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Proactive, Ubiquitous, Fierce, Collaborative School Library Advocacy

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I love you, Rod Stewart, but you're wrong about this: "The first cut is the deepest." Every school library cut hurts as painfully as the last, and the best response is proactive, ubiquitous, fierce, collaborative school library advocacy.

School librarians have a passionate love of words, and recognize the power of words to impact action. It is through powerful words and evidential data that librarians convince others of the value, the profound academic impact, of a well-funded school library supervised by a certified librarian. As proctors of our profession and our programs, school librarians must advocate constantly for full support of their school libraries. Librarians serve on the front lines of literacy as information stewards and "right to read" freedom fighters.

Proactive

The first time I tried to "sell" school library advocacy to school librarians in a district where librarians were struggling with the news of more cuts, I was admonished for asking the school librarians to do more. Instead of being supportive or sympathetic, they felt I was adding another duty to their already packed schedules. The cuts came. That was twenty years ago, and that district's school libraries have still not recovered.

A sorrowful truth is that library cuts are hard to heal and nearly impossible to reinstate. Therefore, it is imperative for school librarians to advocate proactively at every level, ensuring patrons and parents, administrators and board

members, champions and legislators fully understand the school library's impact on student academic success.

As information managers, school librarians understand the importance of staying informed; thus, representation at the bargaining table during contract negotiations, at local school board meetings, and on curriculum decision-making committees is critical when decisions that could impact the library are discussed.

Ubiquitous

Today's school librarians have been taught that advocacy is a seamless, ongoing component of the job. It's not an add-on or additional work, but rather a part of a school librarian's DNA. It is ubiquitous, quotidian, and must be a part of everything that school librarians say and do in their positions. Advocacy must saturate a school librarian's work, workplace, and beyond. And while it does not always preserve school libraries from cuts, more often than not, beyond doing the job well, advocacy is the most powerful tool available to sustain school libraries. School librarians must infuse ubiquitous advocacy into their daily lives, whether working as the sole librarian in a district or serving a district with a hundred other librarians. Today, it is not an option to opt out of advocacy work.

Fierce

I remember years ago hearing a quote by the (at that time) Springfield, Pennsylvania, high school librarian, Joyce Valenza, "You can't be fierce in a holiday sweater." It

resonated with me, and I have quoted Joyce often. “That’s the word! Fierce.” A descriptor that might be missing from the professional vocabulary of the cadre of hard-working school librarians.

I knew instinctively that Valenza’s holiday sweater metaphor represented stereotypes, and unfortunately stereotype-casting has lambasted the school library profession. I thought, at the time, of all the truly hard-working librarians who are not drawn to the limelight, too modest or reserved to sound their own trumpet. Who only want to do the best possible job for their students and their schools. To those librarians know this: “You are fierce! You love your students fiercely. You are fierce in your convictions for teaching and learning.” But if I can make just one request: ask one student, teacher, and/or family member to share their appreciation of all that you do with a district decision-maker or a stakeholder. That’s close enough to the spotlight but not too uncomfortable, right?

Legislative

School librarians often watch as district decision-makers are dazzled by shiny promoted educational solutions and pour valuable limited education dollars into programs that work...or don’t. Meanwhile, school library shelves often go unfunded, and children are not granted opportunities to develop a love of reading, a love of learning, and information-seeking skills, all of which can last a lifetime.

However, when the law states that school libraries will be funded, that librarian FTEs are part of the state’s basic education law and education budget, districts must adhere despite opinions, priorities, or narrow-minded local administrators. A state’s basic education law is sacrosanct. Therefore, it behooves school librarians to get involved in educational decision-making at the state legislative level (see Kaaland p. 28). Further, through the state library organization one school librarian member can track legislation that could impact the state’s school library, and then inform its members within the state, potentially protecting or expanding school libraries statewide.

Strategic

School library advocacy does not simply mean seeking champions to speak for libraries without providing context for what the library provides and what today’s students need. Rather, advocacy efforts must be flexible and nimble, responding to district needs and more global changes in the work we do as librarians.

Today, teaching inquiry skills to information-seeking student researchers is likely a role that stakeholders and decision-makers understand as important skills for student learning. In her article Dr. Barbara Stripling (p. 14) provides one of the most important lessons in advocacy work. Stripling reminds librarians of the importance of considering the “why” of advocacy. She shares the transformative power of teaching learners how to “navigate and evaluate the complex world of information,” empowering learners through the inquiry process.

Viral

Suzanna Panter, district library administrator, works tirelessly to infuse her district’s school librarians with strategic advocacy skills. In 2019–2020, major state legislative budget decisions saw last-minute cuts to large urban school districts. Panter’s district was severely impacted and she jumped into action, adopting an advocacy-first campaign for the year’s focus. She has pulled every rabbit out of her hat to maintain FTEs, for example, renaming their positions (e.g., “K–3 collaborative makerspace teachers”).

Collaborative

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Naomi Giles shares her story of how she single-handedly advocated for expanding her school library position. Her story is a David-and-Goliath analogy for advocating for oneself through bold requests, collaborative reaching and teaching, and making sure every administrator knows what she does and what she could do for all kids, given more time. Hers is a success story that resulted in receiving more than she asked for—from part time to full time librarian.

These feature articles in this *Knowledge Quest* issue offer inspiration and help to strengthen advocacy muscles for every school librarian.

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