Research that Resonates: Influencing Stakeholders

by DEBRA E. KACHEL

FORMER SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR
Gary Hartzell has stated, “When you’re trying to convince your principal that you and your library are valuable and worth supporting, you need to hit the bull’s eye of her interest, not just give a blast of information and hope that some will hit the target” (2013, 30). He further suggests strategically selecting information and data that are meaningful to the audience we, as school librarians, are addressing. In other words, we need to share findings that will resonate with specific stakeholders. This article will show how school librarians can use research, in particular the 2012 Pennsylvania school library impact study findings, to cultivate stakeholders as school library advocates and possibly champions.

HITTING THE BULL’S EYE

School librarians have to ask themselves, “With over two decades of research that show how quality school library programs help students achieve academically, why is this research not impacting policy makers who control the purse strings on school library staffing and resources?” Have school policy makers and school administrators not heard about this research? Or, are they ignoring it because they discount correlation studies and are looking for direct causal research? Or, are we as librarians not sharing these findings and packaging the message to “hit the target”?

In 2012, Keith Curry Lance and his associates completed a second school library impact study in Pennsylvania. To date, twenty-two states and one Canadian province have conducted similar research that shows a strong correlation between quality school library programs with certified school librarians and higher standardized tests scores, as well as other indicators of academic success (School Library Research Summarized). The research conducted in Pennsylvania was the result of an Institute of Museums and Library Services (IMLS) National Leadership grant that examined students’ reading and writing scores with sub-groups of students (Hispanic, Black, economically disadvantaged, and disabled).

Additionally, in the Pennsylvania study, over 1,800 teachers, school administrators, and school librarians rated the effectiveness of school library programs in teaching AASL’s Standards for the 21st-Century Learner and the PA/Common Core Standards. The opinions of these educators were then compared to their school’s test scores, thus verifying the correlational evidence. The final report, How Pennsylvania School Libraries Pay Off: Investments in Student Achievement and Academic Standards,
is over 160 pages. How does a school librarian dissect this information to share with stakeholders and library advocates?

IDENTIFYING STAKEHOLDERS

Before using research, a librarian needs to identify both in-school and out-of-school stakeholders who could become library advocates and, perhaps ultimately, library champions. A library “champion” is an extreme library advocate—a change agent—who doesn’t just support school libraries, but makes it a mission to speak out and work to bring about improvements. For example, in Washington state the “Spokane Mom” library champions influenced lawmakers to add language and mandates to laws that school librarians are essential to basic education (Whelan 2008).

To identify potential in-school advocates, consider school leaders who others listen to and whose opinions are respected. These can include teachers, administrators, school board members, or other school specialists, such as counselors, special education and support staff. Identify also out-of-school or community potential advocates: an influential parent, a business person who frequents school board meetings, a graduate now in the community who used the school library’s services, the public librarian, or a college professor. (For more examples, refer to Chapter 7, “Building Champions in the School Community,” Activism and the School Librarian. Libraries Unlimited, 2012.)

Potential stakeholders will have varying degrees of commitment ranging from a slight interest to a burning desire. Consider first those who have a strong basis or personal connection for ensuring a quality school library program. These people might be a school board member who has children in the school, an author/writer who lives in the community and heavily supports public libraries, or a teacher who frequently co-teaches with the librarian. All should be respected in the community, live in the school district, and be recognized as community leaders.

ZEROING IN

Find Potential Advocates. To capture the attention of potential advocates, first study their education priorities. Google their names or ask others about their careers, hobbies, connection to the school (school age children), or other interests. For example, you may find that a biochemist who was a judge in the high school science fair has children in the school district. Use his concern as a parent and his interest in science as a “hook” by inviting him to your library to show the science and databases students use. Or, provide a hands-on demonstration of searching electronic periodical databases and using interlibrary loan services to the school principal who is working on her doctorate. While this may seem outside the realm of the librarian’s responsibilities, it could pay huge dividends if these people become library champions!

Identify the Recipient. After researching potential advocates, select specific research findings that will resonate with each person’s concerns or interests. Don’t copy prepared handouts, “Highlights,” or fact sheets you may find on the Internet that summarize the research. These are usually press releases created for the general population. They are not a targeted message for a particular stakeholder. Instead, use specific facts or craft talking points that will spark interest or address a problem or concern for the stakeholder.

Customizing the message for each stakeholder will take time. Read the research and search for specific facts or ideas. For example, to influence an elementary principal, use findings about elementary school age students. He will not be interested in high school test scores or teenagers’ reading abilities. When focusing on a parent who has a senior in high school, focus on information literacy and research skills that help students succeed in college. An effective strategy is to search for key words important to identified stakeholders in the online, full-text report.

Most of the impact studies can be found at Library Research Service (http://www.lrs.org) or School Library Research Summarized. Use the “find” search (control-F) on key words, such as “high school” or “elementary,” “technology,” “test scores,” “special education,” “Hispanic,” etc.

Massaging the Message. After selecting facts or quotes, reword the idea or concept to further appeal to the identified stakeholder, removing jargon to create a short, compelling statement. Seldom are full-text research reports written for a lay audience. This was a valuable lesson learned in working with the Education Law Center (ELC) in Pennsylvania. The ELC communications staff helped librarians and researchers reword findings to remove the academic and scholarly tone.

Craft messages that are memorable, deliver a specific benefit that the stakeholder cares about, and solve a problem or concern of the stakeholder, ideally, showing why the school library is a better or unique solution than other alternatives. See examples on page 7, “How to Massage the Message” and additional information on Use This Page, page 2.

NURTURING ADVOCATES

A school librarian may ask, “Why take the time to cultivate advocates? I can do this myself.” While many school librarians are respected leaders in their schools, ultimately those listening will wonder, “Is this about the kids or is she just worried about saving her job?” It is, therefore, critical to foster advocates and develop school library champions to carry the message.

Experience has taught me that there is no replacement for the face-to-face, personal contact when developing a library advocate. Email and phone calls are fine for follow-up, but only the “in-the-trenches” field expert can provide the passion and information needed by interested stakeholders.
HOW TO MASSAGE THE MESSAGE

Below are examples from Creating 21st-Century Learners: A Report on Pennsylvania’s Public School Libraries and the press release on the PA School Library Project home page. The messages are created to fit a target audience.

See also “Use This Page,” page 2, in this issue of SLM, for additional examples of how to massage the message to fit the target audience.

EXAMPLES:
For a teacher: “Co-teaching reduces your workload and provides students with more individualized instruction.”
For an administrator: “Studies have shown that school libraries can improve student test scores.”
For a parent: “The library program can help your teen become career and college ready.”
For a school board member: “It is difficult to help students achieve the reading targets without the kind of books that students want to read. The school library supports students’ reading interests.”
For the curriculum coordinator: “When school librarians and teachers work together, they teach information skills, content, and Common Core standards all in one lesson or unit. Students learn more in a shortened amount of time and benefit from the expertise of two educators.”
To the Learning Support Coordinator: “The research shows that the reading and writing scores improve for struggling students—ELL, deficient readers, the disabled—when they use school libraries and are taught by a school librarian.”

This may mean the difference between a future for school library programs or not. It is only the librarian who has the knowledge, experience, and skills to make the case for school libraries—a case so strong that others will believe and carry that message forward.

MAKING THE “ASK”

Stephanie Vance, the Advocacy Guru (http://advocacyguru.com/) and presenter of library advocacy webinars, insists that librarians need to ask for something specific rather than simply trying to “educate” or “inform” legislators or others who influence education. People naturally want to know what you want them to do with the information you are sharing. So, ask them, “Will you help me to ensure that our students will have quality school library programs and librarians to teach them now and in the future?” It is not a simple thing to accomplish, but it is a question that must be asked.

FINAL WORDS

Amazingly, some school librarians are still unaware of the growing body of school library impact studies and supporting research. And while some policy makers denigrate correlational studies, none has found a way to ethically conduct a large-scale, randomized experiment with students who have and don’t have access to a particular level of school library services and instruction. However, over thirty school library studies, including recent ones that combine the professional wisdom of experienced educators with quantitative test data, go a long way to verify a causal relationship between quality school library programs and student achievement.

The library profession has strong evidence that students in schools with good school libraries learn more, achieve academic standards, and score higher on standardized tests than students in schools without school libraries and librarians. And, as found in the Pennsylvania study, this is particularly true of our most vulnerable and struggling learners.

School librarians must seize the charge to use this body of research and master “messaging” strategies to create library advocates among school and community stakeholders and, hopefully, one or two school library champions. Although they are few and far between, champions like Washington’s Spokane Moms are instrumental change agents that the school library profession needs.

School librarians have the knowledge and skills to identify potential advocates and champions and to strategically use specific and meaningful research targeted for them. School libraries are a solution to improve student learning and potentially close achievement gaps among struggling learners. School librarians must learn, embrace, and share these research findings.

REFERENCES:

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Debra Kachel, MLS, is an online instructor for Mansfield University’s School Library & Information Technologies Graduate School, Mansfield, PA. She is a former school librarian and library supervisor and serves as co-chairperson of the Legislation Committee for the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association. Email: dkachel@mansfield.edu