

Get grounded to manage the school library classroom

By *Hilda K. Weisburg*

Snapshot

Hilda K. Weisburg clearly outlines the need to articulate a philosophy, a mission, and a vision to underpin and support the development of your library program. Establishing these statements informs practice and enables you to better manage your role within the school community with clarity and purpose.

Why is managing the library classroom such a challenge? Many of you were classroom teachers before you became school librarians. You may have thought you were more than ready to manage a class, and then found teaching and managing the school library classroom was not nearly the same thing.

As soon as you begin, you are expected to know everything about running and managing a school library program. Yet the people who expect that have little or no idea what your full responsibilities are. This is very different from the classroom situation where a new teacher is not supposed to be able to hit the ground running. In addition, his/her grade level or subject area colleagues can help. That is not true for school librarians since you are likely the only one in the building.

The differences are striking.

- First and foremost, the students are not 'yours'.
- – and they know it. Developing continuity and relationships with them is difficult. You see them at best once a week for 30-45 minutes if you are at the elementary level and only as a teacher brings in a class at the upper levels.
- You have many more names to learn. Knowing the students' names is important. It makes them feel you recognize them as individuals. But with so many students this is extremely difficult to accomplish. You will have to ask them for their understanding and help.
- Your library classroom has many places for students to hide. Unless you stay on top of the situation, there will be those who wander off. When they do, they often get into trouble.
- People are always walking through. Teachers come to find something or ask you a question --sometimes when you are in the middle of teaching. The principal might drop by, possibly bringing guests and often unannounced. Students are sent to the library to complete different tasks or because they cannot participate in other classes. Keeping track of people's comings and goings is a challenge.

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- Lunchtime presents other challenges. Do you allow students to eat in the library? Are classes meeting during lunch periods? If so, you may be teaching as students come in to spend the time in the library. Socialization tends to raise the noise level and it's difficult to enforce rules when there are so many different groups in different places.

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How can you manage all this? The best way to start is to find and connect with other librarians since only they will understand your situation and challenges. If you are new to the profession, seek out a mentor. If you are experienced, find a buddy. You need someone who can guide and/or be a listening ear to what is happening in your library.

The purpose of a mentor is to guide you as you grow into your full role as a school librarian. To find a mentor, see if your state library association has a mentorship program and take advantage of it. If not, you must find your own. Consider officers in your state association or those who contribute regularly to your state's electronic discussion list or social media platforms. Reach out to one of them. You may think they are too busy or too important to mentor, but you will be amazed to discover what a helpful, supportive profession this is. Determine which means of communication works best for your mentor and do your best to accommodate it. Be mindful—and grateful—for your mentor's time.

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The Three-legged Stool

Your philosophy, mission, and vision make up a three-legged stool which forms a firm support for your program. Your Philosophy is your Foundation. Your Mission is your Motivation - and your Perspiration. It's why you do what you do. You should be proud every time you see it. Your Vision is the ultimate objective you are striving for. It's your Aspiration.

Your Philosophy

Begin by formulating your philosophy. There are numerous titles for what we do. We are called school librarians, teacher librarians, school library media specialists, and several others. The name is not important. What is important, is who you are and what you stand for. Knowing this keeps you confident and focused as you manage your shifting roles and responsibilities.

Begin by identifying your Core Values. What do you think are most important and vital to a school library program.? The six Common Beliefs in the *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* are (AASL, 2018):

1. The school library is a unique and essential part of a learning community.
2. Qualified school librarians lead effective school libraries.
3. Learners should be prepared for college, career, and life.
4. Reading is the core of personal and academic competency.
5. Intellectual freedom is every learner's right.
6. Information technologies must be appropriately integrated and equitably available.

Which one(s) stand out for you? What would you add to your personal list? Making the library a safe and welcoming place for all might be one you include. You need to be clear in your mind as to what you believe the library is and should be. Jot down your thoughts and use them to write your own philosophy. You can incorporate both what the library should be as well as what the librarian brings to the program.

The completed philosophy statement should be somewhere between two paragraphs and one full page. It is the Foundation of your library. Since it's too long to post and share it with those who come to the library, consider using one of the word cloud apps to create a picture of your philosophy and hang that in a prominent place in the library.

Mission Statement

As the second leg of that three-legged stool, your Mission Statement declares your purpose. Why are you here? What makes you indispensable to the school community?

I hope you already have a Mission, but it is always good to review yours and see if it needs any tweaks. Write it in the present tense. It's not about what you will do in the future. It's what you are doing now. Don't use the conditional either. Again, it's not about "should," it's what you do. Don't minimize it.

I have seen long Missions which include bulleted statements as to how it will be realized. I prefer to keep the statement at no more than 50 words. This allows it to be easily framed and hung—and you can memorize it. When you know your Mission by heart, it stays with you all the time.

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Your Mission Statement promotes the library program as essential. It shows that the library is unique and can't be replaced by anyone. If some other teacher in the school covers what you have included, you are redundant which means not needed.

Avoid weak words. Saying you support, extend, or complement the curriculum is nice, but in tough times the administration can do without it. Being “integral” to achieving curricular goals is more powerful. Here are two examples to consider.

- The mission of the school library program is to achieve district and curricular goals, address diverse learning and teaching styles of students and faculty, enabling them to become effective users and producers of information by providing them with the technology, resources and guidance they need to stay informed in a rapidly changing world and thrive in a collaborative and productive environment.

- The Library Media Program teaches effective and ethical uses of information, develops critical thinking, fosters and promotes independent reading, provides equitably accessible media sources to all users, and builds personal and social responsibility.

If you are trying to reach your administrators through your Mission, choose words and terms that are part of their vocabulary. For example, in the last example the phrase ‘independent reading’ is used. If administrators are more concerned with ‘literacy’ change this to say ‘fosters and promotes literacy through independent reading.’

Before deciding if your Mission is complete, review your school and/or district goals. What words in there can be included in your statement. You want your Mission to be aligned with the larger school goals to demonstrate you are an integral part of the educational community, and that what you do furthers their aims.

In addition to informing others of the unique and vital role of the library program – and you – the Mission statement clarifies your own decision-making. It’s your touchstone for determining where you want to go, such as whether to introduce a new program, and who to target for your advocacy. As much as possible, all your work should be related to carrying out your Mission.

Vision Statements

Your Vision is the third leg of that stool, and it represents your Aspiration and Inspiration. It captures an exciting view of what the library program can bring.

Vision shows what your library program would be like in the best of all possible worlds. How do you want others to perceive you? What do you ultimately want to achieve? What messages should the library send?

Vision shows what your library program would be like in the best of all possible worlds. How do you want others to perceive you? What do you ultimately want to achieve?

Although it's unlikely your Vision exists now, and if it did you would have to make it still bigger, you still write it in the present tense. This gives it immediacy even if you never attain it. Keep it to no more than 50 words so it, too, can be memorized, framed, and hung on your library wall.

Writing a Vision is more challenging than writing a Mission. It's hard to articulate something you may believe is unattainable, but if you don't put it out there it will never even come close to happening.

Consider these three examples:

- The Blank School Library Media Program is the center of collaborative learning, producing creative students who have an appreciation of literature, critical thinking skills, and a respect for others and self, and who are prepared to make a contribution to the world.

- The school library media program is a safe, open, accessible, and inviting learning library commons, essential to student achievement, citizenship, and supports the principles of intellectual freedom. Our students think globally and are capable of creating new knowledge.

- The Blank Elementary School Library Media Center is the hub for educational resources utilized by students and staff members. With literacy as its core, our Library Media Program stimulates curiosity, innovation, and the skills and techniques forming the foundation for lifetime learning.

Post your Mission and Vision where everyone who comes into the library sees them. Memorize them so they are a part of you. Once you do, you will find they more easily become part of your plans, decisions, and actions.

Before the start of every school year, review these statements. Have you made any steps towards achieving them? What could you try this year that will bring you closer? Is there something you need to support you? If you need funding, consider looking for a grant. If you need help, think about started a volunteer group of students or parents.

New or experienced, you are now ready to explore the challenges of classroom management in the library setting. You will never be bored. Every day is different. Whether you are at the elementary, middle, or high school level, you will learn something new each day. The demands are many, but the rewards are greater.

References

American Association of School Libraries (2018). *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*. Chicago: ALA Editions., pp. 11-14

(Editor's Note: This article is based on *Classroom Management for School Librarians* which will be published soon by ALA Editions.)

Hilda K. Weisburg was a school librarian for over 30 years and is now an author, speaker, and adjunct instructor at William Paterson University (NJ). She coauthored 14 books for school librarians (with Ruth Toor), including *Leading for School Librarians: There Is No Option*, *Being Indispensable: A School Librarian's Guide to Becoming an Invaluable Leader*, *New on the Job: A School Library Media Specialist's Guide to Success*, and *School Librarian's Career Planner*, which was her first work without Toor, all published by ALA Editions. Her newest book, *Classroom Management for School Librarians* will be coming out shortly. For 35 years she cowrote and edited *School Librarian's Workshop*, a bimonthly newsletter for K-12 librarians. She has given presentations, and keynotes at ALA, AASL, and state library conferences and given staff development workshops in many locations. A past president of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians, she has served on many ALSA and AASL committees, chairs The Ruth Toor Grant for Strong Public Libraries, and serves on the ALA Professional Ethics Committee. Her YA fantasy novel *Woven through Time* was a finalist in the International Book Award in the Fiction/Fantasy category. Hilda was the recipient of the 2016 AASL Distinguished Service Award.