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Communication Tools

The School Library Newsletter

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The ideal world would be where everyone understands the vital role of the teacher librarian and the role of the library program in the lives of students.

It would be a world where school libraries are fully supported and funded at every level. But, until we get there, teacher librarians have to advocate for students and show the importance of a school library program in their lives. One successful approach to advocacy in my own practice is consistently sending out a monthly digital newsletter.

SCHOOL LIBRARIAN COMMUNICATION

Parents perceive the classroom and the classroom teacher as the central point of contact with the school. Similarly, parents are likely to be aware of the role of the principal, guidance counselor, and the traditional “specials” teachers for PE, art, and music. However, to many, the school library may only be thought of as a place to check out books and the school librarian as the facilitator. The responsibility to make the true nature of a school library program and the role of the school librarian visible falls on the teacher librarian. Keep in mind that the goal is transparency and communication; many teacher librarians are unwilling to share for fear of looking like they are “bragging” about their own work or feel that what they teach is not extraordinary. As professionals who love to collaborate, we should understand that this mindset is not serving us well. As programmer and writer Sivvers (2011) suggests, “what is obvious to you is amazing to others.”

The goal of a library newsletter is trifold: to communicate, educate, and advocate. Your audience needs to know what students are creating and learning in and outside of school as a result of having access to a qualified teacher librarian. Your

readers need to know what a qualified teacher librarian is, does, and knows and why a qualified teacher librarian is so necessary for student growth. A monthly newsletter is the perfect opportunity to share the highlights of your program and the learning and teaching that take place, as well as to keep constituents thinking about libraries and librarians in a positive light.

GO DIGITAL

A print newsletter may suffice, but I can’t stress enough how valuable it is to make your newsletter digital. Not only can you amp up the content with links, videos, and photos, but also a digital newsletter is easily shared and inexpensive to create. The real win factor is the opportunity to gather and analyze statistics. For example, using the educator version of Smore.com, it is possible to determine how many views each flyer has received, the average number of minutes spent interacting with the flyer, and a full report on exactly which email recipients opened and/or clicked on the flyer. You can see which outgoing links were clicked most often and

where views originate. Readers can be encouraged to share via popular social media outlets, gaining the information even more viewership.

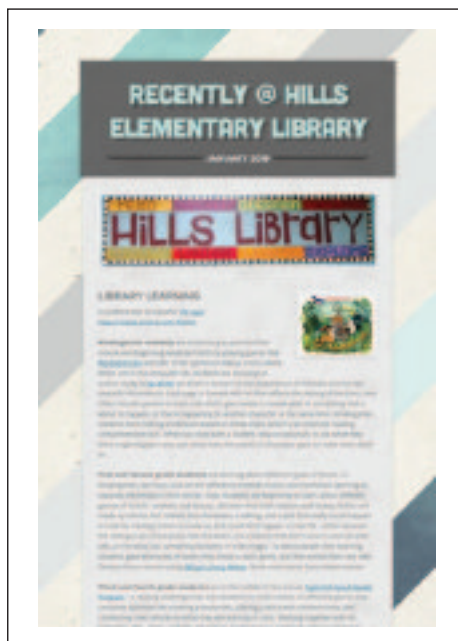
SOMETHING FOR EVERYBODY

While it may be easier to target only one audience in a monthly newsletter, it is possible to make your newsletter appeal to various stakeholders: teachers, parents, administrators, legislators, and community members.

Teachers will appreciate having a better understanding of what you are teaching their students and what other teachers are doing in collaboration with you. It is a way to inspire “collaboration envy” and bring new teachers on board. For example, a colleague may read about a member of your team who has been working with you to develop a new authentic research project for sixth-grade students. This idea may inspire your colleague to find out more about how she can scaffold the relevant skills into her own fifth-grade unit. This type of sharing and communication may inspire others to think differently about their own teaching.

Parents will not only enjoy knowing what their children are learning in the library, but if you include suggestions for discussion questions, parents will appreciate having something they can ask their children. You can also suggest activities for families related to books children have experienced in the library. For example, after reading books that have won a Caldecott medal in library class, suggest that parents work with their children to nominate books from their home library for various awards and/or hold their own voting with family and friends.

A newsletter can also be an op-



portunity to help parents know more about what 21st-century skills and tools teacher librarians incorporate into learning as they collaborate with classroom teachers. Many parents have not been students for years and may be unfamiliar with the best or most appropriate tools for their children to use for school work and would appreciate suggestions of websites, apps, or tutorials.

Of course, administrators will also appreciate this communication. Principals want evidence that you are contributing to student learning, the school climate, and a positive image within the community. A newsletter affords the opportunity to connect student learning in the library to relevant standards or school improvement plan goals. Further, these newsletters become artifacts in your teaching portfolio, while serving as points of pride for administrators.

Consider sending your newsletter to local legislators. Not only do they need to understand what you contribute to the community, they also need to understand how you impact their constituents (e.g., students and their families). Likewise, send community leaders your newsletter (e.g., the city

council, local publications, and service clubs). The business and civic community members need to know the value of the school library in their area and that their tax money is well spent. Many businesses and organizations are eager to find ways to partner with schools, and your newsletter may help enlist volunteers.

Keep in mind that the audience for a school library newsletter is made largely of people who have little knowledge of what a teacher librarian does or what constitutes an effective library program. The majority of your audience will not fully understand terms like “information literacy” or “digital literacy.” This calls for clear and user-friendly descriptions of events, activities, and lessons.

STUDENT CENTERED

In attempting to advocate for library programs, it is easy to slip into a “me-me-me” tone and occasionally into a “woe-is-me, no one understands what I do” tone. The best ways to avoid sounding like you are advocating for your own job or whining is to make sure everything stays student focused. Typically, this is a simple shift in language away from “I taught” to “students learned.” Or, in the context of circulation statistics, a shift away from “250 books circulated this month” to “students independently chose and read 250 books this month!”

Johnson’s (2011) Rule #3 for Library Advocacy reminds us that we should never advocate for the librarian or the library program but rather for our students. We know that the library is vital to our school communities, but we need to be able to express *why* the library is vital to student learning. He



JUNIOR FICTION

BIG CHANGES

Evans, Douglas and Shelley, John. **MVP* [*Magellan Voyage Project]**. Front Street, Inc., 2004. 232 p. \$16.95. ISBN: 9781932425130. Grades 4-6. On Adam's twelfth birthday, an oddly dressed man who introduces himself as Prince Olioli Oh XL approaches him after school. Claiming to be part of a group called LORD [The League of Royalty without Domains], he enlists Adam in an around-the-world-in-40-days contest that offers a prize of 4 million dollars to the winner.

Adam, who is already signed up for three back-to-back summer camps (for a total of 40 days away from home) that he has no interest in, is intrigued. He'll do it! But he doesn't know he's not the only contestant – and that there are a lot of people betting on the race and doing their best to make sure that, whoever wins, it isn't Adam.

This story is filled with famous monuments, world cultures, time zones and other details that make it a natural for classroom reading along with a geography unit. Plus, it's fun!

Philbrick, Rodman. **The Big Dark**. Scholastic Press, 2016. 192 p. \$17.99. ISBN: 978-0545789752. Grades 3-7. Life's good in Harmony, NH (pop. 857), despite the Braggs, with their stockpiled food, automatic weapons and very unfriendly attitudes. Then, one winter night, as the village gathers to watch the northern lights, a massive solar flare knocks out the earth's magnetic field and all power. Even batteries don't work. Cars won't start, furnaces and wells won't work, and there's no way to communicate with the outside world.

While Harmony's sole policeman in the village tries to make sure everyone has food, water, and firewood, the Braggs have other ideas. This is the catastrophe they've been predicting all along, and they intend to make the most of it, with the village and all supplies under their rule. But Charlie Cobb, whose diabetic mom has only 17 days of medicine left, thinks differently. He'll battle the elements, wild animals, and the Braggs' iron rule to save his mom, and nobody better get in his way!

Robshaw, Brandon. **Big Wish**. Scholastic Press, 2016. 240 p. \$16.99. ISBN: 9780545904100. Grades 3-7. Eleven-year-old Sam's life is a mess. His sister was dumped by her boyfriend for another girl, his best friend's dad is dying, his own dad's job is in jeopardy, his mom's artistic career is failing, and the school bullies won't leave him and Evan (his friend) alone. So, when he wishes on a falling star while he and his dad are on a walk, he doesn't know what to ask for. There are so many things he'd like to change! He ends up asking for a million wishes, even though his dad tells him wishes don't come true.

However, Sam's do. All of them. Silly ones, like making himself and Evan gigantic and then miniature. Dangerous ones, like using super powers to fight a bully. Lazy ones, like wishing himself somewhere instead of walking. Even important ones, like healing Evan's dad and making sure no one else ever dies. But even well-meant wishes can backfire....

Woodrow, Allan. **Class Dismissed**. Scholastic Press, 2015. 272 p. \$16.99. ISBN: 9780545800716. Grades 3-7. When Mrs. Bryce gets so fed up with class 507 that she stomps out and doesn't return, a few twists leave the class without a teacher and the front office unaware of Mrs. Bryce's abrupt departure. Now, if they can keep the secret, they'll have at least a few weeks of rule-free anarchy! It'll be awesome!

It isn't, though. While some students toss erasers at each other, chat about fashion magazines, sleep on their desks, and in general goof off, others worry about how far behind they're getting. Finally, one worried student takes over. She's smart enough to run things! However, running a classroom of 21 students who won't cooperate isn't as easy as it looks, and the big fifth grade yearly project is coming up. Can Maggie whip 507 into shape in time? Will the front office figure things out? And where is Mrs. Bryce, anyway?

suggests reframing common “advocacy” requests for a bigger budget or more clerical staffing as student needs. An example would be to use statements such as, “Without an adequate budget, students will not have access to the newest books and reading interest will decline,” or “If the clerical position is reduced, students will not benefit from cotaught collaborative units, as I will not have as much time to work with teachers.”

By structuring the program need as a student-learning need, it not only demonstrates that the library is a vital student-focused program but also reinforces that teacher librarians are in fact teachers with an instructional role. In this way, the request won't be perceived as self-serving but rather as based in concern about success for students and how we can best provide resources, instruction, and collaborative learning opportunities to the school community. The same concept applies to more than just requests to the building administration. When communicating with parents—whether in a newsletter, on Twitter, or in person—focus on all of the great things *students* have done and learned with the help of the librarian and library resources.

LEARNING EMPHASIS

In addition to focusing on students, your descriptions should be focused on learning. Make it clear which skills students are learning and how those skills apply to areas beyond the number of books they bring home. Are they learning to select books independently, leading to a lifelong love of reading for enjoyment? Are students learning to use the library's electronic catalog and learning that information that is orga-

nized effectively saves time? Are students learning how to use databases, and do they understand that sources of information can vary in their trustworthiness and usefulness? In the language of the Understanding by Design curriculum framework, these phrases are reframing traditional library lessons as essential understandings and help to transfer skills (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011).

CREATING CONTENT

A monthly digital newsletter becomes more efficient with the use of a template. I use Smore.com, but other tools can work as well. With the template, identify consistent categories to be used each month. The categories I use are “Library Learning,” “Technology Supporting the Curriculum,” and “Creating a Culture of Readers,” with additional categories rotating in and out.

The “Library Learning” section features a summary of what students at each grade level have been working on in our scheduled library classes and include examples of student work, photos of students working, and links to more information or where to find a particular book we’ve read. If students are working on a topic that may be unfamiliar to their families, I might embed a video that relates to the skill or topic. At the junior high level, where classes are not on a set schedule, this category is called “Collaborative Teaching and Learning” and focuses on units my colleagues and I are teaching together. In a few paragraphs, I describe the unit; how my colleagues and I have worked together to plan, teach, and/or assess the unit; and which essential learnings the students are fo-

cused on. Depending on the month, this section can be quite long!

The “Technology Supporting the Curriculum” section features tech tools, skills, projects, or trainings that are relevant to students and families. This section may explain how a new tool is being used by students to create projects or detail what training teachers are receiving from the teacher librarian in before or after school sessions. Occasionally, I will include a tutorial or video on how families can use a tool or resource at home with their children.

In the “Creating a Culture of Readers” section, I include photos of recent displays and briefly explain how they connect to curriculum or to students’ interest. I occasionally include circulation stats or popular titles and encourage families to ask their child about what they are reading. This section also serves as a venue for advertising upcoming events or programs.

Trying to remember everything you’ve done with teachers and students over a month can be difficult. In addition to my lesson plan map, one successful strategy has been using Twitter as a running diary. I make an effort to Tweet at least once a day about something my students are doing or learning and include photos when possible. At the end of the month, I check my own Twitter feed and use it to jog my memory and generate content. I keep photos on my phone and upload them when I’m ready to create the newsletter.

I email newsletters the last week of the month, always including a thank-you for interest in student learning and supporting students and their library program. Our newsletters have generated great positive responses. I have received invitations to feature an ac-

tivity we are doing in the local paper and several notes back from parents saying how much they appreciate the good work we are doing in the library. For a complete list of my newsletters, please visit <https://www.smores.com/u/hillslibrary>.

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