

# Action advocacy for school libraries

By Anita Brooks Kirkland

## Snapshot

Anita Brooks Kirkland outlines the development during recent history of advocacy and how our profession has changed its position over time. She makes a case for action advocacy and outlines a range of approaches and strategies that define advocacy in a current context.

Advocacy is one of the most discussed and yet one of the most frustrating topics in the school library world. From the very first courses I took in school librarianship it was drilled into me that advocacy was part of the job, and I embraced that message. But as I suspect is the case with so many, I struggled to understand what this meant in practice, and questioned the impact that I might have. One might think that my influence increased as I took on leadership positions in my school district and in school library associations at the provincial and now the national level, but I would argue that this is not necessarily the case. What happens every day within the school is as important or even more important than actions undertaken by the leaders.

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We all own advocacy, at every level of an organization and across the profession. We demonstrate our worth and move the profession and program forward through what we do every day. I call this approach action advocacy.

## The evolution of school library advocacy

As with everything, we learn from history. Advocacy approaches for school libraries have evolved over the past decades in parallel with research approaches, a topic I dealt with extensively in my last Synergy column, *The Canadian School Libraries Research Toolkit: Supporting Practitioner Research for the School Library Learning Commons*.

### 1990s – 2000s: School libraries are good for you

I was a school-based teacher-librarian in the turbulence of the late 1990s, an era where the emergence of the Internet provoked a crisis of confidence. In Ontario where I live and work, the populist government at the time was cutting funding to education, all in the name of “back to basics”. School

### The “School libraries are good for you” approach.



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**Advocacy tended towards the “school libraries are good for you” approach, preaching and pleading...**

libraries were the proverbial low-hanging fruit, and we were overwhelmed. There were large-scale studies that demonstrated 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, preaching and pleading from the proverbial soapbox, and our audience was not receptive.

## **2000s: School library programs have an impact on learning, and here’s the evidence.**

The influence of Ross Todd cannot be overstated when it comes to school library research and by extension, school library advocacy. Todd implored us to focus on learning, measuring our impact by the outcomes for students. Evidence-based practice focusses our attention on what works and helps us answer those pesky “how” questions when making the case for school library programs.

## **2019: School libraries are essential for student success in learning and in life.**

Gathering and sharing evidence of student learning is inherent to current practice. Our focus now is alignment. We need to demonstrate that learning in the library is directly relevant to the goals of our school and district. Our view needs to be outward to the broader education world. Collaborative teaching is vital not only for student learning, but for increasing understanding of the importance of the library program.

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## **Lessons learned from key influencers**

Within the extensive literature about library advocacy, a few voices stand out for me. Here are some of the lessons I have learned from the masters.

### **Ken Haycock & Wendy Newman**

Dr. Haycock has conducted extensive research across library sectors about advocacy, distilling this simple but powerful definition. “Advocacy is a planned, deliberate and sustained effort to develop understanding and support incrementally over time.” There is no instant gratification here. Canadian library leader Wendy Newman succinctly summarizes what that means in terms

of influencing decision-makers. “People do things for their reasons, not our reasons; we need to understand and respect those reasons; cultivating relationships of credibility and trust is essential to this approach.”

## **Ross Todd**

I have already mentioned Todd’s influence, but emphasize again that his mantra of basing practice on evidence of learning is not only at the core of practice and research, but the foundation for demonstrating efficacy. It is, after all, all about the students.

## **Doug Johnson**

Johnson’s *Blue Skunk Blog* has always provided inspiration. He pulls no punches with his four rules of library advocacy.

1. Don’t depend on national studies, statistics or publications.
2. Build relationships and inform so others will advocate for you.
3. Never advocate for libraries or the librarian – only for library users.
4. Don’t depend on the library supervisor to make your case.

## **Barbara Stripling**

Stripling deals head-on with the greatest frustration of advocacy. No matter what we do, why doesn’t it seem to make any difference?

The mildly amusing question, “If a tree falls in a forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?” has much more serious implications if considered in light of advocacy for school libraries. For years, school librarians have pleaded, cajoled, publicized, and even demanded that administrators, teachers, parents, and school boards recognize the value of school libraries and support them accordingly. If no one has heeded our pleas, then have we really made a sound? (2014)

Stripling asks us to consider the following essential questions as we deal with the trickiest part of advocacy, crafting our message.

1. What is the compelling message about school libraries that cannot be denied?
2. What message about the impact of school libraries on learning will change the mind-set of teachers, administrators, parents, and legislators?

Stripling encourages us to articulate the unique value proposition of the school library program.

## **Deborah Levitov**

Levitov prefers the word activism over advocacy, emphasizing that it is in our actions that we demonstrate our worth. She also focusses our priorities on student learning above all else.

School librarians should stop and realize that advocacy planning and activism can only be successful when student learning is at the heart of every advocacy plan conceived, created and acted upon for school libraries. (2012)

## Anita's action advocacy advice

Synthesizing ideas from these key influencers and so many more with my many years of experience, I offer my own action advocacy advice.

### 1. Advocacy is a lifestyle, not an event

We demonstrate our worth and move the profession and program forward through what we do every day. We all own advocacy, at every level of an organization and across the profession. Please don't take that as encouragement to jump on the proverbial soapbox whenever possible. In all hope the rest of my advice will start you on a more convincing path.

### 2. Understand and be able to articulate the unique value proposition of the school library learning commons

School libraries have unique value in education. Understanding and being able to articulate that unique value proposition is critical. If we can't explain *why* we exist, how do we expect others to understand? *Why* is freedom of choice in reading important to literacy development? *Why* is the free exploration of ideas, an idea at the heart of the library's identity, a critical part of inquiry learning and creativity?

*"When provincial, national, or international learning assessments are analyzed, the areas of concern that emerge are frequently library-related, particularly in the realm of information literacy practices: formulating questions, identifying appropriate sources of information, locating information, distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information."*

(Dianne Oberg, 2012)

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Why is information literacy more important now than ever before, and what does that look like in the era of big data, social media and "fake news"? If we cannot articulate the added value of learning in the library, how do we expect others to get it?

### 3. It's not about us, it's about the students

School library advocacy is often voiced as advocacy for the teacher-librarian. The research is unequivocal in demonstrating the essential role that the teacher-librarian has in connecting

to the learning agenda, but advocacy for a particular position is often perceived as being self-serving.

## Student success and the school library learning commons



<https://www.canadianschoollibraries.ca/excellent-school-libraries/>

The great disparities in school library staffing and funding models across Canada, and I daresay most jurisdictions, is symptomatic of the lack of a clear understanding amongst policymakers of the potential that school libraries have to offer. Amongst ourselves discussion frequently devolves into acrimonious debates about staffing. Our vision gets clouded and we lose sight of our mission.

School library programs exist to support student learning and growth. Period. Our future depends on sharing that clarity of vision. Our future depends on working together, no matter our job title, respecting each other's roles and understanding our interdependence.

**School library programs exist to support student learning and growth.**

## 4. Be strategic, and be accountable

Remember Wendy Newman's advice? People do things for their reasons, not our reasons. Being strategic means connecting to their reasons. Can you identify your school district's strategic priorities? Do you participate in your school's success planning? Can you articulate how the library program contributes to those goals?

**Being strategic means connecting to their reasons.**

Measurement and program assessment are key to accountability. Gathering, analyzing and sharing evidence of student learning are key to advocacy, to say nothing of improving practice. The **Canadian School Libraries Research Toolkit**, introduced in my last column, offers support for integrating measurement and research into practice.

## 5. Expand your sphere of influence and build relationships

Having an influence on what student learning looks like and building understanding of the role we play in that regard depends on expanding our sphere of influence. Building relationships builds influence. The more we increase our sphere of influence through relationship-building, the more say we will have about things that concern us. Your sphere of influence may be within the school or school district, or within professional learning networks or associations. Expanding our sphere of influence strengthens our voice. Join that committee, volunteer for a project, connect with your peers through social media, be a voice for change. Positive relationships and building influence go hand in hand.

**Expanding our sphere of influence strengthens our voice.**

Trying not to be unduly negative, I do need to address the culture of complaining. Of course, we need to speak out and express concerns. But I'd like to have a dollar for every time I hear, "Yes, but I can't do that at my school because...". Dealing with constraints can be a great incubator for creativity; using those constraints as a persistent excuse is a way of absolving oneself from responsibility.

## 6. Market ideas and possibilities

**Ask them what they are trying to achieve - what their goals are - and then make the connections to how you can help them achieve those goals.**

Marketing is the process of intentionally making connections between what is valued by those we serve and what we have to offer. This addresses the perception that others don't understand what we do. Of course, they don't! They don't have the training and specific program knowledge that we do! It is up to us to open their minds to the possibilities.

Here's a marketing approach to try on. Instead of asking colleagues how you can help them, why not flip that approach 180 degrees. Ask them what they are trying to achieve - what their goals are - and then make the connections to how you can help them achieve those goals. A simple but powerful change. Instead of despairing at our own perception that nobody understands what we do, take a proactive marketing approach to open up deeper understanding and new opportunities.

## 7. We are in constant beta. Embrace the challenge

The world is changing so rapidly that we struggle to keep up. The only way to thrive in this environment is to be in constant learning mode. Clinging to the past is the worst possible strategy for program growth and for advocacy. We despair over antiquated notions of the library but may be hesitant to move forward ourselves. Embracing change and leading through learning is not only

essential, it has huge potential for capturing the imagination of the larger community. Innovation is at the heart of strategic thinking.

**Innovation is at the heart of strategic thinking.**

## 8. Understand that this is what advocacy looks like – all of us taking positive action

We often think of advocacy as something that leaders do. But I believe that we all own advocacy through what we do every day. In the words of Shakespeare (Coriolanus), *action is eloquence*. We all own it, and we can all influence change.

## 9. When necessary, be prepared to take a stand

Earlier in this article I described the dire situation in Ontario in the late 1990s. There were devastating consequences for school libraries, and we were poorly prepared to defend ourselves. As I write this article the province is in a very similar place politically, and education is under attack once again. The difference this time around is that incrementally, over time, innovative practitioners have been capturing people's imaginations about the potential of learning in the library. They've been collaborating with their colleagues and building relationships of influence. They've been telling their stories and backing up those stories with the evidence. Taking a stand at this critical time has a much stronger foundation. Aligning with goals and building relationships does not mean backing down in the face of adversity. On the contrary, crafting our response on the strong foundation of the advocacy approaches suggested here sends a much more convincing message when there is a significant disconnect between our core values and those of decision-makers.

## Students Need School Libraries

I am encouraged and inspired to see the great advocacy work being done in Australia with the [\*\*\*Students Need School Libraries\*\*\*](#) campaign, created by a coalition of school library associations. The campaign is an exemplary expression of effective advocacy in today's context, and a wonderful resource for Australia's school library community. It puts students at the heart of the campaign and focuses on making connections and understanding potential.

"School libraries improve students' lives, now and into the future, providing them with improved opportunities. The impact on students is our central focus. We know that students need school libraries for better outcomes, and we want to support our communities to advocate for their children's futures." (We Need School Libraries FAQ – School Library Coalition)

Couldn't have said it better myself.

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