

FEATURE



**A TEAM APPROACH
TO DESIGNING**

FUTURE READY LIBRARY SPACES

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We want our school library spaces to be **FUTURE READY**—flexible, mobile, creative, technology friendly, and instructionally active.

What better way to drive home your vision of future ready libraries than to redesign your library spaces? But across a district, too often, school librarians are tackling this task on their own. Creating a district-wide plan for modernizing school libraries helps a district approach the problem strategically. In Eanes (TX) Independent School District, a small suburban district near Austin, we spent a year purposefully analyzing our libraries in preparation for building better spaces for the future. We want our school library spaces to be future ready—flexible, mobile, creative, technology friendly, and instructionally active. The lessons our team learned in undertaking this project can be applied across an entire district or used by a team in one library to assess and improve their space.

As district librarian, I had a wonderful opportunity to undertake this effort with support because I had been named part of the 2017–2018 Lilead Fellows cohort, a project led by Ann Carlson Weeks at the University of Maryland and Jeffrey DiScala from Old Dominion University. The Lilead Fellows Project gathers a group of district librarians from across the country and assigns them mentors for small teams. Professors Weeks and DiScala, the other mentors, and the Lilead Fellows work together through online coursework and in-person meetings so that each

fellow can develop a project within his or her own district.

Getting Started

As part of Lilead, fellows developed action plans for our projects, plans that we updated periodically during the 2017–2018 academic year. In the action plan, we identified change goals, interested parties, set step-by-step guidelines, and identified potential partners. Creating an action plan and identifying potential partners (or adversaries) is a great way to start any large task for school library planning. I used the action plan carefully throughout the year, checking in to see if I had missed steps that I had planned to take. The plan proved not only to be a strategic document, but also a source of motivation when I hit roadblocks or was distracted by other tasks.

The Plan

Within my district, the plan was to set a vision for future ready library spaces in our district, and to assemble a district-wide library advisory committee to analyze each of our library spaces. We planned to make recommendations to the district at the end of the year, based on site visits, surveys of students and staff, analyses of programs, as well as on input from my Lilead colleagues and mentor. My goals—shared by the building-level librarians in our

district—were to communicate the vision to all district leadership at the central office and building-level principals, and to present a plan to include funds for school library updates in our upcoming bond vote in 2019.

I began by assembling our library advisory committee. At our Lilead meeting in Norfolk in August 2017 we'd had several key discussions about potential partners led by John Chrastka, founder of EveryLibrary. We participated in an exercise for which we listed everyone in the community who might care about school libraries and have a stake in them—everyone from local police to the chamber of commerce to parents to local literacy groups. For my own committee, I decided I wanted to include parents (ones connected to our PTO or district foundation) and also a couple of local business leaders. I also wanted to include school librarians, educational technologists, classroom teachers at all grade levels, and students. In addition, I wanted to gather student input more broadly in a variety of other ways.

I spent a great deal of time identifying committee members that I didn't know personally, especially parents who might have links to businesses. This was the most challenging part of the process for me, but it was interesting researching different community players and getting recommendations. I didn't have quite as much success in this area as I wanted, but I reached out to several business leaders connected with our district's business programs and influential parents on our education foundation, one of whom did join our team. I also reached out to community leaders and was thrilled that a staff member at our local children's museum, a local Westbank Community Library librarian, and a University of Texas librarian who had guided redesign of their space were willing to be part of our committee.

The next ingredient was adding teachers I knew from across the district who were innovators or who were classroom furniture experts so that we could benefit from their viewpoint. One of the unexpected things that happened was that as our committee began to form, we had only two males who had agreed to serve. I was trying hard to balance the committee in so many ways that balancing for gender had escaped me. (Something I'll pay closer attention to this year!)

I also included a district administrator and kept other administrators informed by e-mail throughout the process. Our assistant superintendent gave me the okay to go ahead with this plan, and we were off and running! To ensure participation, at the beginning of the process I sent the committee members invitations and dates for meetings. We had seven meetings, which included site visits of district schools, as well as visits to the brand-new Austin Public Library downtown (see figure 1), the University of Texas Perry Castañeda Library (see figure 2), and a new school library in a neighboring district.

Beginning the Process

The Lilead Fellows had an assignment to read a John Kotter article on leading change and eight ways change fails. The top reason change fails is that people don't feel a sense of urgency (1995). How could I make redesigning our school libraries seem urgent to this combined group of people who had never met before? Did they even know that school librarians support student learning or classroom teaching? Did they know what our new AASL Standards were or even that we have standards? I envisioned this group not only as one that could give advice for our project, but also as *future advocates* for our libraries. What information would they need to begin to provide leadership for our organization?

Data was the key. I spent a great deal of time crunching data from the district—the age of our school libraries, square footage of each library and the number of students served, our circulation statistics district-wide, the number of activities

each library hosted, and more. The graphs I created showing the age of each of our school libraries were especially impactful to developing a sense of urgency. It surprised even me how old the facilities were; 75 percent of our libraries hadn't been renovated in twenty years. The square footage per pupil statistics also showed disparities throughout the district that the committee members would observe in person when they toured the spaces.

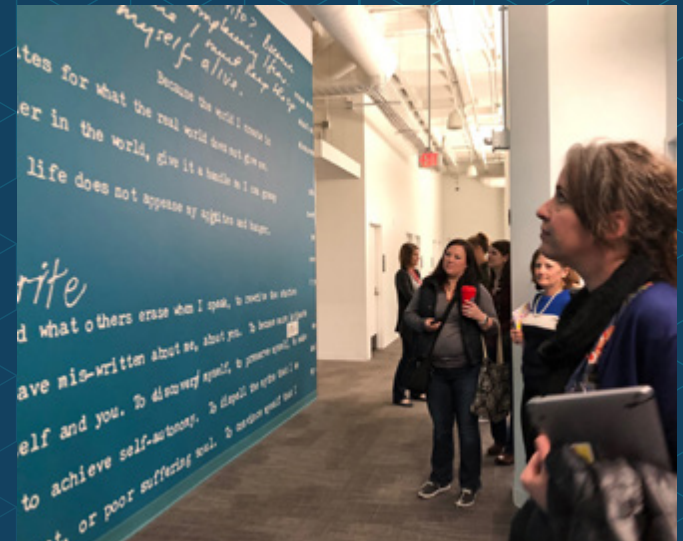
In my first presentation, I also shared the Future Ready Librarians Framework, the fact that new AASL Standards were upcoming, trends that libraries are facing, and photographs of what I considered future ready libraries. The committee's homework was to watch the inspiring TED Talk by Michael Bierut "How to Design a Library that Makes Kids Want to Read" <www.ted.com/talks/michael_bierut_how_to_design_a_library_that_makes_kids_want_to_read?language=en>.

At our second meeting, we "speed dated" the new AASL Standards (which had by then become available)

Figure 1. Library advisory committee members at new downtown Austin Public Library.



Figure 2. Tour of Perry Castañeda Library at University of Texas in Austin.



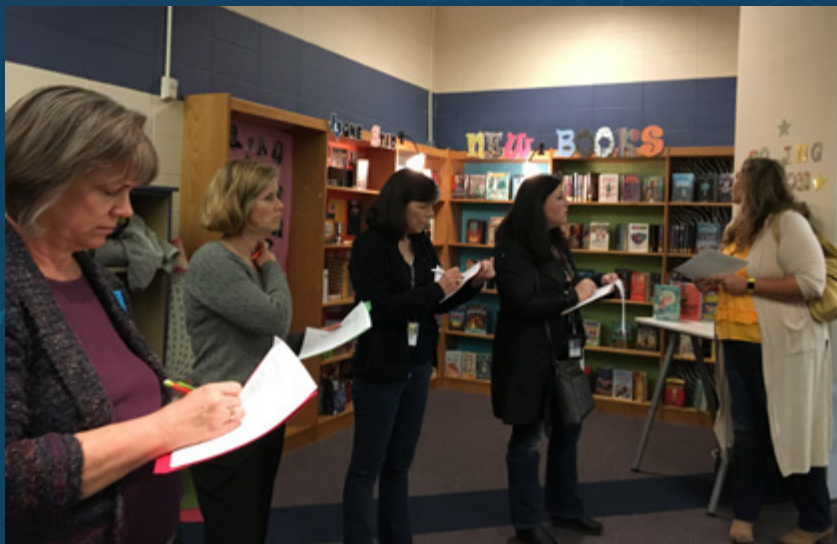


Figure 3. Committee members—rubric in hand—touring a school library.



Figure 4. Sycamore Springs Elementary School's new library.

by skimming them and then brainstorming how the standards might impact our district's library spaces. The students on the committee had interesting insights here, especially identifying "time" and the school schedule as real barriers to using our school libraries. The student desire was clearly there, but access would be a problem at some campuses—a circumstance that gave us a future goal to work on.

Tours Begin

After these two meetings, we began our tours, three libraries per meeting. Normally we met after school, but all of the tours took place during work hours and our district generously provided substitutes for the teachers and librarians on the committee. Interspersed during these three months of Eanes library tours, we toured other spaces, too.

I knew I wanted a rubric to help us objectively evaluate the libraries, and again this is where my Lilead cohort was so helpful. Jenny Umbarger, one

of my Lilead team members, was using a rubric for a library diversity walkthrough. She shared it with me, and I created a new rubric based on future ready goals to evaluate each aspect of our school library spaces. The rubric can be found at www.oercommons.org/authoring/26202-library-space-walkthrough.

Our district has 1:1 iPads. I would have done this rubric virtually, but not all committee members would have access. Therefore, we filled out the rubrics on paper (see figure 3). I included space for both a numeric ranking and descriptive notes on each rubric so we could really get a feel for committee members' impressions of each library. I compiled the data after each visit.

After the first tours, I felt I needed a more graphic depiction of the committee's impressions. The Center for the Future of Libraries had released a scatter plot rubric, which I modified for our use. Combining graphs from the whole committee gave us a visual representation

of each library's strengths and weaknesses. Also, during this same time, I asked our school librarians to interview students and, in combination with Google form surveys and Flipgrid.com videos, we gathered more student feedback about their vision for libraries.

Identifying Final District Recommendations

Our final two meetings involved pulling together data and findings into recommendations for the district. We also wanted to hone in on a mission statement or overarching statement about our school libraries. We did some "speed" mission statement writing at one of our meetings, looking at our district graduate profile, library standards, and our data. I gathered all of these mission statements for the committee to consider at the next meeting.

I also had somewhat painful brainstorming meetings with our own school librarians as we decided if we wanted to not only rebrand our

spaces but our name as well. After much discussion, we settled on the concept of the “libratory,” a term coined by Joyce Valenza for use in the school library/education field. It felt like it summarized the sort of space we wanted to create—one of experimentation and exploration of ideas and books. We also surveyed some students about names, and their feedback was fascinating and helpful. By the way, this is also where my work in Lilead helped. A book we read—*StrengthsFinder 2.0* by Tom Rath (Gallup 2007)—helped me learn how to approach different personalities and work through hard conversations.

At the final meeting, we organized recommendations under larger headings, like Critical and Creative Thinking, Technology in the Service of Learning, and so on. We grouped recommendations under each heading. What we found was that our recommendations about building future ready libraries evolved beyond just the “stuff” needed, but into policy and program recommendations as well.

For example, recommendations included adding staff at the middle schools so librarians could embed themselves in classrooms often, asking principals to examine the access provided to the library, asking elementary librarians to consider more flexible scheduling, and asking the district to include school librarians on the instructional partner team.

We also recommended increased use of mobile furniture, more mobile technology, and adding more TV monitors for promotional messages (realizing we are communicating with the YouTube generation). We wanted to glass-in quiet study and project rooms to support project creation and design for the diverse needs of students. We recommended mobile story steps instead of stationary ones to make elementary

spaces more flexible, suggested rethinking and shrinking front desk areas, adding connections to the outdoors, and actually relocating one library to a more-central campus location.

Follow-Up and Further Plans for Outreach

I organized the data and recommendations into a slide presentation that we presented in May to our superintendent, district cabinet, district budget leader, and assistant superintendents. After I finished the presentation and fielded questions, I felt unsure about the impact on the audience. I realized what I had thought of as a one-year project was actually a much longer one. I also realized if I wanted to get these items into the bond planning for the next year, I had better begin right away creating a follow-up plan for year two.

A great deal of outreach was involved in this process. Though I’m a bit of an introvert, the advanced planning helped me feel more comfortable leading this effort. I also learned a lot about listening and asking others what their goals were, rather than rushing in with my goals. Most of all, I learned the power of the library advisory committee and am determined that I will always have one from now on.

In the 2018–2019 school year, our team meets during the school day for some meetings and after school for others so that we can accommodate different people’s schedules. We continue to learn from the perspective of classroom teacher and student members; they each have a unique vantage point that is very helpful to our process.

Advice for Your Change Project

If you are leading your own change project, strategically build a

committee to support your effort. Make sure it is balanced. Communicate every step in the process to school leaders. Challenge your own leadership skills. Read widely in leadership texts. Make a strategic step-by-step plan and follow it. Seek help and find partners. Evaluate your process. Focus on your strengths. Be bold. And if you think you are being bold, ask yourself, “Is this bold enough?” Be brave. Find ideas to inspire and support you and put them in front of you on your desk.

Most importantly of all, think of your learners first in all that you do, instead of putting the library first. Then, organize your team and get going!



Carolyn Foote, a technolibrarian at a small suburban school district near Austin, Texas, is passionate about design for

students. She is a member of the advisory group for ALA’s Center of the Future of Libraries, the advisory board for School Library Connection, and has been recently published in *Texas Library Journal*. She frequently presents for the Texas Computer Education Association, the Texas Library Association, and the International Society for Technology in Education. She feels honored to have been named a White House Champion of Change.

Work Cited:

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