

Supporting
ARTICLE

CREATIVE COLLABORATIONS FOR STUDENT LEARNING AND ADVOCACY



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Introduction

Overcoming the obstacles of recent years requires educators to be innovative in their methods. Rather than approaching recent challenges with ineffective, outdated strategies, this is an opportunity to reimagine and redesign, especially in regard to collaboration. Decades of research have shown that a high-quality school library positively impacts student achievement, graduation rates, and mastery of academic standards (Lance 2018). The high-quality instruction offered in the school library and in collaboration with classroom teachers helps students understand and practice the content standards. The power of these collaborations to impact student learning has been established by researchers. To accelerate learning, students need collaborative learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond 2021).

School librarians should begin by collaborating within their school building and then thoughtfully expand those connections to neighboring schools, community organizations, and state entities. Below you will find examples of collaborative projects and programs that not only impacted student learning but championed school

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libraries by highlighting the power of a high-quality school library.

School librarians work collaboratively within the school building.

Hopefully, every school librarian has established or is currently working to establish collaborations with classroom teachers, but don't forget the other educators in your building. Collaborations with school

counselors can help students build mindfulness, social skills, and empathy toward others through the school library (Jacobson 2017). Many social and emotional skills can be addressed by reading and sharing diverse and inclusive books in lessons and in formal and informal book clubs. Book displays can highlight mental health awareness, cultural diversity, and student voice.

This year our school book club tackled two books with tough topics: *The Bridge* by Bill Konigsberg and *Grown* by Tiffany Jackson. Reading these books opened up opportunities for partnering with our counselors and local community organizations. One of our civic clubs chose mental health and suicide prevention as their focus for the year so the book club read *The Bridge*, had a virtual chat with the author, and discussed the book with our school counselors. Our school library complemented the other suicide prevention programs hosted by the school.

We partnered with our school counselors and counselors from a local abuse help center when we read and discussed *Grown*. Including the counselor's perspectives and expertise in the book club discussions enriched the experience and provided our students with resources and information that helped them

understand these issues. Consider possibilities for working with the school resource office, cafeteria staff, speech pathologists, and others. Building collaborations with a variety of educators in the school building can improve and strengthen school libraries, events, and lessons.

School librarians work collaboratively with other schools.

Collaborations with neighboring schools can be powerful. Students enjoy working with others from different grade levels. Older students enjoy being seen as the leader and the young students are really engaged when activities and lessons are led by the “big kids.” My high school offers a Family Life class so I partnered with that teacher to have students select a book to create an interactive story in one of our outdoor spaces.

We decided on the book *Move!* by Steve Jenkins and Robin Page. In addition to the pages of the story, we added QR code links to videos of the real animals depicted in the book and an animal movement that the children performed as they moved on to the next spot. We put all these elements on corrugated plastic yard signs and placed them on a trail. The students from the Child Development class led their little ones through the story. Because the story was portable we decided to make it a traveling set and sent it to the local elementary schools so that they could place the story on their playgrounds. This was a fun activity for the little ones and helped our students learn about child development and the value of reading.

Another collaboration with our feeder elementary schools is our Mock Caldecott lesson. I use the resources provided by John Schu,

Colby Sharp, and Brian Sammons each year (Schu 2023). I partner with one of our English teachers to have students read and score the 20 books that may be considered for the Caldecott Award that year. Then we use Flip to record read-alouds so that our elementary librarians can have students listen to the books and vote on their favorite from the list. This collaboration is mutually beneficial. Our students learn about various professional book awards, how the scoring process works, practice their reading skills, and learn about the value of reading to young children; while our elementary students see their older peers reading and enjoying a story and have the chance to listen to a wide variety of picture books being read aloud.

I encourage you to reach out to neighboring schools and see what kind of collaborative possibilities can be discovered.



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School librarians work collaboratively with the public library and other local and state agencies.

Partnering with the local public library is an excellent way to bring in authors, promote summer reading, provide teen and children's programming, and help students get library cards. Don't forget your state library. The South Carolina State Library has a variety of services for schools and even partners with our state school library association to host the annual SC Read In, bringing thousands of children to our state house to celebrate the power of reading and libraries. I think most school librarians understand the value of working together with the public library, but there are also other local and state agencies that you can work with.

Each year during midterms and final exams, I invite therapy dogs from our local organization, SC Dogs. The students absolutely love when they visit and enjoy the break from the stress of the classroom. Our teachers love it too! The same organization visits our elementary schools so that students can practice their reading skills by reading to the dogs.

One of our school's civic organizations chose road safety as their project this year, so we hosted local law enforcement officers in the library for several safety presentations. Each year when it is time to vote for our favorite book on our state's book award nominee lists, I invite our county election commission to our school. The theme of voting ties in perfectly; we can get some of our older students registered to vote, recruit poll workers, and show the students how the voting machines work.

This demystifies voting and helps students feel more comfortable about voting, especially if they have never gone to the polls with their families. If your students are younger, it is still a valuable lesson for them to see the machines and ask questions about the voting process. Each year I invite our congressional district's state representative to speak with our Government classes when they are learning about the legislative branch. This is a powerful way to showcase your school library and connect with local leaders.

Another agency that I work with often is our state public broadcasting system, South Carolina Educational Television (SCETV). Our state affiliate has worked with educators across the state to offer professional development opportunities, resources for our classrooms and libraries, and even ready-to-use lesson plans. They are a great friend to educators.

When censorship attempts really ramped up in 2022, the South Carolina Association of School Librarians (SCASL) connected with the state's branch of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to form a coalition of organizations that are committed to free speech and intellectual freedom. The coalition, called Freedom to Read SC, includes education, civic, and religious groups that work together to resist the wave of censorship spreading across the state (League 2022). The work of Freedom to Read SC has been very successful in resisting book bans by attending and speaking at school board meetings and helping educate and empower community members to speak up for their rights.

I encourage you to think beyond the traditional collaborations and consider other organizations and agencies you could work with to bring more opportunities to your students and advocate for school libraries.

School librarians work collaboratively with local businesses.

I have found that many local businesses are eager to partner with our schools. One of the most obvious for librarians is bookstores. I have been lucky enough to partner with a local bookstore for author visits, free advance reader copies, and ordering books.

This year when we started a gaming club at school we worked with a local gaming store to get all the supplies we needed at a discounted price. They even offered to come to school to teach students how to play the games. Another local comic book/gaming store is a huge help when navigating the selection of comic and manga series. They are always happy to help by providing advice on which series are best for the ages you serve in your school.

One of our local real estate agents accepted my invitation to come in and speak with our Economics classes about the process of purchasing a home. The students had excellent questions and the agent was able to break down a complicated process in ways that were easy to understand.

I encourage you to explore possibilities for connecting local businesses with the library program. I believe you will find they are excited about partnering with schools.

School librarians work collaboratively with their state library association and other educator associations.

Not only are our school library associations important, but partnering with other educator associations can be powerful. Last summer I co-presented with my principal at the state association for administrators' conference, which led to professional development

opportunities with other counties and the chance to visit other libraries and share ideas. The administrator organization also publishes a newsletter and invites submissions, which is an excellent way to share library-specific information with those important stakeholders.

Many South Carolina school librarians are also members of state educator associations including the South Carolina Education Association (SCEA) and Palmetto State Teachers Association (PSTA). Both of these organizations provide professional development opportunities and legal protections as well as important legislative updates and action items. We encourage members of our library associations to become members of one or both of these organizations since we provide different types of member benefits.

In my state, we have an organization called the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement (CERRA). I currently serve as the teacher representative on the board for CERRA and it has opened my eyes to all the possibilities for collaborating with them. One of the programs they oversee is the

Teacher Cadets, a class for seniors interested in pursuing an education degree. I, along with other librarians across the state, have been able to connect with the Teacher Cadets in their classrooms and at their conferences to share information about the school library field and the work we do. This is especially important in our state where the field is a critical needs teaching area.

CERRA oversees the Teaching Fellows program, which is a scholarship program for education majors. Librarians have attended and presented at their conferences and spoken to them as they prepare to complete their student teaching. These opportunities allow us to share the value of collaborating with school librarians and consider school librarianship as a career. CERRA hosts informational webinars for pursuing National Board certification, which we have been able

to help with so that librarians across the state can earn this certification and be eligible for incentives that come with the designation.

All these collaborations have an indirect link to student learning by ensuring that all students in our state have a fully qualified school librarian and classroom teachers who know the value of library partnerships. The specific organizations in your state may be different, but these examples illustrate the power of expanding your reach beyond just library-specific organizations to build collaborative relationships with other educator organizations.

School librarians work collaboratively with organizations in order to prepare librarians as leaders.

Thanks to an American Association of School Librarians (AASL) ABC-CLIO grant in 2018, the South

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Carolina Association of School Librarians (SCASL) was able to start an Emerging Leaders (EL) program for our newest librarians. This program has been very successful in connecting our members with one another, recruiting committee members, and developing leaders who have been elected to the SCASL board.

In the current climate, we must amplify our efforts for the future by preparing our Emerging Leaders (EL) class to be advocacy experts. A second ABC-CLIO grant in 2023 is allowing us to tackle these issues with a new class of leaders. We are connecting with other education and library organizations to help our ELs hone and practice library advocacy skills. Some of our legislators have been openly hostile to school libraries, claiming that we have pornographic materials, disparaging librarians on radio shows, and urging us to revoke professional awards for librarians who have publicly defended intellectual freedom. This generation of leaders must have the legislative background, communication skills, and confidence to face these challenges head-on.

In partnership with the University of South Carolina iSchool, our Summer Institute is where ELs and their administrators set goals for their library program, explore collaboration possibilities, and become familiar with the new state documents for library programs. Throughout the year ELs will explore leadership opportunities at the school, district, regional, and state levels with expert guest speakers. ELs will participate in the Share Your Story and Library Legislative Day events with other state library organizations including the SC Library Association (SCLA), SC Association of Public Library Administrators (APLA), the Friends of SC Libraries, and Partnership

Among SC Libraries (PASCAL). A unified voice helps ensure that we are heard over the political noise.

In February 2024, our ELs and other librarians will attend our annual Hill Day event. SCASL works in partnership with the Palmetto State Teachers Association (PSTA) to organize the event. Participants visit our state capital, attend a state school board meeting, meet with legislators, visit the legislative chambers in session, and get updates about education and library-related legislation. This is an important day that lets us connect with our lawmakers and share how their decisions directly impact our learners and school library programs. Many librarians are reluctant to speak with lawmakers so our partnership with PSTA is important because it helps educate our ELs and SCASL board on how to effectively communicate and feel confident in those meetings. Sharing our perspective is vital to protect library programs that serve our state's children.

Collaboration with all these organizations gives our efforts more impact and makes them more successful.

Conclusion

There are a wide variety of collaboration opportunities both within and outside the school walls. I encourage you to take the challenges and obstacles that have faced libraries in recent years and turn those into opportunities for connecting with other educators and organizations that share our mission to serve our learners. These collaborations can not only enhance student learning and increase advocates for the school library but can also be a source of inspiration and encouragement for you in your role as a school librarian.



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president of the AASL Chapter, South Carolina Association of School Librarians, during her tenure SCASL won the AASL Chapter of the Year and the ABC-CLIO Leadership Grant. Cox is also a 2020 Library Journal Mover and Shaker, finalist for SC Teacher of the Year, SC Librarian of the Year and I Love My Librarian Award recipient.

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