Growing Your Roots of Influence

Debra Kachel

In our profession, people are always talking about leadership, advocacy, and influence. While these terms can easily be defined, embracing their meaning and embedding related activities to transform one’s professional practice are not so easy.

To me, the root of leadership—an earned position—and advocacy—the process of building library champions—is influence. In the context of our profession, influence is the school librarian’s effect on potential library advocates that inspires them to support the mission and vision of the school library program. You cannot become a leader or an effective builder of library advocates unless you have influence over others.

Leadership is the process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal. (Krouse, 2013)

THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING IN THE MIDDLE

How do school librarians influence others? School librarians, fortunately, have a positional advantage within the school organization. They work in a “middle space,” between teachers and administration, serving as middle managers responsible for expensive school resources to support students’ reading and the school’s curriculum. We often hear about “leading from the middle,” but what does it mean in terms of advocacy and influence? Think of an Oreo cookie. Librarians are the filling that holds together and connects administrators and teachers to facilitate curriculum, instruction, professional development, and other school initiatives. Being in the middle allows the librarian to be a quiet force for change, working “both sides of the aisle,” to make a legislative analogy.

The reality is that 99 percent of all leadership occurs not from the top but from the middle of an organization. (Maxwell, 2010)

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

A quote from the movie Cool Hand Luke applies to our profession: “What we’ve got here is failure to communicate.” As the school library profession evolved from the stereotypical shushing librarian who checked out books to a teacher with specialized information and technology skills, we have failed to articulate this change to school and laypeople alike. This failure has led to diminished school library programs and staffing across our nation and world. We are now in triage mode, trying to determine priorities and actions for responding to this critical situation. What we have learned is that telling people why school libraries are important doesn’t seem to work. The multitude of school library impact research and survey findings doesn’t seem to sway school administrators and education policy makers, even when we can get the information to them. Why? Because we have not “sold” the reasons for maintaining quality school library programs in ways that solve their problems or address their priorities. For example, schools are creating new positions, such as assessment coordinators and technology integrators, while decreasing school librarian positions. It’s not hard to connect the dots. Testing coordinators solve the workload of school administrators; technology integrators implement 1:1 and other costly, technology-laden school initiatives for district administrators. In too many schools, the work of the school librarian is not seen as solving anyone else’s problems or addressing school initiatives. While administrators and board members like hav-
ing a school library (how many photos are taken in the school library for PR purposes?), when weighing the return on investment, school decision makers use the funding they have for other programs they consider more important to the school’s mission.

To influence stakeholders who make critical decisions about funding and support for school library programs, school librarians need to figure out how to “message” and market what we do and how school library programs are essential to student achievement and the success of the school. The messages need to show the connection between what our stakeholders care about and how supporting the school library program aligns with their concerns and issues. This requires a critical assessment of the “environment”—listening to and identifying those whom others listen to (the real leaders who already have influence) and learning what they care about. Only then can messages be constructed to illustrate how school library objectives align with their needs. Realize that this takes time and careful thought. Messaging needs to be sincere, passionate, and focused on students who are at the core of both the school and school library missions. After crafting a message, always re-evaluate it to determine if and how it impacts student learning and then how it appeals to the targeted stakeholder.

For example, pitch an idea to the principal who is concerned about reading test scores to organize, train, and manage a tutoring program in the library to help struggling readers in collaboration with the reading specialist and National Honor Society students as tutors. Or offer to manage a web page for the PTA as part of a LibGuide license that the PTA will fund so this web tool can also be used with students to curate learning resources. Partnerships work best and are more lasting when both parties realize benefits.

**We are drawn to passionate people on a mission that we believe in. Give people a reason to follow you.** (Shnall, 2013)

**YOU CAN’T DO THIS ALONE! COLLABORATION**

A major misconception about advocacy is that it is something you do alone. You send an email to a legislator; you make a speech to the school board; you tell your principal why students need more resources written in other languages. Isolated and individual acts of advocacy are laudable but are seldom effective unless you have many voices singing the same song. There is power in numbers! Librarians need to inspire stakeholders who can help them move the school library program forward. Collaboration—working with others to achieve desired and shared goals—is something school librarians do every day in instruction and curriculum work. Working with stakeholders invested in the success of the school library program, such as parents, school administrators, and policy makers, utilizes the same skill set. Collaboration is essential to create a team of advocates who all share the same values and passion.

A team or “tribe” approach—whether you call it a library advisory committee, strategic planning committee, or an advocacy team—will coalesce around big goals and refine action steps utilizing the information that only the librarian knows. A team approach can spread the messaging wider and faster and shares the workload. However, understand that collaborative planning requires the librarian to give up some control over the outcomes. Keep the big picture in mind, realizing that the school library program is just one cog in the school machine. All parts of the machine must work together to be successful. Compromises will need to be made, activities negotiated. But in the end, if you have transmitted your passion and knowledge, the committee will be energized to act upon a collaboratively developed advocacy plan that puts students in the forefront. As participating creators of the plan, they will “own” and be committed to the work, thus ensuring its success and longevity.

**INFLUENCE GROUNDS THE ADVOCACY TREE**

Think of growing your influence like a tree. As the tree sprouts limbs and leaves, the roots grow proportionately deeper and stronger, supporting the tree. Visualize stakeholder groups as the limbs, such as students, teachers, parents, school administrators, policy makers, and elected officials. Visualize each leaf as an activity that engages those stakeholders, such as providing professional development for teachers, volunteering for a school committee, voting in public elections, and presenting to the PTA. As you add leaves, both limbs and roots grow—your capacity for influence grows stronger and deeper. Like the rings in the tree trunk,
your advocacy efforts are expressed in years of good work, as advocacy and influence require time, persistence, and stamina. Nurturing the tree with the help of your “tribe” fortifies growth and will get you through the cold, hard winters and the hot, dry summers. As the players change through retirements, new hires, and elections, deep roots supported by the advocates you have developed will sustain your position of influence. Clear, targeted messaging that markets the school library program and achieves goals that others care about will move the program forward. Potential advocates will become strong library champions who publicly articulate how school libraries are essential for student learning. Ultimately, students will benefit when advocates who are in a strong position of influence and leadership stand up for them.

REFERENCES


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