Surviving the recession: Fostering environments that support school librarians

By Ann Dutton Ewbank

Introduction

The number of school librarians in the United States has diminished alarmingly in the past few years. Currently, only 60 per cent of K-12 public schools in the United States employ a state certified school librarian (American Libraries, 2007). And, due to the country's recent economic challenges, the profession seems to be losing more ground. School districts across the country, faced with massive budget cuts, have targeted 'extraneous' positions, including librarians, for elimination as they grapple with enormous financial challenges.

Enterprising advocates, such as Shonda Brisco, have created ways to highlight the problem. Shonda created a Google map that tracks the potential loss of school librarians in the United States (see <http://tinyurl.com/anationwithoutschoollibrarians>). The map is a powerful visual reminder that school librarian positions are in jeopardy across the country. When delving further into the schools and districts represented on the map, it is apparent that no librarian position is immune. Librarians are losing ground in communities serving high and low-economic status students, in both urban and rural areas, and in all regions of the country. As the map indicates, this is a pervasive issue that is of concern for all school librarians and serves as a reminder that no position is 'safe'

To keep or not to keep

As a result of this alarming loss of positions in the United States, I became intrigued with a school district that chose *not* to eliminate certified school librarians. Many neighbouring school districts, faced with nearly identical budget cuts, chose to eliminate some or all of their librarians. I wanted to know *why* this district was invested in its school librarians and considered these positions crucial to retain even during the economic hurricane that has (and is currently) devastating schools in my home state, Arizona, where fewer than four in 10 public schools are staffed with a certified librarian (Kossan, 2008).

I contacted a school board member for an interview, and she helped me set up interviews with the superintendent, the director of finance, an assistant principal, and a librarian. Unfortunately, I was unable to interview a classroom teacher for this round of investigation, but I intend to do so for a future study. Based on these interviews, I found several factors that supported the retention of librarian positions in this school district.

In the following sections, each of these factors, supporting the retention of school librarians even in an economic crisis, will be discussed. These factors can serve as a guide to school librarians who want to be active participants in establishing the importance of school librarian positions.

Creating opportunities for stakeholder involvement

The school district for this study had a carefully crafted budget reduction process. Each person I interviewed agreed that the process for gathering input for making decisions about budget reductions

involved stakeholders at multiple levels. While it may not be possible to directly influence the process in the event of district budget reductions, school librarians *can* advocate with decision-makers for this type of process, and they *can* participate, if invited, to give input.

The best way to advocate for a transparent budgeting process is to pay attention to what is happening in the district and community. That means keeping up with local news, attending school board meetings, and participating in the district's education association. The bottom line is to *stay informed.* Regardless of the district budget decision making process, school librarians are positioned to be knowledgeable and make a contribution if or when asked. Gary Hartzell, a former school administrator and professor of educational administration, states, 'If you elect not to engage, you'll probably lose your opportunity to significantly impact the decision-making process' (2003, p. 9).

Another way to support this idea is by actively encouraging stakeholder involvement in the direction and management of the school library. Advisory committees for students, parents, and teachers should be established to gather input and make decisions regarding collection development and program management. These are processes that can be directly controlled as well as provide a way for the school librarian to model stakeholder involvement through actions.

Fostering transparency in communication

The school district that I studied made a commitment to transparency despite the potential risks. In her interview, the superintendent stated, "The risk is that [transparency] begins in a sort of fearful environment. It potentially pits employees against each other. 'Let's see. I think my job is really important, but I don't think *that* job's important, and we pay *that* much for *that*?' So it really begins to provoke some conversations about value."

Again, while others cannot be forced to be transparent, school librarians can certainly model transparency in their own actions. School librarians need to ask, "If this decision was on the front page

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of my local newspaper, would I be embarrassed or proud?" Transparency encourages people to act with integrity. School librarians should consider the following questions: Are you proud of your library lesson plans? Would you be willing to show them to any parent or teacher? What about your budget decisions? Most school librarians are responsible for one of the largest budgets in the school. Do purchases support the curriculum and students' literacy development? By being transparent about decisions, school librarians ensure integrity and model an important value in the development of a healthy school and school district culture.

Ensuring trust

In my study, I found that the relationship between the school board and school district leadership positively impacted decision-making. There is a significant body of literature that indicates that the relationship between the district superintendent and the school board significantly impacts the quality of education and student academic success (Peterson and Williams, 2005).

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It might be assumed that the same is true about the relationship between the school librarian and the principal. Do you trust your principal and does your principal trust you? Do you have the type of relationship with your principal that allows you to speak openly about issues, and to disagree without being disagreeable? Does your principal see you as someone with the knowledge and capacity to make important decisions about the library and its function and importance within the school? And if not, why

not? By developing a relationship with the principal based on mutual trust, the school librarian models this value for others in the school and district.

Committing to the school's and district's core values

Each person I interviewed had a very strong commitment to the district's core values. The district's model, called the Learning System, is a cycle of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The assistant principal interviewed for the study stated, "I think that there's no doubt that [the Learning System] influences budget . . . our district for lack of a better word, lives and dies by that and how they all effect each other."

Does your school and district have a strong statement of core values? If not, what can you do to encourage your school and district to adopt articulated statements of core values? If your school and district do have a strong core values statement, do you consider this each time you make a decision and implement an action? Core values only work if the people who make up the organisation buy into them and breathe life into them with each and every action. These words mean nothing if they are only printed on stationery.

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Increasing the value of the school library program

Each person I interviewed understood the multiple roles of the school librarian but this understanding is usually uncommon. The four roles of the school librarian as teacher, instructional partner, information specialist, and program manager are described in *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning (American Association of School Librarians/Association for Educational Communication and Technology, 1998)*. The new AASL guidelines, *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* added the fifth role of leader (2009). Most administrators, however, have little understanding about the roles the school librarian can play in the school academic program (Levitov, 2010).

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School librarians should consider these questions: What are you doing to ensure that everyone in your school and district understands the value of the school library program? Do your stakeholders know the importance of having the library program managed by a certified school librarian? How will you communicate this? Ross Todd advocates evidence-based practice as an avenue for demonstrating the value of the school library program (2008). Ruth Toor and Hilda Weisberg's book, *Being Indispensable: A School Librarian's Guide to Becoming an Invaluable Leader*, offers a blueprint for increasing the value of the library program with stakeholders and decision-makers in mind (2010).

A continuous process

While school librarian positions in the district that I studied were not eliminated in the latest round of cuts, it is clear that, given Arizona's economic problems, these positions might not be retained in the future. When asked about the potential of eliminating school librarians in the future, the superintendent stated, "It wouldn't be honest of me to say [school librarian positions] would never be on the table. We still think they provide unique, valuable services that, in their absence [pauses] . . . I don't know what staffing . . . looks like without a librarian in the building." Though the superintendent had a demonstrable understanding of the importance of the school librarian, and a commitment to maintaining them, this statement shows that school librarians cannot rest on their laurels.

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Special Committee on Advocacy defines advocacy as the "on-going process of building partnerships so that others will act for and with you, turning passive support into educated action for the library program. **It begins with a vision and a plan for the library media program that is then matched to the agenda and priorities of stakeholders.** It begins with a vision and a plan for the library media program that is then matched to the agenda and priorities of stakeholders" (AASL, 2009). This process does not happen overnight. Like building a healthy culture, it is something that can take years. I hope that the lessons learned from this study will inspire school librarians to become active participants in creating environments conducive to the profession's survival.

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