

# The Principal and the Librarian

## Positioning the School Library Program

Debra Kachel

**S**chool librarians are shocked when their programs and positions are cut, often saying, “But I know I had a good school library program and lots of students benefitted from it.

I can’t believe this is happening!” This sounds all too familiar these days, and there is no doubt that many of these library programs *were* making a difference with kids. The problem is that those librarians were likely not spending time to position their programs and increase their influence with their principals. It’s just too easy to close the library door and ignore the political ramifications of being ambivalent to power and positioning of the school library program (SLP).

It is often said that librarians in general shrink from political activism, even local politics within their own schools and communities. Whether school librarians like it or not, they are part of a government organization funded from federal and state revenues with political implications. Maybe it is because librarians are trained to present all perspectives on issues, show tolerance to all viewpoints, or cast no personal opinions (Lynch, 2017). Hopefully, the school library profession is not personified as the shrinking violet, perpetuating the stereotypical school marm librarian, shushing students and checking out books, oblivious to what’s happening in education and the politics that drive major educational priorities and funding.

Suggesting that librarians spend more time influencing their principals, and thus reducing time spent with students and teachers, seems like an anathema. When many librarians are serving multiple buildings, teaching classes, and occupied with nonlibrary duties, shouldn’t librarians spend all their

available time with students? The reality is that if the librarian position is cut, there is no librarian to help students or teachers. The number-one priority becomes ensuring that the school librarian’s position remains intact. Think of the flight attendant’s mantra, “In case of emergency, place the oxygen mask on yourself first, then the child.” There is a reason for this.

Developing strategies to influence principals is nothing new, and this article relies heavily on Hartzell’s seminal work *Building Influence for the School Librarian* (2003). It remains the best source for understanding and influencing principals, specifically chapters 6 through 9. Hartzell writes from his experiences as a former school principal, superintendent, and education professor. His fundamental principle is: “Influence is derived from the perceptions of the person to be influenced, *not* from the perceptions of the person doing the influencing. The key to building your influence lies in your ability to shape the perceptions of others.” (p. vii).

This directly aligns with American Association for School Librarians’s (AASL’s) definition of marketing when thinking of the principal as the “customer.” Marketing is “a planned and sustained process to assess the customer’s needs and then to select materials and services to meet those needs” (AASL, n.d.). A well-accepted principle of advocacy work is WIIFM—“What’s in it for me?” It’s not about what the school librarian does or wants to accomplish. In this case, it is about what the principal cares about, what motivates him or her, and what factors will determine the principal’s job success. Aligning the priorities and work of the SLP to what the principal wants to accomplish will increase the value of the SLP in the eyes of the principal.

The reality is that influence comes when you solve someone else’s problem or help them achieve *their* goals, not *yours*. Therefore, in order for the SLP to be in a position of strength and importance, the principal, as the key decision maker, must perceive the SLP as critical to the mission of the school and capable of helping to achieve the principal’s goals. It is the principal’s perceptions that count, and to change or influence those perceptions, the librarian needs a strategic plan of action.

### DEVELOPING A PLAN FOR INCREASING INFLUENCE

#### *Research What Your Principal Cares About*

Begin by researching the principal’s objectives, concerns, and what determines the principal’s success. The principal’s priorities might be clearly stated on the school’s website or on faculty meeting agendas, or they can be unpublished hid-



den agendas. New librarians can ask veteran teachers who have worked with the principal what those hidden agendas might be. Or, when a new principal is hired, call the librarians at the school from which the principal came.

Other ways to research the principal's concerns may include exploring the principal's social media, such as LinkedIn or FaceBook. Learning about personal interests, colleges attended, sports, or hobbies can help the librarian to make initial connections. There is no cookie-cutter approach. Each principal will likely have different concerns due to his or her background, professional interests, district directives, and the school culture—"the beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how a school functions" ("School Culture," n.d.).

### *Change the Conversation*

Most librarians frequently update their principals, either in person or writing, about what is happening in the library. Annual and monthly reports and event announcements are standard. However, the best use of the limited face-to-face time with a principal is not to reiterate what the library has done and is doing. That can best be reported in written reports. When face-to-face time is scheduled, make it count and change the conversation. Instead of *telling* the principal what's happening, *ask* the principal what he or she wants to happen. Is the SLP helping to achieve building goals? How can the SLP do a better job? This changes the conversation to become more collaborative, engaging, and productive, allowing the librarian to learn helpful insights into the principal's priorities.

## DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A PLAN TO INFLUENCE

Knowing the principal's concerns allows the librarian to rethink the SLP's role in achieving school objectives. With a core group of advocates or possibly the Library Advisory Committee, the librarian can brainstorm the role of the SLP and realign time, activities, and instruction to better address building concerns and the principal's priorities (see "Additional Resources"). Often the librarian will need to "think outside the library box," realizing that some long-held, traditional activities need to be replaced with actions that more directly meet building goals. For example, letting students shelve books may be a way to free up time to collaborate with teachers on instructional units. Or serving afterschool on the 1:1 technology committee instead of sponsoring the afterschool chess club might be a better use of time to position the SLP. Yes, some of these choices will be difficult, but librarians only have so much time. Finessing time to use it in the most valuable, productive way is one of the most difficult work behaviors to acquire and practice.

Developing two or three SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time bound) objectives per school year makes the plan of action doable. Don't overload the plan with too many activities or expectations. Consider the time it will take from other activities and the resources that will be needed. Seek input from others, including the principal, to establish ownership and assistance. Asking the principal to review the plan makes him or her an active participant and facilitates conversations during the librarian's annual job performance review.

## CONCLUSION

"Nice to have, but not necessary" is defining too many SLPs and certified librarian positions. It really is not enough to just do a good job if school library positions and programs are to exist today and in the future. Although cultivating a good rapport with administration is an essential foundation for building influence, implementing a strategic plan is needed to actively position the SLP in the school as indispensable.

School librarians need to influence key decision makers who hold the power over whether SLPs are funded and staffed. Most often, the building principal is the first-line supervisor who is most instrumental in recognizing the SLP as a valued and necessary component in the delivery of a quality educational program. School librarians need to research the principal's published priorities and hidden agendas, rethink their communications with the principal, and develop a plan to solve or address those priorities, realigning the mission and goals of the SLP to achieve building or district initiatives. Although this advocacy work may take some time away from working with students and teachers, it is well spent if the position of the school librarian is secure. No student or teacher can be helped if there is no librarian.

## REFERENCES

- American Association of School Librarians (AASL). (n.d.). *What is advocacy?* Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/definitions>
- Hartzell, G. (2003). *Building influence for the school librarian: Tenets, targets,*





## JUNIOR FICTION

### PERILOUS TIMES

Baker, E. D. **The Princess and the Pearl**. Bloomsbury, 2017. 226p. \$16.99. ISBN: 9781681191355. Grade level 3-6. Princess Annie and Prince Liam have traveled to many places since their wedding, using a wedding gift of magic postcards. They've survived danger, met Annie's Uncle Rupert, thwarted an attempted kingdom overthrow by Liam's mother, Queen Lenore, and his brother, Clarence, and discovered that dragons are real.

When they return home, though, they discover Annie's father has a disease that's turning him blue and sapping his strength, and while taking Clarence into exile in Rupert's winter kingdom, they discover Rupert has a much more advanced case, and Annie's grandfather died of it! There's a healer in Skull Cove, on the other side of the world, who might be able to help, but only Clarence knows where she is, and he's not feeling too cooperative. The trip will take them through dangerous monster-filled waters, and no one knows if the cure really exists. Will they find the healer in time? And will she be able to help them?

Diáz, Enrique Pérez. **My Ocean**. Groundwood Books, 2008. 173p. \$17.95 ISBN: 9780888997973. Grades 4-7. Twelve-year-old Enrique, who's lived in Cuba all his life, has never wanted to leave Cuba. He loves his family, his home, and the ocean. Others disagree. Despite possible dangers, his grandparents and uncle sell everything to immigrate to the United States. Enrique and his mother struggle with whether or not they should follow. His divorced father doesn't want him to go. "Who will care for me when I am old?" he demands. When he finally consents, Enrique and Mami prepare to join her parents and brother.

However, they aren't able to. As life goes on, Mami remarries and Enrique becomes a Young Pioneer (the first step to membership in the Communist Party), although Cubans with relatives who've fled the country are viewed with suspicion. He isn't sure what he believes, struggles with what he will do with his life, and finds solace in the ocean. Translated from Cuban by Trudy Balch. Contains glossary and an author's note.

Hitchcock, Shannon. **Ruby Lee & Me**. Scholastic Press, 2016. 224p. \$16.99. ISBN: 9780545782326. Grades 3-7. Sarah Beth Willis's life is suddenly changing. Her six-year-old sister, Robin, was hit by a car, meaning a hospital stay, a long stretch of physical therapy, and the chance she may never walk again. Sarah feels guilty, since she was supposed to be watching her and was reading a book instead. The medical bills mean selling their house and moving to Grandma and Grandpa's farm. Moving means a new (and newly integrated) school and a black sixth grade teacher. Her best friend, Ruby Lee, will be there, too, but she's black and Sarah's white, and their families are both convinced that being friendly in school is going to cause big problems.

Then Sarah confesses her guilt to Ruby Lee and makes her swear not to tell anyone. When she tells her grandma anyway, Sarah's furious, and in the ensuing argument, calls Ruby Lee an ugly name. Will they ever be friends again? Includes author's note.

O'Brien, Anne Sibley. **In the Shadow of the Sun**. Arthur A. Levine Books, 2017. 338p. \$17.99. ISBN: 9780545905763. Grades 3-7. Mia, adopted as a baby from North Korea, has never been inconspicuous; everywhere she and her Caucasian family go in their small Connecticut town, people always notice her. When her dad, an aid-worker, decides to take her and her brother, Simon, to North Korea, she's excited to be just another Korean face, and to learn more about her native country.

That is, until her dad, who's been acting oddly, is arrested, and she and Simon have to decide what to do. Should they turn themselves in? What about the phone someone gave them, full of dangerous pictures? Should they destroy it? But then, who will know the truth about what is going on in the country? Can they get out of North Korea and get help for their dad? Who can they trust?

Contains short alternating chapters of events from a North Korean perspective, as well as author's notes with additional resources.

and tactics (2nd ed.). Worthington, OH: Linworth.

Lynch, G. H. (2017, February 15). An inside look at librarians, schools, and the political climate. *SLJ.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.slj.com/2017/02/schools/an-inside-look-at-librarians-schools-and-the-political-climate/#\\_](http://www.slj.com/2017/02/schools/an-inside-look-at-librarians-schools-and-the-political-climate/#_)

School culture. (n.d.). *Glossary of education reform*. Retrieved from <http://edglossary.org/school-culture/>

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Kachel, D. E. (2016). Advocacy is not a solo sport! *Teacher Librarian*, 43(6), 46-48.

Kachel, D. E. (2016). Communicate your unique contribution. *Teacher Librarian*, 44(4), 46-48.

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