The talents of school librarians to curate resources for their students and staff by creating “something from nothing” when libraries have no instructional budgets can’t be questioned.

With the wealth of resources on the Internet, well-trained and educated librarians can usually find online learning resources to support the school’s curricula. However, is that really fair to students and staff? Can all students find and read full-length books after school and at home via the Internet? Do they all have access? How long can the SLP be sustained with no budget? Will collections reach a point where almost the entire print collection needs to be chucked as it becomes obsolete and worn out to the point of uselessness? Are we as school librarians really doing our jobs if we don’t advocate for a library budget that supports the learning needs of all students and teachers?

A BOOK FAIR IS NOT A LIBRARY BUDGET

Too many librarians say that they don’t bother preparing an annual budget because they know that the library won’t receive any funds. Some principals even tell their librarians not to submit a budget. The library budget in too many schools consists of whatever can be begged, borrowed, or purchased through fund-raising or grant-writing efforts. Without book fairs and PTAs and the money from those sources, many school libraries would have no funds to update collections and buy the new novels and picture books students crave, much less the costly databases, ebooks, and references needed to support today’s curricula.

THE LIBRARY BUDGET BEGINS WITH AN ADVOCACY PLAN

School librarians need to first make their case to the school’s fiscal decision makers. As a program administrator, the school librarian, according to the American Association of School Librarians’s job description, is responsible for “preparing, justifying, and administering the budget to support specific program goals” (AASL, 2010.). School administrators need to be presented with the facts and needs, so they can determine funding priorities. Without that information, the library program will surely be bypassed when funds are allocated. It is the responsibility of the school librarian to inform principals of the information, reading, and instructional technology needs of the school. If asked why a budget is being prepared, the librarian should respond, “I am a student advocate for the learning needs of this school. Whether these needs are funded or not, it is my responsibility to present them for consideration.” Remember, principals (and other budget managers) “don’t know what they don’t know.”

BUDGET PLANNING

First, find out the district’s budget cycle: When is the budget planned, considered, and finalized? When and how do other departments submit their requests? Often budgeting for the next school year begins in fall of the current school year and is finalized in January. Submitting requests after the school’s budget has been decided will leave the library program out in the cold. Also, learn when budgets are closed out for the school year. If funds are not spent by a certain date, they are usually returned to the district coffers. Some districts require all funds for a school year to be spent or encumbered as early as December.

If there is no budget request format, create one that shows how requests are directly tied to curricular subjects and/or student needs. Use data to support requests. For example, if a curriculum is being revised, evaluate current print and digital resources, research needed resources, and estimate costs. “Hard” data, including age of books, circulation indicating popular types of recreational reading, database usage stats, and so forth can be quickly collected with automated systems. Qualitative data, in the form of student or teacher surveys, are also supportive. Using state and national data that show how much is spent per student on library resources may also cause budget decision makers to rethink library support.

Rule one in working with principals is don’t surprise them! Librarians should have a conversation with the principal early about assessment of the school’s (not just the library’s) information, reading, and technology needs. Discuss ways to develop a plan for submitting an annual budget. Request
to serve on technology and curriculum committees to learn about needs and offer suggestions. Remember, “If you aren’t at the table, you’re on the menu!” Clarify the library’s role in 1:1 device initiatives, provision of ebooks, revisions of curricula, and other school priorities. Seek direction from the district’s strategic plan and consider how the library program can help achieve stated goals. Think globally, considering all the information resources available to students and staff, not just what can be located within the library walls! Principals need to see the librarian as a team player and student advocate who cares about all the school’s resources that contribute to student learning.

Meet with teachers and/or departments to understand their information needs in teaching. Demonstrate potential resources, like a science database and how its information aligns with the curriculum. Show teachers how to determine reading levels of books (i.e., Follett’s TitleWave or the library’s online catalog) and articles (i.e., EBSCO or other periodical database) for use in classrooms. If the resource is costly, ask department chairpersons or others who oversee a specific budget to share the cost. Cost-sharing is an effective budget strategy.

Use a spreadsheet to detail requests and a rationale for them, aligning to identified needs with supporting data and estimated costs. Align requests to the district or principal’s goals for the school year. For example, if reading tests scores are low, particularly at a certain grade level or among a certain group of students, show how the requests can address that grade level or group. If students are receiving laptops in a 1:1 initiative, show how ebooks can be licensed and read by students with the devices. While the school may initially need to depend on the public library’s ebook collection (a no-cost budget item), include an ebook collection that would specifically address students’ reading levels.

Finally, prioritize the list with input from teachers and students. When money is tight (as it always is), principals will want to know the top two or three library needs as perceived by the entire school. The requests will be given increased consideration when other teachers and departments, as well as students, support the library’s budget requests. Always be realistic and articulate how these requests will improve student learning.

**BUDGET PRESENTATION**

When presenting the budget to the principal, remember “less is more.” Summarize the top three library requests on a single cover page with bullets and rationales tied directly to student achievement. Include a rounded-off budget cost for each. Attach spreadsheet pages with more detailed descriptions, vendors, and itemized costs. First impressions count, so make the cover page the most impactful. Refrain from using the phrase “my budget.” This is not the librarian’s budget; it is a budget requesting student and staff learning resources managed through the school library program. The role of the librarian, as the chief information officer, is to assess current school resources, identify needs, research appropriate resources, and present a budget with articulated rationales to the budget decision makers, with the ultimate goal of increasing student achievement.

Schedule an appointment with the principal to present the budget face-to-face when there will be as few interruptions as possible. Share the library budget requests first with the district’s library coordinator, if there is one. This can serve as a “dry run” for presenting to the principal. Email an electronic copy to the principal after the budget meeting and follow up in a week or so to see if the principal has any questions (and to remind him of the requests).

**LIBRARIAN AS STUDENT ADVOCATE**

Regardless, whether some items of the library budget are funded or not, thank the principal for considering the requests. Even if the principal states there is no money, suggest that when budgets are closed out for the school year that perhaps leftover funds in multiple accounts could be compiled and reallocated to the library’s budget to purchase a few of the items. Actually, this often happens in practice, so be prepared to immediately process a purchase order using the prepared library budget documents. Also, let the principal know that you plan to seek outside funding from the PTA, the school’s foundation, or other potential funders in order to fill some of the needs. By annually preparing a reasonable and articulated library budget that reflects the needs of students to learn and teachers to teach, the school librarian makes clear his or her leadership role in advocating for student learning.

**REFERENCES**

CLASSROOM CAPERS

Grades 3-7. Gavin, Randi, Trevor, Scott, and Natalie have all been anticipating sixth grade in Mr. Mitchell’s class. When he moves away, and the school brings Mrs. Woods out of retirement to replace him, they can’t believe it. She’s so old some of their parents had her! And she’s strict, too!

Worse follows: They’ll also have Mrs. Magenta, a free-spirited teacher with a fun approach to math and science. Who ever heard of math and science being fun? School turns out to be fun, however, with reading aloud, art projects, and recess fun - until administration insists recess and reading aloud stop so everyone can focus on test prepping. They want perfect scores for the state-wide tests, so the kids come up with a way to cheat to ensure perfect scores. Will they get caught? Or will they give themselves up to save their teacher? Told in alternating voices.

Grades 3-4. Mallory’s neighbor needs a sitter for her twin five-year-old sons while she works from home, and Mallory and her friend Chloe need to make some money. How hard can it be to take care of two adorable little boys, especially in their own house? It turns out to be plenty hard, especially when it starts interfering with school homework and getting ready for the class poetry slam.

When a lack of attention ends up with marker-painted walls and a skinned bloody knee, the twins’ mom ends up firing the girls, and only some fast talking and apologizing gets them back to work. However, is Mallory going to be able to get her log cabin project done and her poem written and still make sure the boys are safe and occupied? How is she going to balance all the stuff she needs to do for school and still keep her word?

Grades 3-7. When Chase falls off his horse onto his head, he’s in coma for four days, then wakes up with amnesia. Although he used to be a big sports star, his concussion means no contact sports for a while. This doesn’t seem like that big of a deal, but his dad, a former sports star, thinks his mom is coddling him, his best friends can’t believe he can’t play, and no one at school seems to believe he has forgotten everything.

Even worse, as he hears stories about himself and begins to regain bits of memory, he discovers he was a bully and a troublemaker. He wants to be different, but it takes him a while to convince people he’s not the old Chase. Then, a bad decision from his past catches up with him and threatens to ruin the new Chase’s life and drive away all his new friends.

Grades 3-7. George and Lilly, best friends since before they can remember, have been looking forward to the fifth grade Spirit Week all year. The prize is rumored to be amazing, and they really want whatever it is! Although they are in different classrooms this year, their classes have always paired against the other two fifth grades, and they know they can win. George is very organized, while Lilly is full of ideas and energy. Together they will be unstoppable!

However, to their shock, their classes are pitted against each other this year, and Lilly becomes her class captain. When an accident puts George’s team captain out of commission, he gets picked to replace her, and suddenly best friends go head-to-head. Lilly wants to win at any cost, and people on both teams keep undermining the captains’ desire to remain friends. Will Spirit Week cost George and Lilly lifelong friendship?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


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