

ACHIEVING BALANCE

MOVING FROM SCHOOL
LIBRARIANSHIP TO
STATE-LEVEL SPECIALIST

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"The principal would like to see you in his office," the vice principal began. "You're not in trouble," he added.

My face had betrayed me again, I thought.

My professional life took a turn that day for which I am grateful. I began my journey to become a school librarian. Like many librarians, I didn't start my education career as a school librarian. I was an English language arts and music teacher. I became a librarian by default, some might say. The administration was reducing staff, and the high school librarian was retiring.

"Well, I'm glad I made your day," the principal stated as I was leaving his office.

He had offered me the library position for the upcoming school year. Floating on air, I made my way back to the classroom. I was being given an opportunity I had only dreamed of. Changing career directions wasn't something I had considered as being realistic. In fact, I wasn't that far from retirement.

Growing into a School Librarian

I worked on my state's library credential, taking classes for the next

three years as I held the position of school librarian. What I learned in those three years tied together and reinforced all the years of pedagogy I had been exposed to in professional development. Those educational engagements were no longer bits and pieces in isolation. They became a cohesive foundation for how I approached student learning and delivery of instruction. But, I was a school librarian now, not a teacher, or so many of my colleagues thought.

"You are going to be the librarian?" they asked quizzically.

"Will you still teach?" some asked, taking care not to add, "Because being a librarian can't be a full-time job."

"Oh, no!" chimed others. "Did you have to take a pay cut?"

Viewing school librarians as non-teachers is an old phenomenon that continues to have life. Being relegated to the position of school librarian was, most certainly in the eyes of some teachers, a step down from teaching. Some colleagues, administrators, students, and community members still hold the notion that librarians sit at the circulation desk and check out books all day. Let's not forget that librarians also have time to read the books.

Besides, isn't becoming the librarian what tired teachers do until they are ready to retire?

My library classes taught me that becoming a credentialed school librarian would not be easy. *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* states that school librarians are "the essential link who connect students, teachers, and others with the information resources they need" (AASL and AECT 1998, 4). Additionally, according to *Information Power*, the school librarian has four specific responsibilities: as teacher, instructional partner, information specialist, and program administrator. In 2009, AASL's *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs* added leader to the school librarian's responsibilities. Collaboration, leadership, and technology are mentioned more than once in both these books as components that are interwoven in all of a school librarian's responsibilities. As I studied *Information Power*, I noticed the emphasis on the role of the school librarian as a teaching partner as described on pages 4 and 5 of the text. I was beginning to understand the depth of my role and the weight of my responsibilities. I eagerly accepted the challenges.

As a former teacher, standards were nothing new to me, but realizing that

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school librarians had standards made me respect the profession even more. *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* had a 1988 predecessor: *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs*. Together these two texts helped shape the framework for future standards. In 2007 AASL released *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner*, which focused on the essential skills, dispositions, responsibilities, and self-assessment strategies for students engaged in all information literacies. Most recently, AASL released its newest standards: *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*. For the first time, the standards did not focus on one group over the others. Learners, librarians, and libraries share responsibilities for learning. AASL continues to update its vision in response to research and technology advancements. School librarians need to support the organization that works diligently to serve us.

As a high school English and music teacher, I recognized that professional affiliation was important. Having access to professional journals, packed with new insights and ideas, was a must for me. I was fortunate to be exposed to hours of professional development (PD) on various topics. The PD did not immediately produce increased

student achievement as administrators hoped, but I found that just as we are products of our sum of experiences, I became a more insightful educator because of the mix of professional development in which I had engaged. I could not absorb all that I had been exposed to, but from each experience, I took away valuable ideas that I could add to my teaching toolkit. Yet, I never felt truly successful. A piece was missing. Then, I became a school librarian.

More Learning and Exploring

So, why were my library classes making such an impact on how I viewed teaching and learning? There wasn't a single class or Eureka moment that brought my learning into focus. Rather, the way I was learning was the key. My classes were taught at the upper level of Bloom's taxonomy: analyzing, evaluating, and creating. I was shown the SAMR cycle (Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, and Redefinition) and how to incorporate technology into learning in a meaningful, transformative way. I explored philosophies of education to determine if I was a pragmatist, constructivist, realist, or existentialist. A meaningful discussion ensued. I started to understand how I processed information and made it my own. As my learning transformed, I saw students'

learning in a new way. Now, I was eager to collaborate with classroom teachers.

I wish I could say that my first experiences were astounding successes. Unfortunately, they were not. I should have handled many situations differently. Collaboration takes dedicated time and planning. Relationships need to be developed. My enthusiasm alone was not enough to make projects work. My vision was not always the teacher's vision. I realized that I had to step back at times and proceed with more care, foresight, and patience. Some teachers may see this "collaboration time" as a way for the librarian to teach his or her classes. Other teachers will take an active part. The key is having adequate planning time and a supportive administration.

Further Growth and Positive Changes

My opportunities to collaborate are different now that I work at the state level. Projects come together more organically. Creating partnerships and supporting one another is a natural extension of the job.

Applying for the School and Youth Services Specialist position became a focus of mine after I read an online post advertising the job. I was ready



for a change, something I hadn't realized until a series of events sent me looking. Earlier that year, I had volunteered to take over the public library in our small rural community. The director's husband had received a promotion, and they were leaving. I had recently begun serving on the library board. Although I never became the director, I realized that I was seeking new challenges. I had spent eleven years in the community, and family was not close by.

Additionally, the school where I was librarian advertised for four ELA teachers for the upcoming school year. Because one of my majors was in English language arts, my chances of being moved to the classroom rose exponentially even though my administration assured me I would remain the librarian. Four years before, I had been taken out of the school library to substitute-teach full time in ELA for over four months. Scared of losing my position as librarian, I volunteered to do both, by working in the library before and after school and on weekends if necessary. The following school year, I came to the fall in-service to be told I would be teaching composition half-time. The contract that I had signed the previous spring read that I was the school librarian, but I had no recourse. My flexibility was surely being tested. Incidentally, the situations I describe are quite commonplace in education—especially in library positions.

I am a spiritual person and believe doors open and close for a reason. Had I signed a contract to be the school librarian for the upcoming school year, I probably would have been teaching English. Had I taken the directorship of the public library, I would have honored my commitment and remained in the community and in the school system nearby. Because I allowed myself the opportunity to look beyond my

present situation, I was given the option of exploring other areas of librarianship. I applied for the state position, received an interview, and accepted the job all within two weeks. Inside of two more weeks, I was packed, moved, and working as a state specialist.

As I write this in July, a year has passed since I filled the position of School and Youth Services Specialist at the North Dakota State Library. This position was developed in answer to school librarians' requests that they have a voice and representation at the state level. My role has been split between supporting school librarians and working with public libraries' summer reading programs.

I am still becoming acquainted with my job, its responsibilities, and its possibilities. I have enjoyed seeing how other state libraries answer the needs of their librarians, be they in school, public, academic, or special libraries. I have found camaraderie with my counterparts from other states. We are able to share and glean the best library practices to enhance our services. We are developing relationships between libraries that share common patrons. I envision a partnership between school and public libraries that will open the lines of communications to benefit those we commonly serve. For now, my school and public library services are handled separately.

Recently, I gathered a small group of school librarians across the state to write an elementary curriculum for three disaster-preparedness booklets. These booklets and accompanying curriculum will be distributed to all elementary school libraries this fall. The committee members meet via Zoom, and we share ideas and lessons through Google Drive and Google Docs.

On a broader scope, North Dakota has joined forces with South Dakota and Wyoming as part of a Reach Out grant funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Over the course of the next three years, the school librarian specialists in each state will partner with Technology and Innovation in Education (TIE), educational consultants from Rapid City, South Dakota, to aid rural school librarians as they move to a more digital-based learning hub. PD opportunities will help librarians build capacity as instructional leaders to work collaboratively with other school



personnel—teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals. Rural school librarians will also develop skills to utilize open education resources to integrate digital applications into their professional practices. Again, librarians will work collaboratively with teachers to bring information to students.

When I focus on public libraries, my work is with the Collaborative Summer Library Program (CSLP) for children and teen public librarians. I have the opportunity each year to introduce the summer reading materials and facilitate six workshops across the state. For the 2020 programming year, I will also serve on the national School Outreach committee for CSLP.

This year, the Bank of North Dakota partnered with the state library to bring the 529 College Save program to the summer reading program participants. Each public library that ran a summer program will submit the participants' names to me. Their names will be placed in one of eight regional drawings. Each winner will receive a \$529 scholarship to be put toward education after high school. Every participant who completes the summer reading program will receive a \$25 certificate to be applied to a College SAVE account.

Another one of my tasks is to coordinate the Summer Reading Celebration at the capitol grounds in

Bismarck. We host a celebration in late May to begin the summer program. The two local public libraries use the opportunity to register summer reading participants. We bring in vendors who are willing to create learning opportunities for kids. No one is permitted so sell anything. Children, parents, and daycare center groups visit the various booths and take part in activities. This year we had approximately 3,500 visitors.

As a state-level specialist, I have been able to increase my visibility in professional organizations such as YALSA, serving as the North Dakota voice in teen services. I also answered an e-mail asking for volunteers to help write supplemental materials (fact sheets) for the new teen competencies for public libraries. I collaborated with three other librarians from across the United

States. This fall I will present on teen competencies at our state library conference.

Leaving the students has been the most difficult transition for me. I miss the opportunities to work directly with them. I also realize I am a teacher and learner foremost, though I have had to put my teacher hat, as I knew it, away. The state position, however, has opened a new world for me. I have more flexibility to explore and deepen my professional interests, meet people at a national level, and share commonalities and differences. I look through information with a broader lens and consider the bigger picture and wider impact to delivering services. My journey has become richer, and as I pursue my Master's in Library Science through Emporia State, I will welcome the opportunity to continue learning and sharing.



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is the school and youth services specialist for the North Dakota State Library. This is a newly

developed position that she has held for one year. She belongs to the American Library Association, the American Association of School Librarians, the Young Adult Library Services Association, the Public Library Association, and the National Science Teachers Association. She volunteered to work with other YALSA members, developing fact sheets for the new teen competencies. She is the state-assigned teen representative to YALSA and participated in the YALSA 2017 National Forum on Transforming Teen Services through Continuing Education at which attendees discussed ways to share the new teen competencies with public librarians serving teens.

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