



A School Librarian's Purpose

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If you ask an administrator, a teacher, a student, or a parent what a school librarian's purpose is, you will get a variety of answers. Many of the responses would be accurate, but sometimes stakeholders have a misconception about what the occupation or role truly is. As a result, they do not realize that school librarians are incredible assets to the community. Some administrators and teachers have expectations primarily based on stereotypes. The perception is often that librarians simply shelf and check out books. This misconception is why some feel a clerk can replace a library professional. In an article from *Edutopia*, Benjamin Barbour lists "3 Key Roles of School Librarians." He encourages teachers to understand librarians' roles as literacy advocates, resource managers, and research specialists (Barbour 2022). Though school librarians wear many hats, these roles are both critical and enduring.

Choosing a Career in School Librarianship on Purpose

If you will indulge me, I will tell you a bit of my path to school librarianship.

School librarianship was not my first career. I worked in the travel industry for seven years, and that career path abruptly ended following the events of September 11, 2001. That week in September all flights were grounded. Within a week after the tragedy, nearly all of my clients had canceled their future travel. I went from full-time to part-time that week, and then a week after that I was job-hunting. Before the tragic events of 9/11, I had seen the writing on the wall with reduced airline and hotel commissions. Additionally, more and more customers were booking their travel online. Then in early 2002, airlines stopped paying commissions altogether. So

I began the career transition into librarianship in February 2002. Of course, some questioned my decision. They asked if I was just going from one struggling sector to another. The primary concern raised by family, friends, and advisors was that the Internet would shrink the need for librarians as it had diminished careers in travel consulting.

I went through a deep searching process to decide on my ultimate career path. I knew the library world was calling, and I began study for an MLIS degree. However, I didn't know whether I wanted to work at and advance in a university library where I had found an amazing position as a paraprofessional or pursue the route of school librarianship. I enrolled in a class that I thought was focused on resume writing and other career-building tips, only to find that it was a class about decision-making and discernment. The professor in the class employed a two-part method of decision-making. She used St. Ignatius of Loyola's discernment process, which has been used for centuries by people contemplating religious vocation. The other part of the method was adapted from the Quakers' decision-making process using both discernment and questioning as articulated in Parker J. Palmer's 1999 book *Let Your Life Speak*. Instead of pros and cons, the process the professor taught considers what brings deep comfort and "consolation" juxtaposed against what makes the person feel dry like a desert or "desolate."

In the class, we were instructed to "live" a week with each side of a decision. For me, it was a choice between academic and school librarianship. In the living with each side of the decision, one plays out all of the consequences of each decision. During my week of "living" as a school librarian and seeing the comforts and challenges, I knew

with great clarity that this was the field for me. I would not only be a librarian, but very specifically—and intentionally—I would be a school librarian.

Choosing to Practice School Librarianship with Intentionality

What does it mean to practice school librarianship with intentionality?

We have many resources to inform our practice. Whether advocating with jobs and industry research gleaned from experts like Keith Curry Lance and Deborah E. Kachel or using data gathered in individual libraries, we can mindfully approach day-to-day work in a school library with informed practice. Our efforts will garner the respect of teachers and administrators as we support classroom instruction and help our students develop critical-thinking and information-literacy skills that will serve them well throughout their lives. Some intentional work of professional librarians as we seek to best serve learners includes conducting collection analyses, creating well-crafted surveys, and serving on the school's academic leadership team.

When doing our work, we are guided by our values. My MLIS program covered what would become "The Core Values of Librarianship," adopted by the American Library Association Council (ALA 2019). These values guide my decisions in professional practice and have been the cornerstone of my career in library science. For example, intellectual freedom and privacy are critical ethical concepts I discussed eighteen years ago in graduate school that I practice with intentionality today.

Not too many years ago, I heard about a librarian and mathematician from India who in 1931 created the

“Five Laws of Librarianship” (Yucht 2001). These concepts or “laws” stated by S. R. Ranganathan, though designed for the public library, relate even more to the school library, in my opinion. Consciously observing these laws can help our collections and mindsets remain critical and relevant as our practices evolve while our focus remains on supporting learners.

Ranganathan’s Five Laws

1. Books are for use
2. Every person their book
3. Every book its reader
4. Save the time of the reader
5. A library is a growing organism

On his website Jim Collins, one of the authors of *Built to Last*, explains the paradox of an enduring and visionary organization:

Enduring great organizations exhibit a dynamic duality. On the one hand, they have a set of timeless core values and purpose that remain constant over time. On the other hand, they have a relentless drive for progress—change, improvement, innovation, and renewal. (Collins 2022)

Like any enduring organization, school librarianship—if it is “built to last”—must also have this duality of core values and the commitment to adapt and grow. In 2017 AASL launched the *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*. The six Shared Foundations are Inquire, Include, Collaborate, Curate, Explore, and Engage. Much time has been invested in helping school librarians put the standards into practice, developing their own competencies while leading a school library that aligns with the

AASL Standards to support learners as they develop the competencies needed for success in school and in the rest of their lives. AASL has developed tools to support librarians’ efforts as they purposefully examine their practices and incorporate the standards. Among these tools are five crosswalks showing commonalities and overlap with other education standards relevant to 21st-century teaching and learning, books, videos, and even a standards card game. These materials help school librarians deliberately and effectively adapt in a rapidly changing education landscape.

Choosing to Advocate for School Librarians and School Libraries with Intentionality and Confidence

At a plenary session at the 2016 Tennessee Association of Independent Schools conference, Dr. Andrew Van Schaack, a futurist and Vanderbilt professor, said of future careers, “Nonroutine cognitive jobs are not going away.” Van Schaack drew these conclusions from a 2015 report by Henry Siu and Nir Jaimovich. In other words, computers, the Internet, or robots will not replace cognitive jobs like ours. That said, we know that for our students’ sakes, we must persist in advocating for school libraries led by qualified school librarians.

The big advocacy questions we must answer are: How can we as school librarians help administrators and other stakeholders understand that school librarianship is primarily cognitive and needs high levels of flexibility—especially when the stereotype is that librarians are all about routine? How do we advocate using our purpose or intention to best support learners and our school communities?

I believe that librarianship is a noble profession, and I’m in good company! Benjamin Franklin, founding father, inventor, and advocate for both libraries and democracy, is the focus of a 2021 *Publishers Weekly* article “School



Libraries Are the Bedrock of Freedom.” Authors Joann Davis and Kenneth C. Davis wrote:

Convinced that libraries cultivated the spirit of democracy, Franklin later noted, 'These Libraries have improved the general Conversation of Americans'...he also believed that every school should have a dedicated library, because a democracy can only survive with educated citizens.

Move ahead a century from Franklin's time to the late 1800s when my school was founded. In 1886 the Webb brothers moved their school from Culleoka to Bell Buckle, Tennessee. They had \$12,000 to invest in education. Of their original investment, they spent \$8,000 on books (Holliman 1977). The elder brother, William R. "Sawney" Webb, wrote in a pamphlet in 1898 about secondary schools:

In every case let the library cost more than the other equipment, for a good school must have for teachers as well as pupils, a library of well-selected books.

Our school not only has a strong tie to books, it also has a long history of professional school librarians. For example, our archives contain a 1931 article "The Webb School Library." Initially published in *The Tennessee Teacher*, the article was written by then-school librarian David N. McQuiddy. He refers to a report made at the June 1931 ALA annual meeting in New Haven, Connecticut. In this article McQuiddy encourages reading for personal growth, praises ways to facilitate research, and promotes literacy, inquiry, and critical thinking. McQuiddy wrote:

Today, more than ever before, the purpose of an education should be 'to teach one to read' and to read intelligently. But

reading intelligently implies more than correct literary tastes. [It] implies the ability to consult the correct sources of reliable information.

Our 1930s librarian was concerned in his time with teaching students about skills for determining reliable sources.

The concept that libraries are critical to our country's democracy was not just a concern of Ben Franklin. It is revealed in communication between Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Librarian of Congress Herbert Putnam in 1939.

I have an unshaken conviction that democracy can never be undermined if we maintain our library resources and a national intelligence capable of utilizing them. (Waters 1976)

Unfortunately, not everyone shares our convictions about the importance of libraries and school librarians. As school librarians, we have a massive job to do in 2022—and beyond. In many areas of the U.S., school librarians are in a battle for the profession. In some quarters, there is a current campaign to deprofessionalize not just librarians but all educators. In an investigative report, the local TV news station in Tennessee (where I live and work) reported that an education advisor to the governor was caught on video saying:

Here's a key thing that we're going to try to do. We are going to try to demonstrate that you don't have to be an expert to educate a child because basically anybody can do it. ...The teachers are trained

The Webb School Library

DAVID N. MCQUIDDY
Librarian, The Webb School, Bell Buckle
Reprint from THE TENNESSEE TEACHER



WEBB SCHOOL enjoys the distinction of the finest private school libraries in Tennessee. It contains more than 8,000 volumes of the same size among the private school libraries of the South in the entire nation surpasses it in number of volumes in a modern fireproof building, which is furnished with the latest library equipment and is the most beautiful building on campus. Neither its size nor its building, however, is its distinguishing feature of this library. The quality of its books is its distinction. It would be difficult to find anywhere else the same size which is equal to it in this respect. There is no other library in all fields of fact and fiction. There is



in the dumbest parts of the dumbest colleges in the country. (Williams 2022)

Though it may not be a comfort to know educators are not alone in being under attack, there is evidence of distrust of all experts, including medical professionals and other scientists. For example, in early 2022, Tennessee's Board of Medical Examiners adopted a statement—and posted it on their website—warning that doctors who promulgate false information about Covid-19 and its treatment could lose their licenses. State lawmakers demanded that the warning statement be removed from the Board of Medical Examiners website, usurping the board's power. According to Blake Farmer and Mary Louise Kelly of NPR, "Tennessee's medical board did pull down its COVID [anti]misinformation statement from the web, as ordered by lawmakers" (2022).

Librarians in Tennessee and across the U.S. are encountering attacks on professionalism. Political groups have launched fierce campaigns attempting to defame librarians when we advocate for intellectual freedom and support books written by or about those in marginalized communities. Faith Huff, a librarian quoted by *Publishers Weekly*, explains

that “public schools as a whole are being held to an expectation of one type of person. But those aren’t the only people we serve” (Maughan 2022). The idea of parental control should frustrate most parents because no one would want another parent with a very different world view “controlling” what all children can and cannot read. This pursuit of both equity and intellectual freedom is precisely where and when a professional librarian is essential.

We are working in a sometimes difficult social climate, but we must, as professionals, rise to the occasion with intention and prove that school librarians and school libraries that support *all* learners are here to stay!



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ALA, AASL, and ACRL member, she writes a monthly article for the AASL Knowledge Quest website. She is the 2022–2023 chair of the AASL Independent School Section and was recognized as an AASL Social Media Superstar in 2019 for Sensational Student Voice. She co-authored a local history book for Arcadia Publishing in 2019. Hannah also served on the Tennessee Association of School Librarians (TASL) Executive Board from 2009 to 2013 and was TASL president in 2012. Before working in schools, she spent nearly four years in an academic library. She began working in technical services and then added instructional work with the university’s information literacy team.



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