

How To Speak Administrator

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Tips on language and presentation to get administrators to listen (and act) when advocating for the library.

In the last 18 months, our district realized we have been ignoring one of the most powerful sets of allies and tools in our prime focus to improve literacy. Librarians and libraries have been around, but we have treated both as catchalls: for tasks, for events, for a lot of things other than their true purpose and the work that librarians are educated and qualified to do.



Administrators Mike Daria (left) and Andrew Maxey (right) share their advice on advocating for school libraries.

We are administrators in the Tuscaloosa (AL) City Schools. Our district's need is not unique. Most schools need to improve literacy. We all know perfectly well that large numbers of students in schools across the country struggle to demonstrate strong reading skills—no matter how you evaluate them. Yet most schools do not treat their libraries and librarians as indispensable, core parts of the work to produce strong readers. We admit (to our

shame) that this described us not long ago, and it's still incredible to us. How could we have missed something so obvious? Why didn't our librarians speak up and help us see what we were missing?

They did. They tried over and over again. But public education administrators have a great way of saying, "Listen here everyone, this is what we are going to do. So get in line, be quiet, and help!" Ours is not a unique position. Most schools in the United States have a library. And while the percentage has fallen alarmingly, most of those schools are still served by a librarian.

During the last year or so, as we've been advocating for our colleagues to look to their libraries for solutions, we have been stunned to realize that virtually no one is advocating for school libraries except for librarians, authors, and book vendors. Folks in decision-making positions like us just can't—or don't—hear them.

Because we can't speak to every principal, superintendent, and school board member directly, allow us to help you be heard with these seven tips to make the case for your library.

Use Data

We (Mike and Andrew) don't usually see eye to eye on what the role of data should be in public education, but we are in lock step in our observation of reality: Data is the language of educational leaders. We love our kids individually, but we make decisions about them as a group, so we like to think big picture.

Use that to your advantage. One way is to reveal the state of your library collection. How many books do you have per student? What's the average "age" of your collection? How does that stack up against recommended numbers? Show your administrator the connection between self-directed learning and strengthened reading—the evidence, not rhetoric. In your school, where are the examples of students who are better readers for the same reason?



Check Your Vocabulary

Odds are you have been unwittingly using language that undermines the point you are trying to make. In advocating to decision-makers, we are willing to bet you have talked about the importance of "recreational reading." Or maybe you pointed to research about "leisure reading"? Or passionately argued about the importance of instilling a "love of reading"? These things may matter, but they are insufficiently compelling to a school administrator in the context of pursuing the goals that are in front of them. Use the term "self-directed reading." Student choice is absolutely important. We fight illiteracy while we wrestle with illiteracy. But you will have a better chance of getting through to your administrator by getting rid of the terms that carry overt or hidden meanings that scream "optional." Self-directed reading

A student reads in the "castle" at Oakdale Elementary School in Tuscaloosa, AL is **not** optional to build strong readers. It is the indispensable companion of reading instruction. That is a point all administrators should understand.

Photo courtesy of Tuscaloosa City Schools

Jerry Maguire Them: "Help Me Help You"

Principals spend most of their days responding to requests for help. Don't start by asking for more (time, focus, authority, funds) for the library. Instead, offer to help with your school's goals. Literacy is the core mission of all schools. In a lot of cases, it is the very public focus of the school's work. Unfortunately, when we in public education say, "literacy," far too often we mean "reading instruction." You have no doubt seen self-directed reading silently squeezed out of the equation, so this point is simple: "Libraries are strong tools for building a culture of literacy; let me help." Be ready for the answer to be yes, though, and don't expect it to make things easier. You may be asking to do *q s v i* work. You are definitely asking to do more meaningful work.

Show Alignment with School/System Plan

If you work with a principal or superintendent who is visual, help her/him *w i* where the library fits into and supports the school or district's existing plan and direction. Crosswalk the potential of the library and the plan. For example, in our district, we are in the middle of a professional learning community for literacy coaches and librarians designed to build strong and cohesive literacy leadership teams at each school. Take time to think through how you and your library could help make a difference. Demonstrate many options but don't insist on all or nothing. Take a small "yes" enthusiastically—it can become a big yes later.

Talk About Students

Don't talk about "my schedule" or "my books." We believe very passionately in the need to elevate the role of teachers and librarians, but this is about how to successfully advocate for libraries and the role of the librarian. Keep the spotlight on the kids and make it *ki r y m i p* about them. Talk about the importance of student access, student choice, and actions needed to help students grow as strong readers. This is not about circulating more books; this is about becoming a school where each human in the building reads so much (because she/he *{ er w f*) that there is no way to avoid becoming better readers.



Students at Rock Quarry Elementary School in Tuscaloosa, AL, proudly show off their library selections.

Photo courtesy of Tuscaloosa City Schools

Tell Library Story Through Students and Teachers

Social media is free. Produce what we call “happy kid data.” Take pictures of kids being awesome in the library. If your district policy allows it, capture little video clips of your kids sharing why they love the library or what reading books means to them. Be strategic in your sharing. Work to show how the library is a powerful learning “experience” for students and teachers, not a just place to check out books. Show how the library is much more than the space. A school library should evoke excitement, discovery, imagination, and joy for all students. Check out #MyLibraryStory for examples of how many of our librarians use social media to advocate publicly. Leadership listens to and looks for things that reveal their school to be a positive place; libraries can s{ r that market.

Show Library’s Connection To Student Growth

Not only is a library collection essential to building strong readers, a librarian is an incredible resource for student learning across all subject areas. While you are Jerry Maguire-ing your principal, you should give your teachers the same treatment. Position yourself as a co-teacher and collaborator. Be more than a research assistant or the person who creates a new book display at the start of a new unit. Be a direct part of advancing p{ evr mk{ for students. “Happy teacher data” will start to accumulate as this role grows. Make sure this is visible to educational leaders.

Bonus Tip: Share New AASL Standards

The October issue of Hwvx Ehq mwx vCa as a two-page piece on the new national school library standards. The magazine has a readership of more than 200,000, so there is a great chance that leadership in your district receives it and will w i { the article. Reach out with an offer to discuss the new standards and recommend approaches to implementing them. Administrators understand and appreciate standards for practice; pointing out how those standards support the school or district’s vision will be a compelling conversation. For more information about the AASL standards, including access to a PDF of the “advertorial” that is in DA, visit standards.aasl.org/project/transform (https://standards.aasl.org/project/transform/).

Our profession is complicated, and this advice offers no{ilver bullet. It has been our experience, however, that when teachers and librarians take the time to understand the way we think and translate their concerns and recommendations into ideas and visions that resonate with the way our brains have been (re)wired to think, it is much easier to grasp the weight of what is being communicated.

If all else fails, just give this article to your principal and (gently) suggest they shoot us an email. We would be delighted to talk.

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