

# A District-Wide School Library Self Study: A Story of Improving from Within

By Marla W. McGhee and Barbara A. Jansen

Being committed to continuous improvement means having the will to engage in a journey. The journey's path may be long and unpredictable but most believe the path is well worth navigating if improvement is the end result. Sometimes the most poignant and successful improvement endeavors begin when we examine ourselves from within. When we assess ourselves from the inside out, we can grapple with the reality of our strengths while honestly owning up to our needs or weaknesses. This was the case with a school district that courageously engaged in a year-long improvement effort focusing on its library media programs and practices.

## BACKGROUND

In spring, 2006, a central office coordinator from a moderately sized public school district attended the annual meeting of the Texas Library Association (TLA). As part of the conference, the coordinator took part in a day-long session offered specifically for principals, superintendents, and district-level administrators who supervise librarians and library media programs. This workshop featured state-level and nationally recognized speakers, writers, researchers, and practitioners who focus on issues related to PK-12 school libraries. Session planners and presenters used their time to primarily target the instructional partnership role of librarians and the documented positive impact that quality library programs have on student achievement and learning.

As a result of the conference and the administrators' session, the coordinator convinced district-level leaders to initiate a year-long self study of the school libraries to examine effectiveness and determine a path for continuous improvement. Participants included all school librarians and campus level administrators (a principal or assistant principal) from each school. Moreover, a special pilot project was established at one of the elementary campuses to encourage instructional collaboration through the use of an information search process. An overview of the project and its outcomes follows.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE INITIATIVE

The improvement initiative had four overarching goals:

- 1 To study the district school library program as compared to the *School Library Programs*:

*Standards and Guidelines*, developed by the State Library and Archives Commission in accordance with Texas Administrative Code, Title 13, Cultural Resources Part I, and best practices documented and presented in the professional literature on school libraries.

- 2 To increase collaboration and communication between campus administrators and school library media specialists in reviewing and supporting the school library program.
- 3 To foster increased collaboration among teachers and school library media specialists, resulting in increased student achievement.
- 4 To develop a long range improvement plan for each campus.

During the course of the academic year, a series of sessions were conducted for campus administrators, librarians, and classroom teachers. As the consultants for the study, we also made ourselves available for planning meetings, small group question and answer sessions, and monthly principals' meetings. Additionally, an electronic forum was established and maintained so that self-study participants could post questions, discuss issues, and share successes along the way. Workshop participants could also access and download documents and materials from this site.

## END OF PROJECT PRESENTATION AND PARTICIPANT EVALUATIONS

Near the close of the academic year, district librarians presented a comprehensive *State of the Libraries* report in which they highlighted strengths and weaknesses of the elementary, junior high, and high school programs. The report linked directly to the state's school library standards and included items such as funding, staffing, scheduling, and library-related statistics (i.e. number of students, library holdings, age of collections, etc.). Each campus administrator/librarian team drafted an improvement plan with topics or themes specific to *instructional collaboration*, *collection development*, and *library programming*. Additionally, campus administrators and librarians were asked to respond to a series of questions related to the self-study and its outcomes. Sample items and selected anonymous responses are presented in the next column.

When asked, "*In your opinion, what was successful about the year-long study and improvement initiative*," one administrator responded, "The study helped me focus on our library, noting strengths and areas for growth, but also was a tool for communication." Another campus leader noted, "It has helped me to understand what is involved with our librarians at the school! I understand why staffing is an issue and we will see how it can be addressed for next year. I also see the need for the budget increase for our libraries." Still another remarked, "I think that it brought to everyone's attention that libraries can play a significant functional role in the school's overall academic program."

Principals and assistant principals were also asked, "*What did you learn about the role of your librarian and the library media program in your school?*" In their responses administrators consistently mentioned learning more about the critical instructional and teaching role of the librarian. One referred to the library media specialist as "part of the instructional team" and as someone having "a direct impact on curriculum."

Another item posed to the campus administrators as they assessed the year-long self study was the question, "*How has your professional relationship with the librarian changed during the course of this year?*" Two administrators' remarks were particularly compelling. One said:

Although we have always had a great relationship, we have had an increase in the number of conversations revolving around research and how to get the classroom teachers involved and utilizing the library and [the librarian's] expertise more.

Another wrote:

I had an epiphany today that [the librarian] needs to be part of our leadership team. Our library has undergone a metamorphosis—from a room with books to a vibrant center of learning. [The librarian] is an incredible asset to our campus and I now know I can rely on her to enhance instruction and learning on our campus.

“When we assess ourselves from the inside out, we can grapple with the reality of our strengths while honestly owning up to our needs or weaknesses.”

The librarian participants reflected on their experiences during the improvement project by responding to questions such as, *In your opinion, what was successful about the year-long study and improvement initiative?* In response to this question one librarian remarked, “It brought attention and awareness to libraries and the functions they perform—over and above just checking out books. It required that we compare our programs and facilities to set standards, and also to the other libraries in the district. It forced us to make goals and look at areas of growth that otherwise could’ve been avoided.” Another librarian participant said, “We took an in depth look at our libraries in relation to standards, and with our principals involved, we have already begun to see the changes.”

When asked how their administrator viewed their role as librarian, the library media specialists responded:

- Teacher; important factor on campus; has ideas that should be shared; I have been asked to serve on next year’s leadership team.
- Because my principal attended she learned new things about many of the tasks the librarian does which aren’t outwardly obvious. She has a new appreciation for me and my work.
- Librarian as a collaborator and supporter of the curriculum.

When asked how their professional relationship with their administrator had been impacted during the course of the self study year, one noted, “We became closer, professionally,” while another responded, “We’ve gotten to know each other better, having been able to have directed conversations about the role of the library and librarian...the timing was perfect.”

## GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE AREAS OF FOCUS AND IMPROVEMENT

Based on our work during the course of the year and numerous interactions with faculty, staff, librarians, and administrators, observations, findings, and recommendations were generated and presented to the district’s lead librarian, the assistant superintendent for curriculum, and the deputy superintendent of teaching and learning.

Two significant outcomes specifically dealt with the administrators and the librarians themselves.

- 1 Campus administrators’ knowledge increased, and changes were made based on their new understanding. Improved *content knowledge* impacted practice at a number of schools in rich, positive, and student-centered ways. Campus leaders retooled budgets, adjusted schedules, and gave librarians time to interact with campus faculties to disseminate information and provide professional development.
- 2 Librarian professionalism and collaboration across the district increased. Librarians are eagerly embracing the role of “teacher leader,” meeting regularly, sharing ideas and resources, and brainstorming solutions to learning, literacy, and information-related issues.

A brief set of recommendations were also offered to district personnel for long-term consideration. These suggestions centered on staffing issues, technology network concerns, and a long range commitment to learning, particularly for campus level leaders.

The extended outcomes of this year of self reflection and examination will depend on how those involved continue to embrace and value the learning accomplished as well as the improvements yet to come. But for this district and many of its educational leaders at all levels, the essential journey to improvement has begun! 🌈

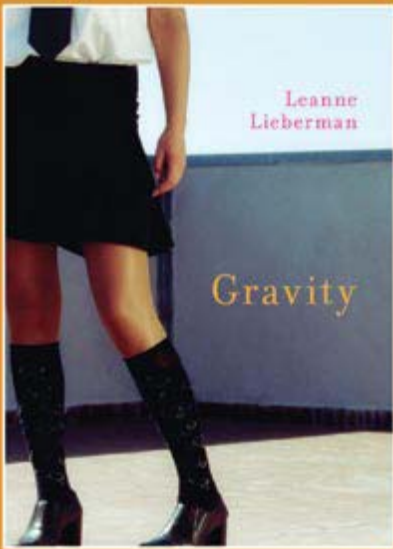
**Dr. Marla W. McGhee** is an associate professor in the Educational Leadership Program at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. She can be reached at [mmcghee@lclark.edu](mailto:mmcghee@lclark.edu).



**Barbara A. Jansen** is librarian/technology coordinator at Saint Andrew’s Episcopal High School in Austin, Texas. She can be reached at [bjansen@sasaustin.org](mailto:bjansen@sasaustin.org). Marla and Barbara are co-authors of *The Principal’s Guide to a Powerful Library Media Program* (Linworth Pub., 2005).



An orthodox Jewish girl struggles with her sexuality.



Leanne Lieberman

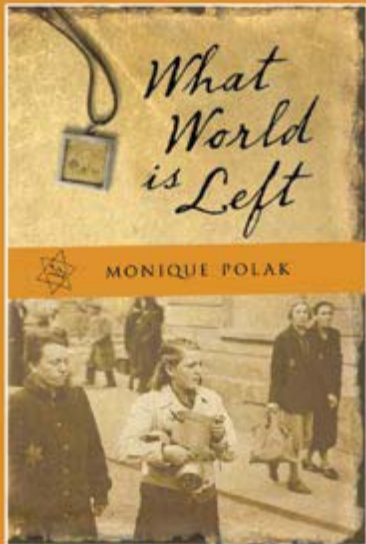
Gravity

Gravity  
Leanne Lieberman

ISBN 978-1-55469-049-7 PB  
\$12.95 AGES 12+ 256 PAGES

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS  
800.210.5277 www.orcabook.com

Imprisoned by the Nazis, Anneke fights for what is right.



What World is Left

MONIQUE POLAK

What World is Left  
Monique Polak

ISBN 978-1-55143-847-4 PB  
\$12.95 AGES 12+ 208 PAGES

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS  
800.210.5277 www.orcabook.com