name of the library, the librarian's name, and contact information. Collaborative work should include names of all involved. To further brand library-related work, consider having students design a library logo and add it to all written and digital works.
- ▶ Use data and evidence to document library work. Review annual reports to identify data that really make the case for having a library program with a certified librarian. Maintain both quantitative and qualitative evidence, such as number of classes taught, number of students using the library, use of licensed databases and other resources, as well as examples of student work. Student work can be highlighted on the library webpages.
- ▶ Embrace "less is more." Keep reports short and to the point, summarizing data for trends and main points. Create charts, graphs, or infographics when possible. Post them on the library website to reach beyond the school to parents and community members.
- ▶ Redesign the library website. Add photos, student-produced book reviews, and interactive polls about recommended books, short videos, and more. Invite students to help with the design and content. This also helps develop ownership and advocacy among students for the library program. A parent resources page can include advice on promoting reading, homework, career and college tools, video tutorials of licensed databases, policies on borrowing portable computing devices, and more.

- ▶ Gain school recognition. Look for grants or school foundation funds that can be used for projects that the school can't fund. Produce a list of community speakers to enrich the curriculum. Invite legislators to talk to students about voting rights, how a bill becomes law, or the election process. Volunteer to be on leadership committees and align with influential school leaders. Offer to provide staff development to teachers in collaboration with technology or other staff. These colleagues could become future library champions as they get to know the librarian and the library's program.

IDENTIFYING AND NURTURING LIBRARY CHAMPIONS

The greatest ally of the school library will be a group of vocal, respected parent leaders who understand the importance and impact of what the library program is delivering to their children and teens. Yet, school librarians tend to spend very little time communicating the library program to parents. Parents are taxpayers and voters with an emotional and personal investment in schools. School librarians would be wise to nurture PTA/PTO leaders who care about the quality of education and tend to unite on issues of concern. As Keith Curry Lance has stated, "Five minutes of parent advocacy for school libraries can have more effect than five years of what might appear a self-serving advocacy" (Keith Curry Lance, email message to author, September 20, 2013).

Unfortunately, most librarians only think of parents as a source of volunteers, i.e., shelving, checking out items, and fundraising. School librarians need to reconsider how to cultivate parents as library champions—advocates who will speak out for library programs. Relationship building at the grassroots level is a two-way street! What can librarians do for parents? School librarians could present at PTA/PTO meetings, offer the library for parent meetings, and create a parent webpage to post PTA/PTO agendas, minutes, and other important information. Awareness raising is more than just fund raising! Most importantly, librarians can show their commitment by joining the PTA. Membership fees are minimal, often around \$10 per year. Attending PTA meetings provides a venue for parents and librarians to get to know each other.

Another good strategy for identifying potential advocates in the community is as an observer at school board meetings. Librarians within the same district can take turns attending school board meetings to identify the "movers and shakers" on the board and in the community. Librarians can also meet local reporters who cover education. This could lead to a presentation to the board on school libraries. Librarians can also consider presentations to the Chamber of Commerce, local American Association of University Women, American Business Women Association, or similar groups interested in education.

Another strategy to communicate information about the school library program is to create a Library Advisory Committee (LAC). After receiving approval from the principal, the school librarian can invite key individuals representing administrators, parents, business people, and community leaders, as well as some teacher and student leaders. While the committee's role is purely advisory, this begins a two-way exchange of ideas, giving the committee an insider's view of the complexities of managing a quality school library program. As stated by Harper and Schwelik, creating a LAC "is a strategic investment of time and energy to develop grassroots support for the library program and maximize advocacy efforts with library stakeholders" (25).

BEING PREPARED

More often than not, school library program reductions, especially staffing cuts, catch librarians by surprise. Confused and shocked, some librarians believe inaction is the best course. It's not; that will only seal the fate of the library program if there is no push back from vocal parent and community leaders. Some librarians will individually oppose cuts at board meetings and elsewhere. While laudable, without organizing and involving community and parent input, these opinions will only be considered self-serving and ignored. School employees alone seldom sway school officials in changing decisions. The only approach that seems to work is for librarians to feed information to a small cadre of vocal, well-respected, and well-organized parent and community leaders who agree to be library champions and speak out for students' right to school libraries. Allowing them to take the lead, so to speak, does not lessen the critical role of the librarians in gathering and sharing accurate information about the proposed cuts, impacts to students, supportive research, and talking points for library champions to use.

Because of this, an essential resource that school librarians need to create and maintain is a contact list of library-friendly people in the community who could become potential library champions when needed. Ideally, the district librarians should meet in someone's home, not in school or a public place, to plan the list. A private Google Docs or similar web tool can be created so everyone can add to the list. It is surprising "who knows who" when you begin to put the list of potential library advocates together. In addition to an email and phone number, notes can be added such as job/career, graduate of the school district, which schools their children attend, and connections to administrators or board members who ultimately make school decisions. This advocacy tool may become invaluable when cuts are announced only days before a vote will be taken. The ability of the librarians to quickly respond and organize is critical to thwarting library threats.

Proactively, it is also important to join and use professional networks of librarians. Meet regularly with district

librarians. If no time is scheduled for library department meetings, organize the district librarians to meet outside school time. Solo librarians (one per district) can reach out to organize a regional get-together of librarians. Learn if neighboring districts are planning library reductions as school decision makers share ideas for balancing budgets. Librarians sometimes live and have children within another district, so they could be called upon as taxpayers to oppose reductions to school library programs.

Join local, state, and national library and education organizations. There is strength in numbers and most of the associations have supportive resources to help when staffing and budgets are threatened. For example, AASL has a number of excellent resources (<http://www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy>) and most state school library associations also have advocacy resources.

FINAL ADVICE

Be prepared and don't think "this would never happen in my school or district because the librarians in our district are doing a great job." Sadly, in today's environment of poorly funded schools, having a quality program will not necessarily negate budget and staffing cuts to the school library. Sometimes all it takes is one change in a top-level administrator or a change of a few school board members and the library program becomes a target for cuts.

Since the best defense is a good offense, chisel out some time each month for some serious advocacy building activities that seem to be best planned together with other district librarians who can share the workload. Focus strategies on those stakeholders who have the power and influence to impact library staffing, budgets, and resources. Remember, students, who can't vote for school board members and seldom have any influence with those who make school budgetary decisions, are counting on their school librarians to fight for their right to libraries.

REFERENCES:

Harper, Meghan, and Jennifer Schwelik. "School Library Challenge." *Knowledge Quest* 42, no. 1 (September 2013): 24-28. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed July 10, 2014).◀

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