

**Rachel Altobelli**  
rkaltobelli@gmail.com

**Kris Fedeli**  
kfedeli@ccboe.com

**Allison Dunn**  
allison.dunn@aps.edu

**Margaret Kennelly**  
mkennelly@ccboe.com

# DIVING INTO SCHOOL LIBRARIANSHIP DURING THE PANDEMIC

March 2020 kicked off a period of unprecedented change and new experiences for all of us, but for one group of school librarians, the months to follow would be incredibly unique. Imagine (or remember, if this was also your story!) embarking on an exciting new job as a school librarian...and beginning this journey between March 2020 and March 2021.

Below three elementary school librarians share their experiences as brand-new school librarians, seeing everything with new eyes at the exact moment in time when the school library profession (and indeed, the K–12 educational system) was busy reinventing, reimagining, and reconsidering every best practice. By drawing upon their creativity and the strong foundations of what a school librarian does and what a school library should be, these school librarians were able to create supportive library spaces for their students. Under incredibly challenging circumstances, they taught fundamental research and reading skills and did what school librarians do best—analyze, adapt, and move forward.

### Building a Community of Learners

Kris Fedeli of C. Paul Barnhart Elementary School in Waldorf, Maryland, seized upon serendipity, personal interests, and a willingness to find any possible way to build a community of learners during the 2020–2021 school year to bring the perennially popular topic of learning about insects to her library classes.

*My students and I delved into nonfiction books and online encyclopedias due to a chance encounter with a bright-green chrysalis on the screen of my home one Saturday morning. I gently pried the chrysalis off, took it inside, took pictures beside a ruler,*

## UNDER INCREDIBLY CHALLENGING CIRCUMSTANCES, THEY TAUGHT FUNDAMENTAL RESEARCH AND READING SKILLS AND DID WHAT SCHOOL LIBRARIANS DO BEST—ANALYZE, ADAPT, AND MOVE FORWARD.

*and then gently placed it in my butterfly cage and took it to school.*

*I decided to document the progress of the chrysalis on the library website, allowing students to track changes even though I saw them only once a week. At the time I was scheduled to see only pre-Kindergarten through second-grade students. For two weeks I took pictures daily and posted them on the website to document the changes, including my observations of the changes. I added links to fiction and nonfiction e-books, as well as database articles for students interested in delving deeper into caterpillars and butterflies.*

*My original lesson plans for the next few weeks involved sharing Maryland's Black Eyed Susan Award nominees, but those plans were pushed back to allow for an impromptu butterfly unit starting with a real chrysalis, observing the changes as we waited for it to hatch. We read fiction and nonfiction books, comparing and contrasting the two types of texts. I shared e-books that offered clear, vibrant pictures that we zoomed in on to closely inspect the photographs, as well as text features that offered additional tidbits of information about the butterfly. While reading the nonfiction e-books I introduced text features, sharing with students how facts are presented using a multitude of vehicles. During our second week of the Great Green Chrysalis project, I had the kids make predictions about whether it was a moth or a*

*butterfly and what kind of moth/butterfly it was.*

*I also used this time to introduce the digital encyclopedia PebbleGo, which we used to answer the question "Do moths form a chrysalis?" (Yes, they do, but they are called cocoons). We also looked up butterflies on PebbleGo and explored the three different types of species. By this time over a week had passed since the caterpillar had created its chrysalis and the color had changed from green to clear, allowing us to see the developing butterfly inside. We read through the life cycles of the three different butterflies after looking at the various pictures of the chrysalides, and we finally determined that a monarch butterfly would hatch from the chrysalis.*

*Two weeks had passed since I had found the chrysalis, and the husk of the chrysalis was so clear we could see the color of the wings through it, so I decided to take it home with me over the weekend. I hoped that I could take a video of the hatching and share it with all the kids. One beautiful fall Saturday morning I was up just in time to take a video of the butterfly hatching. It took about an hour for the wings to dry, and I took short videos to show the progress. My final video of that morning showed me releasing it onto a tree to start its migration south. I shared*

**I SHARED E-BOOKS THAT OFFERED CLEAR, VIBRANT PICTURES THAT WE ZOOMED IN ON TO CLOSELY INSPECT THE PHOTOGRAPHS, AS WELL AS TEXT FEATURES THAT OFFERED ADDITIONAL TIDBITS OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE BUTTERFLY.**

this video on the library webpage. I took multiple pictures daily and posted them on the library website with observations of the changes, in addition to the videos of the hatching butterfly.

During the second week of our chrysalis research with the early elementary grades I organized to drop into third through fifth grades, which were not in my schedule at the time. My fifteen minutes of fame with those grades started with a short introduction of myself and then I shared the already changing chrysalis. I shared pictures from the week before when it was bright green but was becoming transparent, and they were able to spot black and orange stripes with white dots. I invited them to ask questions and offer observations about the chrysalis, and then I challenged them to find out what kind of butterfly the chrysalis turned into. I shared the PebbleGO resource, showing them how to log in and search for resources, and told them they could e-mail me with their guess along with a link to the page where they found their information. I had about sixty responses. For those that were incorrect I directed them to look again. For those that correctly deduced that it was a monarch, I created a little “Great Job on Your Research Skills” card and mailed that

**IT WAS MY PERSONAL EXCITEMENT AND INTEREST IN INSECTS THAT BROUGHT A VIRTUAL LIBRARY CLASS TO LIFE. BY SHARING WHAT I LOVE WITH THE STUDENTS, THEY IN TURN WERE INTRIGUED AND INSPIRED TO DO RESEARCH AND JOIN ME ON THIS JOURNEY.**

along with a bookmark to them. In early May my assistant shared a live Brood X cicada he had just caught. This prompted a similar version of the butterfly lesson with the pre-Kindergarteners, third-, and fourth-graders I had at the time.

What made this so exciting for the kids was connecting a concrete object to reading and research, not to mention sharing my crazy excitement for insects with my students. It was my personal excitement and interest in insects that brought a virtual library class to life. By sharing what I love with the students, they in turn were intrigued and inspired to do research and join me on this journey.

### **Creating an Engaging and Supportive Library Space**

In a similar vein, Allison Dunn of Emerson Elementary School in Albuquerque, New Mexico, who started her position in March 2021, only a few weeks before her district shifted from remote to hybrid instruction, cycled through becoming a remote and then hybrid school librarian with incredible speed, while pursuing goals of creating an engaging and supportive library space and learning environment.

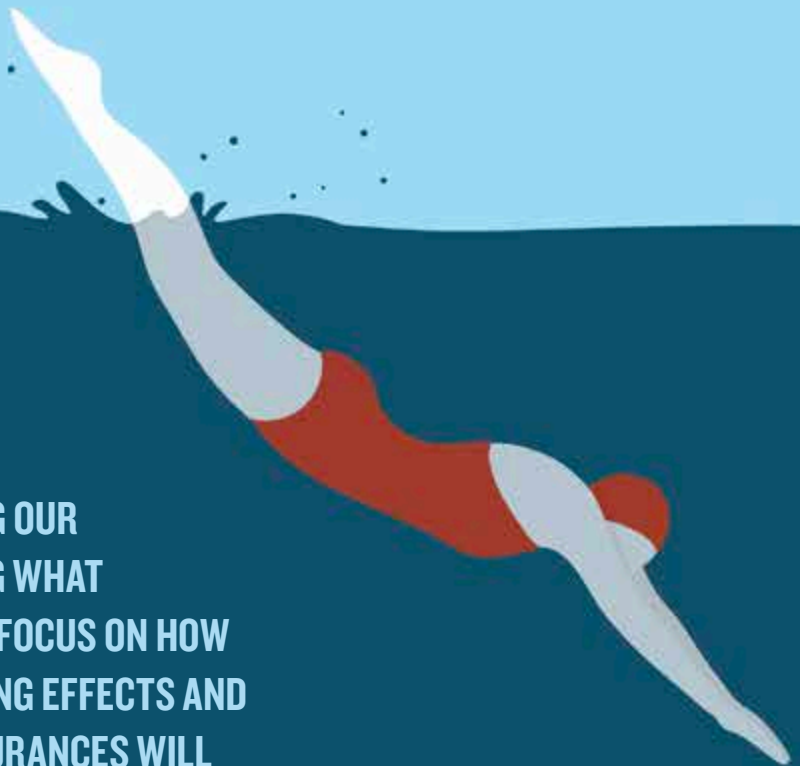
I was hired in late March of 2021, just as schools were welcoming back students into a hybrid format.

I inherited a school library that had been used for storage during COVID and needed its spring cleaning badly. I discarded much and found new places for all my teaching supplies, keeping the hybrid model in mind. To this end, I created a classroom space within our library and placed a desk near the white board, much like it was a student. Disinfectant spray and wipes and hand sanitizer also sat on that table for quick access. On my first day, after watching a first-grader pull his mask down so he could lay the red pencil sharpener squarely in his mouth, I realized the need to sanitize went deeper than I expected.

**I RELIED HEAVILY ON MY SEVENTEEN YEARS OF TEACHING EXPERIENCE TO FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH SUCH A BROADCAST, BUT I ADMIT THAT IT WAS A LOT OF EYES ON ME AS I WAS LEARNING MY NEW ENVIRONMENT.**

I was building new routines, systems, and procedures in my new environment—figuring it all out as I went—but with the broad eyes of the internet watching each step. Although teachers are used to speaking in front of audiences all day, there was something foreign and uncomfortable about having my computer monitor display my students, each in his/her own box—layered with family and community members tucked away in the background. It was a uniquely different audience. It piped in with questions at unexpected times. Sometimes one saw more sofas, walls, refrigerators, bedroom furniture than faces; parents could “poke in” to get immediate feedback at inopportune times. Though it looked nothing like a student, it could behave as an entire class when presented to; its eyes and ears were listening and often trying to keep up, but it couldn’t receive support the way our in-person kids could, and one could feel its occasional frustration and exasperation thinly veiled behind the screen.

Staff members who chose to keep their Google Meets live while I taught got to see how I worked with their classes and how I met my challenges; family members and friends at home got a real-time close look at what takes place in our school library. I relied heavily on my seventeen years of teaching experience to feel comfortable with such a broadcast, but I admit that it was a lot of eyes on me as I was learning my new environment.



**TO SOME EXTENT, WE ARE SHAPING OUR CHILDREN'S MINDSETS REGARDING WHAT COMMUNITY LOOKS LIKE. I TRY TO FOCUS ON HOW OUR SIMPLE CHOICES HAVE RIPPLING EFFECTS AND THAT OUR KIND ACTIONS AND ASSURANCES WILL ALLOW US TO BE HEALTHY AND STRONG AGAIN.**

*Had I known our community longer, I am sure these virtual interactions would have been welcomed after a year in isolation, but I always felt like a newcomer and introduced myself at the start of every session in case someone new was logged in. Though I had competed with YouTube as a high school English teacher in the past, this level of divided attention with other media was more challenging. I had no idea how to win the attention of the students at home with all the distractions they had available, while also providing the one-on-one, hands-on assistance asked of me by those students who sat before me.*

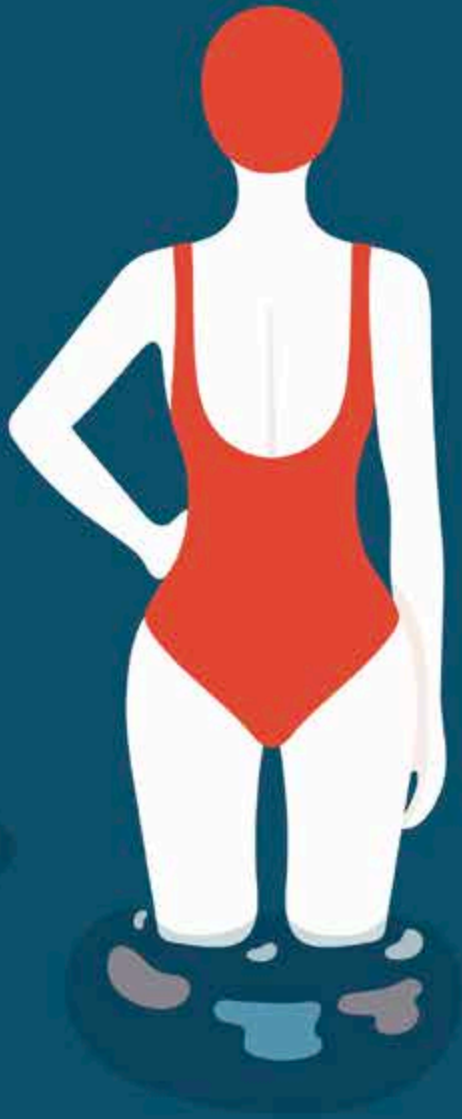
*Over the seven short weeks of school, it became clearer and clearer to me that I was leaving the kids at home behind. We all were. I rarely looked to the computer for an answer to my question or to see how a student was engaging with our*

*activities. It isn't natural to look towards a computer for a reaction to a story or to check on its growth as a result from an activity well done. It always felt like I was trying to uphold a valuable conversation—as with a good friend—while also taking an important phone call. In truth, I grew more convinced that it wasn't possible to reach two separate audiences simultaneously. I believe kids at home saw that too. I watched as many kids retreated even further than they had already.*

*That said, hybrid also meant smaller class sizes and gave me more time to think deeply about how our school library ought to be organized. I got a good feel for what I could (and could not) accomplish in our 45-minute blocks. By May, our school library got a full makeover that has certainly supported our efforts to put a strong library together this fall.*

*To empower kids to keep their masks on, I prepared a unit on superheroes and compared our masks to capes. For many students, returning to school this fall required them to summon their courage. I reminded my patrons often that their daily choices can save lives. Building a strong community looks different during a pandemic. To some extent, we are shaping our children's mindsets regarding what community looks like. I try to focus on how our simple choices have rippling effects and that our kind actions and assurances will allow us to be healthy and strong again. Indeed, could there be a better place to learn the elemental aspects of how to build a strong community than in our school libraries, where character building lessons and simple, profound truths are written plainly and illustrated beautifully? May these lessons pave the foundation for our post-pandemic world.*

**SINCE THE STUDENTS COULDN'T COME INTO THE LIBRARY I TRIED BRINGING THE SAFETY OF THE LIBRARY TO THEM BY ALLOWING THEM TO SOCIALIZE AND SHARE AT THE BEGINNING OF EVERY LIBRARY CLASS. GIVING KIDS THAT TIME HELPED BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH EVERYONE AND MADE THE KIDS MORE COMFORTABLE DURING LIBRARY CLASS.**



## **Establishing the Essential Components of a School Library**

Finally, Margaret Kennelly of Indian Head Elementary in Indian Head, Maryland, came to her school library from the public library world and was able to leverage that experience to help her drill down to the essential components of what she wanted her school library to have.

*Last year was a new learning experience on multiple fronts for everyone in my school community. I was fresh out of grad school with only some public library experience and student teaching experience and joining a school that had not had a school librarian the year before. It was a bit of a challenge trying to bring the ideology of safe spaces and reader access to the digital world, while coming to terms with the fact that no, we weren't allowed to check out physical books to students. So, after a few Zoom lessons of just relationship building and talking with the wonderful educators at my school, I sat down and wrote out what the school library should do for students and then prioritized.*

*First, a safe space while online. While I had been taught plenty about creating a safe space in library school and got to see what a great community looks like through the public library, the digital world required the best of both worlds in a different space. Since the students couldn't come into the library I tried bringing the safety of the library to them by allowing them to socialize and share at the beginning of every library class. Giving kids that time helped build relationships with everyone and made the kids more comfortable during library class. However, it worked only for students who showed up to class. I just had to hope that the news and online resources helped those who didn't.*

*Second, access to books. Our district uses Synergy, so the school library got its own little website where I put links to Destiny Discover, Storyline Online, Beanstack, the public library, and a few other useful links. The best method of communication with students was during library classes, where I made sure to show them how to use Destiny*

## I MADE SURE STUDENTS WERE ABLE TO LISTEN TO A FUN AND EDUCATIONAL STORY, USUALLY RELYING ON OUR STATE BOOK AWARD NOMINEES OR THEME OF THE MONTH TO SHOW DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES. THIS WAY STUDENTS GOT TO READ AT LEAST ONE BOOK A WEEK.

and helped students with questions on how to use the platform. This ensured classes were still able to find the books they wanted to read and check them out. Some students got it right away, while others needed more time, which I didn't have. I partially solved this problem by sending multiple e-mails with instructions about how to use and find books. I also included this information in the newsletters I sent out (along with color-in bookmarks) in student material bags. The newsletters also helped inform parents about these resources so they could in turn help their child to use them.

Twitter was also useful in promoting our Beanstack challenges and winners of the library raffle for those who completed a challenge, drawing more readers in with the possibility of public acknowledgment. Since I didn't get to see grades 3 through 5 I created an optional book club and popped into some of their reading classes to introduce digital books, which offered some access. I also made sure to promote the public library events and resources to families, since I knew that the public library could provide more access.

Third, read-alouds. Read-alouds were one of my favorite things to do when I worked in a public library, and they're a great way to engage and educate students (and plan lessons!). I made sure students were able to listen to a fun and educational story, usually

relying on our state book award nominees or theme of the month to show diverse perspectives. This way students got to read at least one book a week. It also enabled me to more easily create a theme and activity for each lesson, like Fry Bread for November and Native American Heritage month. Even if a student treated library time as an audiobook, I at least could make sure the stories were told.

*I am extremely thankful for my previous educational and job experiences for teaching me about these priorities, so that I could do my best to provide them last year. I now can take those original lessons and*



**Rachel Altobelli** (she/her) is the director of library services and instructional materials for Albuquerque Public

Schools in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She received the 2020 Excellence in Student Achievement Award from the New Mexico School Boards Association. Rachel was the member guide for the 2017–2018 ALA Emerging Leaders cohort that created the toolkit “Defending Intellectual Freedom: LGBTQ Materials in School Libraries.” She was a panelist for the Junior Library Guild for the July 16, 2020, webinar “Innovation in Uncertainty: Back to School” and the May 20, 2020, webinar “Innovation in Uncertainty: How Librarians Step Up, Support Students, and Find Solutions.” She was also a co-presenter for the June 20, 2020, online presentation “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: The School Library and Me in the Global Learning Community” to the AASL Affiliate Assembly. She was the guest editor for the January/February 2020 issue of Knowledge Quest. She is a member of AASL and is a member of the Knowledge Quest Editorial Board.

hopefully delve deeper into the worlds of books this year, with more hands-on lessons and student engagement.

All three of these brave new school librarians joined the profession at an immensely challenging time, but clearly remain undaunted by the challenges of either last year or this one. Instead, they dug deep and thought hard about what they wanted their libraries to give students—research, engagement, reading, safe spaces, and more—and figured out how to teach those lessons, last year and now.



**Kris Fedeli** (she/her) is the librarian at C. Paul Barnhart Elementary School in Waldorf, Maryland.



**Allison Dunn** is the teacher-librarian at Emerson Elementary in Albuquerque, New Mexico. For seventeen years,

Allison taught 9th- and 10th-grade English and ESL grades 9–12 at Eldorado High School. She also taught special education to support nonverbal students during the period of remote learning brought on by the pandemic. She is a National Board Certified Teacher and a Golden Apple Award Recipient.



**Margaret Kennelly** (she/her) is the media specialist at Indian Head Elementary School in Indian Head, Maryland.

She is a member of AASL.