SCHOOL LIBRARIAN'S CAREER PLANNER

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Hilda K. Weisburg

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Extensive effort has gone into ensuring the reliability of the information in this book; however, the publisher makes no warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein.

To Ruth Toor, my coauthor and friend for thirty-five years.
It was a very strange experience doing this solo. I missed you.

and

To Jay Toor, our publisher for almost thirty years. I thank you for your
generosity and kindness. I will never forget the gift you gave me.

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INTRODUCTION

"It's good to have an end to journey towards,
but it's the journey that matters in the end."

This quote has been attributed to several sources, but its message is one that should guide school librarians as they embark on their career. Some may plan to find a position and stay with it to the end. Others may from the first want to be supervisors or administrators. All, in one way or another, will find that life events require changes to be made to original plans. It is best to keep options in mind from the very beginning. Using the *School Librarian's Career Planner* as a guide, you will always have an option B—and often an option C to allow you to skillfully weather whatever comes your way.

School librarianship is a career requiring the ability to develop relationships, build leadership skills, and be a lifelong learner. The path to the profession varies widely. Some start as teachers and become interested through that route. A few have always wanted to be a school librarian and seek the degree immediately after graduating from college. Others volunteer in their child's school library and realize how much they love working in that environment, and there are those who have had careers in the corporate world or any number of jobs outside of education but for one reason or another become attracted to the profession.

The possible career paths for school librarians is an area largely ignored both in the literature and in library school. The common belief is that one gets a degree, finds a job, hopefully is awarded tenure, and then remains in that district until retirement. Yet life rarely works like that. Those who are most successful have learned they can make choices and plan strategically to create a career that is within their control and infinitely rewarding.

School librarianship is frequently a second career, but even those who come to it from teaching and are familiar with the educational system are not fully aware of the possibilities. Library school rarely covers the multifaceted

aspects of how school librarians can successfully carve out a unique niche within the educational community. Given the current economic conditions, new practitioners, now more than ever, need to be astute in how they

- Present themselves
- Learn the workings of the school and district while still demonstrating expertise
- Develop the skills needed to assume various leadership positions (both official and unofficial)
- Prepare for changes that still keep them active whether it is the result of staff cuts or a personal decision
- Plan for a retirement that is as rewarding as their work world

The *School Librarian's Career Planner* guides readers from finding the right first job to having a rewarding retirement. Starting with resume writing through the interview, the first steps and possible pitfalls are outlined as candidates are shown how to be alert throughout the interview process. Even while promoting themselves as the best applicant, they must be listening carefully to what is being said—and not said—so they can accurately determine whether the situation is the right one for them. Unlike a classroom teacher, a school librarian's job can vary tremendously from one district to another, and sometimes from one building to another.

Once school librarians are in the job, it is up to them to continue to evolve professionally, be aware of developments in pedagogy and technology, integrate the two, and incorporate their new knowledge and understanding into the fabric of the school. Their leadership must be evident. As they develop management skills, in addition to other abilities, they are frequently given more responsibilities such as chairing important committees and even some administrative opportunities.

The wise school librarians are always prepared for change, including moving on from a job they had loved. Even the best of them can get caught up in a district-wide elimination of positions. Work conditions can alter when a new administrator takes the helm. In the former case, there is no option. In the latter, it is important to realize when it is time to leave. The key is for them to know where to go next, recognizing that they still have choices, and can continue to contribute to the profession and their own well-being.

Along the way, part-time work in other types of libraries can expand expertise and, in some cases, lead to a change in career direction. Eventually, every career winds down and it becomes time to retire. After so many years in the forefront of what is new in technology and education, those post-work years need not be a slow slide into decline. With the same planning that marked the rest of their career, librarians can continue to contribute and find personal fulfillment. Once a librarian, always a librarian.

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GETTING YOUR FIRST
JOB IN THE FIELD

You are seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. With your coursework almost finished and your degree imminent, it is time to get started on your career by landing a great, if not perfect, job. Most of you have learned by now that to attain long-term results, you need to plan, which requires gathering information and determining which choices will get you where you want to go. Reacting to events leaves you at the mercy of whatever currents come your way. Become the architect of your life and design it so that you attain your goals and have the rewarding career you dreamed of when you first chose to enter this field. Put those skills to work as you search for your first school library position.

You have advantages and disadvantages as you begin your search. Being inexperienced is both a positive and a negative. On the plus side, you will be starting off at the bottom of the salary scale, making you a bargain for a school district which may have been paying the guide maximum to the librarian you will be replacing. The drawback is your lack of background. You may struggle with interview questions; you have no track record in the field; and, if you get

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the job, the administrators may see this as an opportunity to assign duties and responsibilities they would not have given to the outgoing librarian. In a tough economy, the latter is more true than ever as staff cuts often mean covering several schools, not having clerical staff (if there had been such help), and taking on teaching classes. In some cases, the person you are replacing left because of these changes.

You will have to weigh these demands against your need and desire to have a job in the field. While recognizing that there are likely to be many candidates for any open position, you do not want to lock yourself into an untenable situation that will cause you to lose your enthusiasm for your career choice and struggle to complete the school year. By being aware of options and resources, and being clear as to your choices, just as with selecting your library school, you can find a job that will be a good fit.

SEARCHING FOR YOUR FIRST JOB

Even before graduation there are several steps that should be undertaken. First and foremost is to be sure you have completed all the requirements for getting certified in your state. Since what is listed on the state's website is not always clear, it is fortunate that your library school, whether traditional or online, will be able to help you with the process. Although you will not have the actual document until you have completed your course work, it is helpful to let potential employers know that it is in the works. States can be very slow in issuing licenses, but human resource departments are well aware of what the timeline is likely to be.

The best place to see what jobs are out there is your library school's placement office. If you are attending a traditional face-to-face program, you probably have already been looking at the bulletin board listing open positions and so have a good idea of the number of openings and what is being sought by districts in your state. A good online program provides most of the same resources with an electronic bulletin board for openings.

Most state library associations have a page on their website listing job openings. If your state is one that has a separate organization for school librarians, check both associations' websites. If you have not done so already, become a member and join the electronic discussion list most have. Job openings are often announced there first, sometimes by the librarian who is leaving the position.

Newspapers are another potential source. School districts tend to be traditional in their approach and most still advertise openings in local papers. Statewide papers are best. Even before you begin your search, you should find out which ones are most likely to carry job listings in education.

Another resource is the ALA JobLIST, and you need not be a member to have access to it. You can subscribe at http://ala.informz.net/ala/profile.asp?fid=1494. It appears weekly in your in-box. In addition to listing openings, it is a treasure trove of advice for job seekers. Articles cover the full range of what applicants need to know. You might find links to resume writing or how to prepare for interviews. Each week brings new information that will give you the help you need to find a job and land it. For more information about the ALA JobLIST and what it offers, go to http://joblist.ala.org/jobseekerfeatures.cfm.

Be prepared to apply for jobs that would not be your first or even second choice. In a tight market, you need to be flexible. However, you do not want to take a position that would make you miserable for even one year. Building experience so that you can be a better candidate in a district where you do want to work is good, but be careful that the situation you accept is at least workable for one year. Resigning mid-year will make your next search that much harder.

Successful Search Strategies

1. Do you know the requirements for certification in your state? Will you have completed them by graduation?
2. What services are offered by your library school's placement office? Which ones can you use right now?
3. Have you joined your state association(s)? Are you on the electronic discussion list? Have you checked out job openings on their website?
4. Which newspapers in your state/county list openings in education?

SOCIAL MEDIA: THE GOOD AND BAD

The online world of social networking starts in middle school, and sharing personal information becomes so habit-forming, many do not stop to consider the electronic trail they are leaving. Well before you actively begin your job search, you need to be sure that you have nothing damaging posted. It is amazing to human resource personnel how unaware applicants can be about what their online persona reveals. Hopefully, you are wise enough to have abandoned any e-mail addresses that are inappropriate. (A possibly apocryphal story alleges that one candidate stated she could be reached at partygirl@aol.com. Definitely not the right image.)

A good start is to Google yourself and see what results. The human resource department will do this, so it is best to know what they will find. You may be surprised at what is out there about you. If you are going to be working in a school

you do not want a Facebook page that has pictures of you drinking or that has inappropriate posts. You may have to take down photos and even your page.

Blog posts are another potential hazard. If you have your own blog, you know your topics and the content. Again, depending on what you shared, it may be necessary to close this out. Some posts you made on other blogs might also show up in your search. Do what you can to have any deleted that you would not want administrators (or your future students) to see.

On the other hand, social networking can be very valuable. You can create a blog that puts you in a very positive light, perhaps structuring it around what you are learning in library school. Focus on the big questions that courses are raising in your mind. Discuss your belief that a school librarian teaches students *how* (not *what*) to think, guides them into understanding how to build new knowledge, and how to become ethical digital citizens.

As part of your course work, or perhaps you have done so on your own, you learned how to create a web page. While this is to teach you how to do one for your library, you can also create a personal one to showcase your abilities and interests. Your blog can be a part of it. Its design will be a good indicator to a prospective employer of your technological expertise.

Another good use of social networks is to join professional ones such as LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) and Plaxo (www.plaxo.com). Go on both. Put up your profile and invite people you know to join your network. Ask them to write recommendations for you which are available to others who search for you or your skill set. You will soon see names of potential connections. Ask any who will be of potential help to accept your invitation to become part of your network. Post any new accomplishments and skills so that those who have included you in their network are kept abreast of your professional development.

Socially Speaking

1. What was the result of your Google search on yourself?
2. Were you surprised? Is there anything that needs to be cleaned up?
3. What are some topics you can address on a blog?
4. What will you put on your profile for LinkedIn and/or Plaxo?

WRITING YOUR RESUME

Whether or not school librarianship is your first career, you need to create a resume that shows you are a candidate worth considering. Ruth Toor and I addressed the process in *New on the Job: A School Library Media Specialist's Guide to Success,* but the advice bears repeating along with additional information

about how to construct this key piece in your job search.[1] The Internet has so many resume templates and samples both free and for a fee that you can quickly become overwhelmed by the sites. Don't spend too much time here. You just need to get an understanding of what your resume might look like.

Pick two or three sites, preferably with samples. You will quickly see that while there are variations in formatting, most are similar in organizational structure. All resumes must have your complete contact information on top, clearly readable. Whether you box and/or shade this, or use a hard underline, is up to you. Be aware, if you are going to be e-mailing your resume, to keep formatting very simple. It may not come through otherwise.

Even if you are sure that you will not be sending your resume via e-mail, choose an easily readable font. Times New Roman, Arial, Verdana, or Tahoma are best. Script fonts and informal looks such as Comic Sans are not to be used. Whatever font you select, stay with it throughout.

Print your resume on any reasonable weight paper in white (or ivory). It is not necessary to purchase "resume paper." Do not get "cute." Fancy paper with "school-theme" borders should not be used, even if you are applying for an elementary position. You want your resume to have a professional look.

Your name, address, and contact information including e-mail address *must* be at the top of the page. Some like to put their name in a larger font size or use bold typeface. Just be sure that all of this is easily readable.

If this is your first job, *Education* typically comes first, followed by *Experience* (more on this later). For those who have had other careers, the order is normally reversed. However, before listing the information in these two areas, you need to consider what leads into it. Stating your *Objective* tends to be the most common but is generally rather boring and trite and undoubtedly barely looked at by either the human resources department or administrators. Typically it reads, "To obtain a challenging position as a school librarian," or more creatively, "To obtain a school library position where I can impact the lives of students." Of course, that is what you want. On the other hand, it is so obvious that it is a waste of space to offer it.

You will get more attention if you begin with a *Profile* or a *Summary.* For this you can use some adjectives to describe yourself (e.g., "a tech-savvy school librarian with the skills to inspire others with my passion for twenty-first-century learning . . ."). Here is where you can highlight your strongest qualities. You can either present it in two or three statements (not full sentences) or as a bulleted list. Keep it to not more than four bullets, and begin each with a descriptive, dynamic word or phrase (e.g., "resourceful," "skilled communicator," "proven leader"). In the balance of your resume, you give examples that show how these qualities were gained on the job (or in your leadership activities in graduate school).

Determining what to include as *Experience* is as challenging for those with previous multiple careers as it is for those who went straight from college

to library school. Your experiences need to be relevant to the position or they are inconsequential. Consider the skills you will need on the job. You have become aware of many of them during your course work. Show how your previous jobs have honed them and will enable you to bring a greater dimension of service as a school librarian. If you had contact with customers, either in person or as part of a help desk, what were you able to do that gave them what they needed? What leadership expertise did you develop? Did you give trainings? All of these can show that you will be an asset even with little or no experience in school librarianship.

Look to your volunteer work to give added breadth to your resume. Have you been involved in scouting? Taught classes in your church or temple? Any of these can be listed under *Education-Related Experience.* You can use these activities to demonstrate your ability to connect with students.

Additional information can make a difference between you and an equally worthy candidate. Definitely list all library and education associations to which you belong. You can safely use NEA rather than the National Education Association, but do spell out ALA and AASL. Administrators are not likely to be familiar with them. Being a member shows your commitment to your chosen profession. If you serve on a committee for one of these organizations, list it. You will be demonstrating your interest in and understanding of the larger issues facing education and school librarianship. Also include any honors you received and, if by some chance you had the opportunity to write an article that was published, include that as well.

At one time, resumes would indicate the computer operating systems and software programs with which you were proficient. Today, that is a given, but you should include specialized skills such as web design and understanding of Web 2.0 tools, including open source.

You will probably be asked to submit the names of references. Few places want you to send the references themselves. They would rather contact the people themselves, knowing it will produce more honest results. Speak to those you want to list and make certain they are prepared to give you a positive recommendation—without reservations. If you are not sure they can do this, go elsewhere.

Do not overlook the resources of your school's career center, whether online or traditional. Check to see if and when they offer workshops on resume writing. Some provide one-on-one critiques by school librarians and others who are involved in the hiring process. Length is often a concern. Some say a resume should not be over one page, but you can have two pages. If you do, be sure it is not one-and-a-quarter pages, which looks peculiar. Also, put your last name and the page number on the top of the second sheet in case the pages get separated. This is also important if you are e-mailing your resume.

If you are sending your resume via e-mail, save it as plain text because formatting can get garbled when sent into cyberspace. Read the employer's

directions carefully. Many places do not want attachments, fearing viruses. In that case you will be doing a cut-and-paste into your e-mail (below your cover letter). Send it first to yourself to see how it looks and make any necessary changes before e-mailing it to the appropriate administrator or human resources department.

One final source of help and advice is your own personal network. If you have classmates or know others who have recently gotten jobs as a school librarian, have them look over your resume. Ask to see theirs. You may want (with their permission) to use some of their wording and ideas. Do get someone to proofread your resume. It is amazing how many resumes reach administrators' desks with spelling and other errors.

Perfecting Your Resume

1. What will you highlight in your *Profile* or *Summary*?
2. Which of your job experiences can you "tweak" to demonstrate how it will make your library program better?
3. What volunteer work can you use to show "education-related" experience?
4. What "extras" can you list?
5. Whom will you ask for recommendations? Do they represent a range of your experiences and abilities?
6. What resume resources are offered by your college's career center?

RESEARCHING A PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYER

Unless you live in or close to the town where you plan to apply for a position, you should do serious research on the educational community and its administrators. Sites such as www.greatschools.org let you know which ones are considered to be among the best, but a lot depends on how they are doing the ranking. Very often, districts with students from diverse backgrounds are rated low, yet they may be challenging, open to new ideas, and filled with a sense of commitment and purpose.

Many states have developed a system of reporting how schools are doing so that parents (and prospective newcomers to a town) can determine how a district measures up to those with a similar student population. These, too, need to be analyzed carefully. Test scores tend to be the basis for the rating. You will not be surprised to see that high-income locations are invariably at the top of the list. Magnet schools, specializing in a specific content area such as technology or the arts, also are usually among those ranking near the top.

These ratings give you background but should not be a deciding factor. You will be drawing on them to ask questions during your interview to get a better idea of how administrators see their school and what their vision is for taking it to the next level. A high-ranking district can be very complacent. While it will embrace the "next thing" in technology, it might not wish to explore changes in teaching methodology. If that is the school's culture, many teachers will have the same attitude. Depending on how you feel about bringing change, this situation might not be a good fit for you. On the other hand, a district that has done poorly on tests and other indicators may now have new administrators who are looking for exciting approaches to motivate students (and faculty) and will be open to your ideas.

Your next step is the district and school websites. You may find a mission statement here. Most are fairly cookie-cutter and do not tell you much, but check out the links and see what you can find. For example, the Morris School District in New Jersey, under "District Information," states, "The Morris School District is a unifying social force and a source of tremendous pride in our community. In our classrooms and on our playgrounds children of every race, religion, and economic background come together to learn with and from each other."[2] It continues with other information on the number of schools, grade levels, and average class size. But those two opening sentences tell you much more that is significant. You immediately know that the district is diverse, and by implication has a strong commitment to multiculturalism. The term *pride* is indicative of how it views itself and its place in the community. *Pride* used in this context is a word rarely seen on most school websites, and its presence gives you a sense of the underlying culture.

Check on what the student body is doing. Websites often tell you about athletic and academic teams, special awards, and community service projects. Not only does this give you a sense of familiarity with what is going on in the district, you also learn where it puts its emphasis. Obviously, you want to see what is on the library's page. Some are absolutely brilliant. You immediately know it is central to everything happening in the school. Others have a few statements about hours and borrowing privileges with a few pictures of library happenings. Exploring several of these will help you quickly realize how well you can probably evaluate the quality of a program by what is posted on the website.

Next research the administrators. Human resource departments will Google you, and you need to do the same with the administration. Using the school and district websites, see what you can find out about the superintendent of schools and the principal. You may locate a page listing a workshop they have presented, giving you a clue as to their special area of expertise. Very probably they are on LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), which will provide you with their past employment history. If the administrator has a common name such as Patrick Brown, add "principal" or "superintendent" to your search term. It will greatly reduce the number of false hits. The information you glean

will help you prepare for your interview—and indicate whether or not you want to work in that district and school.

Ready with Research

1. Research your local school district. Did what you find fit with what you know? Did you learn something about the administrators?
2. Do the same with two or three districts in which you are interested. Which one seems like the best fit for you? Why?
3. Compare your district's website with the others that you researched. Which gave you the most information? Which seems like an inviting place to work (and send your children)?
4. Which of those districts' school library websites seem to have the best program? If possible, visit them and see how reality compares with the online "picture."

COVER LETTERS—PRINT AND ONLINE

The cover letter introduces you to prospective employers. You have only one opportunity to make a first impression. While this letter follows a standard format in overall structure, the contents can set you apart from other applicants and make people want to read your resume.

The opening paragraph states where and how you learned of the job opening. After that initial statement, applicants typically say something like, "I will be graduating in May and believe my background and interest make me an excellent candidate for the position." While not bad, it falls into the cookie-cutter category. Administrators receive so many like that, they barely read it. A far better approach is to draw on the research you did on the district and say, "I am applying because the Blank School seems to focus on a whole child approach which is aligned with my own educational philosophy." No matter what the district is doing, you can invariably tie your background and interests to it, making the reader immediately recognize that you are not just churning out cover letters.

The second section is where you sell yourself in one or two paragraphs. You should not be repeating what is in your resume, but you can highlight key features about yourself. For example, you might be able to state, "In addition to my qualifications as a school librarian, I enjoy integrating technology into whatever I am doing, which can be seen throughout my resume." Perhaps your strength lies in your communication skills. In that case you could say, "I believe strongly in community outreach which includes faculty and staff as well as parents, using my experiences in web design and e-mail newsletters."

In other words, while you do have to briefly indicate you have the basics required for the job, show you are bringing something extra. At the high school level, you could even include interest in coaching or other cocurricular activities. This can be a particularly good selling point if it is in an area that is important to the district. If you want to promote several of your skills, you can use bullet points. Do not go overboard here. You are including your resume.

The final paragraph is another place to stand out from the crowd. Usually it thanks the reader for his or her time and includes the hope for an interview. It might also indicate contact information, even though that is on the resume, but state "I can best be reached at . . . ," giving your e-mail address, cell phone, or whatever is your *primary* means of communication. Do not waste the space. Give administrators a reason to want to call you for an interview. Say something like, "I hope you will give me the opportunity to discuss with you how the school library program can be instrumental in achieving district goals." It would help if you could refer to a goal from the district's website.

As with your resume, if you are e-mailing, find out whether the district wants your cover letter as an attachment or sent within the body of your message. In the latter case, you still must begin with a proper salutation and have a business closing. Do *not* type your letter directly into the e-mail. Create a document on your word processing program and then cut and paste it into the e-mail to be sure there are no missing words, misspellings, or other grammatical errors. If you are sending the cover letter as an attachment, keep the font simple. Again, complex formatting does not always come through at the other end.

Note that in an e-mail cover letter, your signature block is below your name while in hard copy it is placed at the top of the page. Make sure your subject line is clear and to the point, such as "Elementary Library Position, Name of School." Be sure to indicate within your cover letter if you are including your resume within the e-mail, following the district's guidelines. Remember at all times that you are presenting yourself as a professional. This is not a place for using emoticons.

When sending your cover letter and resume via snail mail (and priority mailing is a better idea), make sure the paper matches. If you chose special paper for your resume, use it also for your cover letter. Whether done online or hard copy, keep your cover letter brief. You are sending a resume. All you are doing in the letter is creating the interest that will have your prospective employer consider looking at the resume and feel positively disposed to it. Finally, make certain you have the correct spelling of the names of the recipients—and the school—to which you are applying.

If you are concerned about your cover letter, remember to check out your school's career center. Just as with resume writing, it should provide you with samples you can use. Someone there might even be available to review what you have written.

Covering the Bases

1. Choose a district where you would like to work and compose a sentence for your first paragraph that would explain why you would like to work there and what makes you eminently qualified for this potential position.
2. What strengths will you highlight in your second paragraph? Try a few samples and ask one or two friends or colleagues to critique them.
3. Using that same district, which goal could you address in your closing paragraph?

KEY IDEAS

- Make sure you have completed all the paperwork for your certification before job hunting, or that it's in progress awaiting your graduation.
- Start you job search with your college's placement office.
- Check the website of your state's library association(s) for openings.
- Know which newspapers in your area carry education job listings.
- Subscribe to the ALA JobLIST.
- Do your best to clean up any "inappropriate" content you may have posted on social media sites.
- Join professional social media sites.
- Use your school's career center to learn how to craft a professional resume.
- Scrupulously follow employer directions for submitting resumes.
- Consult your professional network (fellow students and colleagues in the field) to have them review your resume and critique it.
- Research the district to which you are applying to develop an understanding of its composition, academics, and so on.
- Write a cover letter that shows you are familiar with the district, and use it to promote one or two of your strongest points.

NOTES

1. Ruth Toor and Hilda K. Weisburg, *New on the Job: A School Library Media Specialist's Guide to Success* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2007).
2. Morris School District (New Jersey), www.morrisschooldistrict.org.

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