Why Should Principals Support School Libraries?

By Gary Hartzell

Principals should support school libraries because it is in both their students' and their own best interests to do so. Quality library media programs can enhance student achievement, and informed, committed librarians can help principals enhance their own administrative practice.

Student Achievement

Improving student achievement is a vital principal interest, but many principals overlook libraries and librarians as potentially powerful instruments in that work because they have not been educated to the library's value and library media research rarely appears in administrator publications (Wilson & Blake, 1993). Consequently, principals often leave library potential untapped despite fifty years of research evidence that effective library media programs—when led by active, involved librarians—can have a discernible positive impact on student achievement *regardless of student, school and community demographics*.

The evidence is drawn from elementary, middle, and high school studies reaching back to the 1950s. While the volume of evidence alone is cumulatively persuasive, the most recent research is especially powerful because its authors statistically controlled for demographic differences among the schools they studied—a feature missing in the pre-1990 research. This is important because the evidence is largely derived from statistical correlation studies, which cannot unequivocally prove causation. Correlation research can, however, identify relationships and degrees of association among variables. Cause-and-effect probability is strengthened if similar correlations appear in multiple settings over time, which is what occurs here.

Most effectively illustrated in recent work by Lance and his associates in Colorado (Lance, 2001; Lance & Loertscher, 2001) and by Smith (2001) in Texas, the research identifies statistically significant positive correlations between (a) student achievement levels on various types of standardized measures and (b) library media services and school librarians displaying these eleven characteristics:

Media Services Program Characteristics
1. Large, varied, and up-to-date collections.
2. One or more full-time qualified librarians.
3. Library support staff large enough and skilled enough to free certificated librarians from routine clerical duties and to allow them time to teach, to collaborate with teachers, and to engage in leadership activities outside of the library.
4. Free student and teacher access to the library during and beyond school hours.
5. Networked computers providing student and faculty access to catalogs, licensed databases, and the Internet.
6. Budget adequate to support the previous five items.
7. Staff commitment to teaching.
8. Individual student library use well beyond scheduled class visitations.
9. Information literacy instruction integrated into the curriculum.
Librarian Characteristics
10. Extensively collaborates with teachers.
11. Extensively involved in curricular, organizational, and operational school leadership activities outside of the library.

Of particular interest is the recent evidence (Lance & Loertscher, 2001) that the positive effects of library media programs increase when the librarian's traditional role is expanded to include involvement well beyond the library. One great barrier to full library utilization is a lack of faculty awareness of what the library and librarian have to offer. Exposure to and experience working with effective school librarians is a first step in correcting that deficiency.

Administrator Support

Role expansion allows librarians to deliver additional important services, such as research support for administrators. Freed from clerical duties and aware of developing challenges and opportunities through their extra-library involvement, librarians can draw on the Internet and subscription databases to supply principals with up-to-the-minute information on any given topic in planning sessions and prior to any board, faculty, parent, or business partner meeting. Consistent access to such information can only result in improved administrative decision-making.

Librarians also can support targeted faculty and student groups, including counselors (White & Wilson, 1997), beginning teachers (Barron, 1998), and at-risk (Bluemel & Taylor, 1991), latchkey (Feldman, 1990), and special needs youngsters (Wesson & Keefe, 1995).

How Can Principals Support Libraries?

Principals determine school library media program quality as much as librarians do (Haycock, 1999; Oberg, 1995; Oberg, Hay, & Henri, 2000) because they influence or control each of the eleven factors listed above. Collection size, currency, service hours, staff size, and the employment of full-time qualified librarians and adequate support staff all are tied to the principal's budgeting decisions.

As important as money is, however, it's not the only measure of support. Equally important is the principal's role in creating a school environment where student library use and faculty/librarian interaction are valued and promoted (Campbell & Cordiero, 1996; Wilson & Lyders, 2001). For example, the librarian's opportunity to collaborate with teachers depends on the school schedule, which the principal controls (McGregor, 2002; van Dusen & Tallman, 1994) and on how effectively principals encourage collaboration among faculty members. Teachers collaborate more with other teachers and with librarians when principals openly encourage the practice in word and deed (Haycock, 1999; Oberg, 1997; Pounder, 1998; Tallman & van Dusen, 1994a; Tallman & van Dusen, 1994b). How often students use the library similarly follows how well principals encourage faculty/librarian collaboration and their willingness to financially support services beyond regular school hours. As instructional and curriculum leaders, principals also powerfully affect the extent to which information literacy instruction is embedded in the body of the school's curriculum and how the school addresses meeting state standards in varying disciplines.

Perhaps nowhere is a principal's power to affect library media programs more apparent than in the extent to which the librarian has the opportunity to serve in a leadership capacity outside the library itself. Principals structure and populate the committees, teams, and task forces that recommend and implement school policy and practice changes. Prin-

cipals decide who will have the opportunity to take part in boundary-spanning activities to interact with district-level committees, parent groups, business partners, and community organizations (Hoy & Miskel, 2001; Morris, Crowson, Porter-Gehie, & Hurwitz, 1984). An active and committed librarian may be eager to engage in these activities, but will not have the chance unless the principal wills it. This is a particularly important point because many principals do not perceive librarians as potential faculty leaders (Schon, Helmstadter, & Robinson, 1991).

The school library media elements that foster increased student achievement are interactive and their effects are cumulative. Even under optimum conditions, none is sufficient in itself. External leadership opportunities won't increase faculty interaction opportunities if the library is impoverished. The most extensive collection will not produce maximal achievement results unless qualified librarians and support staff are available to help students and teachers use it. Enrichment services to targeted groups and administrative research support cannot be delivered if librarians are saddled with clerical duties. Principal support must be broad-based and multi-dimensional.

Albert Einstein is reputed to have said that problems cannot be solved using the same thinking that created them. How then can principals best support their libraries?

- ♦ Educate themselves to library and librarian potential.
- ♦ Reconfigure the librarian's job to maximize realization of that potential.
- ♦ Hire high-quality, forward-looking, energetic, innovative librarians.
- ♦ Provide budget resources adequate to new roles and demands.
- ♦ Effectively and accurately evaluate both the program and the librarian on jointly developed criteria recognizing library media work as simultaneously integral to instructional quality but distinct from classroom teaching itself.

Finding Assistance

Principals interested in developing their libraries as instruments of school improvement can ask their librarians to assemble a research collection to share with board members, district administration, and faculty. Ireland's (2001) regularly updated annotated bibliography of school library and academic achievement research is a useful starting point. Several ERIC digests (Lance, 2001; Lowe, 2000; Russell, 2000, for example) also point to original sources. A number of useful books (such as Lance & Loertscher, 2001; McQuillan, 1998; Wilson & Lyders, 2001) similarly identify and summarize research findings.

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