

# ESTABLISHING A COMMUNITY OF READERS

## *in a Secondary Library*



**AMANDA KORDELISKI**  
akordelis2@norman.k12.ok.us

Working with tweens and teens can be challenging. They can be hard to reach and sometimes frustratingly difficult to engage. As a secondary school librarian, I've often been asked about the philosophy and practices I've implemented in my library to keep students engaged and help them remain active library users. One of the things I love most about my job as a school librarian, first at a middle school and now at a high school, is the challenge of creating a fresh and engaging atmosphere that brings kids to the library and encourages reading for pleasure. I am determined to foster an environment in my school library that creates an open, welcoming, and safe environment where a culture of reading will flourish and grow. Building a reading culture at the middle or high school level doesn't happen overnight, and

stumbling blocks will be encountered along the way. Flexibility is key. Understand that some things you expect to be smashing successes may end up being your biggest failures—and that it is okay. I once had a principal who always said even if we fail, we are failing forward. This statement became my mantra for developing a culture of reading at my school.

### My Story

Over winter break during the 2010–2011 school year I changed school districts and started my first library job as the school librarian at Washington Irving Middle School in Norman, Oklahoma. Starting to work at a school in the middle of the year is hard. Routines and rules have already been established, expectations set. That spring semester I struggled to learn the collection, bond with students, and

establish coteaching relationships with teachers in the building. The school had long ago established a specific day during homeroom as a reading day, and every student was expected to have a “prime time” reading-for-pleasure book with them at all times. I was ecstatic, what a brilliant plan! A reading culture is alive and well, and these kids truly love to read for pleasure. Except I noticed a very disappointing trend: the hour before the required “reading day” the library would be overrun with kids checking out a book for class. Then the hour after reading in homeroom the library book drop would be overflowing with books checked out at the beginning of the day. Students carried books around so they didn't get in trouble in class, but few teens and even fewer teachers were actually reading for pleasure during this time.

A handful of teachers enforced the mandatory reading day for their students and modeled reading for pleasure by reading themselves during this time period. It was not that my school's teachers were anti-reading. The situation was that the purpose behind having teachers read as well and the importance for having students read for pleasure had not been emphasized in several years. The tradition still stood, but the reasons behind it had been lost. By the end of the school year I had identified several library rules and procedures that I felt kept students from loving the library and reading for pleasure, and I had a plan for the next school year. I had scoured journals and blogs and books and read everything I could find on teens and reading. I had ideas, and I was convinced each and every one of them would work.

Then came construction. The school (which had been built in the 1970s following an open-concept model) was to be renovated; walls were going

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to be created, and the library was going to be a new flexible space with walls. The timeframe for construction had been compressed down to a single school year, and, as a result, for my first full school year at Washington Irving the library would be moved to a much smaller temporary space containing a fraction of the collection. In the long term, having walls and a new flexible space was great, but the immediate future was going to be difficult.

Looking back on my first full year as a school librarian, it is easy to remember feeling the entire year was a massive setback to growing the reading culture. Even though I didn't realize it then, spending a year in a "fun size" library with almost the entire collection in storage was the best thing that could have happened to the library program. Having a tiny collection forced me to become innovative in finding resources. A strong collaborative partnership with the public library developed from that first tough year and continued to grow. Moving into a new innovative and flexible library space the next year gave me the chance to build a new program from the ground up and gave students a voice and choice in what they wanted in their library. Starting fresh allowed me to approach every student in the building as a potential reader who "lost" their love of reading during the construction, and I set out to rekindle that love in each and every student. As a result, the library evolved into a welcoming space for all. We made book trailers, tried our hand at a school newscast, built a Tardis for the Dr. Who fandom, turned the school into Hogwarts for an evening event, played character smackdown, designed wardrobes for our favorite characters through a fashion app, wrote fan fiction, and in the process shaped the library into

the first-choice destination before, during, and after school.

### Essentials for Building a Reading Culture

Renovation and redesign of the school that coincided with my first full year at the school made it easy for me to change things when the new library opened, but a new library is not a requirement for building (or rebuilding) a reading culture at your school. Here is my checklist of essential things to foster a love of reading in teens and tweens:

- a school librarian who reads widely and recommends current YA books
- access to books teens and tweens want to read
- teacher buy-in
- a willingness to adapt programs and rules to fit the needs of readers
- a safe and welcoming space for all, even if they aren't readers (yet)

#### *A School Librarian Who Reads Widely and Recommends Current YA Books*

For me, this is the single most important factor in promoting reading in a school library. Reading what the students read gives you credibility and goes a long way in building relationships with the students. Teens and tweens have an uncanny ability to know when you are pitching books you haven't read and do not intend to read. Be sincere in your recommendations and in your likes and dislikes. I struggle with manga. It isn't something I love to read, and I am upfront with the kids about how hard it is for me to read a book from back to front with little character

development. I always encourage students who do love manga to give me recommendations for purchase and series I should try to build my love of the format. I love romance novels and deliver this news with excitement and passion. Students need to understand they should never feel embarrassed by what they like to read or apologize for liking certain books.

Middle and high school students can tell if you are not genuine, and if you are not they will quickly dismiss your opinion and tune you out. While it is impossible to read every title in your library, it is helpful to know *something* about every title you purchase. Be upfront and honest if you haven't read it yet. Be honest if you hate a book and tell the reason why. Opening up to kids and telling them when you dislike a book builds trust with kids and models critical reading. Explaining why you love or hate a book is a developing skill middle schoolers don't necessarily have yet. By modeling how to critique a book—especially those I don't like—I not only make my readers' advisory job easier by eliminating the need for me to read other books that have similar elements, the process also promotes critical thinking and pushes kids to develop an argument. One of the most successful book club discussions I had at the middle school occurred when I booktalked half a dozen titles I intensely disliked. One of the teachers in the room loved them, and in front of the students we had a lively discussion about what I disliked and she loved. My original goal was to foster discussion about the titles and to get an idea about what made others enjoy a title I hated. The end result was so much more than that. Because I identified specific literary elements I didn't enjoy (I rarely like books written in second person but I can overlook certain flaws in the plot if the character development is exceptional), students adopted the critique



style and became able to identify the things they love and hate in books. The end result? Better readers and better writers.

I often read only the first book in a series, but I know the release day for the next title in a series or next book by a popular author because this information is an excellent icebreaker with students. I keep track using the Goodreads and FictFact sites, even for series I don't personally read. Almost every title I read has a sticky note on it with the names of several students I think will enjoy the book. I use my hall duty during passing period to follow up with kids about titles. Few things go further toward building relationships with students than seeing a kid somewhere other than the library and saying that you have a book set aside specifically for him or her, or stumbled upon a new series you think the reader would love.

### *Access to Books Teens and Tweens Want to Read*

No one has an unlimited budget; narrowing down your consideration list to fit your funding can be an agonizing task. I constantly ask students what they would like to see in the library. I write grants to supplement my budget; I collect advance reader copies at library and reading conferences and offer them up to kids in exchange for a "sticky note review"; I read blog posts and watch book-related video channels and fill student requests to the best of my ability. It is not uncommon to come back to school after being out a day or two for professional development and find my computer monitor covered in sticky notes with book requests.

The year of the construction, the temporary library was housed in the teacher's lounge. Students could have only one book out at a time

because there weren't enough titles for everyone to have two checked out. I worked with the teen librarian at our local public library to have access to new titles and multiple copies of popular titles for students to check out and read. The public library was a lifesaver that year, providing unfettered access to books to make up for the lack of selection in our temporary space. At least once a month the teen librarian came to my school toting bags and bags of popular titles for students to read. We worked together as a team to promote and booktalk titles to students, and those visits were an excellent way to highlight all the teen activities available at the public library. This partnership continues on long after the construction was finished. At least twice a year the teen librarian comes to visit and promote public library programming and booktalk new titles with me. This partnership is beneficial to everyone; the students have better access to books, more exposure to titles with a wider variety of booktalks, and feel more comfortable using the public library because they already know a friendly face there.

Having at least one friendly face can go a long way in making students feel comfortable in a new place. At the end of every school year I visit with my incoming students by going to the feeder schools for my middle/high school. I booktalk the state awards list, show pictures and video of the library, and field questions about procedures, activities, and books. I ask what their favorite current reads are and what they are looking forward to in moving to a secondary library. This is a mutually beneficial activity. My potential students have an opportunity to meet me and get excited about the new opportunities they will have at their new library. The visits allow me to get a feel for what my incoming class likes to read, and over the

summer months I read titles students mentioned, but that I am unfamiliar with. In the fall I can connect these books with read-alike titles in the existing collection.

This outreach gives students who might be overwhelmed the first month of school an opportunity to meet me in a setting they already feel comfortable with and talk to me about what they want in a library. They already know when they walk through the doors in August they are welcome in the school library, and most have an idea of at least one book they want to read or activity they want to do. At the start of the new school year I want students to quickly connect to a familiar book when they come into the library. Therefore, I display titles I talked about or students asked about when I met with them back in May.

### *Teacher Buy-In*

All teachers, not just English teachers, need to believe in the magic and power of pleasure reading. Students need the reinforcement that reading is something that adults do, and it isn't limited to language arts teachers. At our school, teachers display laminated signs on their classroom doors on which they write what they are reading. Interactive displays that highlight books teachers love can be the best conversation-starters in the building. One of my favorite displays is created by asking teachers to list their top reads of the year and encouraging students to post their lists as well. Currently, I run a teacher book club for which we read young adult novels and then get together once a month outside of school to discuss what we have read. An unexpected benefit of the teacher book club is that teachers are actively talking about the titles we read; they discuss the books in their own classrooms. As a result, students come into the library wanting to also read those titles.

### *A Willingness to Adapt Programs and Rules to Fit the Needs of Readers*

My library is a noisy place. It can appear chaotic at times, and you don't have to look very hard at the students to see that not everyone is reading a book or appears initially to be doing anything that relates to reading or research. The library is student-centered, and students should feel a sense of ownership in the library. To foster this sense of ownership, I often break many of the traditional library rules. There isn't a limit to how many books a kid can check out; there are no fines; and food and drink are allowed in the library. In the library makerspace, I freely allow the camera equipment, editing software, and 3-D printer to be used by any student who has met with me to learn how to use the tools properly.

For most of my time at the middle school I ran a very successful hybrid book club that met at lunch once a month and also maintained a virtual space. By offering up a virtual discussion space, students who were not comfortable speaking up during our face-to-face meeting could post opinions and participate as much as they wanted. We selected a genre or an author and then shared our opinions on the books. We had epic character battles and used fashion apps like Polyvore to create wardrobes for our favorite book characters. We made book trailers and wrote fan fiction. The goal was to get students excited about reading and books and to connect reading for pleasure with things in their life they already enjoyed. Out of the virtual space, several fandom groups flourished, and soon I had kids meeting on their own in the library to celebrate their love of manga, Dr. Who, Ranger's Apprentice, and Harry Potter. The Harry Potter group grew so large that I planned a school-wide Harry Potter Book Night

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with activities and games connected to the books and held a read-along for those who were “movie only” fans and had not yet experienced the magic of the book series. As the popularity of writing fan fiction and short stories grew, I signed up for NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month) and for several years I had a group of students who met in the library almost every lunch period to write and share their work.

I let students check out books over the summer and winter breaks, and at back-to-school night, and whenever a student asks. I do all of those things not to be a rebellious rule breaker but because the students asked for them. If I couldn't explain the reasoning behind the rule and the kids could articulate why doing something like eating lunch in the library was important to them, I abandoned or modified the rule to the best of my ability.

### *A Safe and Welcoming Space for All, Even If They Aren't Readers (Yet)*

I don't believe we can have a community of readers until we have established a community. Making sure every student—whether or not students consider themselves to be readers—feels welcomed and at home in the school library is priority number one for me. I never pass up an opportunity while I am teaching to pitch a book that fits with the lesson. Books can be both mirrors and windows, and my goal as a school librarian is to make sure that all kids in the school can find themselves, both who they are and who they want to be, reflected back to them in the pages of a book found in the school library. If students feel welcome they are more likely to become library users, even if they are non-readers. I used to say to teachers that I have to get young

people in the door before I can make them readers. I still believe that, but I have also come to believe that even if students never use the library in the traditional way, that's okay. They are still library users and view it as a place where they have the flexibility and freedom to make it what they need it to be. One day after school last year I was shelving books and wiping down tables and bookshelves, and I found some graffiti left by a student. On the side of a bookshelf the student had written “I love to read” and “This is my happy place.” Exactly how I want my students to feel.

Shortly after the school year started in August 2016 I made the decision to accept a librarian position at one of the high schools in my district. My experiences during the 2016–2017 school year were extraordinarily similar to how I first started at the middle school. I had moved mid-year and came into a library being completely renovated and redesigned. I spent the remainder of the school year in a temporary space with limited resources. My kids from the middle school feed to the other high school in town, so I started at square one with these students. I've already discovered some things that worked at the middle school must be adapted to a high school audience.

As I write this, I'm spending my summer learning how to Snapchat book talks and planning which titles to feature on Instagram. I've asked my high school students what their idea of a perfect library looks like and have continued to plan additional ways to make the high school library dynamic and welcoming for all. The high school campus is immense, and the past school year brought temporary hallways and detours, making it difficult for students

to find their way to the library. In response my co-librarian and I created posters with book covers and QR codes that connected the covers to our digital copies in OverDrive. Students had access to books even if they didn't have time to navigate all the way to the library. Our faculty book club grew every month, and we already have suggestions for the new school year. We allowed students to check out books for summer break and introduced our students to the public librarians. We are laying the foundation for a new community and creating a culture of reading.



### **Amanda Kordeliski**

is a school librarian at Norman North High School in Norman, Oklahoma. Her most

recent publication is as a contributing writer to the award-winning website <[www.abmceducation.org](http://www.abmceducation.org)> where her research and lesson plans integrating World War II into middle and high school curriculum are published as part of the Understanding Sacrifice Program through National History Day and the American Battle Monuments Commission. She currently serves on the ALA Center for the Future of Libraries Advisory Group, the Young Adult Library Services Editorial Board, and the Young Adult Library Services Association's Financial Advancement Committee. Amanda is the chair-elect and marketing liaison for the Oklahoma School Librarians Division of the Oklahoma Library Association and serves on the high school reading team for the Oklahoma Library Association Sequoyah Book Award. You can contact her on Twitter @akordeliski.



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