

Getting the Most from Your School Library Media Program

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Getting the Most from Your School Library Media Program

It sounds almost too good to be true. A single, building-level program that can:

- Improve reading scores
- Teach higher-level thinking skills
- Provide access to information resources in a variety of formats
- Improve every area of the curriculum
- Make students and staff more knowledgeable and comfortable with technology
- Develop motivated and self-directed life-long learners

Yes, it's the school library program that can do all these things and more. But unfortunately, not every school library program has this degree of impact in its school. If yours doesn't, what can you as a building administrator or site leadership team do about it? Find below a six step plan to make your school library program an effective one.

1. Find out what the research shows a good school library program CAN do.

Over 50 years of research has demonstrated that quality library media programs positively affect student achievement. Over the past 10 years, state-wide studies in Colorado, Pennsylvania, Alaska, Washington and Texas have all consistently tied good programs to student achievement. Scores on tests in all states studied showed a 10-15 point advantage in schools with strong library programs. A good link to current research in this area can be found at the American Library Association Resource Guides for School Library Media Program Development: Achievement webpage <<http://www.ala.org/aasl/resources/achievement.html>>.

A good school library media program not only can help improve standardized test scores, but can be at the heart of a school's efforts to develop a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. By providing both print and electronic resources, by team-teaching with classroom teachers, and by developing authentic assessment tools, the school library media specialist becomes an effective partner in resource-based curricular projects. Information literacy, the ability to find, evaluate and use information in order to solve problems, is fast becoming the new basic skill of the information age and it is the school library media program's mission to teach those skills.

Many school districts have melded the school library media and technology departments with good results. The networking equipment is stored, maintained and managed by library staff, the school library media specialist helps inservice staff members in the applied use of new technologies, and technology skills are taught to students as a part of research/resource-based units.

A library program *should* have an impact given its cost in resources, staffing and real estate. A typical library of 4,500 square feet can have a capital value of over a million dollars in facility, furnishings, materials and technology and an annual operating budget of over \$100,000 including salaries, materials and supplies, and operating costs. Given such an outlay of school dollars, the building principal should take an active interest in the effectiveness of the library program.

2. Learn about the qualities of an effective program.

Unfortunately not all building administrators have had the opportunity to work in buildings with effective library media programs nor have they had the opportunity to learn about the qualities of a strong library program. One quick way to learn the basics about good school library programs is to download and read *Principal's Manual for Your School Library Media Program* from <<http://www.ala.org/aasl/principalsmanual.html>>. This two-page brochure neatly summarizes the current information about good school library media centers. For a more comprehensive, yet still brief look at the modern school library, read David Loertscher's *Reinventing Your School's Library in the Age of Technology: A Guide for Principals and Superintendents* published by Hi-Willow Press.

Better yet, talk to effective media specialists and visit vital school libraries. Your state's library association can provide you with a list of superb media specialists and exemplary programs you can visit.

3. Evaluate your building's program.

Have you ever wondered about the quality of your own school's library? Getting a snapshot of the quality of an individual library is neither difficult nor time-consuming. Tools like the one appended to this article can be used to quickly judge the status of your program. Some state school library associations have developed similar assessment tools like the one created by the Minnesota Educational Media Organization at <<http://www.memoweb.org/links/checklist2.pdf>>.

A more formal assessment of a building library program can be made using your own state's library standards or national standards such as AASL/AECT's *Planning Guide for Information Power* ALA. School library media programs are often evaluated as part of a school's accreditation process and your regional accreditation organization may have some tools that can help you do this. An independent set of library media program assessment tools can be found at <<http://www.doug-johnson.com/wgm/wgm.html>>.

4. Plan for program improvement and effectiveness.

Once an assessment of the program is made and areas for improvement decided upon, a long-term improvement plan tied directly to building and district goals and with measurable, annual short-term objectives needs to be established. Since a good school library media program is owned by the staff and students of a building, not just its media specialist, the plan should be created by a building library advisory committee. Good advisory committees have representatives from a number of stakeholder groups: teachers, students, parents, librarians and community members.

This committee should have as its charge making recommendations on goals and objectives, as well as creating the budget, staffing recommendations, and policies needed to meet those objectives. The school library media specialist should be responsible for organizing and chairing this committee, as well as having the major responsibility for working toward the goals and objectives it establishes and reporting to both the committee and building administration progress made toward those goals.

The committee needs to meet on a regular basis each school year, throughout the school year.

5. Evaluate the quality of your media program staff.

If your school does not have the services of a professional school library media specialist, you may as well stop reading and order a few more phonics workbooks. More than any other factor – budget, facilities, resources, support staff or technology – the quality of the school library media specialist determines the quality of the school library program. If the assessment of your library program shows that it is not having an impact on student learning, it may well be because your library media specialist needs upgrading.

As with all professional teaching staff, the school library media specialist should be formally evaluated. Using the same tools and procedures that are used to evaluate the classroom teacher is part of such a process. But a specialized evaluation tool can also be used.

And finally, the third evaluative method is to tie the school library media specialist's performance directly to the successful attainment of yearly program objectives tied to long-term goals described above. Annual conferences with the library media specialist need to be about the progress being made to make the library media program have a positive effect on student achievement.

6. Create, maintain and assess high expectations of the library media specialist.

As building principal or site team member, I would expect my media specialist:

- To be an excellent communicator with me, the staff, the students, the parents and the community. There should be a formal plan that informs each of these groups about the resources and activities of the program.
- To aggressively find ways to plan, team teach and assess with classroom teachers curriculum units that include both content and information literacy and technology skills.
- To serve on site leadership, curriculum and staff development committees.
- To take responsibility for staff development activities.
- To continue to upgrade his/her professional skills by attending workshops, conference and other training opportunities.
- To be able to articulate and demonstrate how the media program has a positive effect on student learning.
- To act as a major supporter and ally in any change effort undertaken in my building that will result in a more positive climate and greater student success.
- To keep me informed about and help me research the latest findings, trends and techniques related to effective schools and instructional practices.

Oh, and as a SLMS, I would expect from YOU as an administrator or site team good communications, support for jointly created library media program goals, and high expectations of me as a professional.

The school library media specialist can be the least or most effective staff member in your school. The building leadership has a dramatic impact on that effectiveness.