





MANAGING THE UNPRECEDENTED

HOW SCHOOL LIBRARIANS ROSE TO THE CHALLENGE OF A **TOPSY-TURVY** YEAR



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Unprecedented. We have heard that word so many times in the past eighteen months that it has all but lost its meaning. But it's a fitting word for what we experienced from March 2020 until now. In the pages that follow, three school librarians share their perspectives on how they handled such unprecedented times. They speak more often than not of their tireless efforts to support their students, but there is also a vulnerability present that illuminates the struggles they faced on a daily basis.

School librarians (and educators in general) are tough and resilient, but also kind and caring. They are flexible and have the ability to wear SO many hats, but they can only continue to do so if they care for themselves as well as their students. In the vignettes that follow, you'll find information on how one school librarian served (and continues to serve) the unique needs of her BIPOC students. You'll find a raw and personal (and probably familiar and validating) account of the ups and downs of the pandemic. And you'll find ideas for serving your students' social-emotional needs in unprecedented times and beyond.

These stories are proof of what we already knew: there is something for everyone at the school library because of school librarians!



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LEADING EMPOWERING YOUTH

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As a child, I knew when I got older, I wanted to have a meaningful impact on the lives of others. I thought for a moment that I would pursue medical school and become a doctor, but the blood made me squeamish. I entertained becoming a government official and pursuing a law degree, but I had no interest in studying Latin or reviewing torts. As I weighed my options through the years, the one aspect all my potential career choices shared was I would be of service. I ultimately went on to become a public librarian. Though this role was dynamic and fulfilling, I yearned for the classroom.

As educators, school librarians can transform the library into an oasis where inquiry and scholarship meet virtually and in person. My co-campus librarian, Christina Gavin, and I are tasked with protecting and nourishing the curious and developing minds of our students. To be successful, a school librarian must be highly intelligent academically, emotionally, and socially. We must anticipate the needs of our students and be ready with information. This was never more pertinent than during the height of the Coronavirus pandemic crisis. We discovered so much about ourselves and our students, the main takeaway being we are all resilient.

This role isn't for the faint of heart—you have to become a superhero. Many of us never imagined that we would be faced with such confusion and peril, yet in March 2020, we were thrust into

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My school library's Instagram account and website offered students ways to engage with me and the school library's resources.

OUT LOUD

THROUGH SCHOOL LIBRARIANSHIP

a world of uncertainty. But we took action.

Though initially scary, in retrospect the crisis was an opportunity for many of us to flex our talents. Many of us adopted multiple hats: technology specialist, educational leader, and unofficial therapist among many other roles. Our digital collections, websites, and social media presences all became more robust to accommodate virtual and hybrid learning.

The schools I serve educate predominantly BIPOC students of various cultural and economic backgrounds. Unfortunately, the digital divide continues to disproportionately affect BIPOC students; however, every effort was made by my school to equip students with the tools needed to provide equitable access. Though awkward and challenging at times, the school community as a whole was patient as we worked to get students the tools and access they needed to continue their education.

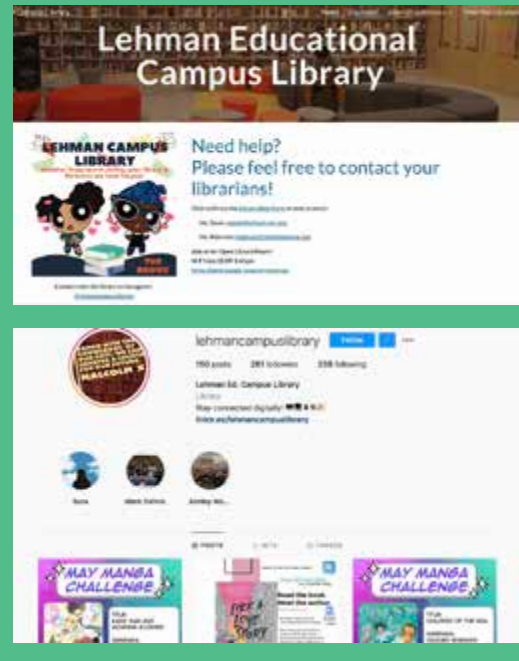
In New York City, there are more than one thousand middle and high schools within the New York City Department of Education, but more than half lack a school library or a certified school librarian. In a 2017 *School Library Worldwide* article Megan Harper asserted, "much research has confirmed that school librarians do positively influence and impact academic achievement. A lesser-known role is that of how a school librarian positively affects students' feelings of being cared for and how thoughtfully designed instruction, collocation of a collection, and the school library facility all contribute to helping students who hurt" (2017). Sadly, in many schools the school

library is erroneously viewed as expendable.

When school librarians were called to step up during school closures, we didn't hesitate. The pandemic sparked the need for school librarians to lead tough and awkward conversations on race, financial inequity, health disparities, and mental health, among other topics. One of the biggest challenges we faced was a rise in misinformation and disinformation. Librarians went into overdrive to combat this troubling trend, continuously vetting and providing timely and accurate resources to our colleagues and students. A school librarian's ability to adapt and empower threads the cape that allows our students to soar.

As school librarians, we are tasked with fostering emotionally intelligent citizens, and we take this duty seriously. Currently, in addition to my virtual librarian duties, I co-moderate an identity club on campus, the Black Student Union (BSU). The Black Student Union provides all students with a safe space to celebrate and acknowledge the contributions of Black people as we muse on current events and the future. Union meetings feature credible multimedia resources including videos, podcasts, and live discussions with experts. It meets virtually weekly on Fridays with approximately ten students and a few faculty members. My co-moderator and I provide prompts to our students that lead to rich, lively, and engaging conversations.

We anticipate this club becoming a major staple of our learning community well beyond this year as



our administration and students have shared with us how much they love our club. Nothing gives us more validation than when a student tells us they now see something differently or that their view has been affirmed after ingesting information we've shared.

Work Cited:

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BREATHING IN A NEW ATMOSPHERE

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Ask any educator and they will tell you that the most popular phrases used over the past year and a half included “synchronous/asynchronous learning,” “remote working,” and “Can you see my screen?” Insurmountable hours behind blue-light and high-glare devices have put physical and emotional strain on teachers, students, and families. Piling new initiatives on top of already heavy workloads caused exhaustion, burnout, high turnover rates, and educational setbacks. Let’s get real: We all considered quitting at one point or another over the past year and a half.

Accelerated learning, remedial intervention, and academic placement for students who fell behind will more than likely take precedence over many academic needs this school year, but we can also take small steps toward prioritizing our students’ emotional health. As a Texas school librarian in the Rio Grande Valley, a predominantly Hispanic region, I have witnessed first-hand how disproportionately affected my students are by state assessments and standards. Large percentages of our students who struggle with English

as a second language often fall below proficiency levels on state exams known as the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness and the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System. Shifting the library’s programming to a digital environment was difficult enough without also considering the social, emotional, and creative needs of my students.

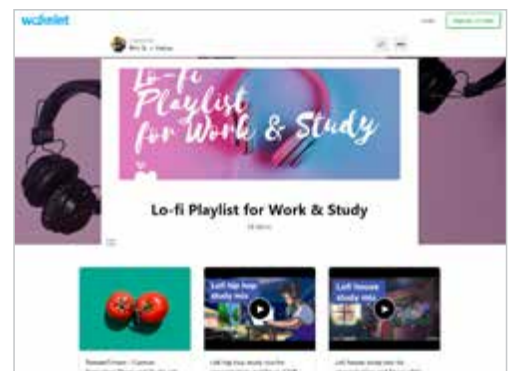
During the 2020–2021 school year, students often voiced their longing for their school experience, friends, and the extracurricular activities that kept them active during the school year. While I am not a mental health professional, more than ten years of experience in education have taught me that attention to students’ holistic well-being impacts their overall academic achievement. The evolution of my school library’s virtual programming reflected my students’ academic needs but lacked opportunities for students to practice coping skills, empathy, community building, and strategies to foster their autonomy.

In collaboration with my campus guidance counselors, and as part of a district-wide event, my school library created opportunities to practice mindfulness and positive

online presence by participating in the 2021 Great Kindness Challenge. The Great Kindness Challenge encourages school communities to practice kind acts daily both in and out of the classroom. Their website, <thegreatkindnesschallenge.com>, includes free resources and activities that campuses or districts can promote each day of the week, along with fifty-plus social-emotional (SEL) lessons that can be incorporated in the classroom. Due to the success of our school’s participation, our campus is officially a Kindness Certified School, and I was recognized as a Kindness Challenge Ambassador.

Some of the most effective and engaging moments were when students were allowed to share their creativity. Our school library offered students creative outlets by uploading free-for-use coloring pages on Whiteboard.chat so the students and I could color together, using Google Jamboard to complete word search puzzles as a group, creating shared musical projects on Chrome Music Lab, and voting on “This or That” questions for “Fun Friday” question-of-the-week challenges. While these moments seemed to deviate from the academic banter that takes place during the typical school day, it gave our students a relaxed space with hosted activities that aren’t designed for student evaluation.

LET’S GET REAL: WE ALL CONSIDERED QUITTING AT ONE POINT OR ANOTHER OVER THE PAST YEAR AND A HALF.



A few examples of self-help activities I incorporated into my school library activities for 2020–2021.



Other self-help suggestions that I offered students or staff often stemmed from my own personal interests. Listening to instrumental music while I work has increased my productivity. Creating a preferred work environment by adjusting the ambiance is something I love to promote with my campus. I often refer to Wakelet to help me curate 60bpm, lo-fi, and binaural music playlists for study and work. Playlists include a direct link to Tomato-Timers.com, a website designed to include work and stretch break timers inspired by the Pomodoro Technique. This technique helps improve productivity by focusing on a single task within a 25-minute session, which is then followed with a five-minute break. These tips encouraged better work efficiency while simultaneously incorporating opportunities for mental and physical breaks, which in turn reduce the likelihood of burnout or screen fatigue.

My favorite activity, however, has been the creation of our school library's gaming league. The school library hosts e-sport tournaments annually, but remote and hybrid scheduling inspired us to find new ways to invite students to take part in both virtual and physical multiplayer environments. Animal

THE SCHOOL LIBRARY HOSTS E-SPORT TOURNAMENTS ANNUALLY, BUT REMOTE AND HYBRID SCHEDULING INSPIRED US TO FIND NEW WAYS TO INVITE STUDENTS TO TAKE PART IN BOTH VIRTUAL & PHYSICAL MULTIPLAYER ENVIRONMENTS.

Crossing: New Horizons and Magic the Gathering gave our students an outlet to expand their gaming network. Animal Crossing fostered student empathy, financial literacy, and creativity—all necessary skills to succeed in the game. The use of in-game currency, island supplies, and communication with island residents play a role in a larger discussion about how to be resourceful and community leaders. For students who were new to the game, I created a virtual library on my own island for students to visit if they needed supplies, recipes, or items to grow their own islands.

The strategic trading card game Magic the Gathering is another game our school library provides. It has given our students exposure to new vocabulary and mythical lore, engages



them in higher-order thinking, and challenges their decision-making skills. The expansion of our club and its resources was made possible by a generous donation from MagiKids, a non-profit organization that donates Magic the Gathering kits and resources for institutions wanting to form their own student clubs. Both games were chosen based on my personal experience with each game



and student interest. I encourage my fellow school librarians, both novice and experienced gamers, to choose games that reflect their school library's unique interests and vision.

As we move onward and continue redefining our educational landscapes, the rationale for strong SEL programs in the library increases. Our students often turn to library spaces as centers for comfort and reassurance; therefore, our work to advocate for student resilience begins with day-to-day interactions. Your journey will require an abundance of understanding, care, forgiveness, and flexibility, but don't forget to give yourself time to breathe in and out all of the new and exciting possibilities.

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Additional Resources:

- Canva for Educators Application: <www.canva.com/help/article/apply-canva-for-education>.
- "JEMS Library Lo-Fi Playlist for Work and Study": <<https://wke.lt/w/s/2ZHM-k>>.
- MagiKids by Weirdcards: <<https://magikids.org/>>.
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OUR STUDENTS OFTEN TURN TO LIBRARY SPACES AS CENTERS FOR COMFORT & REASSURANCE; THEREFORE, OUR WORK TO ADVOCATE FOR STUDENT RESILIENCE BEGINS WITH DAY-TO-DAY INTERACTIONS.

PUTTING ON YOUR FULL ARMOR

ERIKA LONG

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Wow, we made it through a full year of pandemic librarian-ing! It's definitely one for the history books. After making it through the final weeks of the 2019–2020 school year, we had no idea what lay ahead for us the next fall. Old words and phrases took on deeper meaning as virtual/hybrid/distance learning became the most common terminology in eduspeak.

The school year began with many of us still reeling from racial injustice and calls to action, COVID-19 numbers fluctuating, and an economic crisis that our learners felt even though no child should feel the mental and emotional impact of their family's financial circumstance. Our learners and parents were ready to get to a new normal and truthfully, so were we librarians—even those of us struggling through a little anxiety about returning to buildings. After all, we are warriors and change agents. We wear armor built for this work. Only this time, I wonder if it was as strong as we always thought it was.

Many folks familiar with my brand know my passion for equity, diversity, and inclusion. So, it probably wouldn't be a huge surprise to anyone that last summer I made the intentional decision that I would return to school in August as a different school librarian. The racial turmoil that we fought through last year left me broken, speechless, and in tears for more days than I can count. I was determined I would use those emotions as fuel to continue my work and purpose on a deeper level, with less need for permission from

administration. However, before we were midway through the first quarter, I began to crumble despite regular therapy sessions. It felt like my role as a school librarian was shifting to media specialist—a title I loathe if for no other reason than "librarian" has always fit and what's not broken need not be fixed.

During the third week of school, I shared a vulnerable post on Instagram:

The start of week 3 being back at school and I am not okay. There's a new focus to librarianship. Not seeing kids. Drowning in laptops and hotspots. Providing solutions for teachers who are giving it their all to learn new technologies to provide quality instruction for their students. Six weeks ago I was excited about this school year, but this is a new normal I'm not sure I know how to master...I'm passionate about this work but it doesn't feel the same. (@notyomamaslibrarian 2020)

I was ready to walk away from the school library profession. I quit every day, sometimes multiple times a day. While the global pandemic drew the curtain on the many inequities in our

education system, it brought many districts into the twenty-first century regarding technology. The disadvantage, as we all know, was that teachers were not properly equipped to dive into remote/virtual instruction with no lead time or preparation; the job fell to school librarians. Last year, I—and you—were librarians, IT support, technology integration leaders, school counselors, social workers, equity champions, literacy leaders, collaborators, book and laptop delivery drivers, substitute teachers, social media influencers, webmasters, logistics experts, Title I coordinators, and **insert your other role(s) here**.

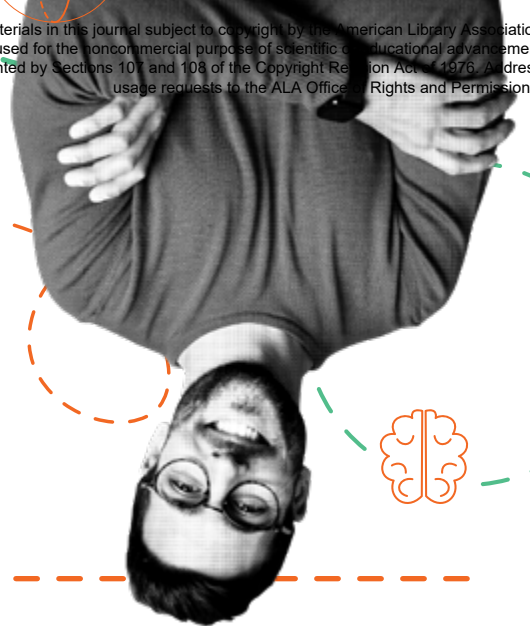
We woke every morning, put on our armor, prepared our mental spaces, and felt ready for whatever the day would throw at us. A routine of sorts: dress, fight, maybe sleep, repeat (180 times). We weren't always successful, but we made it. There were days our impact didn't feel the same as it did in previous years, but we made it. Many times we were approached with an extra task we didn't have the capacity for, but we did it anyway. Because we love our learners and our profession.

With three weeks remaining in the 2020–2021 school year, I ironically

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I'M DEDICATING TIME FOR SPECIFIC TASKS EACH DAY TO COMPLETE THEM UNINTERRUPTED.


I'M LEANING INTO THE WORDS "NO" AND "I CAN'T RIGHT NOW" TO PROTECT MY PRODUCTIVITY & MENTAL HEALTH.





headed to Instagram for another transparency post:

Three weeks into the school year, I made a very transparent post about how it felt to be a school librarian amid COVID-19. We are three weeks away from our last day of the 2020-21 school year and not much has changed. I am here, but I am not okay. Here's what I know:


 This year has been a whirlwind and there are more days I wanted to give up than there were days I felt my impact was deep.


 There's no library degree that could prepare us for this work.


 I failed to execute in spaces that I least expected yet had the best intentions.


 My brand development isn't on track because I allowed being an educator in the COVID era to be the highest priority.


Here's what I'm grateful for:


 **SOON** Though we are still in a pandemic, a break and a breakthrough are soon to come.

 Soft skills are as essential as pedagogical knowledge in this field of work.

 People who understand your struggle are willing to extend grace.

 A supporting cast that understands because they have as big a part in this story as you do.

 Self-care days like today. Even when you psych yourself up to believe you can push thru til the end, your body has a defining way of telling you you're wrong. Listen to it.

 I may not be okay, but I am here. (@notyomamas librarian 2021)

This school year won't be like the last. We've clearly defined the obstacles and know how we would have done things differently. Now is the time we get to implement those ideas. I'm making a concerted effort to empower staff to own simple technology troubleshooting issues so that I can focus on instruction and collaboration. I'm dedicating time for specific tasks each day to complete them uninterrupted. I'm leaning into the words "no" and "I can't right now" to protect my productivity and mental health. What are you taking with you into this fall?

You made it through a tough year. A new one is here. I hope you are okay. I am grateful you are still here.

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