Pushing Forward while Treading Water

Things You Can Do to Help Your School in Times of Uncertainty

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Welcome to year two of the global pandemic. Congratulations! You've accomplished more during the past year and a half than you thought possible. You've innovated, pivoted, adapted, shifted, and transformed. This time has been particularly tough on school librarians, who have worked so hard to develop connections with students and teachers and leverage physical collections. At the same time, the last year and a half was also a period of metamorphosis and reimagining our school libraries.

With new variants of the virus emerging, the coming months and years may be more of a game of whack-a-mole as we conquer some versions of the virus and others pop up. Fortunately, we will be better prepared to adapt the next time. Unfortunately, some experts predict that pandemic-era workarounds may be with us for years (Scudellari 2020). Your interactions with students, teachers, and administrators might be socially distanced off and on for some time, but there are still ripe opportunities to influence teaching and learning.

Many librarians viewed their work performance over the last year and a half through what they *did not* accomplish and not what they *did*. This article's goal is to help you refocus and prioritize impactful activities.

1. **Trojan Horse your information literacy lessons.** Offer to curate and link digital resources or upload materials for an upcoming unit into classroom courseware. There's something in it for you if you infuse those resources with information or digital literacy.

2. **Replenish your surge capacity.** Tara Haelle uses the term "surge capacity" to define one's ability to confront an emergency (2020). A pummeling natural disaster, she points out, lasts a few days before rebuilding begins. No wonder we are out of energy, Haelle writes: our emergency has lasted for more than a year. As schools reopen and adopt more virtual practices, carve out time to connect with others, reduce expectations, practice hobbies, exercise, or practice your faith.

3. **Define success by the impact you make, not by how busy you are, whether for in-person, virtual, or hybrid learning.** Strategically reallocate your energy. What are the influential, urgent, or critical tasks in your building role? Lean into those. Retrain yourself to focus on results, not your to-do list. How might focusing on *less* mean that you actually could do your job *better*?

4. **For virtual environments, consider how videoconferencing's default setting to display one's own videostream alongside that of the lesson may negatively impact tweens and adolescents.** In a survey of K–12 educators teaching virtually, some 77 percent required videocameras to remain on (Will 2020). Is there a risk to tweens' and teens' sense of identity to see a perpetual image of themselves during school? Share how students and teachers can "hide self-view."

5. **Build in ways to give students agency over their presence in virtual classroom spaces.** One teacher allocates each student five "no camera" days, with a caveat that participation is still required (Tolvtvar 2020). Be mindful that for some students, revealing their home to their class may cause embarrassment or even, as in the case of children escaping domestic abuse, dangerous (Barrett-Fox 2020).

6. **Install the Unpaywall extension to find open-access copies of scholarly articles.** That extension provides access to non-paywalled preprint versions of peer-reviewed studies.

7. **Expect tensions between in-school and out-of-school norms for virtual activities.** Some school policies mandate students be groomed, be in a private room to learn, or remain seated at a desk. Open a dialogue about equity and inclusivity of policies like these and how they can unfairly ostracize those in greater need of connection and support.

8. **Reconsider punitive overdue policies.** Signal student-centered flexibility in chaotic times by adjusting catalog software options to let items auto-renew, let students renew on their own, or abolish fines.

9. **Convert online lessons for offline pupils.** Offer to modify materials for students who aren't connected when distance learning is the norm, especially partnering with special educators to keep lessons accessible to those with learning differences.

10. **Go spelunking into a database.** Explore advanced features, tune into a vendor webinar, or update an assignment using new tools. You'll have new ideas you'll be excited to share.

11. **Update your collection and its acquisition policies to reflect a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.** Diversity audits of your collection can be done remotely and in person and will help order priorities for new acquisitions. If an audit feels overwhelming, focus on recalibrating your collection selection habits so the materials you choose better reflect the richness of a global society and a multicultural community.

12. **Remember that parents are watching.** Some caregivers can be vocal about the clash of cultures between home and school. Anticipate these conflicts and discuss ways to mediate a new level of parental curricular

observation (Fontichiaro and Stephens 2021).

13. **Retool your website.** Many library websites were designed as portals to the physical collection. Does your online presence reflect your new reality? What does it look like to have a made-for-virtual hub?

14. **Teach students and teachers how to access Google News** (<news.google.com>) and the Freedom Forum's collection of Today's Front Pages (<www.freedomforum.org/todaysfrontpages>). Explore multiple perspectives on current events. Show older students how to create news alerts for research topics.

15. **Be a parent advocate.** Many parents have felt overwhelmed organizing their child's online learning over the past year and a half. Consider being your building's parent liaison by offering virtual training, posting platform tips in school communications, or sharing engaging screen-free family activities.

16. **Check your social media filter bubble and include some new views.** Whose voices are being over-represented? Whose views are missing? Seek out points of view or sociocultural perspectives different from your own. How diverse are the authors, librarians, and educators you follow?

17. **Curate e-books available for students at home.** Create bookshelves of hand-picked titles, experimenting with a free-for-now platform or your public library's subscription e-book service to test demand.

18. **Tune into municipal, public library, or school board meetings.** Schlepping to a board meeting can be difficult after a long workday. Now that many meetings are being held virtually, it's easier to listen in on decision-makers.

19. **Consider how your school library will address widespread mis- and disinformation.** Manipulative and malicious influencers, gullible members of the public, and polarization are beginning to create siloed realities in American life. The Rand Corporation's Media Literacy Standards to Counter Truth Decay (<rand.org/truthdecay>) offer an avenue to advocate for information and digital literacy priorities in your building or district.

20. **Weigh how being seat-bound for long periods of time impacts young bodies during distance learning.** With online delivery came a new, tacit responsibility for teachers and

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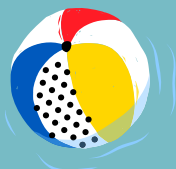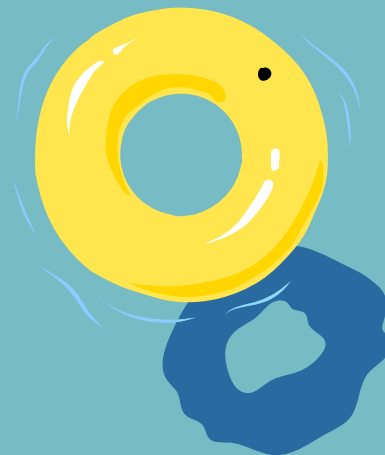
librarians to ensure that student behavior did not detract from parents' need to work. But what does it mean if a second-grader is told they must sit in a chair for an entire morning, when normally they would move from station to station in the physical classroom? Consider sharing a list of quick kinesthetic activities teachers could introduce during transition times.

21. **Weed beyond musty books.** Shut down library social media accounts you no longer use. Check for dead links. Clean out your digital files and photo albums. Spring cleaning lifts one's spirits!

22. **Ask students what makes them feel better.** You may learn about some new resources, trends, and memes while kids can share their passions. With distance learning, a new level of show-and-tell sharing is possible: pet parades, treasured objects, or souvenirs.

23. **Offer drop-in times for students to cultivate relationships during remote learning.** Create lower-pressure settings for students to touch base with you. Schedule both one-on-one reader's advisory and peer-led book clubs so students can connect in non-curricular ways.

24. **Ask difficult questions about the impact of muting practices in online learning spaces on child development.** What does it mean for a student's developing sense of self and self-regulation if a kindergarten student is muted by default?

25. **Become expert with any new 1:1 technology, especially new products and connectivity devices.** Districts are sending home hardware bought with CARES funding, and you can help students and teachers get and stay connected.

26. **Learn about "vocational awe" and how it can harm us in LibraryLand.** Fobazi Ettarh coined the term "vocational awe" to describe the risks of librarians sacrificing self-advocacy at the altar of libraries' sacred traditions (2018). Is vocational awe limiting your ability to make good decisions?

27. **Expand your library's collection with Google Scholar.** Google Scholar (<scholar.google.com>) is a powerful federated search tool to identify intellectual property and scholarly papers. It also often points to open-web copies posted to institutional repositories or author websites. Your collection just got bigger—free!

28. **Evaluate your media diet and that of your building.** Use media bias charts and tools from AllSides (<www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-ratings>) or Ad Fontes Media (<www.adfontesmedia.com>) to assess your media preferences.

29. **Challenge the myth of librarian neutrality.** Have honest conversations with professional peers about whether your collection should really be "neutral," what that would look like in practice, and our duty of care for our school communities.

30. **Realize your own leadership role.** Work with local school administration to re-define your role as a school leader and

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lessen the demands on stretched building leaders. As Ewan McIntosh noted, expanding the traditional notion of leadership fosters the "agile, whole-school, interdisciplinary work that is needed to create the exceptional learning experience our young people deserve" (2021).

31. **For virtual instruction, connect using communication tools other than Zoom.** Not every meeting needs to have a video and slide decks. Phone calls can reduce visual overload and promote mental focus. Students are often relieved to have a break from screen time. Can you host radio plays? Record audio-only storytimes? Students can create a podcast from readers' theater scripts from sites like aaronshep.com.

32. **Acknowledge the effects of a year and a half of cortisol flooding on brain development.** The unprecedented societal trauma we lived through has produced excess amounts of cortisol, which has been shown to have negative outcomes for children's brain development (Carrion, Weems, and Reiss 2007). Practicing self-calming techniques can counter this and help students learn self-regulation.

33. **Take it outside.** With the virus spreading less rampantly outdoors, there has never been a better time to take a class on an excursion around the campus, a guided story walk, or just close observation of the world around them. Some sunlight will be beneficial, too (Mead 2008).

34. **Build in some time for wonder.** For many students, the world feels much smaller now. Luckily, digital resources like livecams of remote locales, Google Arts and Culture, and digitized museum collections bring the world to us. One favorite: plug your school's address into the website "The Wilderness Downtown" (<www.thewildernessdowntown.com>) using Google Street View imagery.

35. **Use pandemic numbers to teach real-life data literacy.** Use media-produced charts and graphs, or find tabular data for students to create their own. Talk about what exponential really means, how metadata definitions colors how you interpret numerical data, and why numbers across data sources might differ.

36. **For remote learning, remember that you are a guest in families' homes.** It's exhausting to teach online, just as it's exhausting for learners to have a daily video invasion into their home. Be gentle with families and remember that school has imposed its terms on them.

37. **Give everyone the mic.** Use virtual sign-ups or online number generators to organize round-robin read-alouds or virtual poetry slams, ways for students to feel forefronted, rather than listening to a talking head in an outdated sit-and-get format.

38. **Do one thing you've put off.** You'll feel relief and accomplishment.

39. **Consider creating co-working opportunities for your teachers and students.** Getting things done together can be convivial. Refer to the paid service
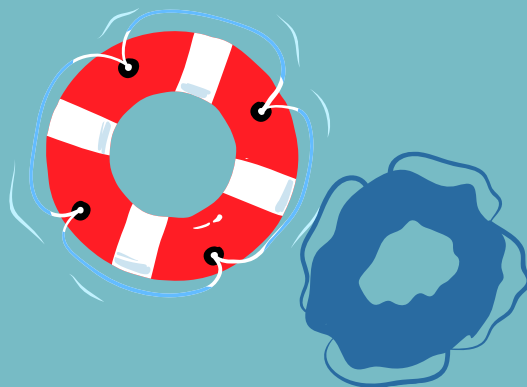
Focusmate.com as a potential model that you could replicate safely.

40. Take the lead on student data privacy. No one else on your campus has an explicit commitment to student privacy as an ethical practice, but school librarians do in the ALA Code of Ethics (2021). Does your district have a plan for how long student digital work is maintained? Who can create online accounts on behalf of students? A system for evaluating whether websites have adequate privacy practices? The answer is likely to be no. What are the potential consequences of student data falling into the hands of international companies? Of the international governments controlling those companies?

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