The power of accountability: Strategies for building credibility and support

By Anita Brooks Kirkland

Snapshot

Our regular contributor from Canada, Anita Brooks Kirkland, shares valuable and practical strategies to enable school libraries to build credibility and support. With a focus on the value of evidence-based practice Brooks Kirkland clearly offers a path to ensuring we are accountable, valued and positioned for a cycle of success.

My first success! You actually moved beyond the title and started to read this article. Kidding aside, it's that word, accountability, which I feared might have scared you away. It is a dry topic, you might surmise, and besides, who needs it? Almost subconsciously we equate accountability with being judged. Not what you really need to hear. After all, we have all spent copious amounts of time trying to prove the worth of the school library. And now you're going to tell me that lack of policy, funding and program development is our fault!

I must say that I am not a stranger to these feelings. I started as a teacher-librarian in the late 1990s, when we were both celebrating new international research that showed the correlation between school library programs and student achievement and suffering through significant funding cuts and de-professionalization. The new research did indeed demonstrate a correlation between school libraries and student success, but we struggled to answer questions as to why this was the case. Advocacy tended towards the 'school libraries are good for you' approach.

Enter Dr. Ross Todd, the international prophet of evidence-based school librarianship. His influence has meant that research has moved away from large correlational studies to investigations into precisely what specific practices improve student success. The shift to evidence-based practice has made us more accountable for what we do.

Evidence-based practice (EBP) focuses on what works – what specific practices have an impact on student learning. EBP is the foundation of accountability, and the concept of accountability means extending the influence of our investigations. If we don't share what we learn through EBP we miss an opportunity to build credibility.

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The other aspect of accountability relates to de-mystifying what we do in the library. How often have I heard the complaint from school library professionals that nobody understands what they do. If that is the case, then we need to take some ownership for that situation. Marketing, transparent practice, planning like an assessor, collecting and sharing evidence of our impact on

learning – in other words, demonstrating accountability – is the best way to open up people's imagination about the potential of the school library program.

Strategies for building credibility and support

1. Make connections through marketing

While promotion is a one-way, informational approach, marketing is the process of intentionally making connections between what is valued by those we serve and what we have to offer. Understanding the power of marketing addresses the perception that others don't understand what we do.

> Marketing is most powerful when we are able to overcome assumptions about what the library has to offer. Typically we ask teachers about what they need, or how we can help them, and may be disappointed when they lack understanding of the full potential of the program. Flipping our approach by asking them about what they are trying to achieve for their students and then responding with ideas about how we can support those goals is a powerful way to open eyes and minds to the potential of learning in the library. As Henry Ford purportedly said, 'If I'd asked them what they wanted, they would have said faster horses.' (Canadian School Libraries, 2023)

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2. Practice transparency

The other undeniable aspect of the 'nobody understands what we do' complaint is that many practices in librarianship are indeed deep mysteries to people in the school community, and those mysteries can cause big misunderstandings and even bigger problems.

Take weeding for example, a frequently misunderstood process. Members of the school community who are unfamiliar with the reasons for weeding are sometimes alarmed to see books being removed from the collection. Poor communication fuels this alarm, and consequently the process may be viewed as wasteful in the least and censorious in the extreme.

Sensitive to these misperceptions, past practice in the profession has often included hiding the process – spiriting books out of the school in the dark of night for disposal off-sight. This is, of course, exactly the wrong approach. Weeding is a critical part of keeping collections current and vibrant, for everyone's benefit, and needs to be understood as such.

Library professionals should always be prepared to explain the value of weeding, and how and why they are making related decisions. We must be able to answer concerns and reassure members of the school community – educators and students – that those concerns are being heard. This is particularly true when it is necessary to undertake a larger-scale weeding project, which is when most alarms are raised.

Open and transparent communication demonstrates accountability, and that accountability increases our professional credibility.

3. Use the teacher advantage

For teachers, accountability is built into student assessment. Through the reporting process, teachers are accountable for the efforts they make to help students be successful learners. If we are in a situation with opportunities for the teacher-librarian to co-teach with their colleagues, integrating information skills into inquiry projects, we might have that golden opportunity for those skills to actually be 'part of the mark'. Co-teaching, that is participating in a partnership with a classroom or subject teacher to plan, teach, and assess learning, offers the best opportunity to gather evidence of the outcomes and impacts of learning in the library. But we can gather that evidence in many ways, at all stages of inquiry learning even if that co-teaching relationship has not been fully realized.

As students progress through the inquiry cycle, exploring ideas, developing questions, formulating their focus, selecting resources, analyzing information, synthesizing thinking, and ultimately presenting their findings, there are many opportunities to gather information about how and how well they are learning, through observation, formal or informal conversations, and assessing the effectiveness of the final product. Using this model of triangulating data provides much deeper insight into how students learn than focusing solely on summative assessments. Even if we are not 'part of the mark', systematically gathering, recording, and analyzing this rich data also provides us with insight into the efficacy of our own practice, and informs future approaches. In other words, it helps us to be accountable.

Gathering Evidence of Learning

CONVERSATIONS OBSERVATIONS

TRIANGULATION of DATA

PRODUCTS/ PERFORMANCE
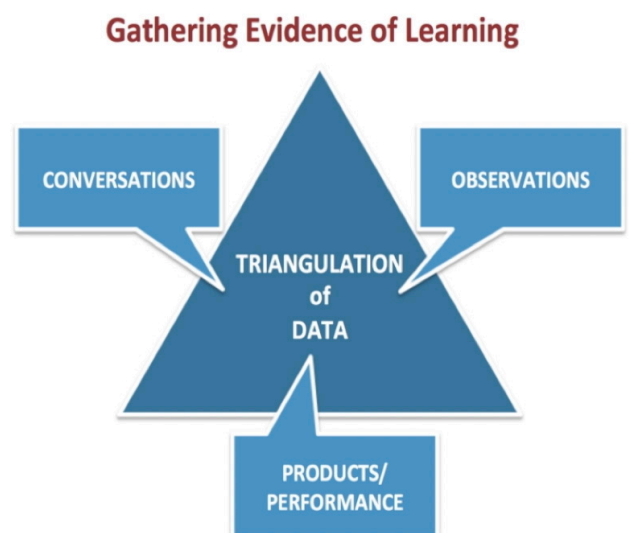
4. Don't put all your eggs in the achievement basket

The primary goal of the school library program is to support learning as it relates to the curriculum, of course, but our greater mission is much broader. Yes, we want students to learn,

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but we are also trying to foster the habit of life-long reading. We are focused on well-being and developing cultural awareness and personal growth. So much of what we do in the library may seem intangible, but the very things that we do to create safe, engaging spaces, build collections to open minds, create programs to foster a love of reading, and promote creativity are extremely important. By documenting related initiatives, gathering, analyzing, and communicating evidence of success, we deepen understanding of the library's core mission and its impact on students. We can measure what really matters.

5. Plan like an assessor

We can build accountability into our practice by taking our cue from the *Understanding by Design Framework* created by Wiggins and McTighe. The 'backward design' of this framework shows us how to plan like an assessor. The model puts assessment at the centre of planning, rather than relegating it to an afterthought. We start with the end in mind, identifying the desired results, and determining what kind of evidence we will need to assess whether those results have been achieved. Only then do we create the actual project plan. Decisions about what we actually do are informed by pre-determined success indicators. 'It's much easier to hit the target when you know what the target is.' (McTighe & Wiggins, 2012). It's also much easier to gather meaningful data when we know what we are looking for.

6. Collect the data, find the story

Data is information that is collected systematically and purposefully and examined in order to make decisions. Typically, we think of data as quantitative – numerical data or data that can be transformed into statistical information. There are so much of this kind of data available to us in the library, we must resist the temptation to report on numbers for their own sake. Rather we must use that data to help determine the success of our actions, and their impact.

The numbers don't tell the whole story. The qualitative data that we collect through observations, conversations, and interactions is also authoritative, when a level of rigour is applied to how it is collected, organized, and analyzed. The *Canadian School Libraries Research Toolkit* can help with these strategies.

> **Output Measures:** Outputs are tangible, quantitative measures, usually related to library operations. We measure outputs – collection and circulation statistics, attendance, etc., but what do these data tell us? Output measures like these have meaning only when put into the larger context of outcomes and impact.
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> **Outcome Measures:** Outcomes measure change from the perspective of the student, teacher or other library customer or stakeholder. For example, the outcome for students who participated in an information literacy lesson may be increased capacity to make critical decisions about the information they use.
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> **Impact Measures:** Impact measures larger and longer-term effects – transferable skills, changes in attitude, and success with larger goals. Impacts are reported as higher-level changes. For example, the longer-term impact of information literacy instruction may be that students understand their research topics more deeply and achieve better marks. Another impact might be that they are able to apply what they have learned in other contexts, at school and in life.
>
> Canadian School Libraries Research Toolkit

There is power in story. As Canadian library advocate Wendy Newman put it, 'Stories give life to data, and data gives authority to stories.' (CSL Research Toolkit).

7. Commit to the cycle of accountability

Professional practice in the library needs to be flexible and responsive to the evolving needs of the school's learning community. It is easy to lose our way if we work solely in responsive mode, however. Not everything is planned, but planning is a must for thinking strategically, growing the program, and building credibility and support. Innovation is at the heart of strategic thinking. With innovation comes accountability: the process of articulating goals, evaluating the success of new strategies, reporting on our progress, and using that information to inform future plans.
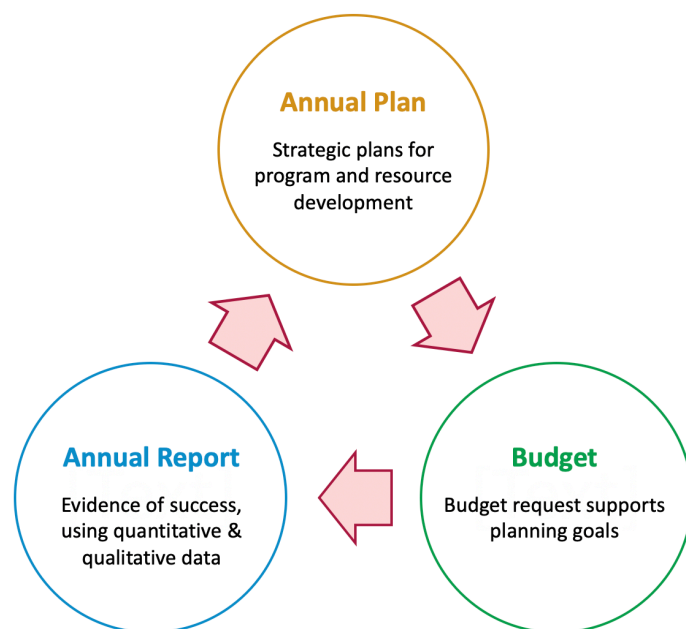
Canadian School Library's new guideline, *Foundations for School Library Learning Commons in Canada: A Framework for Success* includes a simple model for a cycle of accountability. The three stages of the cycle are the annual plan, the budget, and the annual report.

Annual plan: The annual plan articulates goals, project plans, and assessment strategies for particular initiatives. The plan should be explicitly aligned with school and district goals.

Budget: Many changes or initiatives can be made at little cost, but most will require a financial investment. Related funding should be incorporated into the library budget. 'The budget is the practical expression of the strategic plan. A budget request that incorporates a concrete plan which includes strategies for gathering and assessing evidence of success demonstrates accountability.' (Canadian School Libraries, 2023)

Annual report: Being accountable includes reporting on the success of the strategic plan or particular project plans. The report should incorporate both quantitative and qualitative data and should focus on outcomes and impacts. Quantitative data like circulation statistics presented in isolation do not tell the

The Cycle of Accountability

Annual Plan
Strategic plans for program and resource development

Budget
Budget request supports planning goals

Annual Report
Evidence of success, using quantitative & qualitative data

'Ultimately, the measure of the success of the school library program is the impact that it makes on the lives of students. The accountability cycle focuses on professional and program improvement, builds credibility within the school community, and builds support for ongoing and continous improvement.' (Canadian School Libraries, 2023)

library story effectively. Why did circulation improve? How do these statistics demonstrate strategic success? Can you link these numbers to positive outcomes for students? What is the potential impact on the learning community? Can you demonstrate that impact with qualitative data? Remember, 'Stories give life to data, and data gives authority to stories.'

> **Can you link these numbers to positive outcomes for students? What is the potential impact on the learning community?**

The annual report helps the school community understand the impact of the library program. Technology offers many opportunities to transform a dry, written report into an attractive and powerful representation of your success stories. Consider using data visualization techniques like infographics to bring your data alive. Consider presenting the report in a format that can easily be shared online, like an infographic, a simple website, or even an eBook.

The annual report demonstrates strategic successes, but may also raise questions to inform future strategic thinking. And so, the cycle of accountability continues.

Accountability and advocacy

As Dr. Ross Todd emphasized in his much-lauded article, *The Evidence-Based Manifesto* (2008), 'If school librarians can't prove they make a difference, they may cease to exist.' Well we've come a long way in the intervening years, and evidence-based practice has become embedded into school librarianship. EBP is an approach where teachers, teacher-librarians, and other library professionals engage in ongoing assessment of their own practices by gathering and assessing evidence of the outcomes and impacts of instructional initiatives.

The picture I hope I have painted of accountability in this article is also about growth and continuous improvement. Accountability helps build credibility and support over time. It helps us move from the 'libraries are good for you' advocacy soapbox, to being able to confidently say that libraries have a demonstrable impact on students' learning, well-being, cultural awareness, and personal growth, and here's how.

Accountability does not mean checking the boxes of an evaluation rubric full of benchmarks that may be impossible for many schools to achieve. Rather it is about empowering practice through a mindset of continuous improvement and growth, and using evidence of success to build support.

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As a writer, presenter and consultant, **Anita Brooks Kirkland** *specializes in the areas of information and digital literacy and the role of the school library learning commons. She draws on her extensive experience as a teacher educator, both as an instructor in teacher-librarianship for the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, and in her previous role as the Consultant for K-12 Libraries at the Waterloo Region District School Board. Anita was a contributing writer to Together for Learning, Ontario's guideline document for the school library learning commons. Anita is very active in professional organizations, currently serving as chair of Canadian School Libraries. She was the 2014 president of the Ontario Library Association and has also served as president of the Ontario School Library Association (2005) and co-chaired The Association of Library Consultants and Coordinators of Ontario (2011-13). Anita shares an extensive collection of program resources, articles, and presentations on her website and blog,* **www.bythebrooks.ca**