

LEADING FOR SCHOOL LIBRARIANS

There Is No Other Option

SECOND EDITION

Hilda K. Weisburg

FOREWORD BY SUSAN D. BALLARD

ALA
Neal-Schuman

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Foreword

LEADERSHIP. One word, yet endless impact. And while there are many forms of leadership and numerous variations on the theme of how to go about finding our own leadership style and what will work in the environment and organizational culture in which we operate, Hilda Weisburg wants to make sure we understand one thing from the very beginning—that *every* librarian is a leader and that means you, too. As she succinctly states right up front in chapter one “Leadership is not an option—it is a job requirement.”

The second edition of *Leading for School Librarians: There Is No Other Option* continues to be part history lesson, part master class, part cautionary tale, and always spot on in providing information and strategies that will illuminate the sometimes scary pathway to finding your own inner leader. I am delighted to once again have the opportunity to provide readers with an entry point as you prepare to enjoy the well-considered updates that distinguish this edition. While it doesn't seem that much time has passed since Hilda first tackled the subject of school librarian leadership, the world as we knew it has literally been tilted off its axis! The global pandemic disrupted the social, economic, and political landscape in life-altering ways and the ripple effect has yet to subside. More recently, libraryland has been rocked by the growing epidemic of attempts to disrupt the free flow of ideas and information by pressure groups that clamor for restrictive policies and legislation designed to abridge the freedom to read. This results not only in the polarization of our communities but also in how we are viewed by them. These are the proverbial trying times of lore; fortunately, Hilda's up-to-date perspective in addressing these issues helps us to tune into meaningful signal versus being distracted by all the noise out there.

Additionally, Hilda has skillfully amended the text to reflect the need to incorporate the latest iterations of standards. In particular,

AASL's *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* (2018) are brought into focus, and strategies for implementation are highlighted throughout the book. Savvy school librarians will want to follow Hilda's lead regarding how to put them into practice. And in this edition, Hilda is able to capitalize on the serendipity that the *National School Library Standards* place special emphasis on the role of the school librarian as a leader. She encourages the use of the four Domains—Think, Create, Share, and Grow—as a sort of compass to guide our journey to leadership. Likewise, she points out a veritable treasure chest of resources developed by AASL to support the AASL Standards and provides ideas on how to use them.

As with the previous edition, Hilda shares her expertise and yes, her opinions, too. She remains true to form in that. But once again, her opinions are educated, firmly grounded in experience, and the result of a lifetime spent in the pursuit of continuous improvement of school libraries and practice and they count for something—in fact, they count for a lot! Hilda's persistence of vision is a constant, and I remain in awe of her commitment to the task at hand and to the shared obligation of all in the school library profession to step up and face the myriad of roles and responsibilities that come with the territory. Most impressive is that she does so with her ongoing tenacity and verve, even though she readily admits throughout that she hasn't always necessarily seen herself as a leader. As school librarians, we identify with this acknowledgment as all too often we don't see ourselves as leaders either because we view our organizations as hierarchies in which we have low visibility and/or are marginalized. Don't expect a pass from Hilda on that account. Empathy yes, but she'll make you realize that there is no excuse for not getting in the game. From early on in her career, she also had fears, doubts, obstacles, barriers, the criticism of naysayers, or what have you. So, how did she manage to take that first leap toward leadership? She stuck her neck out and a leader emerged by concentrating on creating a personal professional network, getting involved, asking for help, sharing her own story, and listening to and learning from others. Characteristically, she continues to challenge us to never stop reimagining the role and relevance of the school librarian to positively impact student achievement and to recognize our role as catalysts for teaching and learning in the

contemporary educational environment. In this book, she is reaching out to provide the same sort of assistance and guidance she has received along the way.

In the 2017 edition, I noted that I loved the fact that Hilda acknowledged the monsters in the closet and under the bed that keep us up at night, such as the effect of external factors that we can't always control but need to react to, including education reform initiatives, standardized testing, and politics, as well as internal factors, such as school culture and stakeholder needs that shape the daily context in the preK–12 ecosystem. In this outing, she not only addresses the familiar dreaded things that go bump in the night but also extends her thinking to more current specters, such as organized censorship efforts and the influence of social media and digital resources in our lives and in the way we do our jobs. Yet, once again, she won't allow us to use them as an excuse to stand on the sidelines. She promotes our understanding of, but not our dwelling on, the current and emerging learning environmental influences and how that understanding can help us overcome barriers even though they seem insurmountable. Hilda consistently reminds us that despite the unrelenting nature of the impact of these factors, we must stay focused on the alignment of the mission and vision of the school library to the mission and vision of the school in order to maintain a steady course and maneuver around any obstacles.

The actual structure of the book remains intact and as with the original edition, it lends itself to the development of our own individualized personal plans for leadership. We get the lay of the land in part I and are able to provide a context for what on-the-ground school librarianship looks like, as well as learn about the characteristics of a leader and how we can begin to develop seedling strategies to cultivate these dispositions in ourselves. In this edition, in addition to urging us to look to mentors and role models in the field, Hilda introduces the idea of paying heed to the courage and daring of the so-called “warrior librarians” among us. This is a shout-out to our inner “Brave Little Tailor” or “Little Engine That Could,” who just needs one good reason to overcome any residual hesitancy in order to pick up the mantle of leadership and move forward. Hilda has provided us with a myriad of reasons, and we need to answer her call to action.

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Part II provides the next steps to ramp up our impact and build influence and relationships. We are exposed to solid theories about types of power and provided with recommendations about which ones we should seek to optimize as well as how to inventory and leverage our strengths and personal skill sets. Additionally, there is a focus on how to grow our leadership expertise vis-à-vis time and priorities management and to build capacity in various areas of communication. In this section, Hilda wants us to be cognizant of the potential to become complacent if we see ourselves as “good” practitioners and don’t constantly strive to become “great” at what we do. Again, there is no need to be perfect, but there is a need to be great! And I don’t think it is a fluke that throughout the book, and in particular here, Hilda models the conversational, yet respectful and professional tone that she wants us to emulate in our relationships and communications with others because she knows it works. Hilda renews emphasis on accentuating the development of positive interactions even in the face of dealing with negative personalities. This is good—on second thought, make that *great*—advice!

Part III presents the opportunity to add things up and stretch our mindset as Hilda introduces concepts that are standard operating procedures in the business world and which we need to modify and adapt to help serve, advocate for, and express the needs and the value-added aspects of our programs. Strategic planning, goal setting, establishing and then delivering on our brand identity, as well as risk and gap analysis techniques, are all brought into the mix. In her discussions about empowering stakeholders, Hilda shows us that school librarian leadership is a collaborative, flexible process that blends the agency of various types of expertise in the learning community. It occurs when all those responsible for student learning accept leadership in their particular area of focus. It is also a social process through shared and active engagement to address situations and issues and involves a commitment to reflective practice and continuous improvement. And lastly, Hilda evokes one of my very favorite words—“joy.” You will experience pure unadulterated joy if you heed her advice and pay it forward through involvement in state and national professional associations, through sharing expertise by writing and presenting about what you know and have learned in order to advance and improve the profession and education, and by

living a balanced life in which you can set aside (though likely never forget) your passion for school librarianship when family, friends, and adventure call you! Don't apologize or feel guilty for enjoying your life.

At the end of each chapter, "Key Ideas" are highlighted with a bulleted list that can serve as a daily mantra. By my count, 325 are listed, and with more than enough that bear repeating so that they eventually add up to equal 365. Think about it—daily notions to reflect on and internalize throughout the year. The intellectual exercise will be enlightening, to say the least, and will help to engrain these critical ideas into our professional consciousness.

If I were going to attempt to climb Mount Everest, I would seek out a sage and experienced sherpa to help me plan and prepare to make my way and maintain a good foothold on the path as I move along. That is the opportunity that presents itself in *Leading for School Librarians, 2nd edition*. We have an award-winning, legendary, and highly respected guide in Hilda. By asking us to reimagine roles and responsibilities and by providing practical strategies that help leverage programs, expertise, and resources, she shows us that we can scale the heights to find new vistas and ensure that students and teachers engage and participate more fully in the contemporary learning landscape. Hilda's message is for each of us to recognize the need to be forward-thinking, embrace our respective roles as leaders, and help our learning communities make strides toward the achievement of excellence. In the words of my fellow Granite Stater, Daniel Webster, "there is always room at the top"; we are needed there because the future is now, and we must all be part of it. Hilda expects no less. We cannot disappoint her.

Lastly, it seems fitting to quote the ever-practical Hilda herself, who notes in the introduction to part III, "To be a successful leader, you must keep your passion alive and greet each new day with enthusiasm. (Honestly, this doesn't mean every single day. Some of them are more of a challenge.)" Ain't that the truth! And isn't it just like Hilda to let us know that it's okay to take a breather now and then . . . but we need to bear in mind as we engage with this wonderful book that she will be right there urging us to do and be our very best and to lead with confidence, because, after all, there is no other option.

—SUSAN D. BALLARD

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Introduction

OVER THE YEARS, the library profession has evolved in ways beyond the awareness of most non-educators and even many who are in the field. Technology is an obvious area. But another equally important one is the reaction to the wholesale loss of jobs and even libraries as a result of the economic collapse in 2008–09.

School librarians were the hardest hit as boards of education and administrators scrambled to cope with severe budget cuts. Working alone and believing that schools would always need and want librarians, these librarians were totally unprepared for the calamity that ensued. Determined to forestall future decimations of programs, many library schools incorporated advocacy into their curriculums, recognizing that those in all types of libraries needed to know how to develop supporters for their programs.

School librarians have struggled with how to advocate for their programs, burdened as they are by heavier workloads as a result of economic conditions, the pandemic, the growing seriousness of book challenges, and the constant need to keep abreast of changing technology and state and government standards and requirements. It seems to many librarians that advocacy is about begging to keep your job, rather than recognizing that advocacy means becoming so indispensable to stakeholders that they fight to keep you.

The problem is that talking about advocacy is putting the cart before the horse. You can't be an advocate if you aren't a leader. Interestingly enough, library school courses don't often address leadership, and many school librarians are intimidated by the thought of becoming a leader. Yet the vision of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) is "Every school librarian is a leader; every learner has a school librarian" (ala.org/aasl/about/govern).

The truth is, in today's climate, as stated in the subtitle of this book, "There is no other option." Librarians must learn how to lead in order

for their programs to succeed and for them to thrive. In other types of libraries, there is a way to advance: librarians work with those who are further up the hierarchy and see what library leadership looks like. While not perfect, these librarians have living models. And they aren't alone.

By contrast, most school librarians are alone in their buildings. They have no models of library leadership. They have their workload and their fears. Yet their ultimate survival rests on their ability to be recognized as a leader in their building.

AASL's *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* (2018) was published after the first edition of *Leading for School Librarians* came out in 2017. This book forms a foundation for building your leadership skills and assessing where you are and where you must go. Drawing on the four Domains—Think, Create, Share, and Grow—and the six Shared Foundations—Inquire, Include, Collaborate, Curate, Explore, and Engage—from the AASL Standards frameworks will support the ideas provided in this book and can help you on your leadership journey.

I have spent much of my career working to help librarians be their best and promote the value of their program. For many years now, I have been writing, blogging, and presenting workshops on leadership. But I still meet so many librarians who don't know how to get started and don't believe they have what it takes to be a leader.

They look at national or even state leaders and think they never could do that. I realized they were looking at the finished product and didn't see that many small steps preceded becoming a state association president or other recognized leader. Strongly believing that anyone who wants to become a leader can do it, I embarked on this project.

I hope you the reader finds truth in the Lao Tzu quote, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with one small step," and begin your own journey with chapter 1 of this book. If you gradually implement what is discussed and recommended here, by the time you have completed the final chapter, you will have embraced your ability to lead and will be seen as vital and indispensable. You will be a leader and have many advocates for your program.

—HILDA K. WEISBURG

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Safe First Steps to Leadership

SCHOOL LIBRARIANS HAVE the best job in the world. They make their libraries a welcoming environment, promote future-ready learning, integrate the latest educational websites and apps into their teaching, and connect students to the perfect book, to build a love of reading. Through the library program, students become lifelong learners, as well as successful members and contributors in a participatory society that spans the globe.

Encompassing all this in one library program would be an exhausting task in and of itself, but the realities of today's school culture exponentially increase the daily difficulties and stresses. If you are an elementary librarian, you are probably chained to a fixed schedule, with one class following hard on the heels of another. Many librarians find that they have little or no opportunity to meet with teachers. If you are a middle- or high-school librarian, you might have a flexible schedule but must work diligently to get past teachers' resistance to bringing their classes to the library while also feeling the pressure of meeting the demands of state-imposed standards tied to testing and often your own evaluation.

At all levels, school library budgets have been slashed, leaving little money for new acquisitions and causing collections to become woefully outdated. Clerks who once were common at the secondary-school level have been eliminated in many places. Staffing has been cut, forcing many librarians to serve multiple schools or leaving a single librarian

in a school with 2,000 students. Technology (other than computers for testing) is hard to come by. Bandwidth limits the number of devices that can be used.

But listing what is wrong serves no one. This is the new reality, and you must learn to not only live with it but also thrive within it. The question is, “How do you manage to be successful in this environment?” The answer is, somehow, you must become a leader.

For years, AASL has been urging librarians to become leaders in their buildings and districts. Many have done so, but most librarians are still working hard at their day-to-day tasks, unable to see beyond them. The concept of leadership seems to loom too large, yet it can actually be achieved by anyone who wants to become one.

As you work your way through your leadership journey, be guided by the four Domains (Think, Create, Share, and Grow) from the AASL Standards frameworks. The Think Domain helps learners to “inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge”; the Create Domain empowers learners to “draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge”; the Share Domain prompts learners to “share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society”; and the Grow Domain helps learners “pursue personal and aesthetic growth.”¹ These four Domains are at the core of what you bring to the educational community in your planning and collaboration with others. They are how you demonstrate your leadership. And they’re how you grow.

The first part of this book consists of four chapters. In chapter 1, you will walk through the initial steps and learn how to safely and successfully become the leader your students, teachers, and programs need you to be. The chapter starts by guiding you through the core question, “Why be a leader?” that underlies our resistance to undertaking the challenge. One by one, you will eliminate the barriers you have erected, including the fears you have about taking on the role of a leader. By looking at the qualities of a leader, you will discover that you already have much within you which you can use as you move onto a larger stage.

Chapter 2 reviews mission and vision statements, which I have discussed in previous books and are central to keeping you grounded when daily demands pull you in multiple directions. You will find

suggestions on time management and how to deal with procrastination—the “thief of time” that happens to everyone (and thanks to the internet, in so many easy ways).

Chapter 3 deals with managing classes in the library, which is a little-recognized challenge. Unlike a classroom, many people come into the library every day. Students come with their entire class or drop in as individuals to do work there; teachers come looking for information or a quiet spot; and administrators might walk in with guests at any time. You might also have parent volunteers to coordinate. If you are struggling to keep noise to an acceptable level, yelling at students for one reason or another, or having difficulty settling a class down, you will be judged as being incapable of managing the library.

Chapter 4 explores becoming an expert teacher, as you will be judged on that basis by your colleagues and administrators. Even if you started out as a classroom teacher, the library environment is radically different. What worked when the students were “yours” does not always translate when classes come in and out, and you don’t have the implied power of grades.

With these basics in hand, you are ready to fully step into leadership.

NOTE

1. American Association of School Librarians, *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Libraries, and School Librarians* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2018), 15

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