From Me to We: Seeing Is Believing

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A Chance to Write the Ending to Your Own Story

"And they lived happily ever after..." This is the fairy tale ending we all hope for in our professional working worlds. In the real world, however, one of the hardest parts about accomplishing the fairy tale ending or realizing our ideal goals is defining what those goals are with as much detail as possible. Sometimes referred to as backwards design, the foundation of strategic thinking is to identify the end first (the goals) and then work backwards from there (the strategy you employ to get there).

Strategic planning represents a formal process for doing just this: clearly defining, in as much detail as possible, what that happy ending should look like. We can be the authors of our own story, written by us but informed and articulated through the words and dreams of those that we serve. If you had a chance to write the end, middle, and beginning of your future story, would you do it?

Relationships and a Shared Vision of a Fairy Tale Ending

A common and consistent theme heard from librarians, students, and alumni is how poorly understood school libraries often are by administrators, other educators, and stakeholders in general. When you talk to a stakeholder not familiar with the role of your school library, ask them two simple questions:

- What are your highest priority goals over the next three to five years (their version of the fairy tale ending)?)
- In what ways do you feel the school library can help support you in accomplishing your goals?

When prompted to answer these two questions, your stakeholders must think about what they want to accomplish (define in their own minds what that perfect ending looks like with as much detail as possible) and how the school library can help that stakeholder accomplish their goals. What does the stakeholder need, and how can the school librarian help you?

Strategic Planning Key to Effective School Libraries

Developing a strategic plan for a school library is a lot of work. However, the time and energy it takes to develop a strategic plan can pay dividends many times over. Developing a strategic plan starts with beginning a dialogue with school library stakeholders about what’s important to them and identifying their highest priority needs. Creating this dialogue builds relationships; more importantly these conversations go both ways, and the very act of thinking about what an ideal school library might look like helps establish a clearer picture of what the school library should be in every stakeholder’s mind. The stakeholders see the school library as part of the school community, and these conversations serve as part education and part advocacy for the role of the school library.

Having a clear plan and pathway to achieve a strategic vision unites different stakeholders that often have disparate goals. The plan helps everyone understand what is most important for the entire school and clearly delineates how the school library supports them in accomplishing their high-priority goals. This helps change the discussion and focus away from what the school librarian wants to accomplish on her/his own to a collaborative vision crafted by the entire school community, moving the vision of the future from “me to we.”

Historically AASL has recommended strategic planning, evaluation, and assessment in school libraries. In the 2009 standards and guidelines, strategic planning played a prominent role: "The school library program is built on a long-term strategic plan that reflects the mission, goals, and objectives of the school" (AASL 2009). In the 2010 ALA/AASL Standards for Initial Preparation of School Librarians, the collaborative process of assessment and planning were emphasized: “Candidates communicate and collaborate with students, teachers, administrators, and community members to develop a library program that aligns resources, services, and standards with the school’s mission. Candidates make effective use of data and information to assess how the library program addresses the needs of their diverse communities” (AASL 2010, 17). The most recent
AASL Standards highlight the role a strategic plan plays in an effective school library: “An effective school library is fully integrated into the curriculum through ongoing, sustained efforts and a strategic plan that serves the school’s mission, educational goals and objectives, and school community stakeholders” (2018, 170). In addition, Cynthia Keller notes the dynamic interplay between evaluation, planning, and built-in school stakeholder advocacy: “Analysis of data collected for school improvement plans and/or long-range strategic planning results in the development of an action plan for improvement of the school library. The evaluation process then becomes an excellent tool for engaging others in advocating for the school library program” (2018, 17).

Strategic planning can be formally defined as the “systematic process by which a company, organization, or institution (or one of its units) formulates achievable policy objectives for future growth and development over a period of years, based on its mission and goals and on a realistic assessment of the resources, human and material, available to implement the plan” (Reitz 2004, 687). Such a process typically involves three discrete phases: needs assessment, strategic planning, and evaluation and refinement (Chow and Bucknall 2011).

The Steps for Strategic Planning

Step 1. Ask your stakeholders two questions (What should be?):

- What are your highest priorities for the next three to five years?
- In what ways can your school library help you with your priorities?

By asking school administration and representatives from stakeholder groups to answer these two questions, you can establish a list of high priorities that can serve as their ideal vision of the future. During these discussions you also have the opportunity to clarify your role and educate them on what you and your school library currently do and, most importantly, what you could potentially do for them in the future given appropriate time, resources, and support. This is an essential step toward building a stronger relationship with your stakeholders and allows you to establish a collaborative vision with each stakeholder group you serve.

Step 2. Identify the current state of your library and to what extent you are meeting the identified high priorities for your stakeholders (What is?).

Needs assessment is also called gap analysis. The gap is the difference between what is and what should be. A lot of this analysis can be done through your own expert opinion. Ask yourself whether the services and resources needed by your stakeholders are already being provided. If so, what statistics do you have to show how much they are being used. If the services and resources are not provided, add them to the list of potential What should be’s to be included in your future plan.

It is essential to recognize your own professional expertise and perspective when reviewing this information; it is unwise to rely completely on what stakeholders tell you they need and want since the majority of staff may not be familiar with the full potential of what school libraries can do for them.

Step 3. Collect as much data as you can to help define the What is for your school library.

Decision makers generally want to see three things:

- Data to support your position
- Stories of impact demonstrating your value to your users
- How what you are doing is helping them meet their bottom line

The goal here is to establish, in no uncertain terms, the current state of your school library, including resources, scheduling, time allocation, and overall performance statistics. Remember documenting the What is helps establish a starting point and most likely a sizeable gap between where you are and where you should be, especially in terms of helping decision makers...
accomplish their goals. The other important aspect of collecting data is that doing so demonstrates that you have put the time and effort into documenting your current situation, which lends credibility to your story and any requests you may make for your school library.

**Step 4: Conduct a SWOT analysis.**

A large part of the What is and What should be has to come from you and your professional opinion and perspective. As the author of your own story, you need to take a step back and be extremely candid with yourself. Doing a SWOT analysis is a standard first step that most organizations undergo at some point. Stepping back and reflecting on strengths and weaknesses is always a good place to start to put into concrete words what you are already good at and where there are some sizeable gaps. Opportunities represent potential goals that you may want to strive for, and threats are reminders to you and others what could happen if they are not addressed appropriately in your strategic plan.

**Step 5: Seek and identify common ground.**

Once you have spoken to and collected data from your stakeholders, it is time to identify the top needs and priorities from each group, including your own. Using the data gathered from multiple sources, including your stakeholder interviews, focus groups, surveys, SWOT analysis, and performance data, identify common ground for your school library’s priorities. This adds validity and reliability to your findings.

**Step 6: Create the strategic plan.**

Once you’ve gathered all the data, you should work with your stakeholders to outline and describe in detail the fairy tale ending.

A strategic plan can be developed by the school’s steering committee, comprised of school administration, teachers, staff, and parents during a half-day meeting. Committee members can be broken into small groups and asked to craft the primary elements of a strategic plan for the school: vision, mission, core values, core competencies, short- and long-term goals, objectives, and tactics. The vision statement,

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<tr>
<th>Needs Assessment Priorities</th>
<th>Strategic Goal Addressing Need in Priority Order</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Create a library website that supports student learning through providing resources for teachers, students, and information for parents on how to access library services.</td>
<td>Goal 3: Effective, award-winning digital resources and current, relevant technology for advancing the learning goals of 21st-century learners; Goal 5: Timely connection with XX Library community using a variety of communication tools by December 2016.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Engage parents as potential library advocates and funding sources (PTA) through communicating services (esp. Big Universe) and providing opportunities to visit the library.</td>
<td>Goal 2: Inspirational literary experiences throughout the year to foster the ongoing development of a reading culture at XX Elementary by June 2019; Goal 5: Timely connection with XX Library community using a variety of communication tools by December 2016.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Update technology in the library.</td>
<td>Goal 3: Effective, award-winning digital resources and current, relevant technology for advancing the learning goals of 21st-century learners.</td>
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*Table 1. School 1 needs assessment priorities addressed by strategic plan.*
Step 7: Detail your strategic plan timeline and evaluation rubric.

This set of goals, objectives, tactics, and general timeline will serve as a map to where you want to go and by when. You will want to keep the deadlines associated with the plan in a spreadsheet, which can be used as a real–time formative assessment to determine at anytime where you are, where you want to go, and what you have taken care of already. This map or spreadsheet is an excellent tool for asking for the resources you need to get to where you want to go.

Results of Two Case Studies

To study the impact of strategic planning in school libraries, our research team followed two school librarians over an 18-month period from summer 2016 to spring 2018. Two elementary school libraries located in the southeastern United States participated in the study, and at each school the research team used a case study method that involved interviews, focus groups, and online surveys.

The two elementary school librarians live in two vastly different worlds. While both are in Title I schools (40 percent or more students are below poverty), one is nestled in a small, rural, and homogeneous population (predominately white student population), while the second is in a larger urban setting with a 65 percent Spanish-speaking student population. The school librarians began the strategic planning process unsure of the vision of their new leadership for their school libraries; they viewed the strategic planning process as a way to “get on the same page” with their school administration and library stakeholders and establish a common vision based on the priorities of their stakeholders. Tables 1 and 2 show how each school librarian’s strategic plan aligned directly with the priorities identified in their schools’ respective needs assessments.

After both projects were completed, we asked both librarians their thoughts on the process. The first benefit was establishing a clearer focus on what the school

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<tbody>
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<td>1) Grow students’ love of reading</td>
<td>Goal 1: High-quality collection that empowers students and teachers by spring 2020.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2) Create a welcoming environment that grows a love of reading and learning</td>
<td>Goal 3 is library as place [welcoming environment] by fall 2017.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Increase collaboration with teachers</td>
<td>Goal 3 is library as place [for collaboration] by fall 2017.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Update technology in the library</td>
<td>Goal 2 is to integrate state-of-the-art and relevant technology resources by spring 2018.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Create a center of learning for the school, a hub of activity, creativity, and learning</td>
<td>Goal 4 is library as a place of learning by fall 2017</td>
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Table 2. School 2 needs assessment priorities addressed by strategic plan.
librarians wanted to accomplish. One librarian noted:

Answering questions helped the staff better understand what could and should happen in the library. This was a bit of a subversive training for them. I didn’t have to sound preachy, but the more thoughtful participants were able to make connections. (School Librarian 2 Interview, April 2018)

The second benefit was building community around how the school library could help everyone in the school. One librarian called it “built-in advocacy.” The planning process caused everyone to think about and discuss the library. One school librarian observed:

Sometimes, being the only person who does a job in a school can feel isolating. The strategic planning process was a community event. It helped to find out what was going well and what still needed to be addressed in the eyes of most of the people in the school. The plan took the guesswork out of how to meet the needs of stakeholders. The objective process was really helpful and remains the driving force of the work done in the library. (School Librarian 1 Interview, April 2018)

Several parents participating on school 1’s steering committee did not know that their school library did not have a dedicated annual budget. They held a separate meeting with the principal about their concerns. The school library was subsequently given a dedicated book budget. As the librarian at school 1 noted, “...the plan has moved the library from me to we. I have multiple people from students to parents to staff to local members of the community who now consider themselves advocates for the library. They talk to people in the community about the library in their families, churches, and businesses. They have a story to market” (School Librarian 1, April 2018).

Strategic planning helped “get everyone on the same page,” as school 1 librarian noted:

The strategic plan gave our community a renewed focus. Over the course of the last few years, the library has been a driving force for school-wide programs and slowly, the culture of the school is changing to a more literary focus (i.e., students are reading more, author visits, etc.). The school’s community (students, staff, parents, administrators) is making the shift, and the strategic plan has been the fuel to keep the change moving forward. (School Librarian 1, April 2018)

It also helped with fundraising as the library now has a crystal-clear picture and “story to market.” School librarian 2 agreed and reflected:

Answering questions helped the staff better understand what could and should happen in the library. Furthermore, I’m thinking the same is true in many places—we cannot afford to be silent. The strategic planning process helps the librarian know what things need to be advocated for because he/she has to organize their personal thoughts about the library. In addition, it helps the stakeholders better understand its purpose and potential by working as an advocacy tool in addition to its other purposes (School Librarian 2, April 2018).

Because of our strategic planning project, school librarian 2 was given a full-time library assistant by her principal. She found it to be so transformative, we are working together to find a way to create a toolkit to support other school libraries. This is also our primary hope with this article; that it can serve as a roadmap for creating your own strategic plan.

Conclusion

The combination of conducting a school-wide needs assessment, identifying high-priority goals for stakeholders, and then collaboratively developing a plan for how the library can help stakeholders achieve...
their goals represents a clear form of built-in advocacy. It prompts school librarians to have conversations with their stakeholders, which builds both relationships and adds true validity to their understanding of what they want and need. In addition, these conversations also help develop a better understanding of what a school librarian does and can do for stakeholders in the future. The school-wide plan that is created serves as a collective vision for the future that places the school library and librarian at the core, right where they should be. Considering how rapidly the school library field is moving, it is recommended this process be repeated every three to five years.

Strategic planning helps articulate a school librarian’s priorities through the words and aspirations of those they wish to serve, helping redefine a school library and all that it means to the future well-being of your school. Make your own luck by writing your own fairy tale ending.

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Works Cited:

Appendices
Access the following appendices from this study online at <www.nclibraryadvocacy.org>:
Appendix A: General Interview Questions
Appendix B: Teacher Interview Questions
Appendix C: Librarian Interview Questions
Appendix D: Parent Focus Group Questions
Appendix E: Elementary School Student Focus Group Protocol and Questions
Appendix F: Project Phases and Timeline
Appendix G: School 1 Strategic Plan
Appendix H: School 2 Strategic Plan
Appendix I: School Librarian 1 Reflections
Appendix J: School Librarian 2 Reflections
Appendix K: School Library Strategic Planning Process
Appendix L: Strategic Planning Worksheets