

The Not So Big High School Library....why build BIG ?

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the role state departments of education, a professional organization and a leading internet organization play in providing recommendations and guidelines in the construction of new high school libraries. Four state agencies were identified and specific square footage formulas noted as well as information provided by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and Eduscapes internet organizations. An overview of a small public high school library in southwest Virginia, Franklin County High School, was also included, with its collection, and first semester circulation and student use statistics noted. Results show that some state agencies and organizations provide no recommendations, while those that do show significant disparity in those recommendations. It is concluded that smaller may in fact be as effective as larger libraries and that any decision to build big should be based on a qualitative assessment.

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....by G. Ira Stancil, III

If you're in the business of building a new high school library, should it be bigger, in some cases three times the size of your current library or if scaled down a bit, would it be more practical and as effective as the bigger library? This article will provide a brief overview of a small high school library in southwest Virginia as well as the role several state department of education play in building new school libraries. In addition, the role a leading professional organization for libraries (ALA/AASL) will be reviewed as will a leading internet site (Eduscapes)for educators and their recommendations summarized.

THE LIBRARY

I work in a public high school library, in southwest Virginia, that was built in 1951. Franklin County High School (FCHS) was recently recognized as one of America's best in US News and World Report, as it was last year, while year after year it is in the upper echelon of Virginia state assessment scores . It possesses great leadership, outstanding faculty and a high achieving student body.

Yes, we are well over capacity for a school built in the early 1950's, but who isn't? While there's minor local clamor to build another high school, that likely won't happen any time soon, probably not in my lifetime and definitely not during this time of significant recession and stagnant growth. The two library media specialists and a library assistant run the library at FCHS, that serves approximately 2300 students and 222 faculty, staff and administrators. The library contains a thirty pc computer lab, enough seating and tables for two classes of 40 or more students and is, get this, under 5,500 square feet. It's collection consists of approximately 17,000 reference, fiction and nonfiction books. A small room of several hundred square feet serves as a professional library and meeting room while limited office space and magazine storage are included in the figure.

It is not only the smallest library I have worked in, in terms of square footage and collection, but likely the most efficient. In fact, during the first semester of this 2008/2009 school year, more than 21,000 students used the library and more than 5,200 books were circulated. Naturally there's more to efficiency than simple student use and circulation statistics, but those two items are key players in the role a library plays with its faculty and students.

But this article is not about library efficiency, it's about the role state agencies and professional organizations play in the construction of new public school libraries and in remodeling/expanding . Do these agencies in fact provide guidance and recommendations that one may judge as reliable and trustworthy or were they developed at a time supportive of a booming housing and school construction industry or do they exist at all.

For those of you working in a high school library built before or in the 1950's, it's not surprising to find your square footage less than 5,500 square feet. Today, however, many high school libraries being built for schools with student populations of 1,000 or more approach 10,000 or more square feet. Believe me, when you double the square footage you basically double the costs of construction. So why the increase in square footage and at what expense? Accompanying the increased size are increased heating

and cooling costs. Can we afford it in these austere times? ? Will the philosophy of “bigger is better”, serve public education any better than it has the auto industry over the past two decades?

What is the reason for the doubling of the size of high school libraries? It’s quite easy to assume that technology has played a significant role and it is true that most public school libraries, elementary, middle and high, have computer labs of 25 or more computers . But are they truly used for library skills development and research or do they also provide schools with additional lab space for classroom instruction and “no child left behind” testing.

It’s also true that collections have grown dramatically while there is reluctance to weed out the unused. North Carolina’s minimum quality standard of 15 books or more per student (FCHS would need 34,000 books to meet this standard) just doesn’t seem to make much sense when you contrast it with Maryland’s recommendation of 18,000 library media items for a senior high school . If recommendations for collections vary so drastically from state to state, can you rely on them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First, the Virginia State Department of Education and the Virginia Educational Media Association stated that there are no standards and that construction trends seem to be conflicting and vary significantly from division to division, school to school. It seems that any guidance offered will be between the school administrators and architect and in fact, this is exactly what I was told when I contacted the architect for two major school construction jobs in southwest Virginia schools. I was told there were no state or local guidelines used, rather, discussions between the architect and “interested parties” prevailed.

Next, the state of North Carolina, having produced a “North Carolina Public Schools Facilities Guidelines” (revised September 2003), provides roughly two and a half pages of guidelines addressing the media center. For high schools with more than 400 students, that 4 to 6 sq. feet per student be planned for the main library with an additional 1500 square feet for support areas. If video production areas were to be included, an additional 740 square feet is recommended. Converting these recommendations for FCHS, minus video production, would amount to a library with a minimum of 10,700 square feet and maximum 15,300 square feet or roughly three times our size.

The “Massachutes School Library Media Program Standards for 21st Century Learning notes under the heading, Secondary Schools: “The Library (Instructional Materials Center) program area may be up to 15% of enrollment x 40 square feet- maximum. Computer labs/workstations should have 30 square feet per workstation. Other areas may be added, if planned, i.e. office, conference, etc. Storage space is as needed.” It also lists under the heading Seating Capacity that “seating capacity will be 12% of the total student body”. Converting these recommendations for FCHS, and not including any footage for a computer lab, office, conference or storage area, the size would amount up to a maximum of 14,076 square feet. Again, approaching three times our existing size.

The Maryland Department of Education, in their extensive 1998 publication, "Facilities Guidelines for Library Media Programs", notes the following. "Six net square feet is a general guideline – a starting point for planning." The publication goes on to state that the "lowest acceptable space allocation is three net square feet per student enrolled. The publication also includes a planning worksheet, going well beyond guidance offered by other state agencies.

Next on the list, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), American Library Association (ALA) where I was told there were no national standards or recommendations for public high school construction since the 60's and 70's. They made a decision a long time ago to leave it up to the states to make their own recommendations. ALA did provide a comprehensive annotated bibliography however that listed such things as "Design Considerations for School Library Media Centers". Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Public Library Development that uses six square feet per student as a rule of thumb. Was it a wise decision for the national association serving public school and public libraries in this country or was it avoidance?

And finally, Eduscapes, a well known, highly respected internet site for educators provides square foot recommendations for school libraries, amongst many other education related topics. If you were to go to their page at <http://eduscapes.com/sms/administration/elements.html> and use their recommendations for a library with our seating capacity, you would find that their square footage recommendations would exceed 13,000 square feet. However, their recommendations are for school libraries with a student population under 1000.

IN CONCLUSION

It seems some agencies and organizations make no recommendations for the construction of new high school libraries whatsoever and leave it up to the architects to decide. The end result is a hoped for bigger and perhaps "better" library without knowing what better is. And for those that do make recommendations, an inconsistent assortment of formulas and guidelines are proposed. Perhaps it's time to take a fresh look at the "Not So Big Library" to see if there are any lessons to be learned before going big. Bigger may not be better in fact unless student use, circulation and instruction warrant it. The rub, do you want to pay the difference between best and adequate before employing an assessment of quality? Only then, could you possibly tell if it would it be worth the difference?

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