

ADVOCACY AND THE 21ST CENTURY SCHOOL LIBRARIAN: CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICES



Overview

The Libraries Transform Campaign, an initiative of the American Library Association (ALA), aims to increase public awareness of the value, impact and services provided by libraries and library professionals. Libraries transform the lives of people in the communities they serve in copious ways. But libraries themselves have also transformed. Just as technology has transformed the content and programming of today's libraries, the information needs of today's students and educators have changed the scope of school librarianship.

Today's school librarians must work harder than ever to prove their value to students, educators, administrators and parents. Thus, the role of advocacy in school librarianship is critical. This article provides a brief history of how school libraries have transformed, identifies some of the advocacy challenges school librarians face, and offers four best practices that can help school librarians advocate for themselves and for strong school library programs.

21st Century Librarianship

In the 20th century, traditional school librarian tasks included selecting, cataloging and organizing library collections; promoting reading and literacy; supporting classroom teachers in educating students in the school's core curriculum (Harlan, 2015, p. 53); and assisting students with accessing research materials. Although these tasks are still part of the school librarian's repertoire, some administrators and teachers perceive the librarian as merely a "keeper of the books" (Wine, 2016, p. 208).

In recent years, school districts across the U.S. have cut school library budgets, often eliminating certified librarians in favor of hiring part-time aides or volunteers. However, dozens of library impact studies since the mid-1990s have shown that effective school libraries increase student achievement in a variety of ways, such as in reading and on state standardized tests. In fact, "Universal findings from more than 60 impact studies conducted in 22 states conclude that schools with a well-equipped library staffed by a full-time, certified librarian and appropriate support staff contribute significantly to gains in student learning" (Baltimore Library Project, 2013).

In 2016, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) — a division of ALA — updated its position statements for defining effective 21st century school library programs and the instructional role of school librarians. "The information literacy role of school librarians expands beyond the basic literacy of reading to



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teaching students to access, evaluate, and use information, both within their academic environment and as citizens of a democracy" (Harlan, 2015, p. 54). This includes teaching the responsible use of technology. In an era characterized by the proliferation of "fake news" and "alternative facts," digital information literacy skills are now more important than ever.

Challenges in Advocacy

Library and Information Science Professor Debra Kachel (2017a) notes that school librarians typically engage in advocacy only when library budgets and staffing are at risk of being cut. She writes, "Studies suggest that many school librarians only promote library services and resources as a form of intermittent, one-shot communication blasts rather than engaging in the deeper level of advocacy work and relationship-building that involves time, focus, and a plan of action" (Kachel, 2017a, p. 50). Additional challenges (Kachel, 2017b, p. 46; Karabush & Pleviak, 2011, p. 51) include:

- The perception that books, libraries, and librarians are no longer essential because the internet has all of the information students and educators need

- Failure to understand what key stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators, parents, community members) expect of the school library program
- Failure to include stakeholders in the process of defining the library’s mission or the instructional role of the school librarian
- Feeling isolated in your school library practice

To address these challenges, Kachel (2017a) urges school librarians to embed advocacy in their everyday practice.

Embedding Advocacy in Everyday Practice

BUILD PARTNERSHIPS WITH INFLUENTIAL STAKEHOLDERS

In order to effectively market the value of the library, school librarians should first identify what stakeholders want from a library program. What are their priorities and concerns? This information can be gleaned through market research — surveys, focus groups, or informal conversations with teachers, parents and local business leaders (Koontz, 2015). Consulting these stakeholders shows them that the librarian values their input and opinions, and — as a result— they may be more willing to actively support school library programs (Kachel, 2017a).

INCREASE THE SCHOOL LIBRARY’S VISIBILITY THROUGH BRANDING

According to teacher-librarian Kelsey Barker (2017), “The purpose of school library advocacy is to demonstrate the value of what we do” (p. 35). For many school librarians, however, this involves justifying their role to legislators, administrators and community members. Battling stereotypes and budget cuts leaves many librarians feeling discouraged and undervalued (Barker, 2017). However, effective branding can help increase the school library’s visibility.

“Creating a quality brand adds value to any product or service, and school libraries are no exception,” Barker (2017) says. “Branding boosts your advocacy efforts by adding value and visibility to your existing program” (p. 35). Creating a library brand supports advocacy in two ways (Barker, 2017):

1. It informs how the library is viewed by stakeholders.
2. It communicates the library’s value to and impact on students, teachers and members of the community.

Barker identifies four key components of a school library’s unique brand: *values*, *vision*, *voice* and *visuals*.

THE MISSION STATEMENT

- is the “elevator pitch” for the library program, a one- to two-sentence affirmation of the library’s values, purpose, and importance
- describes how library leaders want the program to be viewed by students, teachers, administrators and parents
- supports the goals of the larger organization (should be based on larger organization’s mission statement, if there is one)
- reflects the library’s uniqueness

THE VISION STATEMENT

- emphasizes the library program’s relevance, on its own and/or as part of the larger organization
- sets goals
- defines key success indicators
- articulates the future direction of the library program



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1. VALUES: These form the core of the library's brand, inform the librarian's practice and provide a point of reference for decision making. Focus on three to five essential ideas that drive the school library program, answering the question, "Why does this library program exist?" (Barker, 2017).



2. VISION: Librarians should also consider writing clear vision and mission statements to provide short-term and long-term direction for the library. Vision and mission statements are part of a library's overall vision (Barker, 2017). (See sidebar on page 4.)



3. VOICE: The "unique personality" of your library program should come through in both written and verbal communications. Tone of brand voice should be consistent and support the values of the library program. "A thoughtfully defined brand voice expresses professionalism, awareness, and authenticity and gives credibility to your cause by aligning your communication style to your goals" (Barker, 2017, p. 33-34).



4. VISUALS: All visuals should communicate your library's value, vision and voice. All graphics should feature a consistent font and color palette. The library logo should appear on all library property, such as office supplies, technology, book carts, and instructional materials. "When your logo is featured on everything you create, your stakeholders will come to recognize it and more clearly understand how valuable the library is to the school and the community" (Barker, 2017, p. 34).

MENTOR TEACHERS IN TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION

Many classroom teachers express a desire to integrate technology into their instruction but often lack the time to stay abreast of all the changes. For this reason, school librarians are uniquely positioned to mentor teachers on integrating technology into their teaching (Perez, 2013). However, this mentorship involves more than simply showing teachers how to use the library's online catalog and subscription databases. School librarians can empower teachers to develop proficiency with various technologies so that they may become more confident and independent (Perez, 2013). "As the influence of the school library program expands and the librarian is seen as a technology leader in the school, the administration can see the obvious value in supporting the library" (Perez, 2013, p. 23).

In addition to collaborating with teachers, school librarians should also work closely with instructional technology specialists. "Collaboration opens an avenue to combine the knowledge and experience of two unique members of the teaching staff to support classroom teachers and students to make learning highly engaging through the integration of technology and information literacy skills into content curriculum" (Wine, 2016, p. 209). Rather than jockeying for position, school librarians and technology specialists should present a united front to the administration.

To further demonstrate their value, school librarians should keep track of monthly reports, lesson plans and any other information that documents their mentoring efforts. "When budget conscious administrators view librarians as key influencers who mentor a number of other teachers, are early adopters of new technologies and distributors of the hardware, administrators see value in supporting the school library financially and programmatically" (Perez, 2013, p. 26).



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SEEK ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENGAGE WITH PEERS IN PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND NETWORKS

Effective school librarians seek professional development opportunities that target emerging technologies, resources and curriculum. According to AASL past president Ann M. Martin (2016), "Honing in on skills needed to be an exemplary librarian requires continuous effort" (p. 59). Professional networks also offer librarians opportunities to attend webinars and join committees. Virtual and face-to-face meetings develop "lasting ties with colleagues in the library profession" (Martin, 2016, p. 56).

Cynthia Karabush and Pam Pleviak (2011) contend that networking is especially important for solo librarians who may feel isolated in their practice. "It's crucial to have someone who can 'talk you off the ledge' when you feel overwhelmed" (p. 51). In addition, Karabush and Pleviak (2011) encourage school librarians to join not only networking groups for librarians, but also more widely focused educator groups; for example, "membership in instructional technology professional groups helps to extend our reach and expertise in that area" (p. 51). School librarians should also "develop a robust professional learning network to keep up with the latest technologies" (Perez, 2013, p. 26). Building upon existing skills and competencies will assist librarians in proving their value as instruction professionals.

Finally, school librarians should stay connected to national professional associations such as AASL. These associations provide librarians with forums for "discussion of and action on problems that exist in school libraries," such as privacy and censorship (Martin, 2016, p. 56). "Association resources provide just-in-time information and assistance, enabling school librarians to lead their learning communities through sometimes difficult situations with confidence" (Martin, 2016, p. 56).

Conclusion

The roles and responsibilities of 21st century school librarians have changed dramatically over the past two decades. School librarians must keep current in not only the traditional issues of concern to information professionals, but also the impact of technology on the educational landscape.

To prove the value of school library programs, school librarians must, in effect, become strategic marketing managers who weave advocacy efforts into the fabric of their everyday practice. Best practices include building partnerships with influential stakeholders, increasing the school library's visibility through branding, mentoring teachers in technology integration, seeking ongoing professional development, and engaging with peers in professional organizations and networks.

Web Resources to Help You Get Started

- [AASL Advocacy Tools](#)
- [ALA Office for Library Advocacy](#)
- [llovelibraries.org](#)
- [YALSA Advocacy Toolkit](#)

For more information:

www.ebsco.com | information@ebsco.com | 800-653-2726

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