

# The mentoring stars align in Vermont

*By Judith Kaplan and Nancy Daigle*

## Snapshot

Judith Kaplan and Nancy Daigle describe their wonderful journey with the Vermont School Library Association as they implement the Mentoring School Librarians Matter Grant from the NEA Great Public Schools Fund. The Mentor Program offers fantastic opportunities for Vermont school librarians to learn and grow together.

**Author Note:** Greetings to School Librarians in Victoria and Australia and Around the World from the Vermont School Library Association (VSLA) in New England, USA!



## Who are we?

Vermont is a small, but mighty state that borders Canada to the north, New Hampshire to the east, New York to the west, and Massachusetts to the south! Vermont is known for its brilliant fall foliage, winter snow and ice sports (brrr), spring mud and delicious maple syrup, and warm summer landscapes of mountains and lakes, with a rural and urban vibe. People excel in friendliness and a 'can do' spirit-especially school librarians!

Nancy Daigle and I, Judy Kaplan, have many combined years of experience in school libraries and as library educators in higher education. We have been active members of State and National School Library and Education organizations, but the past few years have been the most exhilarating, nerve wracking, and rewarding of our careers. It is one thing to apply for and receive a sizable grant, but it's another thing to keep the plates spinning, while walking and chewing gum at the same time. We are grateful to report that the successful implementation of our three year ***Mentoring School Librarians Matters*** Grant is due to the support of our colleagues who have been essential in transforming an idea for a mentoring program into a reality. We are humbled and honored to call them friends and partners in learning.

We appreciate the invitation to share reflections about our ongoing journey to develop a statewide mentoring program for school librarians in Vermont. We have made great progress in the past three years, and we are looking forward to future challenges to embed the program into professional practice and leadership in our organization.

The Vermont School Library Association (VSLA) has been an active professional organization that connects school librarians and other supporters for over fifty years, and maintains a membership that represents rural, suburban, and urban areas in Vermont. The executive board is composed of volunteers who rotate leadership positions and provide direction for strategic planning to identify issues that impact school library resources and services within educational communities. The board also disseminates school library position statements and testimony to advocate and voice concerns about contemporary educational issues such as a student's freedom to read and the right to access information.

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A VSLA goal has been to provide opportunities for school librarians to collaborate and learn from each other to improve learning for Vermont public school students, preK-12. Conferences, regional meetings, and a robust listserv allow school librarians to get together to discuss common challenges and to learn about new resources and educational trends. In a sense, this idea drives our approach to mentoring and our desire to share expertise and knowledge among practicing librarians.

## From idea to reality: The stars of possibility

Formalizing a mentoring program has been a topic of discussion for years. Seasoned folks and those entering the profession have developed relationships informally through networking. There has been no established process, until recent changes within Vermont public education opened a gateway for the mentoring stars to align for VSLA.

- Star #1: **Vermont State School Board of Education/Vermont Agency of Education: Education Quality Standards** were enacted in Vermont Statutes in 2016 (2100 STATUTORY AUTHORITY 16 V.S.A. §§164 and 165). Guidelines included a requirement for school districts to provide professional learning for novice educators through mentoring programs. School districts had flexibility to structure local mentoring programs using experienced educators who would be trained and paid as mentors for novice educators.
- Star #2: **Vermont-NEA**, an affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA), began to offer professional training for mentors and coaches. They provided access to NEA resources including the NEA **Great Public Schools Fund Grants**. Summer coursework targeted mentor trainers and teachers to fill mentoring roles in districts. Some school librarians participated and discovered that the focus was on preparation for educator evaluation for teaching and learning. That training was great, but it did not address the multiple roles of specialists, such as a school librarian.
- Star #3 **VSLA**: (2017) A Strategic Planning Goal was created to establish a roster of trained mentor school librarians for induction, mentoring and coaching. Informal mentoring has been supported throughout the state through the professional organization, but we were looking for ways to have school librarian mentors be trained to become paid mentors in school district mentoring programs.

## Connecting the dots

School librarians seek collaboration with other professional and community organizations. We are always looking to find innovative ways to fund initiatives for improving student learning. Change often happens through networking, and by being in the right place and at the right time. In our case, a lunch conversation with the Vermont-NEA Professional Programs Director set the stars in motion. As soon as we heard 'Why don't you apply for this grant,' we decided to shoot for the moon.

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In fall 2019, we completed the outline for an application for an NEA Great Public Schools Fund Grant, with the help of Juliette Longchamp, the Professional Programs Director for Vermont-NEA, and with the guidance of the VSLA Advocacy Team.

- We believe that new school librarians benefit from coaching by trained librarian mentors who understand the unique role of the school library program in the educational community. This has been... and is our mission for writing the grant and seeing it through.
- Rationale presented within the grant application included:
  - Data and research (local and national) that connect improved student learning with access to school library resources and services, especially in areas of poverty and underserved populations.
  - improved retention of educators who are mentored.
  - and would endorse a pilot project to build mentoring capacity, support new school librarians, and improve leadership opportunities for experienced librarians.
- Key action steps to implement the grant included:
  - Creation of an VSLA mentoring advisory committee and framework to support implementation.
  - development of a graduate credit course for mentoring and coaching strategy instruction, with a focus on integration of [\*\*AASL National School Library Standards\*\*](#) into goal setting in teaching and learning in school libraries.
  - development of a structure for a regional network of coordinators to communicate directly with district school administrators and school librarians.
  - a process to recruit seasoned school librarians to participate in the training.
  - and a process for placing the mentors with mentee novice librarians.

- Financial supports requested:
  - Stipends for grant administrator, AASL Consultant, trained mentors, and regional coordinators.
  - educational support expenses, such as providing funds for texts for mentors in the required training course, Zoom licenses, and communication and travel expenses.

## The hard work begins!

In March 2020, we celebrated the award of the \$157,000 *Mentoring Matters* three-year grant proposal—just in time for the Covid shutdown across the country— not an auspicious start! Reaching the moon, we realized that even though we had a plan, implementing it would take time, energy, and creativity just as we were coping with school lockdowns and moving to remote learning, as a result of a worldwide pandemic.

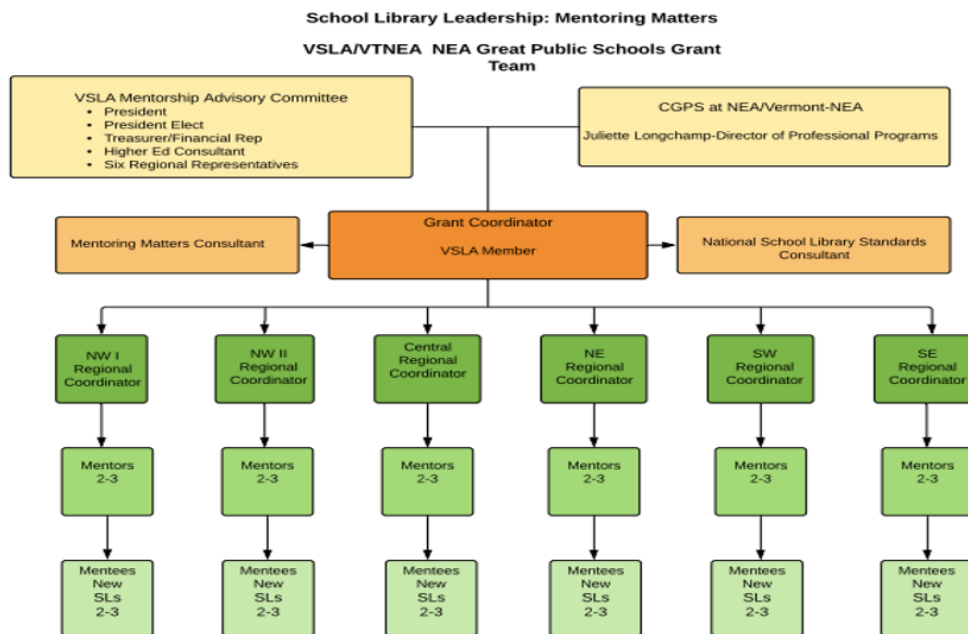
Fortunately, we had flexibility to revise some parts of the plan, and we had already developed a syllabus for the online summer course at the University of Vermont. We had sketched out ideas for an advocacy plan to support the grant. Nancy created a web portal for a central access point to information about the grant, and to recruit mentor participants. We had a statewide database that would be used by regional coordinators. All our planning and implementation moved into a virtual zone as we used Zoom and Google Meet to spread the word about the grant and generate support for the pilot program.

Thanks to our resilient, eager, and courageous professional organization, we recruited our first cohort and launched the first year of our plan in June 2020.

## The nitty gritty!

The framework for the grant implementation is not complicated in a small state of 625,000 people. VSLA partners with Vermont-NEA, the local NEA affiliate to administer fiscal disbursements for the grant and to submit bi-yearly reports during the grant. The Director of Professional Programs oversees those aspects of the grant with input from the Mentorship Advisory Committee and the grant coordinator. The grant coordinator keeps all the plates spinning, facilitates monthly meetings for regional coordinators and mentors, and communicates with stakeholders in the community. The grant coordinator co-instructs the graduate course as a Mentoring Matters Consultant, along with the AASL Consultant.

Regional coordinators play critical roles within the framework and the post-grant sustainability plan. They maintain and update databases of information for every school in their region. Regional coordinators have access to websites for local districts and email lists for all administrators and school librarians. They identify school librarian openings in the districts and communicate with curriculum coordinators and mentor leaders to provide access to mentor school librarians in their districts or regions. They actively work to match mentors with mentees. They are the boots on the ground, so to speak!



## Grant goals and progress - so far...

**Goal 1-to recruit 15 new experienced certified school librarians each year for three years around the state to be trained as mentor-coaches for new school librarians in Vermont.**

Progress: GOAL MET for years 1, 2, 3

- Targeted 15 participants in a cohort, trained 16 in cohorts 1 and 2, and 14 in cohort 3: Total 46

Training included a 2-credit online summer graduate course at the University of Vermont, EDCI 396 *Mentoring Matters for School Librarians*, and ongoing virtual monthly meetings for mentors during the school year. Recertification credit (1) was awarded by VSLA for attendance at monthly meetings.

The most powerful metaphor from the Mentoring Matters course was Mentor as Growth Agent.

- The purpose was to shift the thinking about the role of mentors as ‘the purveyors of great and wonderful wisdom’ ...think the man behind the curtain... to being Growth Agents. Mentors have three roles: to provide support, increase cognitive challenge, and facilitate professional vision. (Lipton & Wellman, 2018, p. 1) We trained mentors to shift their stance in a learning-focused conversation with their mentees back and forth on

**“In effective structured conversations, the mentor is the master of momentum and the beginning [librarian] is the keeper of the content.”**

(Lipton & Wellman, 2018, p. 23.)





a continuum depending on the attitude and aptitude of the mentee. A new hire requires different support than a highly confident and competent mentee. We teach mentors to CHOOSE their response-- to be intentional with their language and to increase the repertoire of their choices of responses.... not jump in with their own stories or solutions or suggestions. Good mentors evaluate their own listening skills. A mentor's job is to decrease dependency and increase capacity. The choices a mentor makes in that moment with a mentee are meant to build capacity for problem solving and self-reliance. It's not about giving advice or enabling. It's about empowerment.

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- The course covered three large areas of content: a framework around the AASL standards; mentoring best practice as outlined in *Mentoring Matters: A Practical Guide to Learning-Focused Relationships* (2018) by Laura Lipton and Bruce Wellman; and information for mentors around supervision and evaluation models. All this content was then further developed throughout the year when the mentors met.
- In Vermont, other mentor training opportunities focus on preparing new educators for supervision and evaluation in their roles as teachers. Our concern was that novice school librarians have typically been assigned mentors who are educators, who support good instruction but have no familiarity with the specialized roles and responsibilities a school librarian has in the school. Training in the VSLA Mentoring Matters program supports school librarians as educators and specialists. School librarian mentors provide guidance for using National Library Standards as they have conversations with mentees about setting goals to improve all aspects of school librarian practice.

**School librarian mentors provide guidance for using National Library Standards as they have conversations with mentees about setting goals to improve all aspects of school librarian practice.**

**Goal 2 -to establish a roster of trained school librarian mentors who are available to be paired with novice school librarians, and a process for matching mentors and mentees.**

Progress: GOAL MET for years 1, 2, 3

A central clearinghouse of 46 trained school library mentors in the six Vermont School Library Association regions of Vermont has been created to pair every newly hired school librarian in Vermont with a seasoned mentor. A database is maintained by regional coordinators and is used to make the pairings as new librarians are identified. Most mentors are mentoring within their own districts, but some meet remotely across districts based on availability. This remote option

was not a part of our original plan, but the pandemic developed a global familiarity with online meetings, and became the norm given the travel time saved.

Several of the regional coordinators for the Mentoring Matters Grant are also VSLA Board Regional Representatives, so post-grant, they will be able to continue to provide access to matching mentees with mentors.

### **Goal 3-To develop a framework for continuing professional learning and sustainability of the program that could be transferred to other endorsements**

Progress: GOAL MET for years 1 and 2, and ongoing into year 3 and beyond...

- The VSLA Executive Board has voted to incorporate elements of the grant framework to support the roster of trained school librarian mentors into their by-laws. A new position has been created to continue to oversee a mentoring process that reflects our unique roles as specialists for novice school librarians.
- Local school district mentoring programs offer stipends for those who are hired as mentors, and that will provide incentives for continued participation as school librarian mentors.
- We are continuing to develop this goal to include a training component that is supported through VSLA's focus on professional learning. We are exploring partnerships with other Vermont organizations that have an interest in mentoring programs. This is still a work in progress.
- We have been consulting with liaisons at the Vermont Agency of Education to help them develop comparable mentoring opportunities for other specialists, such as arts, music and physical education educators. These conversations are ongoing.
- Other states have expressed interest generated by our presentation at the AASL National School Library Conference at Salt Lake City in October 2021.

### **Imagining new possibilities, searching for new constellations...**

The learning journey for innovative educational practices proceeds at an astonishing rate, as well as the challenges of living in information overload. We must embrace the future and the new generations of educators who will take up the quest. We are in it together!

The surveys and anecdotal data and reflections collected during the implementation of the grant have supported the value of mentoring and coaching, not just for newbies, but for experienced practitioners. VSLA mentors have three roles: to prepare the mentee for evaluation, to support the integration of standards, and to have effective ongoing learning-focused conversations using a variety of tools. Mentors incorporate challenge and vision as well as support. They introduce

and model the use of reflective practice as critical for professional growth. The learning goes both ways in trusting relationships that bridge knowledge and encourage new ideas.

While long term benefits have yet to be determined, the data we have collected shows that 30% of the students in Vermont have received library services from a school librarian mentor or someone supported by one of our mentors in the past three years.

The belief that new school librarians benefit from coaching by trained librarian mentors who understand the unique role of the school library program in the educational community has supported the development of strong librarian leaders and a strong professional organization in our state. The VSLA mentoring grant award from the National Education Association has been acknowledged by other organizations within the state and the region. VSLA is committed to expanding the role of a formal mentoring program as part of its mission. We are available to consult with educational or other organizations to offer guidance in establishing mentoring and coaching practices.

As we continue to refine and build on the goals for the grant, we realize that there is much work left on our plates. We need to continue to reach for the stars that are just beyond our sight, and trust that through networking and building relationships we can expand our universe, and our message about libraries and learning.

In closing, we would like to send a shout out to members of SLAV who are shining examples of networking and leadership. As the dwarf stars were aligning for the mentoring program in Vermont, there was an opportunity to learn from Susan LaMarca, Camilla Elliott, Diane Ruffles and Ross Todd in November 2018-way before Covid! At the New England School Library Association Conference in Boston, Massachusetts, *Dancing with the Stars: Stepping into the Future, Honoring the Past*, Susan and friends headlined a virtual presentation that brought Victoria school librarians into the conference hall via Skype. During that presentation which featured mentorship programming that connected Australian school librarians in remote regions of the country, the possibilities and lessons for establishing a mentoring program in Vermont made the Vermonters in the audience see stars! You have been an inspiration for us, as we hope that our story will inspire others.

And finally, thanks for all the support from Vermont-NEA, the National Education Association and VSLA members across the state. You are all stars!

Please feel free to contact us with questions and comments. We would love to hear from you.



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