The Annual Report as an Advocacy Tool

by DEBRA E. KACHEL

A CROSS THE NATION, there is a growing concern over job losses and the school library profession certainly is not exempt. Hit hardest are those states where school librarians and libraries are not required through legislation. As education funds from states shrink, school administrators and school boards, desperate to balance budgets with minimal tax increases to their communities, closely eye the more expensive, non-mandated areas of the budget, like school library programs. Many are asking, “Is that program really worth the cost? Is it essential to academic achievement or is it just a nice program to have?” If school librarians are not producing the evidence to answer these questions, it is very likely that the school library program and its staffing are in jeopardy.

THE ANNUAL REPORT

An annual report that communicates and assesses program goals, trends, and accomplishments is an essential document for every school librarian. Too often, librarians report that their principals do not ask for such a report, so they foolishly think it’s not necessary. A well-crafted annual report, however, can be an effective advocacy tool not just for school administrators, but also as a vehicle to showcase the unique contributions of the school library program to parents, community members, teachers, and students. It is a valuable tool in the school librarian’s arsenal of evidence-based practices that reflects the program’s long-term strategic plan. According to AASL’s Empowering Learners, the annual report is a reflective and formative assessment instrument to gauge progress on long-range goals (2009, 31). Utilizing data, input from library users, and student work collected during the year, the school librarian can easily reflect on and celebrate successes and plan improvements for weaker areas of the program.

The annual report needs to be concise yet inclusive of all aspects of the library program. For readers to stay engaged in the report, it also needs to go beyond written text. Today’s annual report needs to be a Web production, embedded with audio and video content, and posted on the library’s website. There are many free Web-based tools, like Vimeo, Flicker, Issuu, wikis, etc., that can be used to show off the program and the librarian’s talents. For examples, read Joyce Valenza’s NeverEndingSearch blog of June 20, 2011 (http://blog.schoollibraryjournal.com/neverending-search/2011/06/20/reflecting-on-20102011/). A variety of formats, such as the following, need to be considered:

▶ TEXT to explain or to list activities
▶ VISUALS to condense information in graphs and charts
▶ PHOTOS to make it personal and interesting (All school guidelines on using student photos should be followed.)
▶ LINKS to present more detail, such as links to student-produced videos, the written information literacy curriculum by grade level, etc.

The most difficult part of producing an annual report

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is deciding what to include and exclude. It is important to think about the primary audience who will read/view the report, and this may vary with each school. Is the report targeted to school administrators and school board members as an advocacy piece, or is it designed as a public relations tool for teachers, parents, or students? If it is intended for a mixed audience and used for multiple purposes, something for everyone should be included. Administrators want to see the librarian’s role in teaching and improving student skills that will be tested on standardized tests. School board members want to be assured of good fiscal management and that the best resources are purchased with the budget provided. Teachers want to see if they or their colleagues are included and what units are featured. Students and their parents want to see photos or videos of student projects. However, the overriding message needs to be that the library program is indispensable in the teaching and learning process.

One way to select the content for the annual report is to group potential topics into the three major areas of program development outlined in the AASL guidelines, Empowering Learners published in 2009: 1) “Teaching for Learning”—the instructional role of the library program and how it contributes to student learning; 2) “Building the Learning Environment”—the library collection and access to resources; and 3) “Empowering Learning through Leadership”—the performance of the librarian and library staff in achieving the library’s stated mission, goals, and objectives. (See Use This Page on page 2 of this issue.)

TEACHING FOR LEARNING

School administrators and other decision makers need to recognize the significant and unique role that the school library program makes in improving instruction and teaching students critical 21st-century skills. The knowledge that an information specialist brings to the collaboratively created teacher-librarian unit should be especially showcased. For example, school librarians can briefly discuss a lesson on Internet safety or how students learned advanced Internet search techniques. It is not enough to show that the school librarian is a teacher. Today what librarians teach must be seen as “value-added” or something different and desired that is not already being taught by classroom teachers. Readers need to see the connections in planned units among information literacy standards and curriculum, the subject-specific curriculum, and state/national academic standards, such as the Common Core. Readers need to see that teachers and librarians working together create more authentic and diverse learning activities that motivate students to learn.

Undoubtedly, there are many units of instruction from which one can choose, however, the intended audience should be considered. Include what will interest them, not necessarily a favorite lesson or unit. Using charts or graphs that summarize the number of integrated lessons by departments or grade levels is a visual way to present lots of data concisely to show the “big picture.” Be sure to include photos, a personal quote or two, and links for more detail.

BUILDING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Including data on the collection, its size, age, and use are certainly appropriate. However, librarians tend to love these data; others find it boring. Never print out a multi-page, preformatted report from an automated circulation/catalog system and expect the readers to understand it. Readers will be more interested in graphics and the librarian’s analysis of the data and trends. For example, with evidence of increased use of databases, the librarian should include reasons for the increase and predict future needs or trends of use. Sharing an expert knowledge of resources and their use, the school librarian establishes credibility and further illustrates the unique set of information management, program planning, and assessment skills he or she has accrued.

It is also important to show how the library’s mission and goals are carried out with the budget and staff provided. However, use statistics wisely and strategically. Although all of the data shown in Figure 1 are factually correct, the way

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Effective</th>
<th>More Effective</th>
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<tr>
<td>The library budget was $10,000 for 2011-12.</td>
<td>The library budget provided $6.60 per student; however, an average hard bound book today costs $22.00.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The average age of the print collection is 1991.</td>
<td>The average age of the print collection is 1991—the same year that the “World Wide Web” was announced.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book circulation was 24,536.</td>
<td>Reading increased with 23% more books being circulated than last year, particularly the new paperbacks purchased based on a student interest survey.</td>
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Fig. 1. Using Statistics Wisely
the facts are expressed in column 2 work better to “sell” the needs of the school library program.

It is important to keep the tone of your report upbeat and positive. If there is negative information to convey, such as an inadequate budget or reduced staffing, use the facts and let the reader draw the conclusions. For example, “The library served 5,392 fewer students than last year due to staffing cuts.” If it can be documented as fact, it can be included. An annual report should, in a professional and nonbiased way, express what occurred in the library and its program for the year. Don’t sugarcoat it if it’s not pretty. It is best, however, to keep personal feelings out of the annual report. But if cuts are made, begin documenting how they impact student learning as soon as the school year begins. At the end of the year in the annual report, compare the statistics and facts with the previous year, such as number of student and class visits, number of lessons taught, amount of resources used, etc. That’s the evidence that will make a compelling case without emotional hyperbole.

EMPOWERING LEARNING THROUGH LEADERSHIP

It has often been stated that the librarian is the library program and, in some ways, that is true. No one doubts the impact of a dynamic, talented school librarian who cares about student learning and quality instruction. In an annual report, the expertise and leadership of the librarian and his or her accomplishments, continued professional development, and involvement in leadership activities within and outside the school need to be highlighted. This is not the time to be shy. Too often, school librarians do not claim ownership of their good work and share the successes of their practice. Many school library websites fail to even mention the librarian’s name or anything about the person. The annual report should include committee work, grants and fundraisers, articles, presentations, workshops, staff development provided for teachers, professional awards, and such. If there are too many (good for you!), provide a link to a webpage that has more information, perhaps the full-text of articles written and a résumé and photo. Readers need to make a personal connection with the librarian and recognize that he/she is committed to being a school leader and advocate for students.

This section should also reflect on the identified goals for the year and set new ones for the coming year. Buffy Hamilton’s 2011 Creekview High School Media Annual Report is exemplary in this area (http://theunquietlibrary.wordpress.com/2011/05/30/the-unquiet-library-annual-report-2011-part-1/). Broadly stated goals will be further articulated as objectives and action steps in the librarian’s annual professional development plan, generally required as part of the teacher evaluation process. By reviewing the year, the librarian can assess both his or her professional accomplishments and the effectiveness of the total library program. The culmination of data and information in the annual report provides the evidence and rationale for future budget decisions, personal and professional goals, and long-range program planning.

FINAL WORDS

As long as stakeholders such as school administrators, parents, teachers, and community members do not understand the role of school librarians and school libraries in today’s learning environment, the future of school library programs will remain bleak. Advocacy begins with an awareness and recognition. Crafting a Web-based annual report with data, graphics, and links to audio and video student-produced work and projects paints a picture that can create that recognition by illustrating how the library program helps students learn and teachers teach. School librarians need to make the production of an annual report a priority in their practice not only for self and program assessment, but for building the support necessary to maintain robust and quality school library programs.

REFERENCES:

See Use This Page (page 2) for a chart outlining examples of topics to include in the annual report.

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