

SCHOOL LIBRARY MEDIA

TODAY'S ISSUES

Five metro area school librarians and two school library directors kindly answered questions about the state of media programs in their districts, providing insight into issues concerning budgets, renovations, technology, supervision, and advocacy during recent years.

SLMS ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITY CHANGES

The roles and responsibilities of the SLMS are constantly evolving. We must stay current and relevant to the ever-changing landscape of education and technology. The Media Specialists and Directors we interviewed had experienced various changes, if any, that they have seen happen over the last two years. A common theme from a couple of the SLMSs whom we interviewed was the implementation of learning commons. "The School Library Learning Commons is a participatory learning community with attention to excellent instructional designs and use of best resources and technologies to help learners build personal expertise and collaborative knowledge" (Loertscher & Koechlin, 2016, n.p.). This concept is one that moves in the direction of education today but can seem difficult to implement with the other distractions and roadblocks. Our interviewees mentioned that the emerging influx of online testing can often turn the library into a computer lab. When this happens, the library moves away from its intended place of resource, research, and book circulation. As Loertscher (2010) states, "Teacher-librarians are at the forefront of protest as access to information on any personal device becomes central to teaching and learning" (p. 135). With the increase of technology, the SLMS presents more lessons on use of technology and district-sponsored software applications. Some of the SLMSs interviewed also spoke of the battle between the fixed, fixed-flex, and flexible library models. Some SLMSs are treated as Specials activities which limits time for seeing other classes and impedes the time for other SLMS duties. Despite these changes, most expressed that their roles and responsibilities have remained the same and haven't changed. It seems the common theme is that the roles and responsibilities haven't changed but have been added upon.

STAKEHOLDERS AS ADVOCATES

Our stakeholders are all the people and organizations that have a common interest and concern for the students and the education thereof. Many of our interviewees named similar stakeholders such as the students, parents, and teachers. Others named supervisors and even themselves. There are many who depend on our services and many with which our services depend. We look for advocates of our missions and goals that are set forth for the benefit of the community. We don't always get that. One SLMS stated how she viewed the Ed Media department as being the biggest advocate for the librarians in her county. This is helpful when many don't see clearly the benefit of our presence. Others stated how there are teachers in their buildings who collaborate regularly and are great advocates for the SLMS to others. For some, like one interviewee, who feels that she must advocate for herself, this too is true. We have to become 'salesmen' for the value we hold and promote ourselves.

SUPERVISORS: ROLES AND BENEFITS

As we interviewed both teacher-librarians and supervisors, we gained insight from both sides. The teacher-librarians who were interviewed all spoke highly of their supervisors and Ed Media departments. Many of them spoke of how they are supported and advocated for to a high degree. The interviewees stated how their Ed Media Departments share important information with them, ensuring that the district is aware of the needs and responsibilities of the SLMS, and manage district-wide resource acquisition resulting in lower costs to schools for databases. The supervisors who were interviewed expressed how they provide the school librarians with a voice at the district office and advocate for them at every opportunity. Having supportive supervisors helps the SLMSs move through their library programs and provides them with guidance and encouragement. Their encouragement helps alleviate some of the dissatisfaction and can improve low morale of overworked SLMS.

INCREASING AWARENESS OF RELEVANCY

Loertscher (2010) states that, "For a half century, the position of teacher-librarian has been viewed by those both inside and outside the library profession as a selector and disseminator of information via the various popular devices at hand: a room where stuff is housed, managed, circulated, and maintained" (p. 133). Misconceptions have loomed for many years as to the relevancy of the position of the SLMS. One interviewee states that teacher and administrative education programs should heavily stress the importance of working with and using the Library Media Program in their schools and thinks that the library media specialists should work closely with new teachers to the building, particularly their first-year teachers. One of the supervisor interviewees expresses how she constantly brings up what SLMSs do to administrators who think they need an additional hire for facilitating the digital shift or for literacy coaching or for personalized learning initiatives. She also states that when they wring their hands and talk about students not reading, she

must remind them that their library collections have been underfunded and are unattractive which leads to "readicide" that drill-and-practice programs will never fix. Unfortunately, one interviewee shared that recently, the teachers in grades 3-5 were instructed to discontinue their weekly trips to the media center in order to concentrate on test preparation. For the first time, she felt anything other than complete support from her staff members. It is a heavy load we face in advocating for our positions, value, and contributions that we can make to the educational process. There are those who hold SLMSs in high regard, but we must continue to garner the respect and value for what we bring to this profession. As Loertscher (2010) so eloquently states, "It is the time to forge a powerful leadership position" (p. 136).



TEACHING WITH TECH

photo courtesy of Amanda Lee



FLEXIBLE FURNITURE

photo courtesy of Holly Frilot



PROMOTING SPECIAL EVENTS

photo courtesy of Pam Taylor

RENOVATION AND CONSTRUCTION

The experiences of the school librarians seem to be similar in many ways on the topic of renovations. Susan Grigsby, the supervisor for Forsyth County Media, has a bird's eye view of new construction and renovation from the district seat. Principals come up with plans which are made with cost estimates approved or denied by the county, and sometimes the media specialist is involved. Susan was able to provide limited input for two new constructions this year but only in late stages of construction. It has been her experience, and others, that principals and project managers head up renovation projects with little to moderate input from the school librarians, and only some of the media staff members' suggestions are actually incorporated into the final designs. Most of the decisions are made by administration and project managers who come from within the districts typically.

According to Holly Frilot, supervisor for Cobb County Library Media Education, funding for renovations most commonly come from one of three sources: PTA, school's foundations, or the library media funds (state or local). In Cobb County, funding for new media centers comes from SPLOST, and if the new SPLOST 2018 passes, it will be the funding source for the Learning Commons initiative for media centers across the county. The Georgia Department of Education provides guidelines for square footage of media centers based on FTE and encourages the space contain "computers, printers, internet applications, technology support, electronic distribution, networks, and associated instructional

processes and equipment" (p. 7, 30 May 2012). In cases specified, project managers completed all the steps required for new construction. Dekalb School District follows the same state guidelines for construction.

BUDGETS - A VASTLY DIFFERENT PICTURE

In Cobb County, the budget has not changed or been impacted over the past two years. Amanda Easley and Kathy Vinyard at Lassiter High School have used this year's budget of \$29K for databases, books, and audio-visual materials. Holly Frilot's district budget is used for Destiny for the entire county as well as four professional learning days for all media specialists. Holly anticipates that if SPLOST 2018 passes, there will be allocated funds for the Learning Commons transformations at many of the county's schools.

Susan Grigsby of Forsyth County Schools is saddened by the complete lack of funds given to the schools for library media, with the exception of two new constructions. All of the schools have to rely upon fundraisers such as book fairs. Unfortunately for this rural county, some of the schools do not have a certified media specialist running the media center. At the county level, she acquires quotes for digital resources and asks for approval for costs usually running at \$200K for the district's 50,000 students. She has verified that the district received state allotments for FTE, \$15.34 for elementary and \$13.03 for middle and high school, a variance from what her media specialists are actually seeing in their current budgets, an average of \$6.92 per FTE.

Amanda Lee at the Atlanta Area School for the Deaf hasn't seen an impact over the past two years and still receives state and federal monies. The district does not have a dedicated budget but a model is being developed.

DeKalb County, a metro Atlanta district, has seen troublesome trends in budgets for staffing over several years. Staffing is inconsistent and morale is down according to Pamela Taylor at Freedom Middle School. She uses her budget of \$16K for databases, print materials, and eBooks. Natalie Johnson at Hambrick Elementary School uses her \$10K budget similarly and has seen no change over the past two years. Nan Keel at Kingsley Elementary also uses her \$8K budget the same way but is lucky to have PTO/Charter funds of \$10K in addition to state allocated funds. She uses those additional monies for eBooks and hopes to purchase technology although she and the administration have not yet decided what is needed.

TECHNOLOGY IN THE MEDIA CENTER

In Cobb County, each school is allocated funds from the district for technology, and administration with advice from the technology specialists, determines how that money is spent. These funds are renewed every five years says Holly Frilot. At Lassiter High School, the technology is current. In Forsyth County, there is a 3-5 year refresh plan in place, so most computers are current but some have older monitors. Susan Grigsby says, "We are a BYOT district so students have technology and those that don't are supplied with machines

as well as personal hotspots to provide equity. It is not 100% but we are close." The Atlanta Area School for the Deaf is working on a new technology plan because the last one lapsed, so it seems they are trying to get back on track. In DeKalb County, technology seems current with regular refreshes. Natalie Johnson at Hambrick Elementary wishes she had more than 20 desktops but acknowledges it may be impractical given space limitations. According to Nan Keel at Kingsley Elementary, her refresh happened some time ago but she has heard that the county has plans for a new refresh soon.

ADVOCACY "TO DOS"

Our responders embrace Loertscher's (2010) idea that "It has always been about the use of information rather than its existence that mattered most" (p. 134). Almost all of our respondents mentioned the need to develop partnerships with the county public library system so students will have access to resources when schools and school libraries are not open. Promoting the awareness of library offerings and programs such as Reader of the Month through announcements, bulletin boards and eblasts to teachers, students, administrators and parent teacher organizations "to make our presence known" was another common thread from our respondents (Amanda Easley & Kathy Vinyard). Nan Keel, teacher-librarian at Kingsley Elementary, hopes to invite members of the community to be involved as mystery readers so "more of the public [can] see our school and my program." A final thread of responses centered on seeking assistance for what we need in our libraries. The specifics ranged from clerical support and funding to patron usage. Our respondents know, as Loertscher (2010) says, that "[t]here has been no more exciting time in the history of school libraries" and they are choosing to be those who are "reach[ing] out to capture the brass ring" (p. 136).



BOOK RETURN

photo courtesy of Pam Taylor



ASSISTING STUDENTS

photo courtesy of Holly Frilot



CREATIVE SPACES

photo courtesy of Amanda Lee

CONCERNS

Some of the concerns shared by those who responded to our survey are the same as those presented by Loertscher (2010) as examples of "great hope in the behavior of the leaders in our profession" (p. 135). One respondent is concerned about renovation to support 21st century learning. She expresses thoughts similar to those of Loertscher (2010):

"transforming libraries into learning commons where the ownership is passed from the librarian to the teachers and students" (p. 135). Another respondent expressed finding time for collaboration as a concern. She knows the truth of Loertscher's statement that "[c]ollaboration and co-teaching of learning experiences is still a foundational mission of the learning commons" (p. 136)

This comment by Susan Grigsby really gets to the heart of the concerns expressed by several of the others: "So much of the job is invisible and never noticed until it isn't happening." Some respondents expressed concerns over becoming a testing center, others wanting library space, as well as the need for additional personnel and budget, all of which are very valid concerns and tend to be the invisible parts of our job. Teachers, students and administrators will not realize the importance or need of having access to library space, resources and services until they are not available because they are being used in other ways.

RELEVANCY

Half of our survey respondents shared that the Georgia Library Media Association (GLMA) is an advocate on their behalf at the state level with legislators and at the forefront of ESSA discussions. One SLMS added that individual SLMSs can, and should, also write petitions and email legislators. Susan Grigsby eloquently stated:

"Libraries are at the center of all curricular areas and librarians are the bridge between literature and literacy. Data proves it. Research proves it. But as long as legislators see it as an expense rather than an investment I don't know what else we can do short of being squeaky wheels."

Finally, the SLMSs from Lassiter HS believe that in our "cultural climate of 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' makes the relevancy of SLMSs even greater."

ABOUT US

Survey respondents

- Amanda Easley & Kathy Vinyard, Media Specialists, Lassiter HS, Cobb County
- Holly Frilot, Supervisor of Library Media Education, Cobb County
- Susan Grigsby, District Media Specialist, Forsyth County Schools
- Natalie Johnson, Teacher-Librarian, Hambrick Elementary School, DeKalb County
- Nan Keel, Teacher-Librarian, Kingsley Elementary School, DeKalb County
- Amanda Lee, Media Specialist, Atlanta Area School for the Deaf
- Pam Taylor, Teacher-Librarian, Freedom Middle School, DeKalb County

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Flyer created by Eden Clark, Kianna Davis & Lisa Wheeler for Dr. Snipes in MEDT 7469,
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