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Advocating for Change in School Library Perceptions

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"It is critical that school librarians are considered vital to student learning by all stakeholders."

ELIZABETH A. BURNS

Best practice challenges school librarians to develop collaborative information literacy instruction that integrates classroom curriculum standards (AASL, 2009, 2018; Doll, 2005; Vanneman, 2011).

School librarians provide learning opportunities and leadership that add value to the school community. However, Hartzell (1997) contends that the school community can rarely articulate the value school librarians bring to the educational landscape, and many in the school community are in fact unaware of the benefits the school library has to offer. School librarians frequently act as invisible collaborators, and stakeholders cannot define the roles and responsibilities of the school librarian (Hartzell, 1997). When faced with difficult budget cuts, those in power often see the position of school librarian as an easier cut to make than other teaching or resource staff (ALA, 2013).

It is critical that school librarians are considered vital to student learning by all stakeholders. This will ensure that the school library program is protected by and for their patrons (Ewbank, 2012; Kenney, 2008). There is little research available to school librarians about effective advocacy practice. In recent studies (Burns, 2014; Ewbank, 2011), school librarians had differing perceptions of advocacy. Practicing school librarians often confused the AASL definition of advocacy—"the on-going process of building partnerships so that others will act for and with you, turning passive support into educated action for the library program" (AASL, 2007)—with definitions of public relations and marketing by practicing school librarians seeking guidance (Burns, 2014). Further, Ewbank (2011) found that while most school librarians supported the need for advocacy, few participated in advocacy activities. Promoting what goes on in the school library and making stakeholders aware of the programs and resources are not enough to help others outside the school, or even those outside the school library, understand how valuable and integral to student learning the school library can be (Hartzell, 2003; Kerr, 2011). School librarians must identify and engage in advocacy initiatives to alter the perception of the school library and influence others to support the library program.

The purpose of this study was to examine the practices of school librarians to determine their impact on stakeholder perceptions. This research was guided by the question: What advocacy strategies were effective in altering the perception of the school library program among stakeholders?

PARTICIPANTS AND METHODOLOGY

Study Participants

Six participants were selected from 815 respondents to a national survey. The larger study explored school librarian understandings of advocacy. Responses meeting the following criteria were used to identify participants:

- Identification of AASL definition of advocacy
- Identification of advocacy activities
- Perceived success with advocacy

School librarian participants were interviewed, along with a coteacher and administrator, to gain further understanding of the perceptions of their school library program and advocacy

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants

Site	Participant	Years Experience	Education Background	Coparticipants
1	Rose	12 years as school librarian	Master's in educational media	9th grade English teacher and school principal
2	Kelly	5 years as school librarian	Master's in education and school librarianship	3rd grade teacher in first teaching assignment and school principal
3	Sharon	7 years as school librarian	MLIS with a teaching endorsement	5th grade teacher and school principal
4	Lori	4 years as school librarian	MLIS with state teaching credentials	English teacher and assistant principal
5	Joy	7 years as school librarian	MLIS with school library teaching endorsement	4th grade Spanish immersion teacher and teacher leader
6	Linda	17 years as school librarian	Master's in education with school library certification	English/social studies teacher and school principal

success in context. Therefore, 18 participants representing 6 sites were interviewed (see Table 1). The interviews were conducted online (Skype) and were recorded and transcribed.

SITE DESCRIPTIONS

Site 1

Rose's school is a large suburban school in the southeast with more than 3,000 students, 2 school librarians, and 2 full-time assistants. The school library has 3 computer labs located off the library and a student café run with a grant coauthored with the business department. The school library won the state school library award.

Site 2

Kelly worked as the planning librarian prior to the opening of this new school in the mid-Atlantic region and has been influential in developing the school library program. The school adopted the learning commons model; the library space is flexible and interactive. There is one library assistant. The library includes resources to develop multiple literacies and elements of a makerspace, giving it a playschool feel.

Site 3

Sharon's school is an urban PK–5 elementary in the south. Sharon is the only librarian and does not have an assistant. The library operates on a fixed,

JUNIOR NONFICTION

CELEBRATIONS!

Bullard, Lisa. **My Family Celebrates Halloween** (Holiday Time: Early Bird Stories). Lerner, 2019, 24p. LB$26.65. ISBN: 9781541520103. Grades K-2. In addition to Halloween, other titles in this easy-read series include subjects of Christmas, Day of the Dead, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and Thanksgiving. Readers learn the background of each area, including recall and critical thinking questions for each area. Simple glossary, Learn More, and an index are included.

Duffield, Katy. **Celebrations around the World** (Let's Find Out). Rourke, 2019. 17p. LB $27.07. ISBN: 9781641561945. Grades PK-2. In this brief trip of four countries, colorful celebrations in India, China, Brazil, and Japan are featured. A fiction title is suggested on page one for each title in the series. This one is paired with **Trick or Treat** by Robin Wells.

Lindeen, Mary. **Valentine's Day** (Beginning-to-Read Book: Read and Discover Holidays). Norwood House, 2019. 32p. LB $21.08. ISBN: 9781599539089. Grades K-3. What happens on Valentine's Day? Here are simple sentences to explain all the different events on this special friendship day. Full color photographs enhance the text which includes a word list and reading activities. A **Dear Dragon** fiction book, **I Love You, Dear Dragon**, pairs nicely with this nonfiction title.

Markovics, Pearl. **Halloween** (Happy Holidays!). Bearport, 2019. 16p. LB $24.23. ISBN: 9781642801163. Grades PK-1. Very simple, familiar words with predictable text give the beginning reader a comfortable and colorful book. There is a simple picture glossary and a basic index. Other topics in the series are Christmas, Fourth of July, Hanukkah, Thanksgiving Day, and Valentine's Day.

biweekly schedule, seeing PK–2 week one, then 3–5 week two. The remainder of the time, Sharon collaborates with teachers on units and projects to support the curriculum and runs multiple reading incentive programs.

Site 4

Lori works in a large suburban district in a mid-Atlantic state. She is one of two school librarians at her school; there is one assistant. Lori's efforts focus on the library space as well as the program.

Site 5

Joy works at a combined PK–8 school in an urban northeast district. The school is a dual-language immersion school, offering instruction in both English and Spanish. Joy works a 4-day workweek in a shared library space scheduled for renovation. She has a flexible schedule, although the shared space requires her to justify her schedule.

Site 6

Linda is in a middle school in a large, suburban city in the southeast. Linda's library has a large print collection, a full computer lab, and one library assistant. Linda considers her primary role to be a teacher and defines her program based on this role.

FINDINGS

The experiences of the participants exemplify how advocacy is viewed uniquely at each site, although common themes were identified. The relationships between the school librarians and their stakeholders altered the perception of the school librarian position and the value placed on the li-

brary program. The advocacy activities of the participants can be organized into four themes: revitalization of the school librarian position, emphasizing the teaching role of the school librarian, innovation of the school librarian, and relevance of the school library to today's learner. See the sidebar summary, "Actionable Advocacy Steps for School Librarians: Ways to Alter the Perception of Stakeholders," page 12, and the poster on pp. 32-33.

REVITALIZE THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN POSITION

The participants all wanted to change the perception of the school librarian position. This was easier for some than others. Kelly worked in a school library designed around the learning commons concept. She was able to introduce a flexible, adaptable concept of the school library from the day the school opened to both school and community stakeholders. While she admitted she had an advantage starting with a new community of educators, the school was comprised of staff from "different schools and different backgrounds." She focused on training to create a new vision of the library learning commons she hoped the school might share.

Conversely, Sharon, working independently on a fixed schedule, engaged in active support of student learning in a visible way, demonstrating how the school library is an integral part of student achievement. During the school day, she did not engage in the clerical aspects of the library job to facilitate the perception she maintains a teaching library schedule: "I have to do library work too, but if I'm on the computer, if I'm doing inventory, if I'm doing anything other than teaching, it looks

like I'm really not doing what I should be doing."

Redefining the perception of the school librarian to stakeholders outside the school building was also essential to these participants. They built partnerships with community members and decision makers in an effort to demonstrate how the school librarian position has evolved in recent years. In addition to activities that simply promote the school library, such as newsletters, the participants engage others in the activities of the library. Rose, Kelly, Lori, and Joy all offered extended hours and flexible access with the intent of bringing in not only students but also others from the community.

Volunteering for leadership duties within the school and the district has also been effective. Both Kelly and Linda have been assigned permanent seats on their school improvement leadership teams. They feel this demonstrates to others within the school that the librarian is an important, central figure to the school team, and the position provides yet another platform for getting the library message out to multiple groups of stakeholders.

Leading professional development sessions within the county or at district events further demonstrates leadership. Lori recently volunteered to chair the advocacy committee for her districtwide librarian community. Linda has led professional development on new technologies and teacher/librarian collaboration for not only school librarians but classroom teachers as well. By sharing knowledge with not only other school librarians, but other educators, opportunities to influence the perception of the position of the school librarian were created. Linda is invited to work with other school librarians in

her district, influencing administrator support:

I have benefitted from a lot of very vocal support. . . . [My administrator] has gone into schools where she felt that the [school librarian] needed to come and talk with me, to kind of learn some things about how to be more involved in designing lessons and that sort of thing. So I've had at least 4 people that she has sent me to and said, "I'll free you up to go spend the day," which is a real compliment.

EMPHASIZE THE TEACHING ROLE OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN

Participants also emphasized their roles as teachers and instructional partners through advocacy activities. They described building stakeholder support by becoming indispensable partners in student learning. Joy routinely attends common planning meetings with teachers to ensure she is informed of new developments with implementing the Common Core. Sharon described how her program supports the classroom curriculum:

We do a lot of team teaching. When I start teaching, the teachers join in with me. It's based on something that they've already taught or they're getting ready to teach. So it's related. It wasn't always like this.

Though all participants admitted there would always be a teacher or a stakeholder unwilling to work with the school librarian, both Sharon and Lori felt that word of mouth is the best way to elicit collaboration with other teachers. Creating a perception of "research expertise" among teaching colleagues and outside stakeholders also helped to gain support. Joy found that the new rigors and complexity of implementing the Common Core State Standards provided an opportunity to offer her teaching skills—assisting student learning in an area she felt more capable than her teaching peers. She described, "There's a big writing unit that requires research. I think the teachers were kinda spinning their wheels about that until I stepped in and essentially took over that piece of that one unit." Although it is just one part of one unit, it was enough to demonstrate a valuable teaching service she could provide to begin to change perceptions. Linda's entire program centers on her teaching and integrating library skills with content curricula. Even her administrator said, "She probably teaches more than any school librarian I've ever worked with."

INNOVATION OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN

Participants recognized the need to demonstrate something unique or innovative in their program to alter the perception of the library. They purposefully sought opportunities to demonstrate experiences or resources found in the school library program. Joy explained that often the best way to create support is by identifying an element that is not being offered anywhere else. When stakeholders perceive that something of value can only be met through the school library program, they are more likely to support the library. She was able to accomplish this as a leader in technology integration. She explained, "Technology just wasn't a focus. As the CCSS and PARC tests became more of a focus . . . stakeholders placed more of an emphasis on technology as well." She acquired a set of iPads and Chromebooks to further the understanding of how the library

HIGHER RESEARCH

Cawthorne, Nigel. **The History of Code Breaking** (History of Science). RosenYA, 2018. 211p. LB $34.60. ISBN: 9781508177036. Grades 7-12. There has always been the need for secret codes. Here is background of how codes have been broken from ancient times to the digital times. A detailed glossary and index, further reading, and picture credits make this a useful research tool.

Heing, Bridey, ed. **Critical Perspectives on Free Trade and Globalization** (Analyzing the Issues). Enslow, 2018. 228p. LB $47.93. ISBN: 9780766091689. Grades 7-12. Conflicting opinions about world affairs are covered here from different points of view including the government, courts, advocacy groups, media, and the public. Fact boxes with thought-provoking questions are included in each chapter. Debate classes will benefit from this timely information. Back matter has an extensive bibliography, chapter notes, foot notes, glossary, and an index.

Jackson, Tom. **Genetics: Why We Are Who We Are** (The Big Questions). Cavendish Square, 2018. 194p. LB $47.94. ISBN: 9781502628084. Grades 7-12. The Introduction defines genetics as a type of inheritance. Chapters are numbered as "questions" and cover topics such as genetic modification and improving DNA. Photos, fact boxes, and tables enhance the text. Further information, glossary, and an index round out the title.

Schmermund, Elizabeth, ed. **Civil Disobedience** (At Issue: Civil Liberties). Greenhaven, 2018. 142p. LB $39.40. ISBN: 9781534500655. Grades 6-12. Essays by experts in the field provide various points of view on this contemporary social topic. Many of these have works cited and notes. There is a list of organizations with contact information, bibliography, and an index.

Actionable Advocacy Steps for School Librarians: Ways to Alter the Perception of Stakeholders

REVITALIZE THE PERCEPTION OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN

Demonstrate to those outside the school how the school library position has evolved.

- Make the library open and accessible to the school community—both physically and online. Offer extended hours and flexible access.
- Build partnerships that involve community resources (banks, public libraries, businesses, universities, etc.) Cosponsor programs that appeal to students, parents, and staff.
- Be active in leadership at the school and district levels. This brings the library perspective to conversations with other educators.

EMPHASIZE THE TEACHING ROLE OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN

Demonstrate how school librarians are indispensible partners in student achievement.

- Engage in active support of student learning through library programing.
- Coteach or team-teach with peers to integrate library skills.
- Share your expertise (research, information literacy, computational thinking, inquiry, technology, etc.) and work with peers to develop units of instruction that integrate your strengths to advance student achievement.

INNOVATION OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN

Demonstrate something unique or innovative about the school library.

- Identify an element of the school library program not taught elsewhere.
- Curate resources to include social media and online resources and tools. Although students have an online presence, vetted resources and digital citizenship instruction are still areas of need to help learners be safe and effective online users of information.

Provide support for technology use for learning and student achievement.

RELEVANCE OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARY

Provide authentic learning experiences that are relevant to today's learners.

- Develop lessons that provide real-world applications of skills. Prepare students for college, career, and community in their information use and access.
- Integrate opportunities for use of multiple literacies, hands-on learning, and exploratory discovery that mirror daily information practices.
- Focus on developing problem solving and critical thinking; avoid setting up tasks that ask for simple fact-finding or library skills taught in isolation. Increased rigor of assignments that integrate content area expectations are transferrable across disciplines.

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could best support the online skills required for testing.

Others also pointed out that innovation often comes in the form of technology. Kelly realized that the idea of a school library as a physical space must change. Acknowledging a virtual space in her library learning commons, she noted,

We have our website that I've created that is very interactive in nature and houses many, many resources for our students and is constantly curated and changing. It is a space that is curated and created

by me, but we're giving more voice to our students with that as well, even the elementary level. So I think those are ways we can start thinking about ourselves not only as a physical space but as a virtual space, so we can make sure that we are giving everybody access as often as we possibly can.

She extends her ideas of access to include social media and librarian "chat" features, further reshaping the perceptions of her already innovative space.

RELEVANCE OF THE SCHOOL LIBRARY PROGRAM TO TODAY'S LEARNER

A final theme that resonated throughout the interviews was the need for authentic learning experiences relevant to today's learners. School librarians' greatest opportunity to change the perception of school libraries for all stakeholders and to build an educated support group among these stakeholders is to ensure that school library users engage in experiences that are relevant to today's learners.

Participants discussed advocacy activities that show the relevance of the library program to those in the community they are attempting to reach. When Kelly invited parent and community members to informational sessions on library programs and activities, she engaged everyone in hands-on discovery learning activities that resemble the opportunities students participated in during the school day. She explained that engaging in experiences that involved multiple literacies is similar to the experiences everyone encounters in real life. Kelly's administrator further explained that the activities are designed to encourage 21st century learning skills such as problem solving and critical thinking.

Other participants built this type of relevance into the content of their lessons. Linda described designing lessons that engage students in discovering real-world situations. By aligning curriculum and building relevance to today's learner, Linda's students interacted with new resources and deepened their content knowledge of complex concepts. Describing a unit researching developing nations she stated, "Seventh graders are just beginning to develop their social consciousness. It can be very overwhelming." Her approach allowed them to explore these difficult concepts through a guided-inquiry process. Finally, Sharon knew that to engage her urban population and have her teachers perceive her program as relevant to their curriculum, she needed to ensure that her students found her lessons timely. She selected resources that met the teacher objectives but were things the students were already using outside of school, like social media.

IMPLICATIONS

School librarians have the opportunity to alter the perception of the school library when they strategically engage in advocacy. School librarians working as leaders gain influence for the school library position. The increased focus on the role of the school librarian as teacher provides a positive perception of the school librarian when teaching is not seen as additive to the classroom curriculum and does not focus on "library skills." Changing the perception of instruction in the school library to relevant tasks developed to support curricular standards further creates a perception of indispensability and expertise of the school librarian.

As *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* (AASL, 2018) states, today's users have diverse needs, and school libraries have a responsibility to maintain a flexible, fluid program ready to meet them. School librarians engage stakeholders through authentic practices in the school library and deconstruct artificial policies, so they can mirror what may be faced in real life. When stakeholders outside the school are able to identify opportunities provided to the students, it creates an educated group of supporters who value and are willing to advocate for the school library program. For these six sites, no longer is the school library a quiet collection of resources and skills taught in isolation—it is now a collaborative learning hub.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

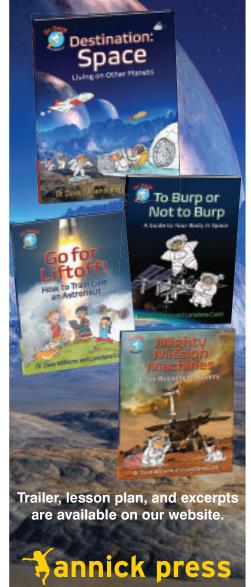There is limited research examining school library advocacy; these findings

strengthen the field's knowledge on practitioner activity. The findings of this study identify strategies six school librarians found successful in altering the perceptions of their stakeholders. The strategies shared by the school librarians and their administrative and coteaching stakeholders represent success stories of advocacy the school library field is eager to hear. By exploring the dynamics of the individual library programs, other school librarians can generalize the strategies used and alter the perception of the library in their unique settings. These stories provide a vision of the impact of advocacy on the profession and will in turn help create a shift in perception among all decision makers.

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