

School Libraries in the Time of COVID: We can do hard things!

September 2020 | Sam Harris

It was a rough spring all around, from the rapid switch to remote learning and the physical distance between us and most of our library spaces, to the domino effect of classroom teachers (and our own) cognitive overload, library programs took a back seat in many schools. Despite it all, librarians stepped up and showed the innovative thinking and essential support for learning that we are known for: we started virtual storytimes and helped schools understand tricky copyright issues; we supported students and teachers in quickly learning to use online tools like Google Classroom, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and SeeSaw; we shared new resources for research that were made available by database publishers and curated what was sometimes an overwhelming amount of “free stuff” so that our students and faculty could choose from the best resources available. School librarians who had access to collections developed models for delivering materials ([some even by bicycle!](#)) and organized curbside pickups. Our hope as we sped into June was that we’d return to normal in the fall and then the reality of the situation became clearer. Schools are facing significant challenges to budgets and, as is typically the case, libraries and librarians are sometimes the first to be reassigned, reduced in hours, or considered nonessential. We know that’s not the case and now is the time to advocate, advocate, advocate.

How do we do that? Focus on three areas to get the biggest bang for your advocacy buck:

1. **Confront misinformation and misunderstanding.** I was surprised to hear an assumption from one school administrator this summer that there would be no way to circulate books this year. Circulation does present some complexities, but the reality is that it’s more than possible - and really important! Both school and public libraries have [well-developed methods and systems](#) we can model that rely on the best guidance from [experts](#). We planned a flexible model that would allow us to circulate books and then communicated the plan early to ensure that assumptions didn’t get in the way of what is possible to get books in the hands of kids. We know print isn’t everything, and advocating for budgets that reflect the need for multiple pathways to books and information (like increasing ebook purchases) was also important.
2. **Leverage existing relationships and build new ones.** Our colleagues and school leaders can be our best advocates when we are able to build collaborative relationships. In my experience this spring, I know I fumbled a bit in the early days of remote learning, partially because I, like many of my colleagues, thought we’d be back at school in a few weeks. We paused and postponed collaborative research units thinking it would work better when we were physically together. The projects we accomplished in history and science looked a little different, but the collaborative model was a boon to students and significant help to teachers who, along with their students, were overwhelmed with the rapid shifts and reconfiguration of the expected learning experiences. Two heads (or more) are always better than one. My job now is to leverage those positive experiences to get in the door with other colleagues and use my partners to advertise the value of

collaboration.

- Promote your expertise as an information literacy professional.** The ability to identify information needs and relevant resources, and the skills to evaluate information effectively are more important than ever. From helping students craft strong and effective research questions, to wading through resources on the environmental impact of oil pipelines, the librarian should be the go-to professional for students and faculty. Even if we focus only on the rapid increase of misinformation surrounding COVID-19 and the upcoming presidential election, the needs are significant. The more opportunities you have to get “air time” the more your colleagues and school leaders will come to expect your presence, and your expertise. Start where you feel most comfortable and build on all the innovation you spearheaded last spring - perhaps you can have a regular space in school newsletters, or during faculty meetings to provide updates, share resources, or get ideas from students, families, faculty? Is there a committee you can join, or lead, that focuses on an area that could benefit from the library program? Are you interested in broadening your impact and participating in WLA and School Library Division committees? There really is no limit to the possibilities, but the important thing is to take a step toward more visibility.

This is hard work. I know that my reserves feel less robust than at the start of a typical school year, but it's more important than ever to get to work. Connect with your colleagues, lean on the support of WLA and the School Library Division, and follow social media for ideas, professional development opportunities and connections (Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook). We can do hard things!

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