Presenting the School Library Program in a Public Forum

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Library advocacy is not a one-time shot. It is an ongoing process of noticing and publicizing where the library program as a whole reinforces, supports, and advances the goals of your school district, where it innovates and moves students to think and expand intellectually, and where and how the teacher librarians districtwide pilot and lead instruction on new informational tools.

Venues for presenting these benefits are numerous, and all can be powerful, but one that we in the Tacoma (Washington) School District found to be particularly effective was presented as a study session at the Tacoma School District School Board meeting.

The 2014–2015 school year was one of transition for Tacoma librarians. The library facilitator position was open, but a decision was made not to fill it until a new administrative structure had been established. During that year, the members of the Library Leadership Cadre, a group comprised of librarians from two elementary schools, four middle schools, and one high school, were asked to fill the leadership role, which included planning meetings, making proposals for professional development, and carrying out other administrative functions. The cadre, elected by district librarians to advise and aid the person who would fill the facilitator position, was concerned that the library program would lose ground during that transitional year. Thus the advocacy tasks previously performed by the facilitator moved temporarily to a group of peer practitioners. The presentation to the school board was the result of collaboration among the members of this group, planned over that 2014–2015 school year.

After discussing options and venues for advocacy activity, the cadre met with a school board member who was interested in learning more about the role of the libraries. He explained the process for doing a study session that was to be presented to the school board about our district school library program. This event was timely, as two new libraries were in the construction process and had attracted public attention. The school board member laid out the needs and expectations for specific types of information necessary for approval. The initial task was to compose and present a white paper that described in detail the current status of the Tacoma school library program and the roles of the librarians. The school board member required that the paper address the ways the Tacoma school library program supported district initiatives and goals, the 21st-century model to which Tacoma aspired, and the efforts we were making to move toward that model.

The paper was submitted to the school board, which subsequently invited the leadership cadre to present information on the school library program at a school board meeting. The presentation, given by three representatives of the cadre (one from each level—elementary, middle, and high school), was allotted 20 minutes. The actual presentation, however, ran almost 40 minutes, as members of the board asked many follow-up questions. The cadre provided copies of the paper, and members presented a PowerPoint with slides that included information,

data, and citations—an element for which we were complimented.

Subsequent to the school board presentation, as administrative restructuring played out, the libraries were moved under instructional technology, an ideal placement given our increasing role in the delivery of technology and information skills to both students and staff, and we were assigned a new and extremely informed facilitator, who, with her director, is working with librarians to improve Tacoma's school library program and increase professional development training to update teacher librarians' skills. Members of the cadre were confident that the school board presentation was key to putting libraries in the spotlight and clarifying to our district how libraries are a potent investment in instruction, materials, and tools that impacts every student every day.

TIPS

Several valuable tips were gained from presenting the school library program to the school board:

Know the community. Knowing the school community, its needs and strengths, is a critical part of the preparation for a school board presentation, as is knowing the broader community. This includes understanding the needs across the area that the district encompasses, as well as understanding the issues and pressures facing the school board. Tacoma School District is urban, large, and very diverse. Prior to the school board presentation, talking with a school board member one on one helped inform the cadre about what kinds of information the school board needed to know about the library program in order to prepare for and facilitate the study session. The members of

the cadre represented the diversity of student and community needs from all parts of town—but we lacked the view from the catwalk provided by the school board. Knowing how to put the picture together was key in creating a cohesive presentation that gave the full scope of the school libraries' impact on the educational lives of Tacoma students. Additionally, it provided a clearer picture of where the library program fit as the district moved forward on an ambitious course of providing students with innovative educational options.

Know district goals. During our initial preparatory meeting, the school board member explained that the cadre needed to address the district goals in their white paper and presentation. The Tacoma School District has four major goals that comprise the strategic plan: academic excellence, community partnerships, early learning, and safety. In preparing the school board presentation, the cadre brainstormed examples and then offered evidence that pinpointed exactly how the libraries addressed each of these goals. We were able to show how the library program creates building hubs that support all of the district goals. From encouraging academic excellence through current, accurate research and a wealth of reading materials, to the community partnership/ early learning connections provided by our preschool programming, to provision of a universally safe environment, the libraries could be shown to not only support district goals but also enhance them. Identifying those elements in the school library program that advance district needs highlights the tremendous reach and influence of the libraries.

Know the data. Having data to support critical assertions is critical. For example, in order to cite the libraries as

loci of support for reading improvement, the presentation noted circulation statistics that tied to improved test scores. To make an argument for equitable funding, the cadre shared results from a relevant survey matching building-by-building funding with poverty data. Results demonstrated the discrepancies between the well-funded school libraries in wealthier communities and the paucity of funding in poorer schools. Cadre members showed how early library use positively impacts student readiness for kindergarten and then produced data that showed the correlation between participation in the district's preschool reading program operated out of the elementary school library programs vis-à-vis measures of kindergarten readiness. Whichever district program or districtwide goal is highlighted in a school board presentation as the academic model for student achievement, ensure that data supporting that program or goal can be tied to the school library. The Tacoma School Board greatly appreciated the use of citations for research shared. For example, the cadre cited authoritative research showing that the presence of a credentialed librarian is strongly associated with student gains in reading from the Stanford studies (Krashen, Lee, & McQuillan, 2010). In the Tacoma school board presentation, all data, research, and facts were cited, and the citations were presented on the final slide. Citations point to data; and producing reliable data gives credence and power to points presented.

Know your target (what you want the program to look like). We wanted to aim Tacoma toward the implementation of the 21st-century library program. This has a nice buzz, but what does it mean? The Vancouver, Washington, program provides a case study for creating a program that enables students to learn in

relevant, real-world contexts; allows equitable access to quality resources, both digital and print; provides a comfortable and accessible space for team, group, and individual learning—both face-to-face and online; and supports professional learning communities for staff. Using Vancouver as a case study allowed us to draft steps for moving to this state and to give a clear, relevant example of the finished product. We are fortunate that our district was willing—once the vision was clearly laid out and explained—to help the school library program and its librarians achieve this goal by implementing the first two steps: appointing a facilitator and looking hard at what kind of professional development would move library staff in the direction of being more innovative and technology savvy.

Show and tell—don't ask. Of course we wanted to ensure greater district investment in our program. We regard the library program as integral to student learning and success. However, we did not ask for funding or for additional staffing. Instead, we showed the school board what we do on a daily basis to both support and enhance the district strategic plan and the student learning experience. One factor in piquing school board interest in our program was a set of questions posed by a community member concerned about the state of the school libraries. Lesson: Let your community do the complaining for you. A concerned citizen willing to speak up on your behalf is powerful and yet does not reflect a negative portrayal of librarians' complaints.

An added tip is to ensure that the presentation is clear, visual, and well paced. The Tacoma cadre used PowerPoint and stayed on topic during the presentation. Since the cadre represented primary and secondary education—one from elementary, middle, and high school librarians—questions specific to each arena could be answered from relevant experience at the same time, offering a comprehensive and cohesive K–12 vision. The cadre also provided the board with copies of the white paper, which went into greater detail on some of the areas only briefly mentioned in the presentation due to time constraints, thus allowing time for questions. As it turned out, there was not enough time. The scheduled 20 minutes was quickly exceeded; questions from the board more than doubled our time allotted, evidence of the positive impression of our presentation.

It is the belief of the Tacoma librarians, based on the school board's positive reception, that libraries are considered an important part of the educational venture. However, school board and other community members may not know how important until it is brought to their attention. Advocacy, then, is key for keeping the school library program in the spotlight. And presenting to the board can showcase the fact that children need libraries, schools need libraries, and districts need libraries—indeed, society does. As conduits for informational access, recreational reading, technology advancement, and high-quality instruction for students and staff, libraries are hard to beat. Make sure that message is heard.

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