

The Principal Factor

By Audrey P. Church

Once upon a time the principal ruled the school from the office ivory tower, emerging only in late spring wearing soft-soled shoes to conduct end-of-the-year teacher evaluations. This is no longer the case. Today's principals must have knowledge of content area standards and be involved in curriculum planning and pacing. They assign strong master teachers as mentors to new teachers. They are involved in what's happening in their classrooms and practice ongoing assessment of the classroom teaching, focusing on improving student learning. Today's principal is the instructional leader of the school and sets the tone and expectations for teaching and learning. In this role, the principal can make or break the library program.

Numerous studies completed in various states show that strong library programs contribute to student achievement (*School Libraries Work!*). Student learning is higher in schools in which the library is adequately funded and appropriately staffed and the library media specialist takes an active role in instruction. As Gary Hartzell noted in his presentation at the 2002 White House Conference on School Libraries, "The principal is a key player, perhaps the key player, in library media programs that make a difference." This key factor is the basis for three important questions:

1. *How does the principal support your ability to contribute to teaching and learning?*
2. *Where does the principal's perception of your job originate?*
3. *What exactly does the principal expect from you instructionally?*

1. HOW DOES THE PRINCIPAL SUPPORT YOUR ABILITY TO CONTRIBUTE TO TEACHING AND LEARNING?

FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR THE LIBRARY PROGRAM

In most schools the principal controls budgets and funding. Adequate funding is necessary to purchase print and electronic materials which support the reading interests and the instructional program of the school. Principals have to know that money invested in the library collection and the library program serves every student and teacher in the school, not merely Mrs. Taylor's classroom or the 3rd grade or the social studies department. When your principal supports the library financially, you

are able to purchase up-to-date resources and provide teachers and students with a collection that serves their needs and interests.

STAFFING SUPPORT FOR THE LIBRARY PROGRAM

To be most effective instructionally, you need time to collaboratively plan, teach, and evaluate with fellow educators. It is difficult to do this if you are the lone ranger of the library. Principal support is key to providing additional staff in your library—clerical assistance or additional professional library media specialists. When your principal supports the library program with adequate support staff, you are more fully able to implement your teacher and instructional partner roles.

SCHEDULING SUPPORT FOR THE LIBRARY PROGRAM

The principal impacts the library program with scheduling decisions. At the secondary school level, this plays out when the library is used for testing or occupied for meetings and closed for all other uses. At the elementary level, it is noticeable in the fixed vs. flex debate, as the principal chooses either regularly scheduled library visits (fixed), most often to provide classroom teacher planning time, or access at the point of need (flex), with library use based on instructional needs. When your principal facilitates open library access (flex), you are better able to build a library program that meets the needs of students and teachers.

become critical thinkers and lifelong learners, and that the library program is an integral part of the teaching and learning taking place. In some instances, principals would like to provide more funding for the library, or hire a full-time clerk, or implement a fully flexible schedule, but are not able to do so. They can emphasize, however, in both words and actions, that the library plays a critical role in student learning.

Today's school library media specialist's role has expanded from that of keeper of the books to facilitator of lifelong learning. Library media specialists understand that their roles have evolved and they must take an active role in instruction, yet many principals still hold the narrow, stereotypical, limiting view of our jobs.

2. WHERE DOES THE PRINCIPAL'S PERCEPTION OF YOUR JOB ORIGINATE?

HOW DO PRINCIPALS LEARN WHAT WE DO?

Hartzell notes that principals are extremely busy individuals and that, ideally, the time to inform them of our instructional role is prior to their move to the principal position. Research demonstrates, however, that topics of school libraries and school librarians are not addressed in coursework in principal preparation programs. Information about school libraries and librarians does not typically appear in administrators' professional journals nor are there

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VERBAL SUPPORT FOR THE LIBRARY PROGRAM

Principals serve as the instructional leaders of the school. They make a powerful statement if they emphasize to teachers that the library media specialist is a teacher and an instructional partner, that collaborative instruction is expected and supported, that the information literacy skills taught in the library are key to helping students

sessions which address this at their professional conferences. Principals learn what library media specialists do from library media specialists with whom they work, either as a principal or as a teacher prior to becoming a principal. In a recent survey of elementary school principals in Virginia, 65.5 percent of the respondents noted that their knowledge of the instructional role of the library media specialist came from interactions with library media specialists during

their administrative careers. Over 26 percent (26.4 percent) stated that their knowledge of the instructional role of the library media specialist came from interactions with library media specialists during their teaching careers (Church). Principals learn what you do . . . from you!

3. WHAT EXACTLY DOES THE PRINCIPAL EXPECT FROM YOU INSTRUCTIONALLY?

So, what makes your principal happy? What types of activities and initiatives will help your principal better understand the contributions that you make to help students become successful, independent 21st century learners? In a recent survey of elementary school principals in Virginia, principals who displayed a solid understanding of the instructional role of the library media specialist identified relational/attitude items and informational/content items that helped them to form their positive views of the library media specialist as teacher and instructional partner.

RELATIONAL/ATTITUDE

Principals want library media specialists who create warm, welcoming environments in their library media centers. They want library media specialists who offer inviting spaces for learning, spaces where instructional activities related to the classroom take place. They want library media specialists who are proactive and collaborative, who exhibit leadership skills, and who interact well with fellow educators. They want team players who are enthusiastic and excited about what they do every day and who are invested in the school culture. They want library media specialists who demonstrate good interpersonal relationships with students and teachers alike and who display and share with others a positive attitude toward the library program and toward the school.

INFORMATIONAL/CONTENT

Principals identified numerous areas in which library media specialists contribute to the instructional program of the school. First, they noted that strong library media specialists connect to state curriculum standards. Library media specialists are knowledgeable regarding state standards, integrate library information skills instruction with classroom content, and proactively provide quality resources to classroom teachers to

support teaching and learning. Secondly, taking this connection a step further, library media specialists who rated high on the principals' instructional scale were knowledgeable about what was going on in each classroom at any particular time of the academic year, and they used this knowledge to make relevant connections between classroom and library instruction. Planning and teaching collaboratively, they made the library an extension of learning in the classroom.

Third, principals recognized and rated highly library media specialists who showed an interest in test data and who were cognizant of student standardized test scores. With the current educational emphasis on student scores and accountability, this action demonstrated to the principal and to teacher colleagues the library media specialist's commitment to the overall instructional program of the school and concern for student achievement. It also facilitated targeting of library information skills instruction to reinforce areas in which students' scores were the lowest. Fourth, principals praised library media specialists who actively taught research skills that students needed to be successful 21st century learners. Principals acknowledged that the information-seeking processes learned in the library provided critical-thinking and problem-solving skills applicable across content areas and transferable to real-life situations.

Next, principals applauded library media specialists who provided staff development for faculty and parents in the area of information technology and resources. When library media specialists provided workshops and training on topics such as the use of subscription databases and effective searching on the Web, principals took note. Finally, principals expressed their expectation that the library media specialist be the primary initiator of collaboration with classroom teachers at both the individual teacher level and the school level. They wanted library media specialists who were proactive, who

stepped out to promote their instructional role, who took the initiative and approached classroom teachers to inform them of the instructional potential that exists.

THE PRINCIPAL FACTOR

It is the responsibility of the school library media specialist to realize the critical role that principals play in full implementation of the library media program. Principals expect positive attitudes and relationships, and they appreciate your active participation in curriculum and instruction. According to Hartzell, "The principal is an absolutely essential element in maximizing the return on library investment." Daily, you invest quite a bit of time, energy, and effort in your library program. It is up to you to take a proactive stance and address the principal factor in your school. 🌈

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