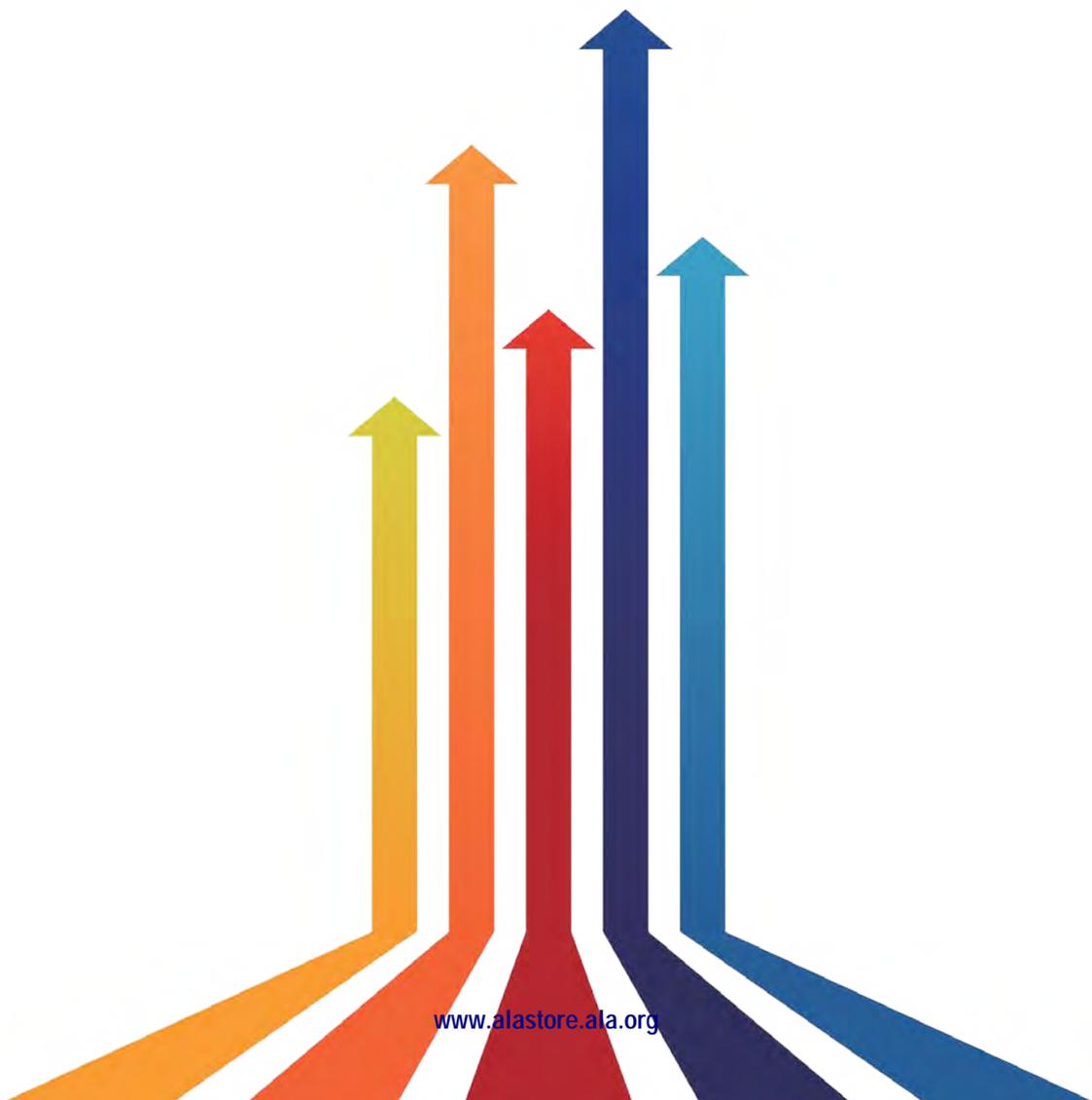


Ruth Toor and Hilda K. Weisburg

BEING INDISPENSABLE

A School Librarian's Guide to Becoming an Invaluable Leader



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Ruth Toor and Hilda K. Weisburg

American Library Association
Chicago 2011

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Toor, Ruth, 1933-

Being indispensable : a school librarian's guide to becoming an invaluable leader / Ruth Toor and Hilda K. Weisburg.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8389-1065-8 (alk. paper)

1. School libraries—United States—Administration. 2. Instructional materials centers—United States—Administration. 3. School libraries—Aims and objectives. 4. School libraries—Public relations. 5. School libraries—Evaluation. 6. Leadership. I. Weisburg, Hilda K., 1942- II. Title.

Z675.S3T5847 2011

025.1'978—dc22

2010014055

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ISBN: 978-0-8389-1065-8

Printed in the United States of America

15 14 13 12 11 5 4 3 2 1

Cover design by Karen Sheets de Gracia

Illustrations by Jill Davis

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INTRODUCTION

Why did we write *Being Indispensable*? Primarily, it was to raise awareness that twenty-first-century learning *requires* school librarians to be leaders. The world has changed, and what you do has become more critical than ever. However, too many school librarians have not been proactive in their buildings, and there has been an ongoing disconnect between what *you* know you do and what administrators and teachers think you do.

This lack of understanding, especially in an economic downturn, has led to severe cuts and elimination of positions. Many wonder if school librarians have become an endangered species. You no longer have an option about becoming an indispensable building leader. Your students and your job depend on it.

Our previous book, *New on the Job*, covered the basics that every school librarian should master in order to be comfortable and successful. *Being Indispensable* is the advanced course. Keeping your job, particularly in tough times, requires a deeper understanding and a commitment to doing it better—and differently. By following these suggestions and recommendations, you can become so invaluable that no one would consider eliminating your position.

Think of this text as a cookbook. You never use all the recipes. Choose those ideas that interest you the most, and begin implementing your plan for success.

Being Indispensable is about leadership and advocacy as well as about knowing and modeling the latest educational trends. Instead of obsessing about why your very small piece of the educational world is not working and you deserve better, you need to have compassion and empathy for all your colleagues from the top down—from superintendent to custodian—and recognize that everyone is struggling and having a hard time and that you are not their personal target.

However, you can do everything in this book and do it well and still find your job in jeopardy. Sometimes a decision is made at a higher level by people who don't know what you are doing no matter how much you are respected in your building. Sometimes budgets have shrunk so much that there is really no alternative for the school board. You may still be able to save your job, how-

ever, even under these dire circumstances, if you have mastered advocacy and built a strong base of support. In large districts where remote superintendents make decisions, principals can have tremendous authority for their own buildings regarding how their budget will be spent, thereby saving your job. You can see that you have many options. Be sure to check the web resources in the appendix for further help.

Best wishes to you in weathering this crisis as you learn to be even more efficient, effective, and indispensable!

CHAPTER 5

What Does the Community Want?

Parents

- Elementary School
- Middle School
- High School

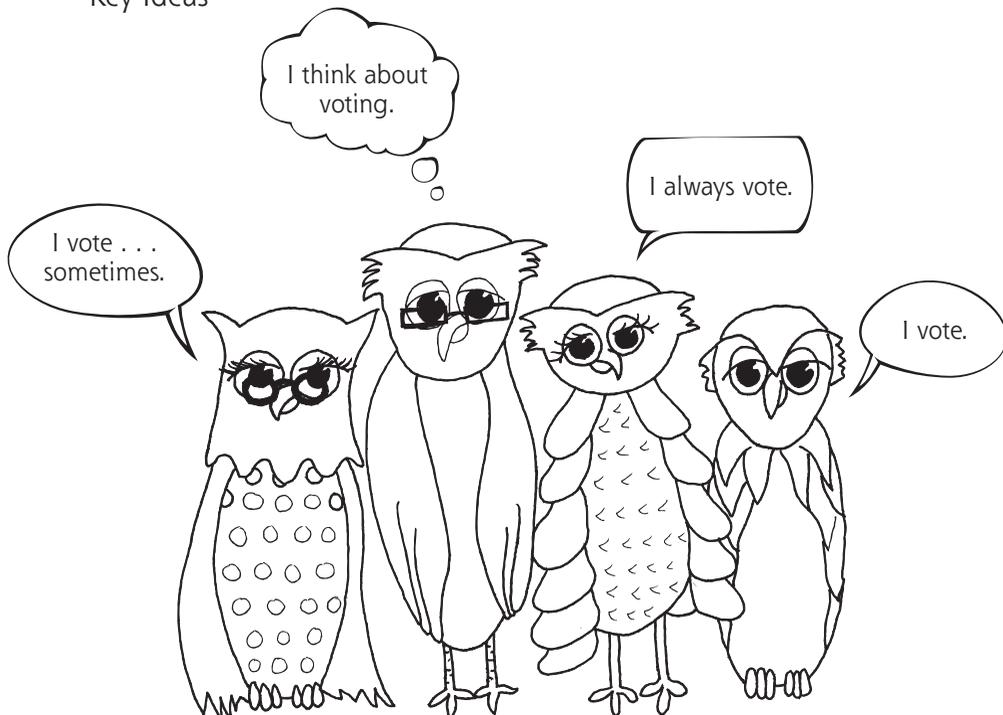
Business Owners

The Public Library

Community or Other Colleges

Other Community Members

Key Ideas



The community covers a broad spectrum, and, though relatively homogenous in many areas, comprises diverse interests. Although districts to a greater or lesser degree seek to cultivate residents and business owners, voters or those who are or can be vocal are of primary concern to you. You will not be able to reach everyone, nor is it a good use of your time to try. Therefore, focus on target groups, selecting from those most likely to support you and any others with whom you can build relationships.

Parents form the most significant core of this subset. They are the ones to whom you have the easiest access and are the most likely to have strong opinions on the schools and, if you can get the word out, the SLP. In many places they seem to run the schools.

The business community is often overlooked by school librarians but not by the administration. Business owners are a powerful group when energized. Making contacts with them is not always easy, but there are various ways to reach them.

Recognizing that all libraries share common interests, it is wise to become familiar with your counterparts in the public library. Although you do not want anyone to think that what you do can be subsumed within the public library, you do want to show the benefits of cooperation. If there is a college in your area, particularly if you are at the high school level, you can bring greater depth to your program by forming a connection there.

What remains is the rest of the community. For the most part, the people in this group are relatively apathetic about the schools. You need to keep their presence in the back of your mind, as they are often the ones who rise up to defeat the budget and cause tremendous harm to your SLP.

PARENTS

In some communities, they dominate the school and are highly active, but generally parents range from a small, very involved core to those who, at best, focus only on their own children's individual situations. How they view the system and what they want from it tends to vary with their child's grade level. Because they all have a personal connection to the school and are rarely ignored by the administration, they can be your best allies or become an opposing force.

Elementary School

These are the warm, fuzzy years. Parents send their young off with a mixture of anticipation and apprehension. Although the start of school often provides parents additional free time or the opportunity to return to work, most parents recognize that this is the first big step in a child's journey toward adulthood. Some may be saddened that they are no longer the center of their offspring's

universe. All want their children to be loved by their teachers and fear that might not happen.

The open, welcoming environment you create allows you to make each child feel special and appreciated. Although most of you have a fixed schedule and focus heavily on large-group instruction, book selection time is when you can have one-on-one interactions with students. Keep track of whom you speak with in each class so that you can eventually get to every child. Your comments and suggestions when repeated at home give parents a sense of your caring.

Parents want their children to be successful in school. How each defines success varies, but most definitions include being a top student (or at least a good one) and being accepted and liked by classmates. Parents also want their child to enjoy reading. The AASL tagline “Kids who read succeed” resonates strongly at this level, as does “Every kid succeeds @ the library.”

Your job is to make sure that both of those messages are sent regularly and demonstrated often. Promote the concept that reading skills are learned in the classroom but lifelong readers are nurtured in the school library. Reading programs lasting a few months and a huge display where interested parents can see how their child or their child’s class is doing get their attention and interest. Inform parents of these programs and displays in as many channels as you have available. Among your options are letters sent home announcing the program and asking for parents’ cooperation, pictures on your web page showing the progress of this schoolwide activity, and an article in the school newsletter when the program ends. If you create a culminating activity that brings in the local media and parents (and administrators), so much the better.

Many parents have fond memories of storytime in libraries and want the same experience for their children. Use your website to capitalize on this support by posting what you read to the different grades. Provide a synopsis of the books. To make it easier, do a cut-and-paste from bookseller websites (giving credit, of course). Suggest simple follow-up activities whenever you can. Two or three questions or one activity, or a combination of these, will suffice.

Author visits and book fairs, even when sponsored by the parent association, give you additional avenues for sending the message while showing your expertise and the resources of the school library. Most schools make much of Read Across America, as it is sponsored by the National Education Association, but do not leave this event just to the teachers. You need to be an active participant. In addition to using the school library as a venue, after checking with your administrator, consider contacting your middle school or high school counterpart, or both, to ask whether older students can come and read to classes.

A chart showing “What I know how to do” can be used to highlight personal achievements for grades K–2. Across the top of the chart, list the skills and

behaviors that you stress. List the students' names vertically. Have the children "self-assess" when they have accomplished each skill or behavior, and fill in the box with a star. Display examples of grades 3–6 research projects, making sure to eventually include each student. On your website, announce whose work is now decorating the school library.

You are probably feeling that there is no way you will have time to do all these tasks. If you are thinking that you need to take on the whole project by yourself, you are right—there's no way. But remember one of the key points of time management: delegate. Consider having volunteers handle this chart. One can select and mount the display (knowing that you want to rotate the featured students). Another who enjoys working on the computer can update the website.

Volunteers are an important resource at the elementary level. Although it takes time to recruit and train them, and some require a certain amount of nurturing, they provide benefits that go beyond getting books shelved and in order. They are your conduit to other parents and to the community at large. Volunteers talk about their work in the school library and observe and comment on how you do your job. Do it well and they will sing your praises—and fight to the death to ensure that you remain in place. They can also inform you about issues of community concern. Pay attention and look for ways to address any issues that fall within your responsibilities.

It's Elementary

1. How can you increase your contact with parents?
2. How can you show parents that their child is nurtured and admired in the school library?
3. What skills and behaviors can indicate student success in the SLP?
4. What projects lend themselves to being displayed in the school library?
5. How will you promote these projects?

Middle School

Many parents have become apprehensive about how their child will fare in middle school. Stories of mean girls and general bullying have gotten widespread notoriety—with some justification. Most schools now have a zero tolerance for these behaviors, but it is harder for them to track and react to the various forms of cyberbullying.

In addition to what the school is doing to prevent various forms of bullying, develop several approaches to educate and inform parents. On your website or via a newsletter, suggest websites such as that of the National Crime Prevention Council (www.ncpc.org/topics/cyberbullying), which has numerous links that explain the problem and provide training on how to deal with it. The Council also has student information at www.ncpc.org/topics/cyberbullying/cyberbullying-faq-for-teens.

Another avenue is to present a program at parent association meetings. Expand the discussion beyond online bullying to include cybersafety. If you have time or can do a follow-up presentation, talk about misinformation and propaganda that students might mistake for credible sites. Although many are blocked during the school day (have them opened for your presentation), kids are accessing these websites at home. Because you cannot be there to teach them how to validate the information, show parents what to do so they can guide their children. This information not only protects students, it also shows parents the value of your expertise. Allow time for questions. Some may suggest a topic for a future program.

Grades take on new importance for middle school parents. With high school looming and college not far beyond, they are concerned about their children's academic success and what it portends for the future. No matter the economic climate, they are beginning to recognize that we are in a global society requiring new and greater skills to compete.

You probably do not give grades, but you can help inform parents of what and how their children are learning by featuring class projects on your website. In addition to noting the grade level and teacher, highlight the information literacy skills and behaviors built into the assignment. Identify the online databases students are expected to access and note that access can be done from home.

Create an FAQ on inquiry learning, explaining what it is and why it is the twenty-first-century approach to instruction. Consider allowing parents to query you online about school library-based assignments and other questions they may have beyond what you explained in the FAQ, adding questions that reveal concerns that others might have.

Although funds are always tight, consider including a parent section in your professional collection. You might be able to get some grant money to do this from your local education foundation. Promote the service through all the available communication channels. If you cannot purchase these titles, at least prepare an annotated bibliography and share it with the public library and local bookstores. Be sure to put your name and the tagline for your SLP on the bibliography as a further promotion of your program.

Caught in the Middle

1. How effective is your school's antibullying program?
2. Whom do you need to contact or inform, or both, before doing a parent presentation?
3. What key points would you highlight in a presentation to parents?
4. Are there other parent concerns that you can address?
5. Which inquiry-based projects should be among the first you feature?

High School

At this level parents seem almost invisible. You might spot them in the principal's or guidance office primarily when their kid has gotten into some difficulty. There may not even be a parent association, because not enough people show up for meetings. They are present in greatest numbers at teacher conferences, followed by attendance at sports and other events in which their child participates.

To reach parents you need to plan strategically. During conferences, lure them into the school library with videos of various classes at work (post a sign where they register to alert them to the fact), or some other draw. For example, offer to give one-time amnesty on overdues if a student's parent stops in and picks up a well-designed, trifold brochure on what the SLP adds to student learning. Also, look for extracurricular activities you can lead that will develop a cadre of faithful parents.

Once parents are in the school library, make sure you have a message that will resonate. Recognize what is most important to them. Safety is still an issue, but they are somewhat less concerned about school bullying and more worried about what is happening on the Internet. They are aware of social networking sites, and some have their own pages on MySpace or Facebook, depending on which site their kid uses. Usually their child will not "friend" them, so they still don't know what is happening.

The presentation on cybersafety recommended for middle school is a good idea at this level as well. If there is no parent association, consider offering a special program on some evening (with administrative approval) or at parent conferences. If possible, hold it either immediately before or after the scheduled conference time. The new problem is that texting on cell phones has virtually replaced e-mail and instant messages. Although parents can select from numerous programs that monitor what happens on home computers, there are still few programs that monitor cell phones. Search for these programs under "monitoring cell phone messages" to find what is currently available.

Many parents do not like invading their children's privacy, but if they choose a program that informs users that monitoring is in progress, it is not like spying. The amount of sexually explicit exchanges on cell phones, both verbal and graphic, makes this a topic parents need to discuss with their children. To more fully bring the point home, show them NetLingo's list of "Top 50 Internet Acronyms Parents Need to Know" at www.netlingo.com/top50/acronyms-for-parents.php.

The other significant want of high school parents is for their son or daughter to get into a good college, or, in some cases and locations, be ready for a well-paid job in industry. The latter is becoming more difficult to accomplish without some postsecondary education. Many parents, however, do not realize they want their children to get through college successfully *in four years*. Few are aware that the average student now takes six years to graduate, and nearly half the entering freshmen do not graduate at all.¹ In addition, parents have no knowledge of the importance of information literacy skills and, awed by the tech-savvy skills of their children, do not perceive any need to teach them anything related to the Internet.

To get your core message across that the range of competencies included in AASL's *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* is vital and that the SLP is an essential component to their children's future success, you will need to funnel it through the college issue. In cooperation with your school's guidance department (more on this in chapter 6), plan programs on using school library resources to select colleges and be accepted by them. Although many will purchase the various compendiums giving college information, few can acquire them all, while you have these as well as additional material on writing entrance-winning essays and other related topics.

In the course of these presentations, introduce the frightening statistics. Parents quickly appreciate that six years of college costs over 50 percent more than the traditional four (because tuition goes up every year). From there you can make the point that these students are college-eligible but not college-ready. The skills, attitudes, and behaviors addressed in the AASL national standards and therefore in the SLP provide the critical thinking necessary for them to be successful and graduate on time.

Depending on the amount of time you have, you might also want to explore with parents the fact that knowing how to search the Internet or use technology is not the same thing as having the ability to evaluate credibility and select relevant information. Once you have proven to them the value you bring and how you directly contribute to student success, they become the allies you need. If you ever question their power, check out the success story of the Spokane (Washington) moms at www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6590045.html.

Going Higher

1. What will you do to bring parents into the school library during conferences?
2. What club or other activity can you advise?
3. Besides presentations, what vehicles do you have available to send your message to parents?

BUSINESS OWNERS

The small-business owners in your community tend to live there. As a result, they have a double agenda. On the one hand, they want schools to thrive because successful schools make the town or area (in larger locations) a favorable place to live. This feature tends to result in more business. On the other hand, they do not want their taxes to go up.

Before determining how you can address business owners' wants, you need to consider whether it is a good use of your time, because this group is hard to reach. If you know local business owners, certainly you want to send messages to them that match their needs, but you should not be actively pursuing them. This does not mean you should ignore opportunities when they fall into your lap.

For instance, at the high school level the school library might be used for a visit from the chamber of commerce or local realtors. Rather than complaining about having to close off a section of your facility (or close it entirely) while they are there, prepare a fact sheet or brochure highlighting key points. Your key message is "What the SLP Does for Our Community."

In the brochure or on the fact sheet, prominently include your tagline and mission and vision statements. Select statistics that go beyond circulation figures to include collaborative units or, at lower grades, the number of stories read in a given month. List top examples of twenty-first-century skills learned through the SLP.

Look for ways to partner with businesses, making owners more aware of what you do, but make sure the partnership connects with your program. Readings at local bookstores are one way to reach out without too great an investment of time. You can have your brochure available by the cash register.

With administrative approval, see if any businesses are willing to help sponsor an author visit. In addition to a big sign announcing the fact, try to get the local media to cover the event. The coverage will give the business some free publicity. Even better, when people help you, they become committed to your success.

Once you have made some good contacts, you might be able to address the Rotary or Kiwanis clubs, or both. Because they meet during the day, you would

have to be excused in order to attend, but most administrators can support this. They might even join you. This is your chance to let club members know that the SLP is a cost-efficient means of improving student learning, which increases scores on high-stakes tests. These scores tend to be heavily reported within the state and show that your community is a great place to live and raise children.

Again, you do not want to commit too much of your time to this segment of the population, but you should stay aware of it and be ready to promote your program here as well. Remember, some of these business owners may serve on the board of education and even more of them are likely to be parents. They often look for graduates to become their employees. They have a stake in a quality education; be sure they know you are a major contributor to it.

Business Sense

1. What contact do you have with the local business community?
2. Which businesses might want to sponsor an event in the school library?
3. What statistics and other information will you put in a brochure for business owners?

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

If you are not a community resident, you may not have much contact with the public library, but you and the librarians there have many common interests. The financial well-being of your town or city affects your budgets. The board of education has oversight in the schools, while a board of trustees does the same for the public library. Both boards are made up of locals. In many places the superintendent of schools is an *ex officio* member of the board of trustees.

You deal with a similar problem in that people mistake clerks for professionals and do not appreciate the need for a college education, let alone advanced degrees, to perform your job. Additionally, you serve much of the same clientele. Students, parents, and teachers living in the district to a greater or lesser extent are public library users. You both promote reading and literacy and often benefit from a state or regional consortium for your electronic databases.

Given these many commonalities, it is foolish not to work together to achieve your similar purposes. The divide that exists may arise from some envy on the part of public librarians and fears from school librarians. In general, the pay scale for teachers—and therefore school librarians—is higher than that of public librarians. They sometimes feel that they put in more hours and work more than the traditional 180-day school year, and yet receive a much lower salary. On the other hand, the jobs of school librarians in some locations are being threatened by cost-cutting attempts that seek to merge the public library and the school library.

A great deal of this distrust can be eliminated or minimized by more contact enabling both librarians to get to know each other better and finding ways to show the community the advantage of your working together as separate institutions. Visits by the children's librarian to the elementary school library happen in some places, usually in preparation for the summer reading program, but these should occur more often so that children recognize that person as a friendly face.

In addition, you should invest some of your time in after-school visits to the public library. You need to know what it looks like, what the collection contains, and what databases are available to students. Resource sharing is another area of cooperation. If you do not have interlibrary loans, look into setting them up with the public library. You can even, with approval, lend your material for student use over the summer.

Although it requires some legal paperwork (fingerprinting and possibly filing for a substitute license), look into the possibility of switching jobs for a day once or twice during the school year. Better than anything, this gives both you and the public librarian an understanding of the different demands your jobs place on both of you. Your time at the public library is an opportunity to present yourself to the general public and promote the SLP.

Just as you are often caught unaware by an assignment, so is the public library. Get in the habit of calling your counterpart as soon as you realize that students are working on a particular topic. Although this is a one-way effort, it builds a positive bridge between the two institutions, and you stand a better chance of having teachers inform you of an upcoming project if they know you are alerting the public library as well.

If your school has a summer reading list, make sure you send copies to the public library. Do the same for any bibliographies you prepare for teachers and students. In locations that hold Battle of the Books competitions, make sure the children's librarian is given the titles as soon as possible.

Ask if you can put up a poster or announcement of events in the school library, whether it is a book fair, a poetry slam, or a schoolwide reading activity. Even if the public is not invited to these events, you can follow up with pictures that show how the SLP is expanding students' love of literature and broadening their horizons. These photos become another medium for you to communicate your messages to the community.

The more you and the public librarian(s) work together, the easier it is to define what makes each of you unique. Look for opportunities to highlight these qualities for the community. You want people to realize that the public library's responsibility is to *everyone*, while your priorities are the students and the curriculum, which includes a strong instructional role. As awareness grows, there will be fewer attempts to put the school library under the auspices of the public library.

Your Public Face

1. Who is your counterpart at the public library?
2. What programs does the public library offer that you should be sharing with your students and faculty?
3. What material do you have that you can share with the public library?
4. Think of past research units. How could cooperation with the public library have improved them?

COMMUNITY OR OTHER COLLEGES

Just as you need to make connections with the public library, high school librarians should reach out to community college librarians. After all, your seniors will be their freshmen. If there is a four-year college in the area, contact it as well.

You want to do this for several reasons. Although colleges do not get their funding from the community, it is wise to take the comments of Jim Rettig, past president of ALA, to heart. During his presidential year he promoted the concept of the library ecosystem, saying,

I think of our school, public, academic, and other types of libraries as parts of an integrated library ecosystem. If one part of the system is threatened or suffers, the entire system is threatened and suffers. Libraries offer incredible lifelong learning opportunities. No one type of library can deliver learning opportunities from cradle to grave. But through our library ecosystem we offer these opportunities in abundance.²

From a survival perspective alone, making this alliance is a good idea, but there is more at stake. Libraries transform communities and, by working together, you can make it happen in your location.

After meeting with the college librarians, see if you can arrange to have one of them address a faculty or parents' meeting, or both. The concern about students not being prepared to meet the academic requirements of college will ring far truer when it comes from someone who deals with overwhelmed freshmen. You then have the opportunity to show how the SLP, in collaboration with teachers, can ensure that your graduates are ready to meet the demands of higher education.

Although the message seems most logical at the high school level, parents and teachers need to recognize that you cannot impart all these skills in the last few years. The thinking habits necessary must be developed from the earliest grades. That is the reasoning behind the Interdivisional Committee on Information Literacy of the American Association of School Librarians and the Association

of College and Research Libraries. The joint committee's focus is on preparing students beginning in kindergarten.

Your relationship with local college librarians should expand over time. Consider a field trip to the college library with a talk from the staff there. Students generally are unprepared for its size and even more taken aback by the Library of Congress system rather than the familiar Dewey Decimal system. The array of databases is staggering to them, as is the large number of students not much older than they are working quietly on research.

The field trip can have even more positive results if a freshman or sophomore can talk with the high school students about what challenged her most when she started college and how she dealt with it. For those who had not planned on going on to higher learning, the visit can be inspirational. Do a follow-up conversation with your students to assess what they learned and what they still want to know.

Explore the possibility of allowing high school students to use the college library. See if they can be permitted to borrow books. This privilege is not as much of an issue in those districts where eleventh and twelfth graders take courses at local colleges.

After establishing ongoing communications between you and the college librarians, suggest an idea that will be a real wake-up call for your students. Have term papers that were graded by the subject teacher submitted (without comments or grade) to a willing college professor. The difference between the two evaluations will send a message better than anything you can say.

Report on these visits and projects on your website. Some might even merit coverage by the local media. As your school and community see the benefits of this connection, they will also place a high value on the SLP.

Higher Education

1. How many colleges are in your area?
2. Have you ever visited their libraries and met the librarians?
3. Which group would most benefit from a talk by a college librarian?
4. Which of the projects described would you most want to bring to your students?

OTHER COMMUNITY MEMBERS

What remains constitutes the majority of the residents. Neither parents of schoolchildren nor local business owners, they have little if any connection to the school system. Despite their number, they would not be included in this discussion if it were not for places where school budgets or tax levies come up for a vote.

Most of the time this group does not bother to vote in these elections, but they will turn out when they want to defeat the budget or levy. This is the only opportunity people have to object directly to being taxed. They cannot vote on the national, state, county, or municipal budgets. When they are angry at rising property and other taxes, community members are likely to make their displeasure known at the only place they can.

As a specific group to target, this one is mainly out of your reach. For the most part, you must leave it to the administration and the education association to work on getting the budget or levy passed. You have neither the resources nor the available time to raise voters' awareness of the importance of the SLP.

However, if you have had frequent coverage in local media outlets, you will begin to appear on the radar of residents. Many are public library patrons, and your work there might get noticed. (It is also one reason why art teachers display their students' work in the public library.) Displaying the name and tagline of your school library at various events creates a positive image. Should the day come when your program is under a potential threat, these community members might support a larger, more proactive group seeking to preserve what they know is essential to students' success.

KEY IDEAS

- Focus on groups most likely to support you and your program, but be aware of all members of the community.
- Recognize that parents of elementary, middle, and high school children have different wants.
- Use a variety of communication channels to reach parents.
- Plan presentations to address parents' concerns and interests.
- Design a brochure or fact sheet to highlight information of interest to business owners.
- Develop an ongoing connection with your counterpart in the public library and work together to support each other's programs.
- Reach out to college librarians in your area, seeking opportunities to better prepare students for the demands of higher education.
- Be a presence in your community.

Notes

1. Education Trust: Press Room, "Empty Caps and Gowns," www.edtrust.org/dc/press-room/press-release/empty-caps-and-gowns-new-analysis-reveals-deep-problems-in-the-graduation.
2. Jim Rettig, "The Library Ecosystem at Work," www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/advocacy/advocacyuniversity/additup/about/abt_2.cfm.

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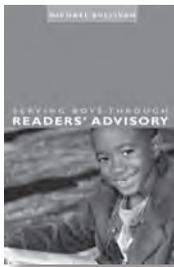
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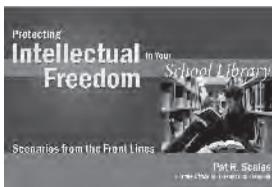
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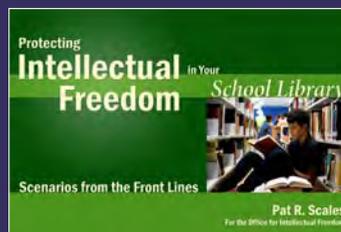
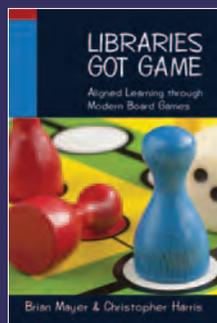
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