School Library Champions

Debra Kachel

You’ve tried to go it alone—you’ve promoted the school library program, collaborated with teachers, published newsletters to parents, and continually communicated with school administrators about the impact and needs of the school library program (SLP).

The problem is, support for the library is at a standstill or getting worse. You are not able to get the staffing, resources, technology, and administrative support you need to create the dynamic, embedded SLP you know you could develop to impact student learning. What’s missing?

Other voices are needed to champion the SLP beside the school librarian, voices of people within the school and community who have influence over decision makers. Committed and respected advocates are needed who share a vision of how to leverage the SLP as an integral and effective tool that achieves the school’s mission. How do you find these people, and how do you foster that level of advocacy and passion that inspires others to stand up and speak out for the school library program?

STAKEHOLDERS AND CHAMPIONS

Stakeholders—those who have a vested interest or stake in the success of the library program—fall into two basic categories: school (those who work inside the school) and community (those who work outside the school). School stakeholders benefit directly from the instructional expertise of the school librarian and library resources and include students, teachers, building and district administrators, and school board members. Community stakeholders also care about the education of K–12 students but only indirectly benefit from access to the SLP. They include parents, taxpayers, community organizations, and local business leaders. Potential library “champions”—advocates who through voices and actions will stand up for quality school libraries and work to influence decision makers—can be found among both school and community stakeholders. Champions

- Care about student achievement and the school’s ability to educate students
- Have a vested or connected interest in a quality school library
- Are respected and recognized leaders
- Have some political “capital” in the school or community

Political capital refers to the trust, credibility, and power that a person has earned over time working with policy and decision makers to influence or control situations. Most, but not all, potential champions with political capital will hold titled positions of power, such as school board members, the president of the PTA/PTO or the teachers union, legislators, or owners of local businesses. Except in a rare situation, students have little power or influence over those who make key decisions on library resources. They have little political capital yet are the most impacted by quality SLPs with certified librarians. Therefore, champions should be sought among stakeholders who have the power to influence those who make decisions about how the school operates and how resources and funds are allocated.

Carefully think through the selection of a principal, superintendent, or other school administrator as a potential library champion. Although they have decision-making powers, they may want to appear unbiased since they represent all the school’s departments, not just the library. Some potential champions may have conflicting interests, such as a public librarian, who is responsible for fund-raising efforts to keep the public library functioning. Ultimately, both school and public libraries vie for taxpayer’s dollars. Recognize, too, that every school’s political environment is different, so there is no cookie-cutter way to identify potential champions. Each school and community setting will be different.
Champions will rally behind an advocacy goal if it is important to them and will ultimately improve the school's educational program.

THE ADVOCACY GOAL

Advocates engaged at a champion level usually do so depending on the goal of the advocacy effort. The goal is the reason for advocacy planning and seeking school library champions. Often the goal is to preserve or reinstate library staffing, but there are other goals. For example, you may need an advocacy campaign to increase student reading, improve collaboration, garner a better budget, or update library technologies. All these ultimately impact student learning.

Champions will rally behind an advocacy goal if it is important to them and will ultimately improve the school’s educational program. The goal needs to be credible, realistic, based on facts and data, and in the best interests of students. If the goal is only about improving the working conditions of the librarian, it has little chance of receiving support. Champions are putting their reputation on the line to advocate for the library, so the goal needs to be justifiable and clearly aligned with the mission of the school or district.

THE ADVOCACY SUPPORT TEAM

While identifying potential champions can be done individually, consider convening a small group of people who are already strong library supporters. This support team can widen the pool of champion candidates by suggesting people they know and can later be the initial contact person to invite potential champions to learn more about the advocacy campaign. The team can also provide ongoing advice for the long-range advocacy plan as it is developed.

The advocacy support team should include someone who has lived in the community for many years and knows the local politics and leaders, especially if you are relatively new to your school or community. Other members can include teachers with whom you regularly collaborate and parents or community leaders you know.

SHARED BENEFITS

Advocacy is based on successful partnerships in which all partners realize some benefit and share a common vision. Library champions often need some external reward or benefit in order to stay engaged for the long haul. This is sometimes referred to as WII-FM: “What’s in it for me?” Consider why stakeholders should care about the SLP and what extrinsic rewards they can earn. How do the interests and concerns of the champion intersect with the library’s advocacy goal? For example, a parent may advocate for afterschool library hours because she needs a safe place for her children until they can be picked up, or a school board member may support an ebooks program because his children attend that school and would benefit. These examples show how the SLP can provide more personalized, tangible rewards for stakeholders. The reality is that when people invest their time and energy, they want to see a return that personally benefits them.

Following are examples of a benefits assessment for identifying potential champions.

CONCLUSION

The ultimate success of the school librarian as advocate is to develop an ongoing program of support by instilling in others the knowledge and desire to be active and vocal school library champions. School library champions are well connected and respected stakeholders who have the power to make decisions or influence decision makers who control vital resources that determine the library’s ability to meet students’ needs. Savvy school librarians articulate advocacy goals in ways that align with what potential champions care about so that both the library program and the champion realize benefits to the partnership, thus ensuring a sustainable relationship. Finding and
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential Champion</th>
<th>Language Arts Department Chairperson/Lead Teacher</th>
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<tr>
<td>Advocacy Goal</td>
<td>Third and fourth graders reading below level will be provided with small-group literature circles or book clubs managed by the librarian in collaboration with teachers in order to boost reading achievement. (This will require a revised library schedule.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit to SLP</td>
<td>Increased use of library, improved literacy among those most at risk, increased collaboration, recognition of the librarian’s instructional role</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benefit to Champion</td>
<td>Additional reading support for below-level readers without additional staff, improved reading scores; enhanced teacher’s evaluation portfolio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Capital/Influence</td>
<td>This teacher is a school leader, has good rapport with principal and superintendent, is on the local public library board, and is close friends with a school board member.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential Champion</th>
<th>PTA President</th>
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<tr>
<td>Advocacy Goal</td>
<td>As the student population has become increasingly diverse, the library’s collection needs culturally relevant, high-interest, low-level, and bilingual books to meet the needs of students. (This will require a collaborative grant-writing project.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit to SLP</td>
<td>Increased parental support, a collection more responsive to student diversity, improved circulation, recognition of librarian’s leadership, addition to librarian’s evaluation portfolio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit to Champion</td>
<td>PTA as an engaged partner, learning more about the library program, fulfilling the PTA’s mission to advocate for all children, good PR and likely boost in PTA membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Capital/Influence</td>
<td>The PTA president will be respected in the community and with school board and will be well connected to social services in the region. Her husband is president of the Chamber of Commerce.</td>
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Cultivating school library champions is a critical step in developing a long-range advocacy plan that has the best chance for success.

Note: In the next issue, this column will present ideas for crafting messages and marketing advocacy goals to school library champions and other stakeholders. Topics will include talking points and elevator speeches. For more tools to develop library champions and advocacy goals, refer to the additional resources.

Additional Resources