Your principal just informed you that your library schedule will be “adjusted” next year, as a retiring librarian will not be replaced. Or your principal tells you that next year’s library budget will be zero, leaving countless subscription resources in jeopardy. You need to plan an immediate response, because these losses will greatly impact students and teachers. But where do you begin? And how can one person fight such devastating cuts?

John Donne said it best, “No man is an island.” One librarian does not an advocacy campaign make—advocacy is not a solo sport! According to the American Association of School Librarian’s (AASL) definition, advocacy is “an ongoing process of building partnerships so that others will act for and with you, turning passive support into educated action for the library program” (AASL). Thus building partnerships or coalitions is critical. Two obvious and local groups are our librarian colleagues and library supporters in our schools and local communities. These two groups are not only the library’s first line of defense when cuts are proposed but also provide an ongoing barrier of preservation. School librarians, whether in the district or regionally, best know and understand the responsibilities and requirements of the job. Local community and school leaders best know and understand the local political environment and can influence key decision makers. Organizing these two groups is the initial step of advocacy planning.

The Coalition of Library Colleagues

It always surprises me when school librarians working in the same district have infrequent contact. Reasons vary: sometimes the district doesn’t provide meeting times, particularly when there is no library coordinator. Sometimes the librarians themselves don’t “get along” due to differing philosophies that define an effective school library program (SLP). My advice is, “Get over it!” Advocacy work is about relationship building, and you need to start locally at the grassroots level. As with your principal and teachers with whom you work, you don’t need to be “BFFs.” However, all school librarians must recognize that they need others to achieve the school library’s mission and, although many things are outside their control, there are ways to stave off debilitating cuts to staff, budgets, and resources, if they work together. Developing a plan to work with colleagues—creating a coalition of library colleagues (CLC)—is an initial step.

All district and community types of librarians, including public, academic, or retired librarians and library educators who may live in the community, could be invited to participate in the CLC. After all, a reduction in school library services will have ripple effects in all libraries. This can result in school librarians with responsibilities for multiple schools and increased school dependency on public or academic libraries. Meeting outside school at someone’s house or a local coffee shop, librarians can discuss the following questions.

- What are the most significant barriers that impede effective SLPs in our schools?
- What local factors have changed the level of support for SLPs?
- Who are the most influential stakeholders in the schools and community?
- What data exist that substantiate identified issues?
- What successful strategies tried elsewhere might we adopt?
- How can we work together to improve SLPs for students and teachers?

Additionally, librarians should take turns attending school board meetings, gathering information about the recognized board and community leaders and what they care about. Then librarians can begin to focus on an issue, create talking points, and assemble relevant data to justify a position, possibly comparing their district to others or to state and national guidelines. This is a time to compare and share, but not to criticize and chastise colleagues. Everyone “comes
to the table” with differing skill sets and knowledge. The task is to tap into those strengths. For example, one librarian may be close friends with important community leaders, one may have marketing and branding skills, while another may have exceptional social media skills and web design capabilities.

As the CLC plans and organizes, it is best to keep advocacy efforts separate from work, meeting outside school and using only personal email and home phones or personal cells. Although advocacy work is conducted in the best interests of students and teachers, some administrators or school board members may view library advocacy work as a conflict of interest in opposition to their decisions about how taxpayers’ money is used to provide student services. Additionally, some administrators may feel that the librarian is not being a team player, because he or she is not supporting the way the district has decided to allocate funds and staffing. As a citizen and possibly a taxpayer in the district, you always have the freedom of speech and a role in influencing decisions in a democratic society.

**THE LIBRARY ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

When the CLC has identified and coalesced around an advocacy goal, it is time to broaden support and create a library advisory committee (LAC). This group, coordinated and organized by the librarian(s), consists of influential stakeholders such as lead teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and sometimes a student leader, who can sway school decision makers. When they advocate for SLPs, their voices dispel the perceived self-serving messages when only librarians speak out. Although this seems an obvious next step, such committees are seldom created. According to the former Library Media Connection journal’s one-question surveys of 2008 and 2012, only 1 in 10 school libraries had an LAC, and “most librarians have no plans to institute a library advisory committee” (Dickinson, 2012, 2008). Perhaps this is due to a paucity of information about LACs, even though they are included in the AASL guidelines, which recommend forming a “Friends of the School Library” as part of an advocacy plan (AASL, 2009, p. 41).

A LAC is different than the group of volunteers who typically shelve books, run book fairs, and assist in other ways. The LAC serves only in an advisory role, meets infrequently or only as needed, and consists of the “movers and shakers” in the school and community who can influence decision makers about library staffing and resources. Initially, librarians need to decide if they need a school or district committee. This will largely depend on the district’s size—small districts may do well with a combined district committee; large districts may need committees at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, or one at each school due to differing goals or building needs. Identifying and inviting influential stakeholders is key. Seeking the advice of your administrators may be a good strategy to create some ownership and set the stage for collaboration.

Since LAC members will likely be busy leaders, clearly identify the purpose of the committee and its time commitment. Limit committee size to a workable number (7–12) and limit the number of meetings (maybe 2–5 per year) and the length of meetings (approx. 45–90 minutes). Have a pre-published agenda, so members know what will be discussed, and be sure that members understand their role is advisory. You want their input and experience as valued leaders in the school and/ or community to address and guide actions dealing with a specific issue. Typical agenda topics for the LAC include updating the library mission and vision statements, reacting to the library’s annual goals and objectives, suggesting strategies to seek needed resources, staffing, funding, and reviewing library policies. The role of the librarian is to prepare the agenda, guide the conversation, take notes, and use the input to form future strategies and actions. The librarian should prepare and present relevant data and trends but listen to their reactions and expectations. As this group exchanges information and ideas, developing a deep understanding of the role of the SLP in student learning, advocacy for the SLP will be nurtured. Refer to “Additional Resources” for more about creating LACs.

As the librarians meet and develop plans, they should not overlook the network of support in state and national school library organizations. American Library Association and AASL, as well as most similar state associations, have abundant advocacy resources, including AASL’s comprehensive Toolkit for Promoting School Library Programs (http://www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/tools/toolkits/promoting). Refer to the LibGuide curated by this author at http://librarschool.libguidescms.com/603 for more resources.

Broadening the library’s base of support by fostering a CLC and creating an LAC of influential stakeholders...
are clearly best practices that are the “new normal” in school library advocacy work. When challenged that advocacy work is “not in your job description,” clearly state that you need to be a strong advocate for your students and teachers in order to provide them with the instruction, learning resources, and reading support to enable high student achievement. If you are unwilling to be that advocate, no one else will! Embrace leadership and create these support networks as a 2016–2017 library goal.

REFERENCES


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


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