



"They wanted to feel like the space was comfortable, safe, cool looking, useful, and ultimately theirs."

From Library to Learning Commons

Our Crescent Heights High School Experience

LISA MUELLER

Our Crescent Heights High School library, like many school libraries in Canada and the United States, has seen many changes over the years. I should know. I was a student there for twelve years, a teacher for nine years, and for the past six years, one of two part-time teacher librarians.

What was once a comfortably quiet, darkish space where my fellow students and I would take out our semester textbooks, do a little research in encyclopedias for Social Studies, and occasionally grab a novel for English is now a space in transition: a learning commons.

And, like many school libraries out there, we continue our quest of creating a responsive, flexible, innovative, collaborative, student-centered hub for our school. We are not done. In fact, we know we won't ever be done, and we embrace that wholeheartedly. But what we do know is that the journey of how we've gotten to where we are, to where we ultimately think we want to go, is an important one. Perhaps, in sharing, we can inspire and inform others who are just beginning their journeys.

OUR LIBRARY: A BIT OF BACKGROUND

The library, as most know it from childhood, began to change at our school when both a large-scale school renovation and a change in staff took place almost twenty years ago. The principal at that time clearly recognized the importance of the library in the school and that there should continue to be a teacher librarian at the center of it. Our newly hired, newly trained teacher librarian, who had a vision of what a learning commons could be, understood that the physical space was critical in making that transformation happen. She was given a voice in the renovation planning for the space and helped lay the groundwork for a centralized hub of activity and learning in the school.

Not only was the library centrally located in our new plan, but it was purposely designed to accommodate the different learning needs of staff and students. There were three main areas that could be reserved for class use: a separate reference and computer area, a

quiet reading area, a bank of ten computers for student use, and an attached computer lab with thirty-two desktop computers and an LCD projector with a screen. In addition, the library was aesthetically pleasing. Our school color, a beautifully calming blue, was incorporated into the bright white space through paint and durable carpeting, along with modern maple shelving, some inviting blue and maroon soft seating, and greenery throughout. There was even consideration of the benefits of natural lighting with the addition of a large skylight down the middle of the space. I remember being in awe when I returned after university to the newly designed space. It was *not* what I remembered of our library as a student!

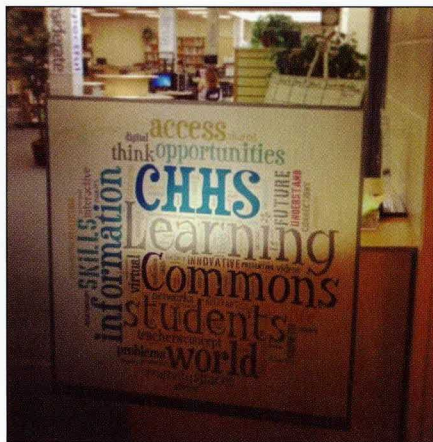
EAGER BUT NAIVE BEGINNINGS

When our teacher librarian retired six years ago, a colleague and I were offered the opportunity to continue the work that she had begun. Luckily for us, we had a huge head start in our transition to a learning commons. Not only did we have a great space to work with, but like the previous teacher librarian, we also had the unwavering support of our administration. Our principal believed, as our previous leaders did, that there was value in having both a qualified educator and a library assistant

in the space in order to continue moving forward. With a great physical space and the support of our administration, we were able to dive right in.

And dive in, we did—with naive enthusiasm! As high school English teachers, we had utilized the library and had worked closely with the teacher librarian on various class research projects. We had new and creative ideas on how to promote and encourage literacy for students. We wanted to continue our past teacher librarian's passion of working with teachers and students on incorporating inquiry wherever possible in the classroom. And, of course, we couldn't wait to spice up the already attractive décor. But we had much to learn in terms of creating a *true* learning commons. We were just beginning to write our own unique story of creating a place to meet, wonder, ask, find, create, and share, among many other things.

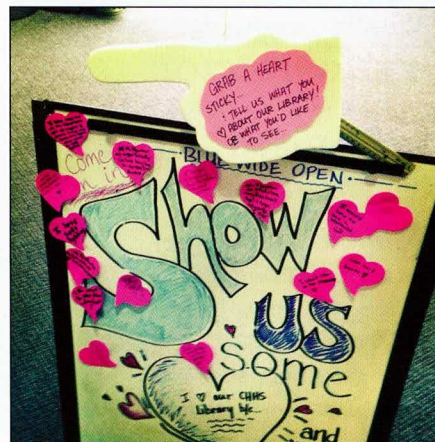
Thus began our steep and glorious learning curve. We read anything and everything we could get our hands on that dealt with emerging ideas on literacy, libraries and learning commons.¹ In our first year we attended district library meetings, met regularly with a small group of helpful teacher librarians in our district, and attended a school library conference, where we were inspired by a Skype session with Joyce Valenza. We read articles and books by the brilliant David Loertscher², followed blogs by prominent librarians like Doug Johnson³, Robin Cicchetti⁴ and Buffy Hamilton⁵, kept an eye on learning leaders through Twitter like Kathy Schrock (@kathyschrock), Richard Byrne (@rbyrne), Lisa Nielsen (@InnovativeEdu), and Steven W. Anderson (@web20classroom), among countless others. Although formal schooling did not fit my life at the time, I often joke with people that I did a mini master's degree on my own the first couple of years. There is still much to learn, but really embracing the philosophy behind a learning commons was where we obviously needed to begin. This gave us an anchor to which we could refer when making any changes, physical or otherwise.



NEXT UP: BUILD IT (SORT OF), AND THEY WILL COME

Let's face it. My coworker and I were also very excited about decorating and making the space even more student friendly. Both of us secretly fancy ourselves interior designers, so this aspect of the role was definitely welcome. Other than educating ourselves about the learning commons philosophy, our main focus was to spruce up the space and figure out what might bring in even more staff and students. We looked at the physical spaces of other well-known high school learning commons, like the ground-breaking Chelmsford High School Learning Commons transformation⁶, began a Pinterest board as inspiration, and started to make small changes to the physical environment in the library. Each decision, it's important to note, was made with the students in mind. And each change was made in light of the ideas and thinking we were beginning to internalize about learning commons. Ultimately, we wanted a safe, inviting atmosphere that would encourage all students to want to be there.

Right away, we asked ourselves, "What would students like to see happen here (physically)?" As both my colleague and I highly value student input and building relationships with kids, it was a no-brainer to talk to them, ask questions, and see what they thought. While not all of their requests were possible (a Tim Horton's coffee shop was mentioned plenty of times), we listened to the underlying message. They wanted to feel like the space was comfortable, safe, cool looking, useful, and ultimately theirs.



One of the first things we did was relocate our "soft seat" area from a dark corner to a more visible spot under our beautiful skylights in order to draw students in to read and socialize. This was my colleague's idea, as she took advantage of both the natural sunlight and the chance to draw students in with just a glance through our entrance doors. We also moved book displays to catch the eyes of readers, removed unused or redundant furniture and resources to open up the space, created an accessible computer nook and computer sign-up board to remove barriers to use, and made signage to convey a consistently welcoming and inclusive environment.

Initially, one of the more involved changes we made was to put as many displays, shelves, and furniture as we could on wheels. We knew that this would allow our space to be more flexible, and it was immediately apparent that a small change like this could help others in our school community envision the space as more than just a receptacle for books. In fact,





YA NONFICTION

PARANORMAL. REAL? FAKE?

Hall, William J. **The Bridgeport Poltergeist: True Tales of a Haunted House** (True Tales of Terror).

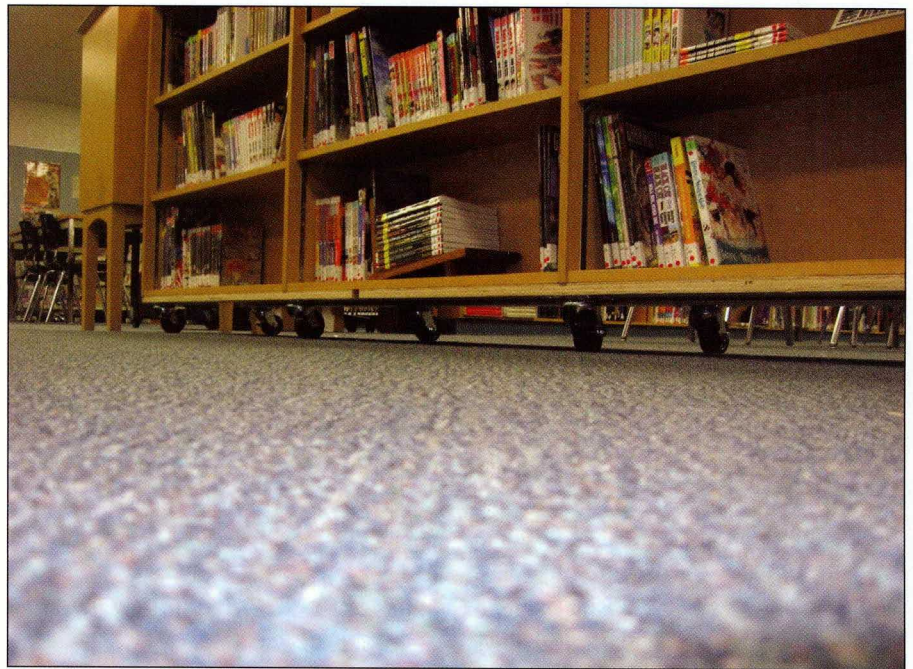
Rosen, 2016. 254p. LB \$38.25. ISBN: 9781499461541. Grades 7-12. Written in a narrative format and with the author's background in performance magic as well as years of study about this event, readers will find a fascinating read. Extensive back matter including appendices, notes, further information, glossary and an index make this suitable for research and school projects.

Halls, Kelly Milner. **Ghostly Evidence: Exploring the Paranormal**.

Lerner, 2014. 64p. LB \$21.32. ISBN: 9781467705636. Grades 6-12. What is a ghost? Are they real? Halls presents her research, and leaves the conclusion to the reader. The source notes and eyewitness accounts add to the credibility of the evidence presented. Photos, websites, further reading and an index round out this appealing title.

Hamilton, S. L. **Ghost Hunting**. (Xtreme Adventures). ABDO, 2015. 32p. LB \$27.07. ISBN: 9781624032110. Grades 3-9. This high/low read introduces the basic methods and equipment needed for ghost hunting, with fact boxes of the dangers and safety suggestions. Information about famous haunted locations, colorful photos, glossary and an index are included.

Henneberg, Susan. **Investigating Ghosts and the Spirit World** (Understanding the Paranormal). Britannica Rosen, 2015. 48p. LB \$25.85. ISBN: 9781622758630. Grades 6-9. Using an analytic, yet easy-to-read approach, the author explores various theories about the topic, including hoaxes and discredited ideas. Other topics in the series cover the abominable snowman, Atlantis, aliens, witches and zombies. Included are a glossary, additional reading, and an index.



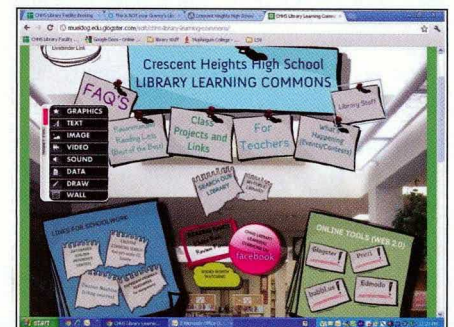
once the wheels were installed, our space was used more often for large-group presentations, author and special guest events, and staff professional development. It was easy to see the possibilities for reconfiguration with this addition.

Once we got started with these physical changes, we began to see more and more students streaming through our doors. Apart from the few die-hards who asked, "But why change things around here?" the response from almost all staff and students was positive. We continued to get informal feedback from them, always asking what they thought would make their visit better, more useful. And so it wasn't simply about making things "prettier" anymore. We wanted to make the space a "third place," different from home and different from a classroom, all the while ensuring that we were supporting and extending what was happening in the classroom. Along with creating a learning commons feel, we began to look for even more ways to extend that learning.

GETTING US OUT THERE: VIRTUALLY AND DIGITALLY

An obvious place to start extending that learning, in addition to our physical space, was our virtual space. Our district had sourced out website development to a local company and had a fairly user-friendly

platform for adding information for each school. And so our teacher librarian had already created a virtual space of sorts for our school community, within our school website. She had an FAQ page, links to both our library search tools photos page and to class research projects (word documents and project PowerPoints). Similarly to the physical space, we decided that we needed to make some changes that ensured we were meeting students where they were and changing with the needs of staff and students. Fortunately, I had developed an interest in educational technology in the years before I entered the library and was a bit obsessed with finding ways to meaningfully integrate tech into the curriculum. Initially, I added more information to the basic library web page; changed the layout, colors, and fonts to be even more visually appealing; and updated information to reflect a bit more of our changing philosophy. However, as I was experimenting more and more with the various web 2.0 tools I



was introducing to my seventh-grade Information Literacy students that first year, I realized that there were perhaps more effective tools I could use to engage students. And I wanted to model the effective use of technology in creating and sharing information with our community. In my search for other current virtual learning commons sites, I found one that inspired me: Buffy Hamilton's Springfield High library page.⁸ I loved its visual component and knew from students that they appreciate a visually appealing, one-stop place to find information. The page used Glogster, one of my favorite online tools, which is basically an interactive poster. I immediately set out to create a new virtual space for our library.

Although it didn't have much to it, we tried to keep relevant and timely information on the page, so that it was not only visually appealing but also easily accessible and useful. Class project information and links to helpful resources were added as they became available. Links to Google forms for feedback on the library and book review submissions were added in order to make the site more interactive and participatory. And, again, I tried to gauge whether the site was working for teachers and students as much as possible. We've had several different versions since that first one as a result of feedback and have since moved away from using Glogster, but it was our first step in trying to engage students outside of the school walls and give our community yet another "space" to be.

We also realized that the school website may not be the first (only?) place our students were going for information related

to our school. We started a Facebook page (CHHS Library Learning Commons) and a Twitter account (@CHHS_Lib76), in addition to my personal account (@bitovageek). Both social media platforms were a bit slow to catch on for our school community, and it has definitely been a challenge for me to maintain them at times, but we are happy to have an online presence as an alternative to the traditional website or blog as a way of sharing our school's story. I try to share photos of important learning or relationship-building that takes place in our learning commons as much as possible. As Eric Sheninger, thought leader and educational speaker, notes, having an online presence and creating an awareness of a school's (or learning commons') values (brand) is really about "showcasing [the] work of students, staff, and leaders in an effort to become more transparent."⁹ We've had other libraries and educators reach out to us because of our online presence, and I know we've been able to share things about our school and learning commons through these channels that I wouldn't otherwise be able to do. Making connections and building relationships both inside and outside of our school community, virtually or otherwise, is yet another aspect of the commons philosophy that is important for our students and staff.

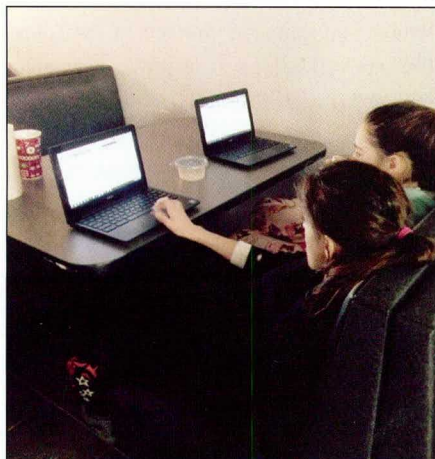
AFTER THE BABY STEPS

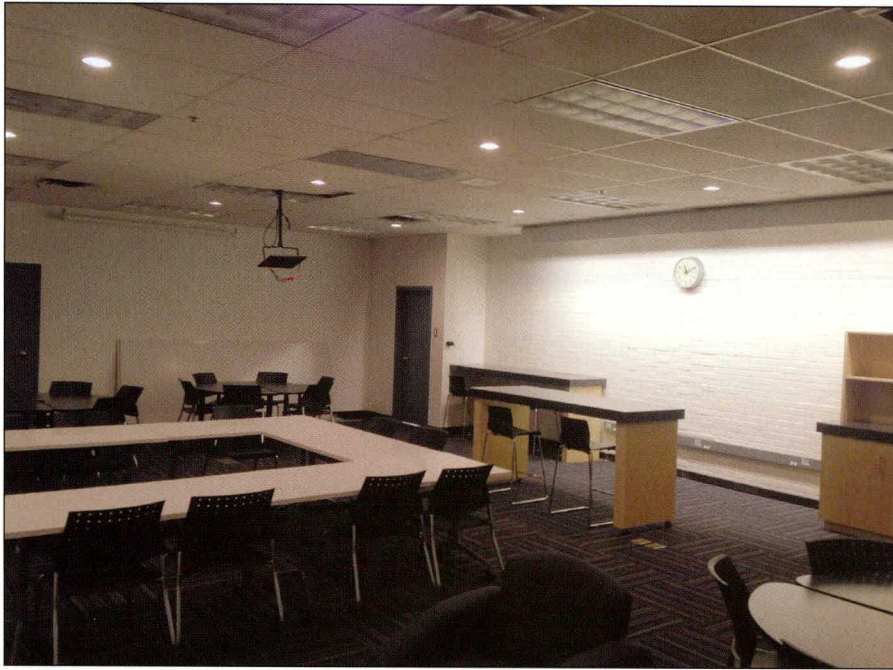
Looking back, those first baby steps I just described were actually fairly big leaps for us and our transformation. Every little step, or leap, counts. Some of the more significant changes that we've made in the past two years have really impacted the use of our space. With our district initiatives over the past five years, which have included a focus on instructional intelligence, TRIBES, and Kagan cooperative learning, an urgency and "permission" to make changes in the physical space to meet the needs of students and teachers is definitely there. Additionally, our province put into place in 2014 the first learning commons policy in our country. It supports our "Ministerial Order on Student Learning"¹⁰ and offers even more ground for us to continue to im-

prove upon our space. With that in mind, some of the more significant changes we were fortunate enough to make in the past few years are outlined below.

We created a library lounge area in response to students asking for a comfortable place to relax, read, and socialize. This speaks to the "third space" idea that offers yet another way for students and staff to interact informally. Since changing out the carpet for sleek tiles, adding three booths and several bistro sets, and turning on several floor lamps in favor of the awful fluorescent lighting, this space is *always* in use. It has housed poetry slams, presentations, small concerts, class celebrations of learning, spontaneous board game tournaments, Gallery Walks for Art classes, regularly scheduled "chill time" for ELA class independent reading, "Lounge Literacy" for our staff wellness fair, and many other valuable school community events.

We created a glassed-in quiet area to accommodate learners who require a less-distracting space to work. This came as one of the few "complaints" from a handful of students who said it was too noisy in the library (after the many changes we made). Because our school supports both the TRIBES and Kagan cooperative learning processes, our library is often busy and the noise level is anything but quiet at times. However, in the moments before school or at lunch, and sometimes during class time, we needed to honor different learning styles, and so the quiet room was created. Students use this space to study independently, to do quiet collaborative work, and even just for a mindful break from the craziness of the day.





In an attempt to make it easier for students to access technology and to allow for more of a collaborative approach to usage, we moved our computers from our cramped computer nook to a more central location. Here, under the skylights, are four pillars that now house our four computer pods, and four desktop computers are set up around each pillar on wrap-around built-in counters. Students are now able to work side by side without congestion, or work independently with minimal distraction.

With the help of a generous literacy and learning commons grant from the major energy company, Cenovus, this past year, we were also able to create what we are currently calling our learning lab. What once housed our computer lab, complete with thirty-two desktop computers in rows, now serves as a flexible space with endless possibilities. Several years ago, I was inspired by Ryan Bretag's video¹¹ that introduced his school's IDEA (innovation, discovery, and engagement) space. I loved the concept so much that I hoped to one day help create a similarly innovative space for our school community. Like IDEA, we wanted an inviting space that offered a variety of seating arrangements, was infused with assorted technology for students and staff, and supported different ways of learning, creating, and sharing. It's amazing to see how organi-

cally the space functions depending on the needs of the users. It has been used for staff professional development and workshops, meetings, presentations, whole-class instruction, and small groups working collaboratively.

All of these changes ultimately support the changes that are happening in education in our province, district, and school. Our space, more than ever, needs to continue to be responsive to the learning needs of students.

NOW WHAT?!

Obviously, we know we still have a way to go to get to that comfortable "I-think-we've-got-it-now" place. As mentioned earlier, we also know we will never be "done" with our transformation, nor should we. The important thing for us is to keep moving and adapting, stay flexible and relevant. And so, moving forward, one of the many things we have been considering this past year is the addition of some kind of makerspace in our learning commons. We want to be sure to incorporate spaces and tools for students to do more exploring, building, and problem-solving, independently and cooperatively. With something this potentially influential and expensive, the past year we assembled a small team of people within our school to advise and help with the vision and planning of such

a space. We've hooked up with the science team lead, an expert at the district level, and are working closely with both our vice principal in charge of the learning commons and our principal. Like any of the changes and improvements made in the learning commons, it is critical to consider the why of what we are doing as much as the how; we are currently ensuring we know the why for our school. With the start of a new school year, it is our hope to begin the first phase of this process.

In the interest of time and space, I will just say that there is so much more that we want to do in our space and in this role. We will continue to add up-to-date technology that supports and enhances learning for students. Through more virtual technologies, video conferencing, and other alternative communication channels, we would love to provide more opportunities for our students to access the world outside the four walls of the school. Building on current relationships with teachers in our building, our district, and even in other parts of the world will definitely help make this a reality, however slow it might be. Ultimately, as our provincial ministerial order mandates, we want to continually strive to provide a physical and virtual space that supports and encourages students to be *engaged* thinkers and *ethical* citizens with an *entrepreneurial* spirit.

REFLECTING ON THE PROCESS

As you can see, the lines between the physical, virtual, and philosophical aspects of a learning commons become blurred the longer you immerse yourself in the transformation. Looking back now, it is clear that our initial, somewhat naive approach to becoming the keepers and visionaries of our learning commons was not such a bad thing. Despite the amazing articles we had access to, we sometimes approached things haphazardly and often not in any systematic or controlled way. As we awkwardly clunked along, we tried to be open, honest, and consistent about what we wanted and didn't want happening in the learning commons; we tried to be optimistic yet

realistic about what *was possible* for the space and our role, and ultimately we allowed ourselves to be vulnerable and accept feedback from our students and staff. We were ready to take risks and try almost anything; we asked tough and sometimes naive questions; we looked outside our school for other ideas and exemplary places of learning and quietly but determinedly reached out to as many teachers as we could to increase buy-in and collaboration in our school community. We didn't know any better. Maybe we still don't know any better.

But as I consider our approach, it occurs to me now that this is actually what we want to happen in our learning commons: going from a place of excitement and wonder, asking questions, looking outside our own school and experiences, making meaningful connections with other people outside and within our building, working together to solve problems or achieve something, trying things and ideas out, experimenting, reflecting and then rethinking and changing and adapting. This process has convinced me that this approach to learning and doing works. And we are fortunate to have a designated place to do this in our school. How lucky are we?

NOTES

(Endnotes)

- 1 "Manifesto for 21st Century Teacher Librarians | Teacher Librarian, 2011. 21 Jul. 2015 <<http://www.teacherlibrarian.com/2011/05/01/manifesto-for-21st-century-teacher-librarians/>>
- 2 Carol Koechlin, Esther Rosenfeld, and David V. Loertscher, *Building a Learning Commons*: Hi Willow Research and Publishing, 2010.
- 3 "Doug Johnson's Blue Skunk Blog: Home." 2005. 25 Jul. 2015 <<http://doug-johnson.squarespace.com/>>
- 4 "CCHS Library Learning Commons." 2007. 26 Jul. 2015 <<http://concordcarlislelibrary.blogspot.com/>>
- 5 "The Unquiet Librarian." 2010. 21 Jul. 2015 <<https://theunquietlibrarian.wordpress.com/>>
- 6 "From Library to Learning Commons: A Metamorphosis." Teacher Librarian, April 2009, pp. 32-38. 2012. <<https://tl-pi.wikispaces.com/file/view/From+Lib+to+Learning+Commons++V+Diggs.pdf>>
- 7 Ray Oldenburg, "The Great Good Place: Cafes." *Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day* (1989)
- 8 "springfieldlibrary - home - Wikispaces." 2009. 6 Aug. 2015 <<http://springfieldlibrary.wikispaces.com/>>
- 9 "A Principal's Reflections: The BrandED Difference." 2015. 7 Aug. 2015 <<http://esheninger.blogspot.com/2015/06/the-branded-difference.html>>
- 10 "Alberta Education: Ministerial Order on Student Learning." 2014. 14 Aug. 2015 <<http://www.education.alberta.ca/StudentLearning>>
- 11 "Habits and Habitats: Introducing the IDEA: YouTube." 2011. 12 Aug. 2015 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0iKZZGSRqw>>

Lisa Mueller is the teacher librarian at Crescent Heights High School in Medicine Hat, Alberta (Canada), a vibrant grade 7-12 school. She is part of a collaborative team of teachers and administrators in the school who believe in creating an inviting, student-centered space that inspires curiosity, collaboration, and a love of learning. She is a member of several committees and teams at the school and district level. She can be reached at lisa.mueller@sd76.ab.ca.



JUNIOR NONFICTION

MAKING MATH FUN!

Arias, Lisa. **Groovy Graphing: Quadrant One and Beyond** (Got Math). Rourke Educational Media, 2015. 32p. LB \$29.95. ISBN: 9781627177207. Grades 3-5. To make math more interesting, this series puts new twists on old topics. Other titles in the series are **Dandy Decimals, Funky Fractions, and Magical Mathematical Properties**. A foreword includes Before and After Reading Activities and is followed by a Table of Contents, colorful illustrations and explanations, then a glossary, index and websites.

James, Dawn. **Store Math** (Bookworms: Math Around Us). Cavendish Square, 2015. 24p. LB \$24.21. ISBN: 9781502601629. Grades PK-1. Day-to-day examples of simple math are introduced here with high-frequency words and basic sentences to help with reading and math. **Backyard Math, Car Math, Kitchen Math, Neighborhood Math** and **Playground Math** are additional titles in the series.

Marsico, Katie. **Math on the Move** (Math Everywhere!). Lerner, 2015. 32p. LB \$26.65. ISBN: 9781467718820. Grades 2-4. This new Lerner series illustrates how math can be fun in many areas such as fitness, cooking, and shopping. In this title, the reader learns how to plan a trip and estimate time to visit museums. Back matter includes an Answer Key with formulas for reaching the correct answer, glossary and index.

Quinlivan, Ada. **Blake the Baker: Develop Understanding of Fractions and Numbers** (Math Masters: Number and Operations and Fractions). PowerKids Press, 2015. 24p. LB \$17.70. ISBN: 9781477764145. Grades 2-4. The reader can learn Common Core Standards in entertaining ways through this easy to read series covering subjects such as butterflies, submarines, fossils and birthday money.

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