

ADVOCACY 2021 STYLE & BEYOND



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"I am a school librarian, and it's the best job on the planet." Whenever I begin a presentation, keynote address, or talk, I proudly share this mantra with the audience conveying my love for school libraries. While some may view this proclamation as corny, it expresses my deep and abiding love for libraries that began when I was in preschool and continues to this day. My love of listening to and reading stories dates back to my early childhood in University Park, Illinois, a small town located in suburban Chicago, Illinois. This sacred space sparked my curiosity and imagination so much that every day I would beg my teacher for a pass to the Hickory Elementary school library. I enjoyed reading the works of Virginia Hamilton, Judy Blume, and Eloise Greenfield and anything that had a Disney stamp on it.

When I became a school librarian, I wanted the same experience, joy, and opportunities for discovery for my students. Unfortunately, in some school districts across the country, there are threats to this space that services our most important patron: the student. These threats have evoked change that has disrupted programming and worst, caused the closure of the school library as a whole. What can school librarians, students, and parents do when this

takes place? Advocate for school libraries and their school librarian, the equalizers in K–12 education.

Advocating for Our Students' Rights

The late Georgia Congressman and civil rights icon John Lewis inspired all of us to get into #Good Trouble: "When you see something that is not fair, not right, not just, you have an obligation to find a way to get in the way" (Seelye 2020). This quote was a personal wake-up call for me to spring into action and advocate for school library programming and librarians. Before beginning the journey into advocating for school libraries and librarians, one must truly understand what advocacy means. The definition of advocacy means taking action in favor of, recommending, or fighting for a cause or supporting/defending others. School librarians and supporters must believe in this statement:

Our students have the educational right to have access to a robust, well-stocked school library program run by a certified school librarian regardless of zip code. — K.C. Boyd

Advocacy is not a new practice but one that is now performed more in various districts/states than others. To advocate for today's school libraries and school librarians, librarians must revisit discussions/lessons taught by professors while enrolled in MLIS programs. This knowledge will provide a foundation and will help identify how the current challenges are impacting the field. For example, interviews of sixteen library leaders from across the country that represent large city districts, medium-size suburban and small rural schools, as well as some affluent and lower income communities, revealed the trend of a high mobility rate of school and district leadership (Kachel and Lance 2018). This data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics revealed a loss of 9,200 full-time equivalent school librarians (15 percent) nationwide from 2009–10 to 2015–16, with more than 10,000 total losses since 2000 (Lance 2018). Strong school libraries require time to develop and grow within a school district, and the data provided offers advocates with the language or bullet points needed to present a strong argument for debate. Advocating for school libraries requires school library supporters arm themselves with patience, understanding, and most importantly

knowledge. This knowledge base is critical for advocates to educate change agents when school officials do not understand our programs or the school librarian's role. Having this knowledge also encourages the rejection of ideology or comments made by uninformed district and school leadership.

The first step for school librarians in their advocacy journey is to understand how the school system operates. This means identifying the district's major educational initiatives, the overall strategic plan, and the three- to five-year programming goals for the district. School librarians and their supporters must become familiar with these goals and align them to the school library's goals, the AASL *National School Library Standards*, and your specific state board of education goals. From my experience, some of my district leaders were surprised to learn that there are national standards school librarians adhere to.

It is at this critical point where school library practitioners will become a teacher/educator for the educated. This is your opportunity to inform district stakeholders about the important role the school library and school librarian play in schools and districts. First, school librarians can detail how student reading scores are higher and students experience higher gains over time at schools/districts where the school library is run by a certified librarian compared with schools/districts where the staffing is either run by non-endorsed staff or library assistants (Lance and Holfshire 2011). School librarians and supporters can also arm themselves with district/state education standards and crosswalk them to the AASL Standards. While this practice is not new, it is one that needs to be repeated over and over again as some of our colleagues in education are unaware that there

are national standards aligned with school libraries. Armed with this information, they can provide personal narratives of how when these standards are adhered to how student achievement increases and how students excel academically across the curriculum.

This is your opportunity to amplify the school librarian's role as a change agent in your school district. Most importantly, this is the opportunity to remind your school officials how a great library program run by a certified librarian can educate all learners by encouraging inquiry and inspiring the next generation of leaders. School librarians and school

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libraries should inspire leadership like that of the late Congressman John Lewis, creativity like that of Lin-Manuel Miranda, determination as seen in climate activist Greta Thunberg, and breaking the glass ceiling like Vice President Kamala Harris.

There's no set "how-to" guide to advocacy. Advocacy evolves and changes as do the demands on public education in every school/district/state. As a best practice, school librarians should revisit knowledge acquired during their MLIS program. This information will serve as a foundation for their messaging as they move forward in developing a strong advocacy message

that will impact decisions made at the school and district levels.

Advocacy Is Displayed in Many Forms

In a climate where school budget cuts threaten the closure of school libraries, advocating for students' rights is more important than ever. In Detroit, Michigan, seven student plaintiffs sued the state for the landmark constitutional right to literacy (Levin 2020). The case settlement found that the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment requires that when a state establishes a public school system, no child living in that state may be denied equal access to schooling. Simply stated, students must have the right to read and the right to literacy. This is what we need to incorporate into our messaging, while advocating for our students.

Our advocacy can be done through school librarians and their stories. Whether you are new, tenured, end of career, or retired, everyone can help. New/non-tenured school librarians can simply document and share the life of their programs. They can inform all school community stakeholders of the good work being done in school libraries through school/district newsletters and/or presentations at education meetings such as PTO/PTA meetings or school board meetings where district officials love to begin the meeting with the good news of the district. It may take a little persistence and patience to gain access to these important meetings, but once granted access these meetings offer an important audience to shine a light on the school library and share the beauty of our programs and our work.

Tenured school librarians can perform the same tasks as their newbie counterparts and advocate

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more aggressively. They can utilize social media with carefully crafted messaging that highlights not only the life of their library programs, but also how their work aligns to current research. These school librarians can also share model school districts locally and nationally that have exemplary school library programming. This band of school library leaders are critical as they have a real-time relationship with students and parents and can engage their support at a deeper level. These practitioners are also more familiar with district goals and objectives around academic achievement.

Our soon-to-be-retired and retired librarians are the backbone of school library advocacy efforts. These skilled practitioners not only provide motivational support and valuable advice but also possess a wealth of knowledge and information. These exemplary librarians also have developed long-term valuable relationships with supporters from the community who are active in civic/political activities that directly impact the school community. Finally, our soon-to-be-retired and retired librarians can provide additional support by forming advisory committees with school advocates for schools within their communities. All of our peers are valued allies in this fight and play important roles as we advocate for school libraries and librarians in our communities.

Don't Get Angry, Get Strategic

Do I get frustrated when my program has been overlooked or disrespected, or when a principal or co-worker just doesn't understand my role in the learning community? Do I feel disrespected as an educated African-American woman when others attempt to silence my voice or dismiss my opinions? Yes, I do; however, I've learned how to turn that frustration and anger into something more productive. I become laser focused and strategic. Advocacy is not easy work; it requires long-term commitment and dedication. It's tiring, sometimes lonely work, especially for those who have an optimistic worldview of the probable outcomes that others may not share that same vision. Years of experience working in three school districts have taught me that you must be open to moving the needle forward to work toward change.

With our school systems becoming increasingly more data driven, I can admit my mind has often gone into overdrive figuring out how school librarians can be included in the critical data. As we all know, if we do not demonstrate our work as school librarians and inform our school communities about the good works we perform daily, it could be perceived that we are not contributing to the learning community. By familiarizing myself with my school district's goals and objectives I can crosswalk these goals



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and objectives to my daily practice. This practice alone provides me with a blueprint for effectively marketing and branding my library program.

When you take on a strategic mindset, it is important to set obtainable goals that you should try to meet. One of my goals this year was to share the beauty and importance of school libraries in places where I would not normally venture into, such as speaking to a group of non-librarians, granting a podcast interview for a technology innovator, or even serving on a panel where you are the sole representative for school libraries. National education conferences designed solely for content-level classroom teachers, principals, and superintendents offer another venue to highlight the importance of school libraries and librarians.

Another way to be strategic is to use the same language and tools to analyze student achievement as our principals and superintendents. While some school librarians reject the notion that libraries should be data driven, the academic climate we live in now requires us to shift our thinking and practice. Using that critical and rich data, like the

reports feature in our electronic circulation system, and connecting it to student achievement/scores can greatly assist us with our messaging about school libraries. Circulation statistics (without identifying types of books or student names) can provide district leaders with an idea of how required and leisure reading can support fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Moreover, these statistics also can provide school officials with a snapshot of the foot traffic in our school libraries and daily activities.

Tracking digital resource usage for our digital resources can also reveal how students utilize supplementary materials; the digital resource use statistics are a direct extension of the lessons taught in the classroom. Monthly, quarterly, and yearly reports are critical for school librarians as they give our busy administrators an overview of our programs. This data can be inserted into their own messaging in many ways. They can report this data to the state board of education and to parents when describing the overall academic achievement of students within the district. They can also use the data when applying for grants. These reports generated through the

school library can have an indelible impact on district officials making important decisions on staffing, funding, or even a school library's livelihood of a program.

Pushing through Adversity

Communication is key when working toward a common goal. Advocating for today's school library calls for all stakeholders to exercise patience and understanding, first with district and school-based leaders who may not understand or recognize a certified school librarian's skillset, and second with teachers and support staff who may have varying levels of experience and understanding of the school librarian's role. We must give our librarian the opportunity to learn and develop a growth mindset that is supportive of advocacy work. This also calls for all parties to "let go of their privilege," meaning that we must maintain a global view so that everyone takes part in advocating for your fellow school librarians regardless of employment status. We must adopt the attitude that we are all in this together. Throughout the country, school libraries have also been grossly impacted in some rural and suburban communities, along

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with cities and states. If we would all take a stand together and advocate for change, we could maximize our voices for positive action.

Here's a couple of tips to remember when dealing with adversity while advocating for your school library:

- Communication is the key. Working with others requires communication, and communicating can benefit all who are committed to advocacy work.
- Be respectful. Understand that everyone can contribute at their own comfort level; everyone's opinion and views are valid.
- Gently "check" or "correct" your peers. Sometimes we have to pull our peers to the side and correct them with love rather than hostility.
- Establish boundaries. This work is tough and it's important that you have a healthy work/life balance so that you can deal with the stress of tackling challenges you are faced with.
- Value your past mistakes. Learn from your mistakes—they will make you strong and more reflective, and they will help guide you as you continue advocating for change.
- Adversity provides valuable insights. Adversity challenges us to look within and reflect on our most inner thoughts and feelings.
- Embrace adversity as a chance for opportunity. What have you learned from your advocacy efforts? Adversity helps build character, which is an important trait to possess even during the toughest of times.
- Refuse to give up. There's always light at the end of the tunnel. Don't give up!

- Keep a positive mindset. Despite the obstacles and setbacks, embed in your mind that you must remain positive even when dealing with the toughest of opposition.

School libraries are more than backdrops for photoshoots and district press conferences. They are special places in each school where students can access information, explore materials, voice their opinions, and be their true and authentic selves. It's a place where the shyest of students will meet new friends from similar/different backgrounds and find their voice in the world through print/digital discovery and collaborative activities. Facilitated by caring, skilled, and credentialed school library practitioners, libraries are truly the heart of the school.

Advocating for school libraries and school librarians is arduous and challenging work; simply stated it's hard. I truly believe school librarians are up for the task; we have the talent, intelligence, and drive to perform this special work. I am



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Association for Library Service to Children. She serves as the District of Columbia ALA DC Chapter Councilor and as a member of ALA's Ethnic and Multicultural Exchange Roundtable. She received the 2020 Distinguished Service Award from the Washington DC Library Association and the 2015 Leadership Award from the Black Caucus of the American Library Association. K.C. was also recognized as a "Mover and Shaker: Change Agent" by Library Journal in 2015. Her website is www.kcboyd.com.

forever the dreamer, optimist, and school librarian who will fight for her students' rights. I want the same experience in school libraries for my students that I had as a curious child. I want to see students beg for a pass to the library just like I did when I was a student at Hickory Elementary, and so should you. It's time to stand up and speak out. Let's support each other in doing this work—our students deserve it.

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