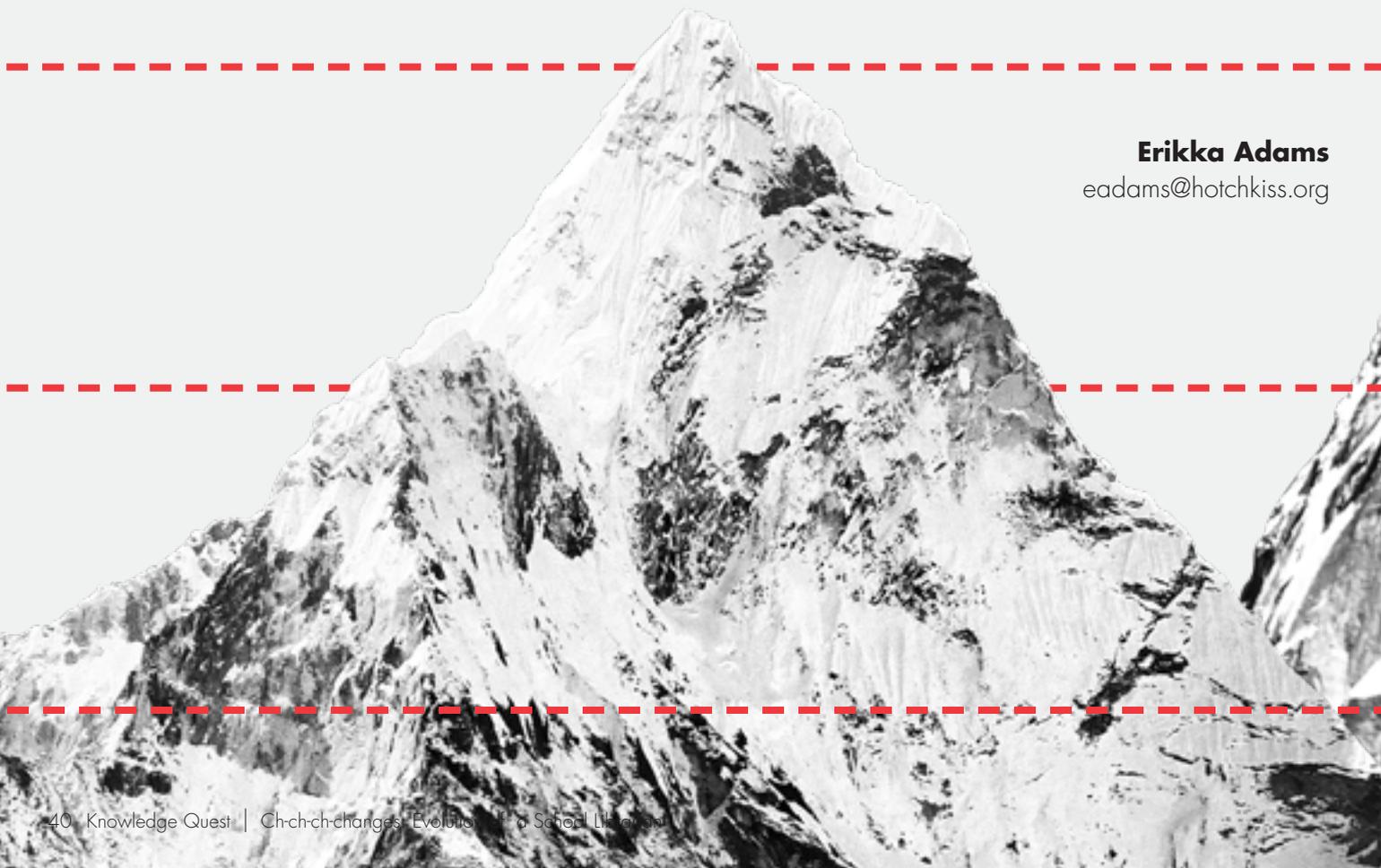


# Professional Expanding

Transitioning to an  
Independent School

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# Growth & My Horizons



When I thought of being a school librarian, I always pictured myself in public high schools. I wanted to be a public servant, so to me, that meant public high schools. I applied for many positions, interviewed at some, and accepted an offer to begin my high school librarian career. I was in that position for five years when I realized I wanted more professional growth and a change of approach to education. During this time, I recalled my pre-professional degree work at the Winsor School in Boston, Massachusetts, a small, all-girls 5–12th grade independent school. I remembered the environment as supportive; the students were eager and excited to be there. Perhaps I recalled this experience when my sister-in-law sent me a job posting at another small, experiential learning-based independent high school. I looked it over and with feelings of trepidation at leaving public schools—but also curiosity to return to something I remembered as positive—I applied.

Accepting the position meant I also accepted changing types of leadership, changing types of accountability, and changing expectations from a broader group of stakeholders. Immediately, I began to learn that not all independent high schools are the same, that these schools are not cut off from the outside world, that history and tradition are important pieces of decision making, and that independent school teachers are not as stuck in a role but get to try many roles.

I saw all this in my first year,  
which flew by in a blur  
of adapting, reacting,  
learning, and  
connecting. I hit  
a few roadblocks,  
almost lost  
traction on a  
few turns,  
and three  
years

later was still learning the rules of the road for being a librarian in an independent high school. For anyone who is about to embark on an MSLIS program, about to graduate from an LIS program, or considering changing roles, here are a few things to consider about being a librarian in an independent high school.

## The Surprises

### *Connectedness*

At the independent high school in which I worked, I saw teachers and administrators work hard to address world events, local community issues, and even internal community happenings that may affect the tenor of the student body. Like all teenagers, students at our school struggled with making healthy decisions and learning to communicate better, and experienced all the other not-so-pretty parts of being a teenager in the twenty-first century. The school as a whole learned how to address these struggles through training sessions, discussions, and a lot of new policies.

I saw the library and my role as natural supports in these efforts. One way was through interactive, pop-up libraries I created around campus, usually with themes on current school or world issues or on teen-centered wellness. The pop-up libraries would include links to database articles, surveys, and sometimes hands-on activities. Schedule permitting, I was also part of a health and wellness committee on which I worked with others across departments to look at how to create a cohesive approach to caring for students and providing resources at different locations around campus.

Another approach was being an advocate for increased student voices in decision-making processes where appropriate. In committees I sat on, I would interject student

voices and opinions that I was aware of and encourage committees to invite students into the process to get real-time input from those usually most affected by what the group was trying to accomplish. I intentionally used students in the library as informal focus group members whenever I needed student insight on a potential library plan or school change under discussion.

Also, my assistant and I worked to promote a safe-space environment in the library, where all were welcome and all questions were encouraged. This environment attracted students who wanted to just relax in the comfortable chairs. This safe space also attracted some students who wanted to download their whole day with us and then go on their way. Also attracted were groups of students who might have questions or make statements about a recent campus speaker or event; I could engage with these students informally, sometimes with no stakes other than to get to know them and help them clarify their own thoughts and ideas.

### *Efforts to Increase Diversity*

I also learned how admissions and communications teams work hard to target and address ways to broaden their school's reach and impact on many different kinds of students, families, and communities in and out of the physical school. While independent schools may have to work harder to ensure their communities reflect the diversity of the global community, they do the work when the intention, money, and drive are there. Admissions and communications staff members made genuine efforts to increase the diversity of the student body.

Sadly, nationally 30 percent of total enrollment at independent schools are students of color (NAIS 2016), a percentage that does not mirror real global diversity. Cost is, of course, a

factor when students are selecting a school to attend. However, the percentage does also come down to student choice—why students choose one independent school over another. Those end decisions can be informed and convinced only so much by the efforts of the school itself. For example, the school at which I worked was in a remote rural location with the closest urban center being fifty minutes away, and that city was not all that big! This environment in itself will attract and support students who want that kind of landscape beyond their learning environment. However, such an environment is not for all students or all families.

### *Independent Means Choices*

Like many people, I used to call independent schools “private schools,” and they are, but not all private schools are independent schools and not all independent schools are created equal. Any school that does not receive funding from a state government is a private school (Dilon 2018). Other differences, according to the National Association of Independent Schools, are that an independent school is “driven by a unique mission” and is specifically governed independent of outside influence (NAIS n.d.). Content focuses, pedagogies, and philosophies can vary according to that unique mission. This difference allows for a learning environment similar to a public charter school in which students have more choice in what kind of education they want to pursue and in how they pursue that education. Some independent schools have a unifying theme like STEM or the arts; some have built-in support programs for learners who need that support or have learning challenges. Some are day schools; others are boarding schools. The major difference is the price tag. Public charter schools do not have fees as a determinant

of who may attend; most independent and private schools do.

I learned having a diverse community at an independent school is a tuition balancing act, a tightrope walk between supporting more students to have the chance to attend while

(and even administrators) at independent boarding schools act like an extended family in which having hard discussions, with students and employees alike, is a priority. Even though I didn’t have a group of students assigned to me, I often found myself in this role. I loved

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supporting more and more robust programs on campus for those students already attending. To do both is expensive and, thus, has led to tuition costs steadily increasing over the last four years at most independent schools (NAIS 2016). Tuition and boarding costs can be almost as much as college tuition. Some schools offer financial aid packages, which vary depending on the size of the school, its endowment and other financial supports, and what focuses the school is promoting for the students who attend there.

### *Social/Emotional Support, Front and Center*

School is a place for learning and personal growth. This is especially true for independent schools that are also boarding schools, where teenagers are away from home and need support to continue their growth in and out of the classroom. Due to proximity and exposure to each other, employees and students

this involvement. As an educator, I truly believe in supporting young people’s emotional development. I often had to have the same conversations multiple times with the same student—and with other students, too.

When I had worked at a rural public school, I had acted in a similar way with an assigned advisory group, although unlike the independent school, the public school did not require faculty to have to provide that type of support. At that same public school, I had also seen character development happen in a few more traditional ways, sometimes implicit in the way teachers talked to students about how to treat other people, but mostly through threats of punitive measures: Here are the rules and if the rules are broken, this punishment happens.

In contrast, at the independent high school, I saw faculty, staff, and administration being more like full-time coaches or even parents

to students, on and off the field. OK, maybe not parents, but more like that favorite aunt or uncle a young teen is drawn to for answers and listens to instead of parental units (sorry, parents!). Adults would approach a student issue by talking about choices, decision making, and looking beyond just the immediate consequence of an action. I saw more onus on students, on how they ended up in x situations or making y choices, and how they intended to right those situations. Seeing this process was witnessing metacognitive development made verbal, and I loved it! I won't claim it always works and not all students choose to get themselves to better places. After all, they *are* teenagers and are learning about themselves and the world.

This approach to supporting students emotionally and guiding their behavior affected my role in a several ways. I often overheard students talking in the library about sensitive subjects or injudicious behavior (the speaker's own or others') and, when appropriate, would step in to address whatever was being said. I'd try various levels of seriousness, depending on the issue, from an easy joke to redirect to a sit down, intense one-to-one conversation. Sometimes my role might be sharing a resource or sending them to a specific website. Other times, I might share a potential issue of academic integrity with a student, the classroom teacher, and the student's advisor if I felt unsure of a behavior I observed while co-teaching. Whatever the situation

was, the climate of coaching at the school helped me see these actions not as punitive and, therefore, not to approach them in a negative way.

Listening and talking with students about difficult topics gave me more insight into two things about teenagers. One, they want to have these talks because sometimes they just don't have all the knowledge they need and the experience to handle difficult situations; talking with someone they trust can be invaluable. Second, I saw just how smart and insightful students can be. Overall, I was re-inspired repeatedly to keep including them in the decision-making processes within the library and the school whenever possible and to feel more motivated to be an advocate for their voices whenever I could.

### *Qualified and Passionate Colleagues*

An idea I'd heard prior to working at an independent school was that independent school teachers do not have to have advanced degrees. This idea seems to imply standards are lower for independent school teachers. The majority of my colleagues (so far) have advanced degrees and, sometimes, additional certifications for experiential, hands-on learning opportunities like Outward Bound, national/international service learning, wilderness first aid, rock climbing, and more. The root of this idea about lower standards is in part, I think, the flexible professional environment I've witnessed within the independent school

where I worked. This environment is designed to foster and retain passionate and creative teachers, not lose them to burnout, overly structured repetition, or disinterest.

I've seen this kind of community encourage and allow teachers to branch out of their "classroom content" domain into other areas, whether it be introducing an elective course, teaching a full-credit course, or organizing an afterschool/extra-curricular offering that is in an area unrelated to their degrees. And sometimes I saw this branching out lead to a complete career shift for a teacher who found that this project area (outside the person's degree and content area) to be a true passion (surprise!). This realization can happen in public schools as well, but to make a major shift in field involves more costs, tests, and records that need to be paid, passed, and reported to state educational offices. In contrast, independent schools may allow an easier transition for teachers, leading, in turn, to retaining those teachers, a win-win for everyone, especially students who see passionate, curious, and creative teachers trying and learning new things.

### **The Tough Stuff**

Not mentioning the challenges I faced would be remiss. What?! It wasn't perfect there?! Even though people pay to be there?! Yes, that's right; the school at which I worked—and I'm guessing other independent high schools as well—are

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not perfect. They have their own sets of challenges, similar and different to those public high schools face.

### *Hierarchy...Where?*

One of the biggest challenges I faced was defining where, in the school's broader landscape and its strategic vision, I as the school librarian and the library program itself fit into that vision. On the micro level, this situation meant supervision and the responsibilities of other staff members were unclear.

On the macro level, long-term goals for the library's future development existed only within the library-specific plans I created. My first year, I knew this situation had to change and worked hard to share my vision with the administrators and to continually ask them for feedback. I thought my work could also speak for itself and went out of my way to collaborate with many other educators in the school and to try dynamic ideas for programming. I hosted a series of authors, cohosted an event with the diversity coordinator that featured a film and discussion for the whole community, helped administrators design a professional development day, with the tech integrator co-planned a tech-sharing day for the faculty, and began sitting on multiple committees to broaden the scope and span of the library's support for other areas on campus. I collaborated with many different departments on curriculum;

at faculty meetings I spoke up about library resources and sometimes at the weekly all-school meetings had quirky informational snippets to share.

In my second year, I lost the part-time library assistant I'd just hired. As a result, I had less time to devote to being out and about on campus. I took more time to deep dive into library-specific work I could do while being in the library's physical space. I rewrote the library mission and vision statements and developed a strategic plan with action steps that tied to the school's plan and the outcomes the school specified for graduates.

While this work may not have changed hearts and minds instantaneously, over the three years I saw more excitement and more collaboration from faculty. I saw more engagement from students. While this work did not lead to immediate discussion of long-term goals for the library, it did lead to administrators' taking

more notice and interest in the day-to-day operations of the library and a clearer reporting system for supervision. All positive steps forward.

### *Think Outside the Line Item*

One line item in the school's tuition costs was for books, a sum that included audio copies of any books students needed for classes. Providing audiobooks was something I struggled with because I wanted to provide a variety of audio resources but didn't know whether students were already purchasing or looking for them elsewhere. Looking at the bigger need, I found a creative solution to provide a support students did need from the library. I consulted the teachers I knew who promoted audio resources to students or helped them access audio resources, and we combined forces into a shared approach. Together, we created a plan to ensure that 1) we all marketed the available tuition funds the same way; 2) we all knew the process for students to get the audiobooks they needed; and 3) we pooled the additional audio resources we knew about into one unified guide accessible to all teachers and students. This guide was valued by the teachers who had helped



create it and by other instructors, as well as by students. Of course, the most important outcome was that students had access to resources in formats that matched their needs. However, as a bonus, this experience was a lesson to me; a useful resource *and* stronger relationships with other educators came from accepting the situation as a challenge not a dead end!

### *All Eyes Are Watching!*

OK, that sounds a bit too Big Brother-ish. Let me clarify. In the public high school, I was lucky to be able to focus on students and faculty as my primary (really only!) and most important library stakeholders. In the independent high school, though students and faculty were still the most important stakeholders, a bigger cast of characters also had to be involved, informed, and made aware of library decisions. Who were these stakeholders? Parents who visited officially on parents' weekends and unofficially when visiting their children. The admissions team, who would bring in prospective students and families. The communications team that needed clear and consistent messaging about the library to share with current and prospective families and the

broader school community (e.g., alumni, local community residents, any collaborating organizations). Trustees. Visiting groups of consultants. Visiting teachers from other independent schools. I also had to be aware of how I spoke of the school to people in my personal life.

That aspect of intentionality in speech and in sharing job specifics was not entirely new to me. When working in the public high school, I had always maintained professional boundaries, which were important to me for keeping work and my personal life separate. At the independent high school, I had to learn how branding was another type of boundary to maintain in addition to the usual professional boundaries; branding is how independent schools differentiate themselves to stand out from other independent schools. I had to live and talk the brand every day when describing the school, the library, and my role. I had to keep the brand in mind as I designed displays or thought of physical space changes to the library. I had to keep the brand in mind for when and how I approached different departments to collaborate and how I broached certain, new ideas. All of this "living the brand" would have been a challenge if I didn't believe in it, or it was a false representation of the school. The brand at this independent school was true, thank goodness, and was one I believed in and supported.

### *School Identity—It's Important*

This challenge was something I stumbled on not very gracefully because I was new to the independent school environment. I was unfamiliar with how rich a history many independent schools have and

how that history can inform so many things at those schools. I struggled to figure out my school's particular history, and how and why it factored into some decisions but not others. I attempted to foster relationships with people in different offices across campus to strengthen information sharing. When changing things or introducing new ideas through the library program, I tried to avoid stepping on the metaphorical toes of those to whom the school's history mattered. I still stepped on toes, apologized for it, and looked to trusted colleagues to help me out in the future.

Although my colleagues wanted to help, their perspectives were very different from mine. Most of my colleagues had been at the school for at least ten years (if not more!) and many had also attended independent or private schools for some or all of their educations. This reality made my stumbles obvious to them and my questions harder for them—and me—to answer because my colleagues had never had to consciously think about navigating the politics, the expectations, or the community in quite the same way that I was finding necessary. I didn't really have someone on the staff to turn to for the inside scoop I needed.

What helped me most was visiting other independent school libraries and speaking with fellow librarians on what they did, how they worked at their schools, and where they fit into their schools' histories, plans, and initiatives. I was reassured by their kindness and grew more confident from their openness and willingness to answer any and all of my questions. They gave me perspective on how to parse the different types of responses and outreach I might get from different offices. They helped me understand why and how the histories of independent schools could help inform me

and lead me to develop more library programming and, more importantly, stronger ties to the core mission and values of the school.

The very first time I reached out to another independent school librarian with an idea to collaborate, I was met with an instant yes! We made plans for monthly meet ups, an online resource-sharing consortium, and a regional librarian meet-up group. At another independent school, a librarian shared a writing program she developed collaboratively with a nearby university's writing center. As my students were hungry for more writing support and my teachers had no time to add more, I stayed in touch with her via e-mail as I slowly tried to build a similar program with a nearby college's writing center. This experience showed me how creating a library program in direct response to a need would already ensure its success and use.

Another librarian at an independent school modeled how she used the school archives and Twitter to connect with the communications team and alumni network to share memories using historical school items. I envisioned doing this with the room of unarchived materials at my school, thinking that, perhaps, I could generate interest in the school community to formalize an archive. I also learned that an intentional social media blitz can tip the scales for program success. When I spoke to a few other librarians, they shared that communication between librarians and administrators is an area of struggle for others, too; I was not alone. These librarians reminded me of the obvious: Change takes time, and I had to keep on doing what I was doing.

This encouragement and sense of alliance was what I needed to remember to use my network. In both public and independent schools,

librarians are often a department of one. We have to rely on our regional, state, and national networks for day-to-day support and idea sharing. While this approach may not be as easy as walking to the faculty room for a chat with another librarian, when used, it can be extremely effective and a powerful boost to

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morale. This had me looking into how I could get more involved in committee work with YALSA as I daydreamed of possibly making a difference beyond my school's walls.

### Looking Ahead

After three years at the same independent school, as I write this in July, I find myself transitioning to a new position at another independent high school to continue my professional growth and learning. I am stepping out of the role of solo library decision maker into a role as one member of a team of school librarians. This change excites me for so many reasons, mostly because I think the challenges I will face in my new role will be more about the

role itself and the objectives of the role, in contrast to my last position, in which I was dealing with the larger landscape challenges while simultaneously learning the ins and outs of the school and trying to run school library programming, all on my own.

I can't wait to start this new journey. I can firmly say I *think* I know the basics of the independent high school world, but even now I'm not sure. I hope I've learned enough to avoid stepping on metaphorical toes and enough to adapt more easily to this new school's rich history and ways of being and doing. I know I've grown as a school librarian. I expect to again have passionate, qualified teachers as colleagues. Unlike my last school, though, I'll also have a super-amazing group of school librarians to turn to for help and advice, people who will speak my language!



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