Communicate Your Unique Contribution

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It’s spring, and while flowers are budding and blooming, school librarians across the nation may be bracing for the dreaded announcement of budget and staffing cuts for the next school year. It’s daffodils and pink slips time! Why is it that school library programs are often the first targets for staff and budget cuts? Maybe it’s because so few decision makers know what school librarians and library programs uniquely contribute to student learning. If school librarians and libraries only “support” or “assist” in the learning process, they are “nice to have” but not perceived as necessary. If librarians aren’t contributing something unique, some instruction that students can’t do without and that no one else teaches, then librarians and library programs are at best vulnerable, at worst expendable. Only if school librarians can articulate, claim, teach, and be responsible for a critical set of skills or content knowledge, like other teachers, will they be viewed as essential.

So what do school librarians specifically and uniquely contribute to the education of students? As professional librarians, we have done a poor job identifying and communicating our instructional “turf.” For example, librarians support reading and guide students to appropriate sources—so do classroom and reading teachers. Librarians teach students how to use online resources and conduct effective Internet searches—so do teachers and technology staff.

PERCEPTION IS REALITY

Traditionally, the library collection was thought to provide a unique contribution to student learning—it was the hub of the school. In many schools, the physical library collection has been devalued and underfunded to the point of being obsolete. In some schools, commercial vendors provide collection development services, negating the cost of a professional librarian’s salary. Some schools fund classroom book collections or online reading programs as an option to school libraries. Certainly, the library has a deeper and broader collection selected to meet the needs of all students. However, the perception may be that classroom libraries and online programs are acceptable alternatives and fill the need—a library is not needed.

Unfortunately, too much emphasis is often placed on the library as a physical collection and place and not on the expertise of the school librarian, who applies learned and practiced curation skills and instructional strategies to meet the needs of students and staff. Whether librarians agree or not, the perception is that books (and, in some cases, librarians) are not needed because the Internet has almost everything anyone, including students, needs.

WHAT STAKEHOLDERS EXPECT FROM SCHOOL LIBRARY PROGRAMS

Our profession has done a good job telling other educators and stakeholders why students need strong school library programs. However, we seldom ask them, What are the essential and critical information-related competencies that school librarians should teach, particularly skills that no other educator teaches? Stakeholders, like those who serve on library advisory committees, such as teachers, administrators, community members, parents, and students, can help prioritize what should be taught. Asking the school community for their opinions shows that you value what they think. This enables advocacy—developing relationships that cause others to understand and support the school library program (SLP). A group of such stakeholders will also take into consideration school initiatives and local needs based on the community and student populations. Resulting conversations may reveal other issues and needs, not necessarily what the librarian feels is important and has done in the past. After all, it is the influential stakeholders who will save librarian positions.

Re-examining the instructional role of the SLP through an advisory group is a great way to gain a different perspective. What are their priorities for teaching information skills to students? Perhaps they too are thinking about who can teach students to distinguish fact from opinion and falsehoods, how students can determine credible sources and know which websites can be trusted in our current environ-
ment of “post truths” and “alternative facts.” Is anyone else in the school teaching these skills to all students and assessing student mastery of them? School library stakeholders may not be able to define information literacy, but they likely know that they want kids to be safe on the Internet and to find reliable, trusted information so they can make good school and life choices.

THE SCHOOL LIBRARY MISSION REVITALIZED

As this school year winds down, take time to revise the mission of the SLP and the instructional role of the librarian in light of recent political changes and priorities of stakeholders and school leaders. Clearly, school librarians need to identify and claim competencies that they alone teach—skills that are needed and critical for student academic success and personal growth. Describe this mission in a clear and concise statement that resonates with stakeholders.

The often-referenced school library mission statement used in the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) guidelines (2009) and enhanced by Eisenberg (2010), Valenza, and other school library leaders is “to ensure that students are effective users and producers of ideas and information” (p. 8). Although it is short, concise, and clear, it may not reflect today’s environment and resonate with lay audiences. School librarians need to recognize and align with the priorities of the school and leverage today’s political climate.

Since the 2016 presidential election, librarians have a huge opportunity to clarify their role in teaching students how to critically evaluate sources of information. There are important competencies already embedded in academic standards that school librarians can claim and be responsible for, such as:

- evaluating diverse media
- drawing evidence from primary and secondary sources
- determining point of view or perspective
- differentiating fact from opinion (or, in popular terms, between accurate and “fake” news)

Aligning with the school or district’s mission, vision, or unstated but known priorities, school librarians, along with their advisory committees, might consider some of the language below for refreshing the school library’s mission statement.

- To ensure that students access, evaluate, and make sense of information and ideas to learn and make informed decisions
- To ensure that students discover, evaluate, and apply ideas and information that they read, hear, or watch
- To ensure that students learn to evaluate facts and media messages to apply credible information to their decisions, academic learning, and personal growth.

Simplicity and clarity always trump long, jargon-laden paragraphs. Terms such as media literacy, blended learning, and digital citizenship hold sway in library circles but are unclear to lay audiences, sometimes even to teachers and administrators. Make it clear what students will gain and learn as a consequence of an effective SLP and a librarian who teaches and charts mastery of designated skills by all students.

REALITY SETS IN

After identifying competencies with stakeholders, examine the capacity for successful implementation. In other words, what barriers exist that limit the school librarian’s ability to teach the identified skills to all students? They may include overloaded, fixed schedules, monitoring study halls or other noninstructional duties, and teachers who do not want to collaborate. Work with administrators to prioritize the skills you can teach given the restraints of your job. Or work with administrators to decide what tasks can be eliminated so that instruction can be a goal. This also presents an opportunity to discuss what more could be taught with fewer schools or fewer students and more collaboration. However, even school librarians with multiple schools and large numbers of students can minimally claim and teach some information skills that no one else is teaching to all students.

Although school librarians would like to state that they teach all information-related skills included in academic standards, only commit to teaching what is possible. Set up the SLP for success. Extract and identify competencies and add language in the school library mission statement to identify that the school librarian will be accountable for teaching students these specific skills. Letting grade-level and subject teachers know that the SLP will be responsible for teaching specific information skills allows other teachers to see the librarian’s clear role and partnership in instruction. Sharing assessment data on the students’ mastery of the claimed skills goes one step further in gaining recognition as a teaching partner among administrators and teachers.
POSITIONING THE SCHOOL LIBRARY PROGRAM

Identifying and selling your unique contribution positions the SLP as an essential, instructional component of the school. However, in working with others, recognize that there is a difference, sometimes a fine line, between bragging and marketing. Bragging focuses on you; marketing focuses on others. Marketing recognizes the “customer’s” needs and selects and “sells” services that the SLP can deliver to meet those needs. Although you want stakeholders to recognize, appreciate, and advocate for the position of a school librarian in the school, you need to depersonalize. In other words, don’t say “I do this or that”; instead, use third person, stating “a school librarian can . . .”, or, better yet, begin sentences with the word “students.”

Make the distinction between the school library program and the librarian. Describe what the SLP could provide and what the school librarian can teach and do. Be assertive and confident that the collaboratively identified skills and competencies delivered through the SLP are a unique contribution that fills an unsatisfied need that no other educator is filling and is something your stakeholders want and value. Always, always, put students’ needs first, and you can’t lose.

After crafting a short, compelling mission statement that a group of stakeholders has vetted, use it and post it everywhere until it becomes your mantra. Add it to annual reports, job performance documents, and library and professional websites. Recognize that this one sentence will not include everything the job requires. However, it is a statement that responds to your stakeholders, stakeholders who have been included in the planning and development of the SLP and who will advocate for maintaining strong SLPs if staffing and budget cuts are threatened. The bottom line is that you are filling a perceived need and responding to the current school and political climate. Recognize, too, that the mission statement will need to be re-examined frequently to maintain immediacy and relevancy.

TIME TO REFRESH

This spring, as you gather evidence and data to reflect on your practice, consider refreshing the school library mission statement. With a group of invested stakeholders, focus conversations on prioritizing critical information-based competencies and skills that the school librarian can teach given the current contact time with students that no other teacher is teaching. This does not trivialize the other tasks librarians do—collection development, reading guidance, technology access, space planning, and other activities. However, to market the relevancy and essential role of the SLP in today’s environment, school librarians need to reposition the SLP and refocus on the instruction that no other educator currently delivers. To ensure continuation of library programs and certified librarians in our schools, it is critical to identify and market the SLP’s unique contribution to the academic success of students. Relying as we have in the past on the physical library collection as the hub of the school is no longer enough.

REFERENCE

Eisenberg, M. (2010). Mike Eisenberg vodcast #4—The role of the teacher-librarian and the school library program. ABC-CLIOLive. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nE2MpvByb1c

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


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