There is still a lot of mystery about what constitutes school library advocacy and how librarians can embed advocacy in their everyday practice.

Often librarians believe that promoting library services through newsletters and having a library website suffice as advocacy. However, an examination of AASL’s definition of advocacy requires a deeper and more strategic investment in planning and action to achieve the level of partnership-building that true advocacy suggests. In an effort to provide some clarity, this month’s centerfold focuses on an “Advocacy Continuum” developed by this author and the editors of Teacher Librarian, Deborah Levitov and Christie Kaaland.

Only about half of school librarians engage in any form of advocacy, according to three recent surveys (Burns, 2015; Ewbank, 2011; Holland & Vance, 2015). This is even more shocking considering that these survey participants were solicited through school library listservs or membership rolls of library associations, thus representing librarians already somewhat engaged in professional development, not the vast majority of school librarians who do not belong to library organizations or use library listservs.

Burns (2015) discovered that school librarians have “difficulty articulating advocacy as a process designed to develop a stakeholder relationship with the intent of gaining support” (p. 28) and that they perceive advocacy to be about public relations and marketing and less about building relationships. This contradicts AASL’s stated definition of advocacy (see Figure 1).

Ewbank’s study (2011) also confirms that advocacy is largely viewed as promotion and awareness, while some school librarians believe advocacy to be about political actions rather than local actions. These 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.

Two of the studies (Ewbank, 2011; Holland & Vance, 2015) further report that the major obstacles to advocacy work are a lack of time and not knowing what to do or how to conduct advocacy activities. While “time” is the four-letter word we all deal with, clarity in understanding what advocacy really means in terms of changing people’s perceptions of school librarians and library programs may help librarians better embed advocacy in their everyday practice.

A CONTINUUM OF ACTIONS

Think of advocacy as a continuum of actions—a progression or range of activities that vary in degrees of engage-
**Figure 2: Examples of Continuum Transitions**

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<tr>
<td>The librarian publishes a newsletter on upcoming library events and new resources to staff.</td>
<td>The librarian meets with the science teachers to learn about their curriculum needs and share a new database resource.</td>
<td>The librarian and science department chairperson present to the school board on recent student science fair awards and how library research instruction improved projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target: Teachers and administrators</td>
<td>Target: Science teachers</td>
<td>Target: Head of science department as library partner advocates to the school board</td>
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<td>The librarian posts the library’s annual report on the library’s website.</td>
<td>The librarian meets with the PTA to discuss the need for updated technology and develop open-access policies for students.</td>
<td>The PTA president and librarian present a plan to the principal to justify an increase in funding for library technology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target: Teachers, administrators, parents</td>
<td>Target: Parents</td>
<td>Target: PTA president as library partner advocates to the school administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>The librarian distributes a recommended summer reading list.</td>
<td>The librarian meets with the principal, public librarian, and reading teachers to discuss recent reading test scores and how the library might help.</td>
<td>The principal presents a plan to the superintendent to fund summer library hours based on input from the school and public librarians and reading teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target: Students</td>
<td>Target: Principal, public librarian, reading teachers</td>
<td>Target: Principal as library partner advocates for a summer library program to the superintendent</td>
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The continuum, from promoting library services to marketing resources to the specific needs of stakeholders to the developing partnerships with stakeholders who will speak out and act for maintaining strong school library programs. The continuum is a connected set of efforts that become more intense and focused over time, ultimately resulting in lasting alliances and partnerships. The three levels of public relations, marketing, and advocacy transition from telling and selling to partnering. This transition, however, does not imply, for example, that PR activities cease when working on marketing or building relationships. These interconnected and often concurrent activities are employed as needed, prioritized by local needs. They are not mutually exclusive. In other words, promoting the library’s activities via a newsletter (PR) will be ongoing while focusing some actions to specific stakeholders to build a partnership (advocacy), while simultaneously getting feedback from another stakeholder group on needed library resources (marketing).

**FOCUSING ADVOCACY EFFORTS**

As you move across the columns of the advocacy continuum, notice that the efforts become more targeted and focused. Public relations is a scattershot approach—a generalized, indiscriminate approach not specifically targeted to any one group of stakeholders. It reaches the largest amount of stakeholders but is not specified to individual needs. School librarians generally do a good job in this area, producing newsletters, announcing library activi-
ties, and creating posters or handouts advertising library resources.

Marketing involves knowing what specific stakeholders care about and what they want from a library program. This understanding often requires the school librarian to conduct some research in the form of surveys, focus groups, or informal conversations to elicit what teachers, parents, local business leaders, etc., expect their school library program to provide and do. Some librarians do this; others do not. Meeting the needs of stakeholders is the initial step to creating library advocates.

Advocacy, in the form of building partnerships, involves a deeper level of strategizing to identify and target specific influential stakeholders who share similar concerns and can be developed into advocates willing to actively support school library programs. This level of advocacy is not an area where school librarians have excelled, as they often struggle to figure out how to develop such library partners. This is a very targeted approach, so it usually addresses a smaller group of people or an individual, but those with the influence to effectively speak out in support of the library program. Figure 2 includes some examples of transitioning from promoting to building supportive advocates.

THE REALITIES OF ADVOCACY WORK

Advocacy is a highly personal, unique, and local effort (Ewbank, 2011) based on the school setting, the stakeholders involved, and the librarian’s ability to strategize and develop partnerships. School librarians do a good job advertising what the library has and can offer but do a less than stellar job reaching out to specific stakeholders with targeted messages to show how the library program provides unique opportunities for student growth and academic achievement.

Also, many school librarians tend to only engage in advocacy activities when library budgets and staffing are threatened (Ewbank, 2011; Holland & Vance, 2015). Unfortunately, that may be “a day late and a dollar short” in terms of impacting a favorable result. Building partnerships, the ultimate goal, takes time. And the players may constantly change—a new superintendent, new PTA leaders, changing staff, etc. Therefore, it is critical that advocacy work be assessed annually to determine how much time was invested in PR, marketing, and building relationships, and which stakeholder groups were impacted. If most of your efforts are promotional in nature, re-focus and strategize which influential stakeholders can be nurtured as library partners and how to do that. Utilizing the advocacy continuum may help you prioritize advocacy activities where and with whom they will make the most impact.

REFERENCES


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


Debra Kachel is an online instructor for Antioch University Seattle’s K–12 Library Media Endorsement program. She received the 2014 AASL Distinguished Service Award for her school library advocacy work. Her email is dkachel@antioch.edu.

Please see pages 32-33 for an expanded chart on the Advocacy Continuum.
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