

FEATURE

All materials in this journal subject to copyright by the American Library Association may be used for the noncommercial purpose of scientific or educational advancement granted by Sections 107 and 108 of the Copyright Revision Act of 1976. Address usage requests to the ALA Office of Rights and Permissions.



# COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP



*as a* **CATALYST FOR**  
*Change*

**Allan Davenport**

Allan\_Davenport@ipsd.org

**Kristen Mattson**

Kristen\_Mattson@ipsd.org

In the spring of 2015 Dr. Karen Sullivan, superintendent of Indian Prairie School District 204 in Aurora, Illinois, signed the Alliance for Excellent Education's Future Ready Pledge, "making a firm commitment to implementing meaningful changes toward a digital learning transition that supports teachers, and addresses the district's vision for student learning" (Alliance for Excellent Education n.d.). The work that followed put school librarians in the spotlight as agents of innovation, professional development, and community support. In this piece we—Kristen Mattson, school librarian at Waubonsie Valley High School, and Allan Davenport, Director of Instructional Leadership and Innovation for Indian Prairie School District 204—share our story of how shared leadership and a coalition of support became the catalysts for both school and organizational change.

### Future Ready Librarians Serve Future Ready Schools

Future Ready Schools is the work of the Alliance for Excellent Education in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education. This initiative, launched in 2015, aims to help school districts "develop comprehensive plans to achieve successful student learning outcomes by transforming instructional pedagogy and practice while simultaneously leveraging technology to personalize learning in the classroom" (Alliance for Excellent Education 2015).

The work of the Alliance is nonprofit and nonpartisan and supports school districts through research and white papers, a digital hub of professional development resources, video interviews and virtual site visits with leading districts, and digital self-assessment and goal-setting tools, as well as professional development institutes and other in-person events (Alliance for Excellent Education 2015).

In June of 2016 Future Ready Schools announced an expansion of their initiative that recognized the value of school librarians and the part they play in Future Ready education. With the support of both Follett and AASL, the Future Ready Librarians initiative is sparking a renewed conversation around the value of school librarianship (Alliance for Excellent Education 2016).

By developing the Future Ready Librarians Framework to mirror the language of the Future Ready Framework, the Alliance is helping administrators, school boards, teachers, and community members make explicit connections between the work of school librarians and the changing landscape of education.

### Collaborative Leadership and Leading beyond the Library

The Future Ready Schools Framework is wrapped in an outer ring that emphasizes the importance

**Allan realized that if he and other district leaders provided a clear direction and a myriad of support systems, the school librarians would become instructional leaders—and that is exactly what happened.**



*The high school librarian team working together on short- and long-term goals.*

of collaborative leadership. Research conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology in partnership with the American Institutes for Research found that districts that were most successfully tackling the transition to digital-age learning were doing so through "a shared vision for teaching, leading and learning [and] a culture of trust and innovation" (U.S. Dept. of Ed. n.d.). These characteristics, coupled with others like transparent communication and modeled use of technology, encompass the idea of collaborative leadership.

In a similar vein, the Future Ready Librarians Framework acknowledges the work practitioners can do to "lead beyond the library" and support the work of Future Ready Schools and districts. While the American Library Association has been charting a steady decrease in school library positions over the last ten years, districts that are tapping into the expertise of the school librarian while allowing the role of the librarian to evolve over time are having more successful transitions into digital-age teaching and learning (Wolf, Jones, and Gilbert 2014).

During the 2015–2016 school year, Allan, who, among his many other duties, oversees and supports librarians, described his vision for shared leadership and began the purposeful work of building community and camaraderie among the thirty-two librarians who serve District 204's thirty-four campuses. To empower librarians as collaborative leaders, Allan recognized that the work would need to be both intentional and systemic. He understood that his vision would challenge the librarians, both instructionally and in the area of educational leadership, and knew that it was up to him to help the librarians see their potential as

agents of change. Allan realized that if he and other district leaders provided a clear direction and a myriad of support systems, the school librarians would become instructional leaders—and that is exactly what happened.

### **Changing Focus, Changing Mindsets**

Because of the size of the district, a librarian leadership team with members from elementary, middle, and high schools meets quarterly with Allan. This leadership team existed prior to the 2015–2016 school year and was often used as a vehicle for disseminating information to all thirty-two librarians. In 2015, however, Allan made a conscious decision to spend less time in the quarterly meetings on logistics and management and more on training this team of librarians to be leaders. The Future Ready Librarians Framework was a natural choice to help frame the vision and the work.

After the leadership team dissected the Future Ready Librarians Framework, team members led a session empowering the rest of the thirty-two librarians in the district to do the same. Each person identified personal successes and struggles within the context of the framework. Then they did the same within grade-level groups. Within the whole group, the components of the framework that came up again and again as areas of importance and opportunities for growth were Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; Collaborative Leadership; and Community Partnerships. These areas of the framework became the intentional focus of everyone's attention and efforts during the 2015–2016 school year.

As a former principal, Allan knew that the first step in creating agency was to build trust and community within the librarian group. When the

thirty-two librarians came together as a whole group each quarter, they were accustomed to receiving instructions, information, and some professional development from Allan or members of the librarian leadership team. They were not as accustomed to working in teams toward a common goal. Allan knew if he needed school librarians to support their buildings as instructional leaders, they would first need to feel comfortable digging into, taking ownership of, and even modeling components of the framework with their fellow librarians.

### **Creating a Local Coalition of Support**

Future Ready and the Alliance for Excellent Education were a fabulous coalition of support and resources, but Allan wanted to help the thirty-two librarians in his district also see one another as their own local coalition of support. To begin building the collective efficacy of the group and breaking down the silos that had naturally developed over time, Allan planned various activities that would get the district librarians collaborating and supporting each other on their journey toward Future Ready.

Allan challenged each of the school librarians to share their personal story in a speech similar to a TED Talk. Many of the thirty-two librarians did not know much about one another aside from their names and building assignments. To foster the librarians' trust in each other and their working together, Allan looked for opportunities to help them know one another on a more-personal level. Librarians like Kristen volunteered to present their stories when they were ready, and each quarterly meeting usually began with two or three talks from members of the group. Librarians shared about their families, their journey toward librarianship, their secret talents or favorite hobbies,



*Superintendent Dr. Karen Sullivan, school board member Mark Rising, and Director of Instructional Technology Allan Davenport listening to ideas Kristen Mattson and the other high school librarians have for the upcoming school year.*

and the life lessons they have learned and apply to their work every day. During these talks, people came together. They found out what they had in common with their colleagues; they discovered new topics to talk about with one another and dove deeper into one another's experiences. They felt vulnerable but also safe to share thoughts and feelings.

Allan encouraged librarians to not only share their stories but also to share their spaces as well. Because of the size of the district and limited release time, it was a rare occurrence for librarians to be in one another's schools. For one of the quarterly meetings during the 2015–2016 school year, Allan asked for volunteer carpool drivers and sent minivans and SUVs full of eager librarians out on field trips to view one another's spaces.

Kristen felt that those library field trips were one of the most-powerful professional development and bonding opportunities for their library team. Her car-full of

colleagues took silly selfies before pulling out of the parking lot, made bets about whose children made the biggest messes in the family car, and generally shared life stories as they drove around town. This opportunity to just be together, without a strict agenda or a task bigger than getting to their destination, allowed this car-full of people to further secure their relationships and levels of trust.

Kristen also noted a stark difference between the library field trips she attended that day with her colleagues and site visits she had done on her own. When librarians visit schools outside of their district, they typically do so with the intention of gathering great ideas to bring back to their own space. When Kristen and her colleagues traveled together, though, the experience was so much richer. Sure, great ideas were still recognized and replicated, but the best part of the visit was when the hosting librarians felt comfortable enough to point out the flaws of their spaces and ask for advice from a coalition of support that they had come to know and trust.

Allan and Kristen agree that the year spent building trust, relationships, and collective efficacy was well worth it. The level of growth within individuals, but also within the group as a whole, was remarkable. Amazing things like the incorporation of makerspaces and STEM programs into the elementary schools, the incorporation of inquiry-based lesson design, and more-purposeful, productive collaboration with teachers that used to happen only in pockets began to spread like wildfire as the thirty-two librarians were empowered to lead, challenge, question, and support one another. A Future Ready Librarian community was being built in and through the collective efforts of Allan and the librarians.

As the 2015–2016 school year came to a close, the intentional focus on a few components of the Future Ready Librarians Framework was carried into the 2016–2017 school year. During that second year of deliberate work, the vision of collaborative leadership began

to become reality! Educators both in and outside of District 204 were noticing evidence of this collaborative, focused work, and Indian Prairie school librarians were quickly becoming the face of Future Ready—not only in their buildings and in their communities, but also on a national level. This recognition was thanks to the commitment of District 204 librarians to blog about their experiences and present at conferences. The work of the District 204 librarians was also highlighted by Superintendent Dr. Karen Sullivan through her appearance at the *School Library Journal* Leadership Summit in 2016 as well as through an article she wrote for AASA's journal, *School Administrator*.

### **A Future Ready School, District, Community**

Shared leadership within the team of librarians and also within relationships between librarians and administrators has resulted in many “wins” for students, teachers, and the larger community that District 204 serves. By partnering with parent-teacher organizations, the local education foundation, public libraries, classroom teachers, building and district administrators, and members of the school board, school librarians have had a significant impact. Here are just a few of those accomplishments:

- A revitalized job description and evaluation process for district librarians that better reflects the Future Ready Librarians Framework.

- Greater partnerships with the public library. Allan himself has provided Chromebook training to the public library staff so they may better support our students who may bring in a 1:1 device. Also, the director has committed some of the public library budget to purchasing WiFi hotspots for our students to check out and take home.
- Greater access to coding, robotics, and STEM education at the elementary schools thanks to generous funding from various sources for makerspace materials and after-school clubs.
- A redesign and revitalization of physical libraries across the district, allowing teachers and school librarians to facilitate far more student collaboration and creation than was previously possible.
- An increase in parent education around digital citizenship, educational technology, and STEM as school librarians lead parent forums and Q&A sessions and bring their makerspaces out to community clubhouses. Librarians have also been intentional about developing relationships with parent volunteers and parent-teacher organizations, relationships that are mutually beneficial to both the school library and the parent community.
- School librarians are now sitting on various curriculum-writing teams, allowing them to embed Future Ready skills alongside content-area goals as curriculum is being collaboratively developed with teacher teams.

- Librarians have been increasingly seen as instructional partners in their buildings; they are co-planning, co-teaching, providing on-the-spot professional development, and also volunteering to lead large groups not only on school-improvement days, but also on much larger district-wide Institute Days.

### **Coalitions Support One Another**

Allan's goal back in 2015 was to equip the thirty-two school librarians in District 204 with the skills and confidence to lead beyond the library by going out into their buildings as instructional partners and advocates of Future Ready Learning. He watched in awe as many of the librarians on the team stepped into leadership roles above and beyond their own schools as well.

The high school librarians formed a *Future Ready Librarians* blog at <https://futureready204librarians.wordpress.com> and encouraged every one of their colleagues to contribute stories that aligned with the areas of the Future Ready Librarians Framework. These stories helped parents, community and board members, and librarians outside of the district recognize the vital role school librarians were playing as leaders in and catalysts of school change.

The biggest honor for Kristen and other librarians in the district was when the Alliance for Excellent Education and Follett Learning asked



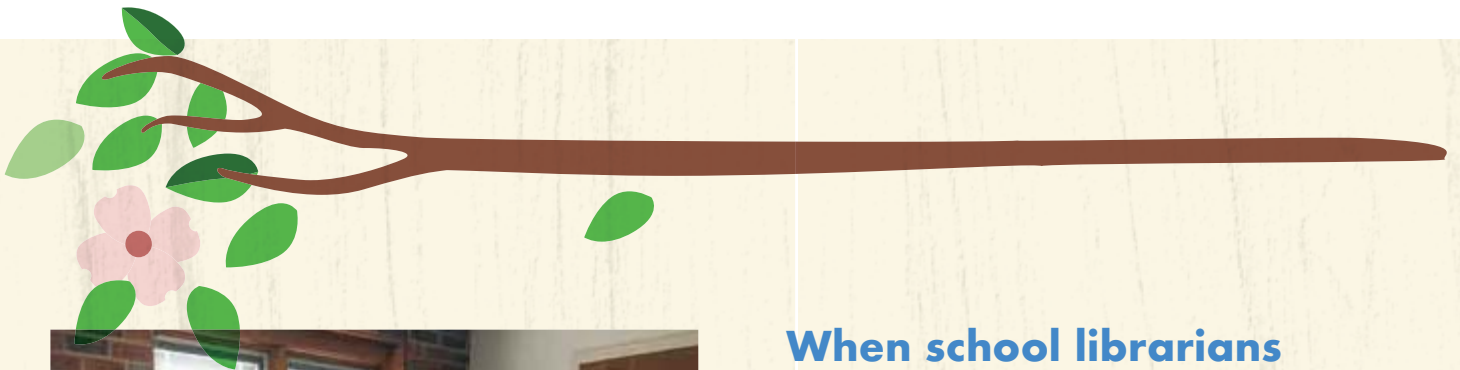
to feature some of their work in educational materials for other districts and librarians. To date, Follett has written Project Connect case studies on two of the District 204 libraries, featured Kristen in one of Follett's Project Connect Leadership Spotlight pieces, and filmed an interview with Kristen, which will be shown at Future Ready Summits around the country.

The hard work of the District 204 librarian team seemed to come full

circle, at least for Kristen, during the opening Institute Day of the 2017–2018 school year. Kristen sat in an auditorium full of educators as Tom Murray, Director of Innovation for Future Ready Schools, took the stage to give a keynote address. His message about innovation in schools and personalized student learning was peppered with compliments about the important work school librarians are doing in District 204 to lead that charge.

## Practical Takeaways for Your Own Coalition

Maybe you have your own coalition that needs some reinvigorating. Maybe your first step in this work will be to find a tribe of local librarians who will support and push one another. No matter where you are starting, we suggest adopting some of what we learned during our district's journey:



*Left to right: Dawn Vieira, Kristen Mattson, Allan Davenport, and Laura Nylén, all members of the District 204 library team, at the University of Illinois to share their journey with other practitioners.*

**When school librarians work in silos, it is easy for them to become discouraged, stop growing, and even be considered irrelevant in this increasingly digital age. When librarians are part of the vital work of the school and district, however, it is difficult to imagine making changes in schools without them.**



- Take time to get to know one another, build trust, and acknowledge that all members of the group are at different points in their journey and bring different strengths and weaknesses to the table. Share your stories with one another. Share a meal together. The time it takes to build this foundation will pay off exponentially in the long run.
- Choose a document like AASL's Standards or the Future Ready Librarians Framework as your guide. Use it to guide reflection, set goals, and monitor progress. Do so as individuals and as the collective coalition.
- Recognize that change is a slow process and a journey that never really ends. Prioritize your work. Celebrate incremental success.
- Try something. Fail. Share your failures, and then try again.
- Don't force change. Recognize where you can make an impact, and work with those who are willing to partner with you. As you build positive experiences and trust with those first followers, word will spread.
- Visit one another's spaces—not just for great ideas, but also for opportunities to get feedback from a safe group of critical but supportive friends.
- Share your story. Success in your coalition should be celebrated, not just by you, but by your community too! Sharing your story also helps support other librarian groups who are just beginning their journey.

## Final Thoughts

When school librarians work in silos, it is easy for them to become discouraged, stop growing, and even be considered irrelevant in this increasingly digital age. When

librarians are part of the vital work of the school and district, however, it is difficult to imagine making changes in schools without them. District and school leaders should not miss the opportunity to empower their librarians as catalysts for change.

As a district leader, Allan has seen countless examples of instructional growth throughout the district that can be directly attributed to the instructional leadership of a librarian. This growth and leadership would not have happened if district leadership had not made a purposeful investment in the continued professional development of librarians.

As a school librarian, please remember that what you do matters. The librarian is one of the few people in a school who can collaborate with everyone. Use that unique position to develop relationships with students, teachers, and parents. Share your story; demonstrate your love for reading, making, research, and student learning; and invest in one another. Learning and growing from working with other



### Dr. Kristen Mattson

is a high school librarian in Indian Prairie School District 204. She is currently serving on the

conference planning committee of the Illinois School Library Media Association and is a leader for the International Society for Technology in Education Digital Citizenship personal learning network. Kristen is the author of *Digital Citizenship in Action: Empowering Students to Engage in Online Communities (ISTE 2017)* and winner of the 2017 American Association for Teaching and Curriculum's John Laska Dissertation of the Year Award in the curriculum category.

librarians in a variety of coalitions of support is vital to this work. Your story is still being written; believe in your ability to impact change as you embark on your own Future Ready journey.



**Allan Davenport** is Director of Instructional Leadership and Innovation for the Indian Prairie School District 204. He

is currently serving as a board member for the Association of Illinois Middle-Grade Schools. In addition, Allan consults with other districts in the areas of leadership, digital citizenship, and school culture.

## Works Cited:

- Alliance for Excellent Education. 2015. "About Us." <<https://dashboard.futurereadyschools.org/about>> (accessed September 26, 2017).
- . 2016. "Future Ready Schools Announces New Project to Recognize School Librarians as Leaders in School Transformation." <<https://all4ed.org/press/future-ready-schools-announces-new-project-to-recognize-school-librarians-as-leaders-in-school-transformation>> (accessed September 26, 2017).
- . n.d. "Take the Pledge." <<http://futureready.org/take-the-pledge>> (accessed August 27, 2017).
- U. S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology. n.d. "Characteristics of Future Ready Leadership: A Research Analysis." <<https://tech.ed.gov/files/2015/12/Characteristics-of-Future-Ready-Leadership.pdf>> (accessed August 25, 2017).
- Wolf, Mary Ann, Rachel Jones, and Daniel Gilbert. 2014. *Leading In and Beyond the Library*. <<http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/BeyondTheLibrary.pdf>> (accessed September 27, 2017).