

FEATURE



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ALL VOICE SCHOOL LIBRARY ACCESS JOURNEY

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It is hard to believe my five-year-old daughter will enter kindergarten this year. Her preschool class is preparing for a graduation ceremony in which they will sing and walk across the stage to the cheers and camera snaps of family members. My daughter, who is extremely bashful, has been quietly rehearsing the words and sign-language motions of the song they will perform. Her soft little voice mouths the words, “With just one small voice singing out a song, with just one small voice singing sweet and strong. One by one they’ll grow and together sing along. And then soon all the world will be singing” (Hartman 1995). Her hands sway and turn to the sign-language motions her teacher taught her. It is in this moment that it hits me: This is my song, and these words describe my advocacy journey. While I certainly do not want to steal her precious moment in the spotlight, I cannot help but smile at how the song’s words apply to my own school library advocacy plan.

You see, I feel like I am “one small voice.” I am a rather new school librarian (wrapping up my second year) at a tiny public school in a rural part of Virginia. When I say tiny, I mean only one class per grade level, kindergarten through fifth grade, with a total student population of 110 students. Due to the school’s size, I work a half-time position (2.5 days per week). I see all classes for lessons and check-out one day a week, and I collaborate with teachers and pull groups for enrichment and remediation one day a week. The half day is reserved for library administration work such as ordering, processing, and reshelving books.

In theory, there is nothing wrong with my schedule. My position does fulfill Virginia’s Standards of Quality for a school with fewer than three hundred students. It is a wonderful little schedule

at a wonderful little school, but there is just one big problem: there is not enough time in my one flex day per week to:

- Collaborate and coteach with teachers,
- Oversee reading programs,
- Provide curated teacher resources,
- Run makerspaces,
- Work with small groups,
- Update websites,
- Fix technology issues,
- Hold book clubs,
- Work on the yearbook, and
- Other teaching, research, collaboration, and enrichment experiences for students and teachers in my school!

The many hats school librarians wear are not easily tucked into one day’s work.

Finding My Voice

I tended to feel powerless since, up until May 2019, I was not fully certified as a school librarian. I began my school library position when I started my Master’s program, and, my! have I learned and grown immensely during my studies. Now that I have wrapped up my Master’s in school librarianship, I see the potential for what a school library can and should be. I have learned important lessons about accessibility, intellectual freedom, privacy, digital citizenship, inquiry-based learning, and other curricular information and digital skills. I have learned that the school library should be the heart of the school, open and welcome to all as a safe haven for inquisitive minds. Students should be engaged in authentic learning experiences filled with 21st-century skills. The

school library is no longer a place of quiet shushing and strict limitations.

In graduate school, I was required to create a mission and vision statement for my school library. I decided to create my library vision statement to align with AASL’s Standards, highlighting the six Shared Foundations:

The vision of the school library program is to **Include** all students and to create a safe community for learning. We aim to teach students how to **Inquire** and think critically about the world around them in order to solve both internal and external problems. Students will learn to **Explore** new topics through a variety of formats, causing them to create new experiences, reflect, and grow. They will **Engage** ethically and legally in the creation and sharing of new knowledge and will **Curate** resources of personal relevance. Students will **Collaborate** with others to broaden perspectives and achieve common goals.

Once I became certified and created my mission, I felt my voice growing stronger.

After realizing that the library at my school was not living up to its full potential due to scheduling, I began to advocate for added time in my school library for the 2019–2020 school year. The principal was very open to increasing the contracted library time. However, it was evident that the battle would be getting the central office on board to make this a priority in the budget.

My county is in a rural part of Virginia, which means our school district tends to have lower teacher pay scales and limited funding. Each year the superintendent fights for dollars and pinches pennies to keep the schools functioning properly. This year, the district

hired a new superintendent whose first priority was to provide a pay raise to all employees. That meant that new positions and more hours for current employees would have to take a back seat.

In order to achieve my goal of more time in the school library, first and foremost the district administrators needed to understand the deficits that the school faced due to the limited two-and-a-half-day schedule each week. I wrote a report detailing some of the difficulties faced due to this limited library schedule and sent it to the director of academics, the school library supervisor, and superintendent. The report highlighted how research projects took weeks and weeks to complete since I was able to work collaboratively with classes only once a week. I explained that some teachers in the lower grades were unable to work with me since upper-grade collaboration and remediation and enrichment took priority. The report also explained that in my absence, I was not able to help teachers find books and resources or help them with technology issues.

Another issue that needed to be made known to the administrators was accessibility for students to check out books. In the existing schedule, all students check out books on Wednesday. If children finish reading their books on Thursday evening, they have to wait until the following Tuesday at the earliest to exchange their books for new reading materials. It was pointed out that this is a major disadvantage for students and hinders them from continually learning and growing.

Sharing these academic concerns and requests was the first step in my advocacy journey. I had to be vocal and raise my small voice to those stakeholder decision-makers that mattered most. Armed with all these important academic needs, I

requested one or one-and-a-half additional days added to my school library schedule for next year. I did not ask to work full-time because I wanted to present an offer that was realistic and would not impede on the overall budget. I did not think that a full-time request would be seen as a need or a priority by

teachers mentioned how thrilled they were with the collaborative lessons that were in progress and how students were excited about research, community involvement, poetry, and reading. Others shared how helpful it was to have a school librarian who helped students understand plagiarism and who

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district administrators and budget decision-makers. Yet, even one extra day would solve many of the collaboration and accessibility issues.

Adding Voices to My Advocacy Song

The next part of my daughter's graduation song says, "One by one they'll grow and together sing along." What a beautiful sight it was to see others joining in on my song so that my voice was not the only one heard. As a result of my work in the library, I heard coworkers share conversations in the office about the remarkable happenings taking place in the school library. Word of mouth spread quickly. The

even graded rubrics and citations. Many of these comments were made in the presence of administration and other stakeholders, such as the parent-teacher organization. Several educators noted how nice it would be to have me working in the school library for more time each week. I received more affirmations as the year progressed:

"We've never had a librarian do this before."

"What an engaging experience for our students."

"We are so blessed to have you here."

These words warmed my heart and encouraged me not to lose hope. Hearing these remarks, the principal had even more reason to join in the song and advocate for more school librarian time to help with technology and research and to increase student checkout time.

Now that others were singing along, I could hear our voices growing louder. I certainly did not want to be impatient or selfish. I knew that the principal had also requested more time for the part-time Title I teacher and school counselor. However, I wanted to impress upon the central office administrative staff why this request is so important to our students. I shared an article with the administration and the director of academics by Deb E. Kachel and Keith Curry Lance titled, "Why

School Librarians Matter: What Years of Research Tell Us" (2018). This article provided an up-to-date look at research statistics regarding school librarians' link to student achievement. It also highlighted the role of the school librarian and how to leverage the school library. District administrators were grateful for the information and assured me that they were doing everything they could to add time into the library schedule.

Not long after I sent the article, I received a confirmation that I would be given one extra day to work as school librarian at my perfectly tiny school. I was overjoyed! Some of the other requests for more staffing time at my school were rejected, which made me feel that my advocacy efforts made the difference.

To my surprise, I was also invited to meet with the superintendent about a possible position for my other one-and-a-half "days off." He disclosed his vision for one individual to manage the county's social media sites and promote student and teacher accomplishments. I told him that my graduate classes had specifically prepared me to promote school programs using social media, and I felt like this would certainly be in my skill set. Since I already update the school's website and create the yearbook, I am familiar with the photo permission rules and already have access to photographs. I would work with a liaison from each school to put the school district's best face forward on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram. These additional duties would make me a full-time employee

Tips for Advocating for Your School Library

Below are my tips for advocating for changes to a school library based on my experience:

- **Be vocal.** Make necessary requests but do so with a humble spirit. Aggressive behaviors or negative attitudes could turn others off to any appeal. Be professional in the approach without begging or nagging.
- **Explain the need.** Do not assume that others understand the significance or effect a request may have. Many teachers, administrators, and stakeholders do not fully understand the role and impact of the school librarian and the school library. Educate others on the matter of the school's and students' needs.
- **Be reasonable.** School library requests may be driven by money, scheduling, or some other priority.

Whatever the ask, be sure that it is attainable. Baby steps in the right direction are better than standing still and remaining stagnant in a role that does not serve students well or meet equitable accessibility to a strong school library.

- **Be faithful in the small things.** Why should one be trusted with additional resources if he or she is not able to complete the small tasks well? Proving one's worth by faithfully completing the current tasks to the best of one's ability is critical for successful advocacy.
- **Make an impression.** While speaking up is necessary, it is more impactful to work in a manner that encourages others to advocate for the school library and/or access to a full-time certified school librarian. By building relationships and

influencing others to see how crucial the request is for the benefit of everyone in the school, others will begin to tell the school library's stories that are needed to increase support.

- **Be persistent.** My request took almost an entire year to come to fruition. If it had been rejected, I would have continued to ask again the following year. Do not give up on something that will change the school library for the better and have a positive effect on student access and their academic success.

Let the voices of all school librarians band together into a beautiful anthem of how indispensable school librarians are. Alone, we may be just one small voice. But together, "All the world will be singing" (Hartman 1995).

again, which is an added plus. This had not been anywhere on my radar!

If I had not advocated for myself, I would not have received additional time to enhance the school library and would certainly not have been offered this fabulous opportunity to promote the school district. Of course, I will ensure that, through this added role of social media content manager, the outstanding school libraries at each school will be visible and well-represented!

Conclusion

Each school library advocacy journey is different. Many do not have such a small voice as me, but may have a cadre of peers with whom to join forces to advocate for the school library. Some may be experienced librarians with decades under their belt. Many librarians who may serve

hundreds of students in a thriving and diverse area are often suddenly faced for the first time with having to advocate to even retain the current school library. No matter the current state of the librarian's job, the state of the school library, or the budget constraints, hopefully, a part of this story can offer hope and encourage others in some form or fashion today.



Naomi Giles is the school librarian at Temperance Elementary School in Amherst, Virginia. She was awarded the Frederick G. Melcher Scholarship through the Association for Library Service to Children in 2017 during her Master's degree program. She is a member of the Virginia Association of School Librarians.

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