Developing Talking Points and More

by DEBRA KACHEL

You want to defend the school library program because you know how much the students and teachers depend on the library. You know you need to step up and speak out. However, you don’t know what to say. You think that maybe you should just remain silent; you might make the situation worse. Sound familiar?

Many school librarians are finding themselves in this position today. The economic realities of today’s schools along with common misunderstandings about school libraries require librarians to learn a new skill set—creating and using prepared messages as part of an advocacy plan or campaign. Knowing what to say, when to say it, and to whom can be critically important to sustain school library programs.

Types of Advocacy Plans and the Challenges

Since most states do not require school library programs and librarians, the levels of support for them varies. Some librarians believe their programs are “safe” from budget and staffing cuts. However, as neighboring districts cut library programs, what works in one district to balance the budget can work elsewhere. Even one change in administration, such as a superintendent, can radically change the support for school libraries. Therefore, librarians need to be prepared with an advocacy plan even if they are currently receiving good support.

Obviously, the goal of the advocacy plan differs from school to school. For example, a new school librarian may need to discover and develop library supporters and advocates. In other schools, veteran librarians may need to ensure continued support. In less fortunate situations, where librarians have been furloughed, the advocacy challenge may be to reinstate positions.

The Core Advocacy Team

Begin by assembling a core team of librarians, teachers, and parents to develop the communication pieces. Keep in mind, staffing and budget cuts are likely to have a ripple effect throughout the district’s libraries so getting all the school librarians on board in the initial stages is essential. Remember, collaboration in advocacy is as important as collaboration in teaching. Plus, a team approach allows you to distribute tasks so no one person does all the work and increases ownership of the plan.

The Local Assessment

One cannot ignore the local environment, politics, personalities, and priorities of each district. Of particular importance is deciding which stakeholders will be the focus for most of the communications. After writing the challenge or goal, identify those stakeholders who have the power or the influence to address the goal.

Although students are the reason school librarians have jobs and the focus of their work, sadly, they are virtually powerless to impact library staffing, schedules, and budgets. School boards and superintendents have the power. Yet in some schools, certain business or community members control the way school board members and superintendents vote on key issues, particularly those that involve taxpayer funds.

Task one is figuring out who has the power or the power to influence those who make the decisions. Asking teachers who have lived in the school district for many years or observing at school board meetings are good strategies to assess this.

The Position Statement

Begin with a position statement that addresses your goal, and state it clearly, concisely, and without library jargon. The position statement is the foundation for the advocacy plan. It needs to be compelling, unique, memorable, and important to the targeted audience or stakeholders. Here are some examples:

► School library programs are essential for students to learn and teachers to teach. All XYZ schools need a
quality school library program with full-time certified staff.

- Students need resources and instructional technologies to learn. School libraries equitably and economically select and manage resources for the entire school.
- Vocal, influential advocates are needed to ensure strong school library programs that prepare students to be career and college ready in a globally competitive 21st Century.

The position statement should show the benefit to students, ideally propose a unique solution to a school concern or issue, and help stakeholders associate a benefit they value with the school library program.

THE TAGLINE

A tagline is a short, memorable phrase that is attached to all your communications (letterhead, emails, library website, etc.) and “brands” your campaign. Branding is a marketing practice to create a name, symbol, or design that identifies a product or program. In Jefferson County, Colorado, school library advocates chose the simple phrase “Support School Libraries” to brand their campaign (https://www.facebook.com/SupportSchoolLibraries). This also became the name of their Facebook page and was printed on banners and even an RV.

A tagline is easily crafted by shortening the position statement. Using the three position statements above, here are examples for each:

- School librarians…teaching students to learn, helping teachers to teach!
- School libraries…the hub of learning resources for all students!
- Support strong school libraries, support student learning!

TALKING POINTS

Talking points are succinct statements without jargon designed to convince or persuade. A concise and clear talking point is easily remembered, both for the librarian and the stakeholder. Talking points keep a speaker on topic and focus the dialog. Think about politicians and how they “stay on message.” They seldom directly answer a question. They have their memorized talking points and they stick to them, often continually repeating the same message.

To create talking points, employ strategies that work best with the identified stakeholder. For example, talking points addressed to administrators may employ the comparison strategy. Administrators are fiercely competitive and do not like to be “bested” by neighboring districts or schools. For example, “Our district has the highest librarian per student ratio in the entire county and the least number of library resources per student.” Statistical and factual talking points may work best with business people or school board members.

An example for a PTA group that employs the equity strategy is, “School libraries provide equal access to books and computers for all students regardless of the wealth of their families or communities.” Parents also often respond to an emotional or personalized talking point. Another strategy employed in Pennsylvania is shame. For example, “Prison libraries in Pennsylvania are required to have certified librarians, but not in public schools.” (Yes, unfortunately, this is true!)

Whether you are actively fighting cuts or being adequately supported by your school district, developing and using planned communications is an essential best practice. It is the librarian’s responsibility to advocate for the learning resources—physical, financial, and human.

To efficiently construct talking points, assign each member of the core advocacy team the task of writing one or two talking points on designated topics. Topics for talking points could include:

- Library staffing compared to other K-12 departments that serve all students
- The number of hours libraries will be open
- The impact of school libraries on reading and improving writing scores or specific populations, such as Hispanic or Black students
- National study of test scores where librarians were cut (Lance and Hofschire 2011)
- The correlation of library budgets and resources on test scores
- Local data on the number of students who don’t have access to the Internet at home
- The number of Common Core State Standards taught by librarians

Although the core team will develop many talking points, select and use those that are meaningful to the stakeholders or audience being addressed. If low test scores are important, use research that supports the role of school libraries and improved test scores. If your school has large numbers of disabled students or students living in poverty, use data showing how libraries help these populations. See References at the end of this article for sources of research.
ELEVATOR SPEECHES

Elevator speeches are short, highly focused, prepared speeches used to persuade. The name refers to the time it can be delivered—about the same time as an average elevator ride (usually 30 seconds to a minute; about 150 words). The speech is memorized and ready for those serendipitous moments when you have an opportunity to influence a potential school library advocate. Through constant use and repetition, it becomes your “signature” speech and you begin to “own” it.

Assign each member of the advocacy team to design an elevator speech for a specific stakeholder, using selected talking points. Share and critique the speeches in the privacy of someone’s home, not at school. All advocacy work should be done on personal time, with personal resources (email accounts, phone, etc.).

An elevator speech consists of a lead sentence that is your position and three supporting points or sentences—a “hook” to engage the interest of the stakeholder, some evidence or proof verifying your position, and a “bring it home” personalization related to the school or the students.

The following are examples of lead sentences:

▶ To a teacher: “Co-teaching reduces our workload and provides students with more individualized instruction.”
▶ To an administrator: “Studies have shown that school libraries can improve student test scores.”
▶ To a parent: “The library program can help your teen become career and college ready.”

The following are examples of supporting points which often answer “how” and “why”:

▶ The “HOOK”—Why the listener should care; elaborate on the benefit
To a parent: “I’m sure you want your son to be safe on the Internet while finding authoritative information for school assignments.”
To a principal: “Providing staff development for teachers on how to use digital resources helps improve instruction for students.”

▶ The PROOF—One sentence with statistics/research to back up your claims
To a school board member: “A recent study reported that students in states that lost librarians tended to have lower reading scores than those in states that gained librarians” (Lance and Hofschire 2011).
To a curriculum coordinator: “In libraries with flexible scheduling, all students are about four times more likely to earn ‘Advanced’ writing scores, and Hispanic students are almost seven times more likely to earn ‘Advanced’ scores with flexible scheduling” (Kachel and Lance 2013).

▶ “BRING IT HOME”—Personalize the issue by talking about your school and students.
To a legislator: “School districts in your legislative district are cutting library staffing and budgets causing students to have less access to learning and the resources they need.”

In delivering the elevator speech, keep it conversational and non-confrontational and stay on message (yours!). Although it may be personal, try to keep it professional and as impersonal as possible. Conclude with a friendly invitation to visit the school library.

MARKETING THE LIBRARY EVERY DAY THROUGH ADVOCACY MESSAGING

Whether you are actively fighting cuts or being adequately supported by your school district, developing and using planned communications is an essential best practice. As stated in the American Association of School Librarians’ (AASL) guidelines, school librarians need to be “guided by an advocacy plan that builds support from decision makers who affect the quality of the school library program” (2009, 41). It is the librarian’s responsibility to advocate for the learning resources—physical, financial, and human.

The students and teachers are counting on you! Use the developed messages on the library’s website, on handouts, even in your email signature and share the elevator speeches at every opportunity. Through repetition and use, the prepared advocacy messages become a transparent, embedded practice and a normal part of your everyday work. Unless potential library supporters know about the added value of a quality school library program in education, they will not become the advocates we so desperately need. Remember the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “There comes a time when silence is betrayal.”

REFERENCES:


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