Getting the Most from Your School Library Media Program

Doug Johnson

An effective program can have a positive impact on teaching, learning, and test scores.

Your library media program can have a great impact on learning in your school, including improved reading scores, higher-level thinking skills, access to a variety of information resources, and knowledgeable use of technology by students and teachers.

1. Find out what a good school library program can do. More than 50 years of research have demonstrated the positive effect of quality library media programs on student...
achievement. A good program not only can help improve standardized test scores, but also can be at the heart of a school’s efforts to develop a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. By providing both print and electronic resources, team-teaching with classroom teachers, and developing authentic assessment tools, the school library media specialist becomes an effective partner in resource-based curricular projects. Information literacy—the ability to find, evaluate, and use information—is fast becoming the new basic skill of the information age and it should be the school library media program’s mission to teach those skills.

2. Learn about the qualities of an effective program. Many principals have not had the opportunity to work in schools with effective library media programs or to learn what is necessary to implement one. One quick way to learn the basics of a good program is to download and read the Principal’s Manual for Your School Library Media Program (see Web Resources). This two-page brochure summarizes current information about good school library media centers. For a more comprehensive look at the modern school library, read Reinventing Your School’s Library in the Age of Technology: A Guide for Principals and Superintendents (Loertscher 2002).

Better yet, talk to effective media specialists and visit other school libraries. Your state’s library association can provide you with a list of exemplary programs.

3. Evaluate your school’s program. Getting a snapshot of your school’s program is neither difficult nor time-consuming. Library media programs are often evaluated as part of a school’s accreditation process and your regional accreditation organization may have some tools that can help you. You could also use assessment tools like the one created by the Minnesota Educational Media Organization (see Web Resources). A more formal assessment can be made using state or national library standards, such as the American Association of School Librarians’ Planning Guide for Information Power (1999).

4. Plan for program improvement. Once an assessment of your program is made and areas for improvement are determined, a long-term plan tied directly to school and district goals, with measurable, short-term objectives, needs to be established by a library advisory committee. The library media specialist should be responsible for organizing and chairing this committee, which should include representatives from a number of stakeholder groups: librarians, teachers, students, parents, and community members. The committee should make recommendations for goals and
A Library Media Program Checklist for Principals

Rapid changes in technology and the library profession in the past 10 years have created a wide disparity in the effectiveness of school library media programs. The following checklist can help you to evaluate your program.

**Professional Staff and Duties**
- Is your library media specialist fully licensed?
- Is the specialist an active member of a professional library organization?
- Is there a written job description for the specialist?
- Does the specialist offer staff development opportunities in information literacy and technology?

**Professional Support**
- Is sufficient clerical help available to your library media specialist?
- Is there a district media supervisor responsible for planning and leadership?
- Do the principal and staff development team encourage the specialist to attend workshops and conferences to update skills and knowledge?

**Collection Size and Development**
- Does the library's collection of books and audiovisual materials meet the needs of the curriculum?
- Are new materials chosen from professional selection sources and tied to the curriculum?
- Is there a variety of media available to address different learning styles?
- Have electronic and online resources been added to the collection when appropriate?

**Facilities**
- Is the library readily accessible from all classrooms?
- Does it have an atmosphere conducive to learning, with comfortable furnishings, instructional displays, and informational posters?
- Does it include a computer lab, multimedia workstations, and TV production facilities as well as general instructional areas and spaces for individuals to work?
- Is it fully networked with adequate quantities of voice, video, and data lines?

**Curriculum Integration**
- Is the specialist an active member of grade-level and/or team planning groups?
- Is the specialist an active member of curriculum writing committees?
- Are library and information technology skills taught as part of content areas rather than in isolation?

**Resource-based Teaching**
- Do teachers use the library media specialist as a resource for instructional design and assessment?
- Does flexible scheduling permit the specialist to team-teach with classroom teachers?
- Is there a clear set of information literacy and technology benchmarks for all grade levels?

**Information Technology**
- Does the library media center provide access to recent information technologies, such as computerized library catalogs?
- Are the skills needed to use technology resources being taught to teachers by the specialist?

**Planning**
- Does the library media program have a set of long-range goals?
- Does the specialist set yearly goals based on long-term goals?
- Is the library media program represented on the school's technology planning committee?

**Evaluation**
- Does the district regularly evaluate the library media program as part of an accreditation process?
- Does the library media specialist determine and report ways in which program goals and objectives are being met?
- Do all new initiatives involving the library media and technology programs have an evaluation component?

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objectives, create a budget, discuss staffing recommendations, and determine policies.

5. **Evaluate the quality of your program specialist.** Your school library media specialist should be formally evaluated. While tools and procedures similar to those used to evaluate classroom teachers can be used, specialized evaluation tools are available. One evaluative method is to tie performance directly to the successful attainment of yearly program objectives and long-term goals. Annual conferences should focus on program progress and the positive effect on student achievement.

6. **Create high expectations for the library media specialist.** You should expect your specialist to:

- Create a formal plan that informs the principal, staff, students, parents, and the community about the program’s resources and activities;
- Aggressively seek ways to plan, team-teach, and assess with classroom teachers curriculum units that include both content information and technology skills;
- Serve on school leadership, curriculum, and staff development committees;
- Continue to upgrade professional skills by attending workshops, conferences, and other training opportunities;
- Be able to articulate and demonstrate the media program’s positive effect on student learning; and
- Keep the principal informed about and help research the latest findings, trends, and techniques related to effective schools and instructional practices.

The school library media specialist can be the most effective staff member in your school. A solid partnership with the school’s leadership is all that it takes.

**References**


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**WEB RESOURCES**


[www.ala.org/aasl/resources/achievement.html](http://www.ala.org/aasl/resources/achievement.html)

[www.ala.org/aasl/principalsmanual.html](http://www.ala.org/aasl/principalsmanual.html)

The Minnesota Educational Media Organization offers an assessment guide for media library programs.

[www.memoweb.org/links/checklist2.pdf](http://www.memoweb.org/links/checklist2.pdf)

The author shares an independent set of library media program assessment tools.

[www.doug-johnson.com/wgm/wgm.html](http://www.doug-johnson.com/wgm/wgm.html)
Conferencing the SMART Way

As schools across the nation strive to eliminate student achievement gaps, it has become more crucial than ever for parents to be involved, especially parents of children achieving below grade level. In Maryland’s Howard County Public Schools, a parent-teacher conferencing program called SMART, focused on Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Results-oriented, and Targeted goals, was created to accelerate the achievement of academically at-risk students by engaging parents in home interventions designed to address the specific needs of individual students.

The need for SMART conferencing was established after conversations with parents and survey data indicated that parents who wanted to help their children often lacked appropriate direction. For example, typically recommended home activities, such as reading 20 minutes a night with their children or helping them memorize math facts, often were not closely aligned to the particular skills and concepts needed by a child to move up to grade level.

A New Involvement Strategy

SMART conferences are different from typical parent-teacher conferences in many ways. They seek to establish an ongoing relationship with parents in which data is shared and assessed, focus areas are established, and specific recommendations are made for student improvement in those areas. Recommendations are broken down into manageable tasks that can be worked on at home for 15 to 20 minutes each night, and parents are provided with the necessary materials, time requirements, and a date when the targeted skill will be assessed.

In a SMART conference, the emphasis is on collaboration and on alignment of the parents’ wishes, hopes, and dreams for their children with the school’s goals. Teachers use information about an individual student’s interests and academic needs to establish goals that are then shared with parents at an initial conference. At this time, the teacher seeks a commitment from the parents to collaborate on a specific intervention.

For example, instead of saying to the parent, “Johnny needs to learn his multiplication facts, so please make sure he studies them at home,” the teacher might say, “As you can see from these assessments, Johnny is making progress learning his multiplication tables. However, he still is having some difficulty with some of his sevens, eights, and nines. There are approximately 10 to 12 facts in the 7, 8, and 9 times tables that he is consistently missing. We have set a goal for Johnny to master all of his multiplication facts by the end of the third marking period.”

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Selling a System

Because conferencing techniques are critical to SMART success, participating teachers are trained to use effective selling techniques to form partnerships with parents and increase follow-through on recommended home interventions. Teachers use information about an individual student’s interests and academic needs to establish goals that are then shared with parents at an initial conference. At this time, the teacher seeks a commitment from the parents to collaborate on a specific intervention.

Meeting the Challenges

To fully implement the strategies of SMART conferencing, funding is needed for teacher training and time must be provided for teachers to have extended conferences and follow-up contact with parents on the progress of each goal. In fact, the short-term follow-up is key to keeping parents and students motivated.

Teachers trained in SMART conferencing techniques have found that focusing parents’ efforts on their children’s specific needs increases parent follow-through at home. In the first year of implementation, 68 percent of the home learning goals were achieved and 40 percent of the participating students reached grade-level status. As teachers become more comfortable with the conferencing format and more proficient at setting SMART goals, and parents become more involved, it is anticipated that the number of students mastering short-term goals will continue to increase.

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Selling parents on specific, manageable recommendations, which are targeted toward their children and have short-term assessment windows, are based on a win-win philosophy focused on an ongoing relationship with parents to achieve goals (Kendall 1995). As an example of how the SMART approach motivates parents, one teacher commented that she had been in the habit of assessing students on the third Friday of each month and informing parents if their children had mastered their set goals. But on a Friday when the teacher was absent from school and did not provide feedback, she received three voice-mail messages from anxious parents inquiring if their children had achieved their goals.

Reference


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