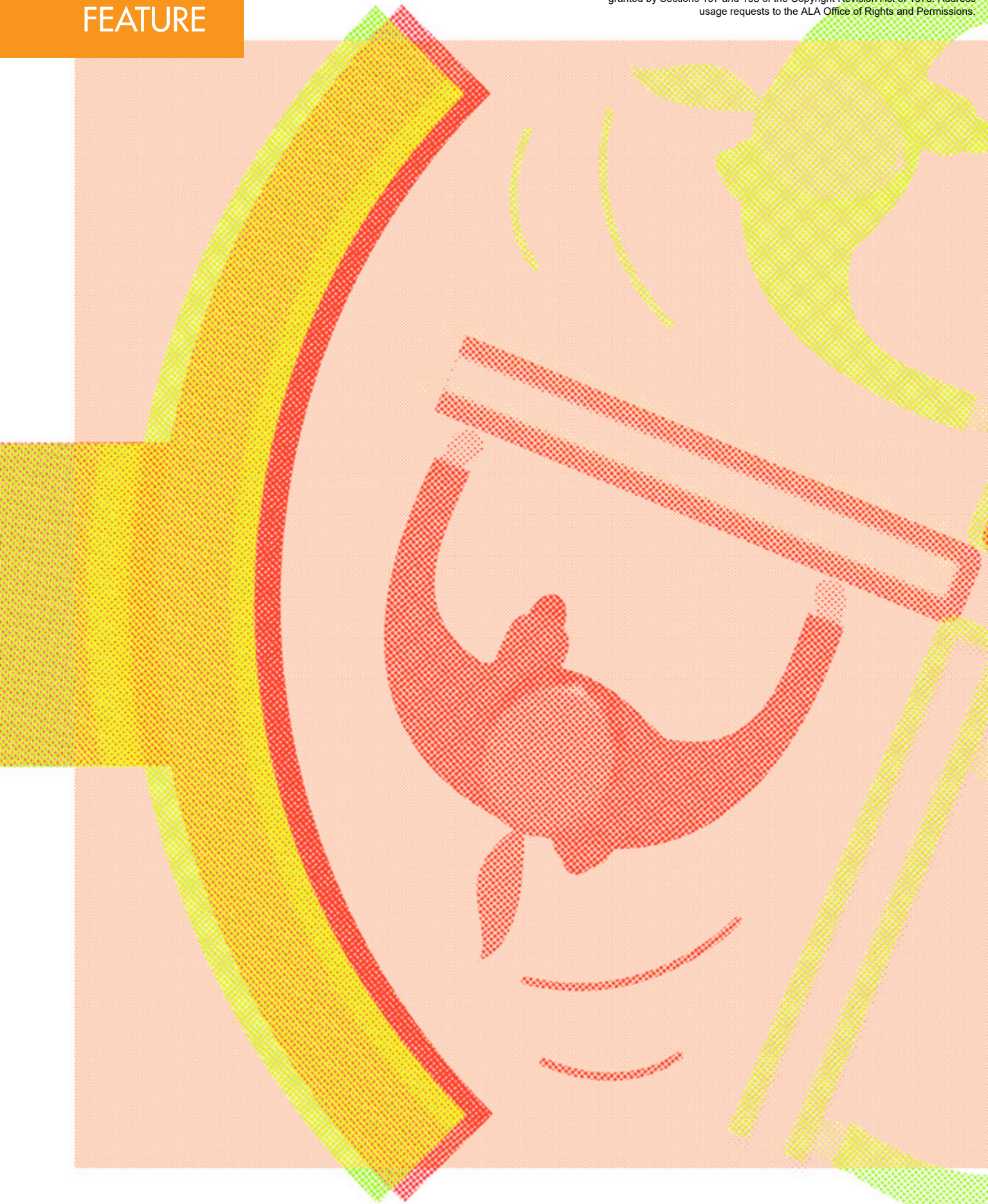


FEATURE



Assessing Readiness for School Library Collaboration

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In many elementary schools across the nation the library looks like a revolving door of classes. Classroom teachers come and drop off their classes for a lesson at a set time during the week. The school librarian teaches a lesson in isolation while the classroom teacher has a planning period. There is little time for collaboration. There is even less time for students to engage in meaningful, authentic activities and research that offer deeper meaning. This antiquated scheduling model of elementary school libraries has been a traditional part of schools for many years. It is time for change.

The *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* identify Collaborate as a Shared Foundation for students, school librarians, and the school library. The Key Commitment states that to collaborate is to value working “effectively with others to broaden perspectives and work toward common goals” (AASL 2018, 85). Preparing school librarians to collaborate with classroom teachers allows librarians to achieve their own Collaborate competencies and to model standards for learners—while also helping them achieve Collaborate competencies. In addition, collaboration between classroom teachers and school librarians creates a learning environment in which learners more fully understand that learning is a social responsibility.

As a 2017–2018 Lilead Fellow and as a district-level school librarian leader, I was charged with planning and implementing a high-impact project that would positively affect my district by bringing about transformational change. In my role as specialist for school libraries for Calvert County (MD) Public Schools, and a former elementary-level school librarian, one of my highest priority goals has always been to move elementary schools toward

a school library model that looks more like the libraries in middle and high schools. I want all students to have the advantage of learning in an environment in which librarians work directly with classroom teachers and students on authentic research projects, technology skills, and literacy.

Thinking about the benefits of a flexible schedule, it struck me that this was not just a schedule change, but a change in culture. Elementary schools and their libraries needed to shift from a culture of the librarian teaching in isolation to a culture of collaboration: librarians working directly with teachers to plan and execute a unit of study. The tricky part was devising a way to make this happen with no additional funding.

My big questions as I started planning my Lilead project boiled down to:

1. Why is a collaborative model not happening in elementary schools?
2. What would a collaborative model of instruction look like in an elementary school?
3. How will I know when a school is ready to move toward a collaborative model?
4. What supports can I put in place to assist with this transformation?
5. How will school administrators and I measure the success of the collaborative model?

The collaborative model of instruction is more than thinking in terms of the school library having a flexible schedule. The flexible schedule is the mechanism that makes high-impact collaboration between the classroom teacher and the librarian possible. Collaboration is defined by Merriam-Webster as “to work jointly

with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor” (2018). When schools have a library program model in which students are dropped off in the school library to provide classroom teachers with planning time, little to no collaboration can occur. It was time to start assessing our readiness as a district to make a move from isolation in the library to collaboration between the classroom teacher and the school librarian becoming the norm.

Assessing Readiness

Knowing what classroom teachers needed and wanted from the school library was the first step. To begin assessing readiness for collaboration, classroom teachers in Calvert County were sent a voluntary survey regarding collaboration with the school librarian. The survey found that most respondents thought that they had little to no opportunity to collaborate with their school librarian. Teachers listed barriers to collaboration, including lack of time, lack of common planning periods, and not knowing the services that the school library could provide (see figure 1). The survey also revealed that the majority of classroom teachers believed that collaboration between the school librarian and the classroom teacher would result in a positive experience for both the teacher and the students (see figure 2).

Assessing Administrator Buy-In

Assessing and getting administrator buy-in to move forward with a collaborative model of instruction was the second phase. To achieve successful implementation, the entire school community must understand how collaboration works. Everyone must realize how collaboration can spark authentic learning experiences and result in improved

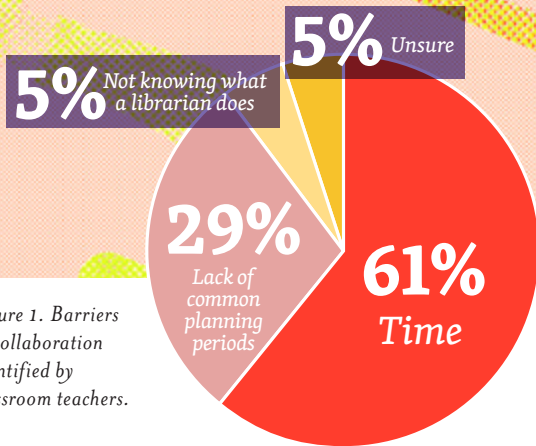


Figure 1. Barriers to collaboration identified by classroom teachers.

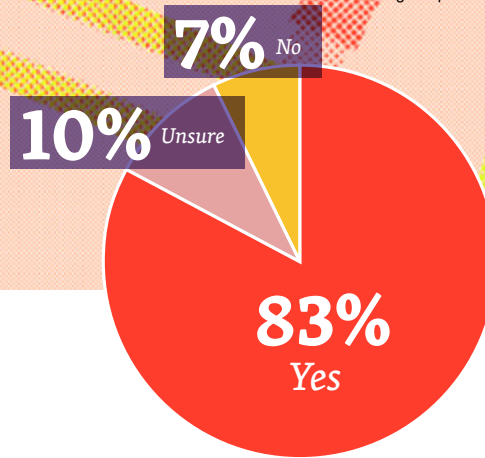


Figure 2. Classroom teachers' perceptions of value of collaborating with the school librarian.

What are barriers to collaboration?

Would collaborating with the school librarian benefit students?

student outcomes. Since all educators involved must be ready to implement a collaborative model of instruction, how does the librarian leader assess administration buy-in and how do administrators assess classroom teachers' readiness for a collaborative model of instruction?

The Lilead Fellowship experience provided me with the tools I needed to talk with our district administrators about my vision for elementary school libraries. As part of the transformational change process, I crafted my mission statement for my project:

In a collaborative setting, elementary school libraries make personal connections, so all students can experience an excellent school library program to explore, learn, and ignite their passion for learning.

Speaking with principals, sharing my vision for a collaborative library, and outlining the benefits of collaboration between the school librarian and the classroom teacher was one of the hardest things I've done as the district-level specialist for school libraries. I was asking administrators to make a shift—to think differently without offering them anything

other than my support and ideas in exchange. While I spoke, I assessed their readiness for a collaborative library as I watched facial expressions, body language, and fielded questions. I needed a school community willing to think outside of the box. I outlined the benefits of a collaborative library model for the elementary principals:

- When collaboration happens, authentic learning experiences are embedded across school experiences; lessons are no longer taught in isolation.
- Collaborative teaching fosters an increase in skills for students, classroom teachers, and librarians.
- Collaboration deepens the culture of reading in school communities, and inquiry is fostered and nurtured.
- Classroom teachers and students are afforded more time to explore and create.
- Content standards are integrated by school librarians and classroom teachers.
- There are additional opportunities for job-embedded

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professional development for educators.

A few days after presenting to principals, the phone rang. The administrators at Windy Hill Elementary were ready and willing to take on this project. They had just hired a brand-new school librarian and were ready to make the change.

When assessing the readiness of her building to make a change, principal Kelly Cleland felt that the time was right for Windy Hill Elementary to shift to a collaborative library

The enemy of creativity and growth is resistance. New, novel, creative thinking, out-of-the-box ideas are familiar to our staff. They [Windy Hill staff] also know the journey of novel ideas is not easy; however, we tackle problems with solutions.

—Windy Hill Elementary School Principal Kelly Cleland on the staff's willingness to embrace change

because what she considered to be preconditions for a successful implementation had been met:

- Classrooms in grades 3–5 had 1:1 laptops.
- The school librarian was willing to embrace implementation of a flexible/collaborative model.
- Teachers at Windy Hill had previously embraced changes to the teaching model.

As Joy H. McGregor reported in 2002, principals identified the two biggest barriers to implementing a collaborative schedule as initial reluctance or inexperience of the teachers and how to cover the teacher planning time with no additional staffing. Even with the preconditions listed above in place, these barriers were issues at Windy Hill Elementary School. To provide teachers with planning time, Windy Hill administrators there were willing to invest their own time and energy.

Here's how Windy Hill Principal Kelly Cleland described their solution:

Our administrative team took on the challenge of working with third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students. Our school counselor taught guidance lessons, the vice principal taught thinking-based lessons, I taught coding. We each committed to teaching one class per day, alternating each week—meaning, if the counselor taught third grade during week one, she then taught fourth grade the next week, and fifth grade the following week. The three of us also committed to covering for each other, if meetings or a crisis occurred. One unintended result of our stepping in to give teachers planning time: Our administration team got to know and develop relationships with students on a different level as we worked with students as learners.

Assessing Teacher Readiness for Collaboration

Being able to articulate the “why” and the “how” of a collaborative library model right from the start of planning for implementation is imperative. At Windy Hill, it was vital to make sure that teachers understood that a collaborative school library was not going to cause them to lose their planning period, which was the biggest concern of the classroom teachers. Therefore, the role of the principal, while assessing readiness, was to be consistent and clear about the expectations of the collaborative process and to find

an alternative time for teacher planning—which she did.

At another school in our district Sunderland Elementary, in the fall of 2018, the administration along with school librarian Sally Wolfe implemented a new library schedule that allowed time for collaboration between the school librarian and classroom teachers. Administrators at Sunderland were focused on Maryland College and Career Ready Standards and the school librarian's pivotal role in assisting other educators in meeting the benchmarks for these standards.

Sunderland Principal Pam Kasulke recognized, as with any change, some will embrace it and some will be more hesitant. However, as she described her perspective:

As long as Sunderland has a few who are willing to jump in and step outside of the box, others will see the amazing learning that can take place when standards-based instruction is supported through collaborative teaching with the school librarian.

Preparing for Successful Collaboration

Before successful collaboration can happen between classroom teachers and the elementary school librarian, classroom teachers must be aware of the role and the expertise of the school librarian. To foster a sense of

Providing collaboration training is essential. Most teachers at the elementary level do not have the experience of working hand in hand with the school librarian.

readiness for collaboration among classroom teachers, the school librarian must nurture relationships with and among the other educators in the school. School librarians can take the following actions well in advance of planning to shift to a collaborative model of teaching:

- Seek out classroom teachers and be proactive in asking about what is happening in their classrooms and suggest resources.
- Provide professional development on technology to establish credibility as an instructor.
- Attend professional learning community meetings whenever possible.
- Volunteer to serve on or lead committees.
- Highlight resources and activities happening in the school library in a newsletter, on a webpage, or via social media—or wherever teachers are sure to see what the librarian is doing.
- Offer to complete parts of classroom projects in the school library, such as creating the multimedia presentation or doing research on a topic in the classroom teachers' curriculum.

The school librarian's being a valued part of the school community goes a long way toward helping classroom teachers feel ready to share their

students, curriculum, time, and space with the librarian. When teachers feel that the librarian is an equal partner on the instructional team, they are ready to begin collaborating in earnest. At first, some teachers may be unsure or not quite ready to dive in with two feet, so start with those who are ready. As more and more teachers see how collaboration works for the benefit of student learning, more will embrace collaboration.

Implementation of our vision for collaboration at Windy Hill Elementary School started slowly but with an activity that made a big impact. Vice principal Lisa Morgan and I modeled a collaborative unit in each grade level, filling the role of classroom teacher and librarian respectively. We modeled the planning and execution of the collaboration.

Initially, the Windy Hill administrators set the expectation for teachers to collaborate with the school librarian on one project per quarter to ensure that every student and teacher started the collaboration process. As more and more teachers saw the value of collaboration, the school librarian's schedule filled.

Providing collaboration training is essential. Most teachers at the elementary level do not have the experience of working hand in hand with the school librarian. One strategy is to offer specific professional development workshops that

focus on specific strategies to use when collaborating.

Possible topics include:

- exploration of collaboration and coteaching models,
- planning together,
- reviewing curriculum together,
- figuring out who is responsible for what part of the lesson,
- and creating rituals for the teachers, librarian, and students. (Rituals can include ideas such as "When the teacher is teaching _____, the librarian is doing _____.")

By establishing norms and rituals, everyone has a role, and no one is left waiting or without a task. We opted to start our collaborative model by focusing on the station rotation coteaching model, in which small groups of learners move from one activity to another during the learning project. By learning how to best use the station rotation model in the school library, we were able to harness the power of the classroom teacher's content knowledge, and the expertise of the school librarian in technology and research. Our stations consisted of a teacher-led station, a librarian-led station, and our independent station was the checkout station, where students browsed and checked out a book before beginning independent work.

I'm ready to try something new and exciting! Collaboration with the [teaching] staff has always been a problem. This new type of schedule will improve teacher collaboration and help us to meet the needs of every student at Sunderland. I'm excited about coteaching and collaborating with the staff to help students analyze, evaluate, and create projects.

—Sally Wolfe, school librarian, on the collaborative model

Students quickly adapted to this new model of teaching and learning. A survey administered to students at the end of the year showed they were now more willing to ask the school librarian for assistance with an information need than they were when asked at the beginning of the year. Students ended the school year viewing the collaboration as having two teachers in the room, not just one.

Timing and Commitment

As with life changes, there will never be the perfect time to implement a collaborative model of instruction and move from a fixed schedule to a collaborative model. We hit several roadblocks along the way. We had to make some changes to schedules and work through some issues that we hadn't anticipated.

One barrier that we did not anticipate was that parents would question the change from their children attending a library class on a fixed schedule and moving to a collaborative model. Parents were worried students would not have an opportunity to check out books. School administration communicated with parents the reasons for the collaborative model, and as parents began to see the benefit, some fears were eased and circulation statistics grew.

Another unexpected barrier that cropped up was teachers' resistance to collaborating and finding the time to work with the school librarian. This barrier was eased as we provided professional development and made more planning time available for collaboration.

Money, time, and staffing will continue to be barriers for many, but those obstacles should not stop the effort to move forward with collaborative scheduling in the elementary school library.

Starting the Process at Your School

As a school librarian, plant the seed with your school administration or with your district leader of school libraries. Identify what problem is important to your administration and make the school library part of the solution. Make a case. Give compelling arguments. Every principal looks for additional ways to provide professional development to the teaching staff. Implementing collaborative planning and teaching allows the school librarian to practice job-embedded professional development directly with classroom teachers in the areas of technology integration, research, and project-based learning. Tie student success on state and national standards to the imple-

mentation of flexible scheduling and collaboration between students and educators.

If you're not sure your building is ready to tackle collaboration head on, try piloting with a small group of classroom teachers or with one grade level. Share your successes and keep reliable data. These actions will assist you in making the case to move forward with collaboration with more teachers or additional grades. Take baby steps. Students and classroom teachers deserve meaningful access to school library resources and your expertise—the expertise of a collaborating school librarian.

Final Thoughts

When I embarked on this journey with the Lilead project and my district, I was hoping to succeed

but was also prepared to fail. After all, how could this project take off without funding? Through the sheer determination of everyone who has recognized the benefits to students and worked along the way with me, we're moving slowly but surely to a

more collaborative approach in our elementary school libraries. I feel hopeful, positive, and excited for the future of collaborative libraries and their positive impact in Calvert County Public Schools.



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Schools. She is a Lilead Fellow and a lifelong learner. Currently, Jennifer collaborates with high school librarian Donna Mignardi on a blog for ALA's Programming Librarian in which they write about information literacy programming. She is an AASL member and serves as a member at large for the Maryland Association of School Librarians.

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