THE SOLO LIBRARIAN

Journal of the American Association of School Librarians

VOLUME 40, NO. 2 | November/December 2011 | ISSN 1094-9046 | www.ala.org/aasl

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Knowledge Quest is read by building-level school librarians, supervisors, library educators and others concerned with the development of school library programs and services in elementary and secondary schools.

Indexing and Abstracting
Knowledge Quest is indexed in Academic Abstracts/CD-ROM; Book Review Index; Current Contents; Social & Behavioral Sciences; Current Index to Journals in Education; Exceptional Child Education Abstracts; Information Science and CSA Illumina.

School Library Media Research, AASL’s online research journal, can be accessed at <www.ala.org/aasl/slmr>.

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Are they alone? Absolutely not!”

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Solo But Not Separate — pg 26
S

ometimes going it alone can be a good thing. In
the entertainment business for example, groups
are always breaking up so the lead singer can have
a solo career—oftentimes overshadowing former
bandmates. Look at Cher, Sting, Paul McCartney,
and Beyoncé, for example. They all seemed to do
OK as solo acts—probably even better than when they
were in the band. However, in the school library
world, going solo isn’t quite as desirable. Without the
help of support staff, many solo school librarians
all across the country are providing service to their
students. It isn’t easy. It isn’t the ideal. However, I
think the one thing this issue of KQ does is prove
that these school librarians aren’t really alone!

I cannot completely relate to being a solo school
librarian. But, I can relate to being stretched and
pulled in all different directions. Twice in my career
I’ve had to serve multiple buildings simultaneously.
It certainly isn’t easy nor the ideal, but that was the
reality of the job at the time. I can remember waking
up trying to remember which school I was supposed to
be at that day. I can remember that the item I wanted
or needed was always at the school where I wasn’t. I
can remember feeling frustrated because I could not
provide the school library program at the high level
I thought my students and staff so deserved. But like
many of the authors in this issue, I tried to do the best
job I could do within the situation, while constantly
painting a vision of what was possible in the future.

I think having a vision for the school library program
is so critical. AASL, in my opinion, sets the bar
high for our field. I’ve heard people suggest that it is
frustrating to look at the ideal school library program
when you are faced with being alone, no support staff,
covering multiple buildings, or have no budget. They
think that AASL doesn’t offer anything for them
because we have our heads in the clouds. But, I’d
strongly disagree. We need that ideal model. We need
that vision of what an outstanding school library
program looks like. We need to know how we can
push ourselves to change those elements of our school
library programs that we can control. We need someone
who advocates for the ideal. It’s one of our national
organization’s roles to set that vision for school library
programs and then work to provide the resources
school librarians need to make that vision a reality.

Whether working as a solo librarian, one
covering multiple buildings, or one with support
staff, we have to use all available resources
to help design and implement a school library
program that our students and staff need.
The trilogy of resources—Empowering Learners, Standards for the 21st-Century Learner, and Standards for the 21st-Century Learner in Action—give us a vision of the possibilities and provide a foundation for the process of making that vision a reality. These resources provide a road map to guide us as we try to reach our goal of focusing our school library programs on teaching skills and helping students develop dispositions that will benefit them throughout their lives. Certainly our current situations are going to dictate how fast we travel down that road, but we shouldn’t let that stop us from beginning the journey.

Each school year we should review where we are, where we want to go, and make a map for getting there. The online Planning Guide for Empowering Learners is a great way to assess where you are on the journey and where you need to go. This guide walks you and your library advisory committee step by step through the process of figuring out how you can create your own 21st-century school library.

The new Standards for the 21st-Century Lesson Plan Database provides a repository of lesson plans for instruction based on the AASL standards. I hope you will add your own lessons to this database as we expand the resources available to all school librarians. School librarians with all types of experiences and working with various grade levels created these documents and resources. The project was a huge amount of work, but I am so thankful for each and every one of the contributors.

However, these tools are not just for school librarians. The vision for the 21st-century school library program is one for us to share with everyone with a stake in the school library program. Administrators, teachers, parents, community members, school board members, etc. all need to have a clear picture of what a quality 21st-century school library program can provide for students. Whether working as a solo librarian, one covering multiple buildings, or one with support staff, we have to use all available resources to help design and implement a school library program that our students and staff need.

Beyond giving our field the vision, I think one of AASL’s roles is all about realizing we’re not alone. As I mentioned in the opening of the column, this issue of KQ is a prime example. Each article contains ideas and strategies that a solo school librarian—or for that matter, any school librarian, no matter what your situation—can use. Our authors and guest editors have created a resource—not only these articles, but also the authors who wrote them—that you can go back to when you need their support.

The number-one benefit in being an AASL member is the network of individuals I have met over the years and come to rely on. Belonging to AASL puts you in a community filled with people that will completely understand your role. Most of us are the only school librarian in our schools. Our jobs, even if we do have support staff, can be very isolated and isolating. AASL is a vital resource for school librarians because it eliminates that isolated feeling. In AASL school librarians are members of a vast network of colleagues and friends from whose experiences you can benefit—and most are as close as your computer. Go to the AASL website and check out the networking resources available to all members.

No matter what situation you have in your current school library world, remember you are not alone. AASL is here. The members that make up the organization are right behind, backing you up. So regardless of whether you are a solo act, part of a duo, or a member of a bigger ensemble, your fellow AASL members can provide you with a whole catalog of songs to sing while you create your own 21st-century school library program.

Carl A. Harvey II is the school librarian at North Elementary School in Noblesville, Indiana, and president of the American Association of School Librarians.
Common threads in these stories are the importance of prioritizing, of letting go of things that we may have always done “that way,” of delegating and sharing responsibility, and of focusing—first and foremost—on services to students.

The Solo Librarian

Audrey Church & Frances Reeve

When Ann Martin, chair of the editorial board for *Knowledge Quest*, called to inquire if we would be interested in serving as guest co-editors of an upcoming issue of *Knowledge Quest*, we were intrigued. When she told us that the theme of the issue would be the “solo librarian,” we were hooked. Between the two of us, we have thirty-nine years experience as building-level school librarians and thirty-four years educating future school librarians. Yet, both of us began our careers as solo librarians, lone rangers in our schools.

Audrey’s first position in the early 1980s was as a primary school librarian in a rural school serving grades K–2, total enrollment just around 300. Frances worked as an elementary school librarian in the early 1970s in a rural school with a total enrollment of 280 in grades 1–7.

Times have changed, however. Fast forward to 2011. We read news of the library field, follow blogs, participate in listservs, attend conferences, and talk with other professionals, and we know that to say that this is a challenging time for school libraries and school librarians is an understatement. A look at Shonda Brisco’s Google map, “A Nation without School Librarians,” on AASL’s Advocacy page is enough to make us lose sleep at night. It shows “cities, towns, communities, and states that have made the decision to either eliminate certified school librarian positions (indicated in blue) or require one school librarian to work with two or more school library programs throughout the week (indicated in red),” and there is entirely too much blue and red on the map!

Solo librarianship was a topic that we wanted to address.

First, our task was to define “solo librarian.” Next we wanted to give you the opportunity to hear the stories of colleagues who are working as solo librarians in the twenty-first century. And, finally, our goal was to provide resources, assistance, and rays of hope.

Faces of Solo Librarianship

What is a solo librarian? For the purpose of this issue of *Knowledge Quest*, we define a solo librarian as a school librarian working alone—no paid clerk, aide, paraprofessional, or second librarian. A solo

We wanted to give you the opportunity to hear the stories of colleagues who are working as solo librarians in the twenty-first century.
school librarian could serve a small school with low enrollment that has always been staffed by a single professional. Or a solo librarian could be a professional who, due to budget cuts and financial challenges, is now working alone in a setting where the school librarian once had staff and, perhaps, a second professional colleague. Or a solo school librarian could be one now called upon to serve multiple schools across a school district, perhaps in the position of being the only professionally trained school librarian in the school district. Solo librarianship has many faces.

Voices of Solo Librarianship

We wanted to hear from solo school librarians from various geographical locations in the country and from various levels and types of schools. We asked them to share their experiences, their strategies, and lessons learned. To that end, elementary school librarian Robbie Nickel (NV) shares how school librarians in Elko County School District (which crosses two time zones!) have collaborated to problem solve, to meet student needs, and to extend resources.

Nancy Terrell (VA) tells about hard choices that impact student services in her middle school library but suggests, nonetheless, that we should embrace change with a positive attitude. Anne Busch (MO) also relates loss of staffing in her high school library, emphasizing the importance of delegating, streamlining, and keeping cool whenever possible.

Wayne Cherry (TX) brings us the school librarian’s perspective from an independent school, likening solo librarianship to juggling and noting the important role that trained volunteers play in his library program.

Cynthia Karabush and Pam Pleviak (IL) argue forcefully that we should be proactive to leverage our talents and usefulness to both students and staff by taking part in committee work and grabbing leadership opportunities and by identifying high-impact tasks. Laura Slusser (VA) shares her powerful story of advocacy opportunities missed and offers advice that she, too, will embrace in her next school library position.

Common threads in these stories are the importance of prioritizing, of letting go of things that we may have always done “that way,” of delegating and sharing responsibility, and of focusing—first and foremost—on services to students.
Resources for School Librarians

Finally, we wanted to offer resources and strategies to assist those school librarians flying solo. Those of you who have a clerk in your library or work with another trained school librarian, don’t put down this issue of KQ; these are resources and strategies and ideas that you certainly can use as well! They are not reserved for our solo colleagues!

Mary Woodard (TX) provides a district supervisor’s perspective, sharing how Mesquite Independent School District has supported its solo school librarians since the 1970s, realizing that the school librarian’s role is to collaborate, to teach, and to work with students and teachers, not to perform clerical tasks.

Helen Adams (WI) explores intellectual freedom in the context of solo librarianship and gives suggestions for setting priorities, finding allies, and taking steps to protect students’ First Amendment rights.

Cynthia Anderson (KS) presents solid ideas and workable strategies for getting grant funding for our libraries, starting small, and making a difference.

Sandra Andrews (NC) summarizes the various national data sets that are available to assist us as we make decisions to improve our programs.

Becky Pasco (NE) explores aspects of solo librarianship from the perspective of an educator of school librarians, reminding school librarians that, though they may be solo librarians, they are an integral part of the educational fabric of their schools.

Carl Harvey, in his president’s column, emphasizes that none of us must go it alone and points out some of the many ways that AASL supports us—from publications to position statements to standards and guidelines to essential links to professional development opportunities to networking.

This issue of Knowledge Quest is rich with stories and ideas. Yes, solo librarians are lone rangers; they juggle; they fly solo. Are they alone? Absolutely not! They are supported by a network of colleagues both in their school districts and beyond, by the educators who taught them to be school librarians, by their state and national professional associations, and by the 21st-century technologies that connect them and prevent them from being isolated.

Are their jobs challenging? Absolutely! They have to learn to prioritize, to work smart, to strategically use their time and resources, and to take time for themselves, both personally and professionally. Are they up for the task? If the stories told here are indicative, we have no doubt!

Audrey Church is an associate professor of school library media at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. She is the author of Leverage Your Library Program to Help Raise Test Scores (Linworth 2003), “The Instructional Role of Library Media Specialists as Perceived by Elementary School Principals” (SLMR 2008), and “Secondary School Principals’ Perceptions of the School Librarian’s Instructional Role” (SLMR 2010). She currently serves as the Educators of School Librarians Section representative to the AASL Board of Directors.

Frances Reeve is an associate professor of school library media at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. She is coauthor of “Prove it! Using Data to Advocate for School Library Media Programs” in Educational Media and Technology Yearbook, 2009. She most recently served AASL as a member of the Standards and Guidelines Implementation Task Force and is president-elect of her state organization, the Virginia Educational Media Association.

Read Audrey’s feature on technology opportunities for solo librarians, “Definitely Not Alone!” on page 36!

Visit Knowledge Quest Online at www.ala.org/aasl/knowledgequest to view an exclusive list of AASL resources compiled by Frances, and to register for Audrey’s Dec. 13 Webinar on the challenges facing solo librarians.

Works Cited:
FEATURE

FREE MONEY!

Cynthia Anderson
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NOW THAT I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, LET’S TALK ABOUT GRANTS.

School library budgets are about as miserably low or nonexistent as many of us have ever seen. The population of school librarians who have not just one, but many school libraries to manage is growing. Time and funds are short, and needs for books, programming, and technology are high. Are you the one and only school librarian in your district? Do you serve multiple schools? Grant money is out there for you, and I want to encourage you to get some for your students and for their school libraries. Roll up your sleeves, and let’s get started.

First Things First
Tell your administrator what your dream is for your library. Paint a crystal-clear picture of what you want your students to be able to achieve and what, in particular, you would need to make that dream come true. Never, ever, write a grant proposal without prior approval of your supervisor. You never know when she might find a spare $1,000 that must be spent by Friday or it will be recaptured by the state department of education. If she knows what you want, it could be your lucky day. But most importantly, do not surprise your administrator with a completed grant proposal without her preapproval. It will save you time and tears in the long run.

Start in Your Own Backyard
The best place to start looking for grant funds is close to home. Start with a simple plan and a quest for a local funder. Is your school seeking greater parental engagement? Go to your parent-teacher organization and pitch a mother/daughter book club centered on a book that the organization will purchase. That could be your first shot at writing a grant proposal. Take baby steps to start. Do you need a continental breakfast for your before-school chess club students? Write a proposal to the neighborhood grocer with a promise of a big “thank you” in the school newsletter. When you get small funding packages like these, add them to your resume. Potential funders are like banks—the better you look on paper, the more likely they are to take a chance on you.

Reach Out and Collaborate
Take out the town or neighborhood public librarian for coffee. Find out what is cooking in the public library and what possibilities exist for collaboration on a joint project that you could pitch to a potential funder. Grantors love to give money when it impacts more, not fewer, beneficiaries. Is a community college, university, or technical school in your vicinity? What about your art teacher or physical education teacher? Could you collaborate on a project with one of them and help several students improve skills? Funders love proposals that span the ages, reach across institutions, and involve school and community.

Network
Networking is one of the very best ways to find out where grant money is available. Get out of your bibli-o-silo and connect with others. Whether it is following your favorite library rock star guru on Twitter or reading a daily blog, reach out and connect with someone every day. You can’t be everywhere simultaneously, so use technology to keep in touch with the movers and shakers who do know where the money is and have innovative ideas to share. Join a listserv like LM_NET and watch...
You need really great ideas for your grant requests. Follow some AASL member eagles to get inspired ideas for your proposals.

**TWITTER TIPSTERS**

David Warlick  
[<http://twitter.com/dwarlick>]

Allen November  
[<http://twitter.com/nlearning>]

Doug Johnson  
[<http://twitter.com/doug_johnson>]

David Loertscher  
[<http://twitter.com/davidloertscher>]

Chris Harris  
[<http://twitter.com/infomancy>]

Kristin Fontichiaro  
[<http://twitter.com/activelearning>]

Joyce Valenza  
[<http://twitter.com/joycevalenza>]

**BLOG TIPSTERS**

Joyce Valenza  
[<http://teacherlibrarian.ning.com/profile/joycevalenza>]

Buffy Hamilton  
[<http://theunquietlibrarian.wordpress.com>]

Allen November  
[<http://novemberlearning.com/blog>]

David Warlick  
[<http://davidwarlick.com/2cents>]

Doug Johnson  
[<http://doug-johnson.squarespace.com>]

David Loertscher  
[<http://davidloertscher.wordpress.com>]

Chris Harris  
[<http://schoolof.info/infomancy>]

Kristin Fontichiaro  
[<http://teacherlibrarian.ning.com/profile/KristinFontichiaro>]

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for topics relating to projects for which you want to find funding. Make a reoccurring appointment in your calendar to prompt you to do a search for grant money once a week or once every two weeks. It only takes a few minutes to check the places you expect might have some grant money. You have to lift a lot of rocks to find a nice little nest of grant money.

**Kids First**

Funders want to help young people learn, achieve, communicate, stay in school, and graduate. Funders’ primary goal is not to make life better for school librarians. When you write your grant or pitch your idea, put the focus on the benefits to the students. Even though getting a grant might make your life better, that improvement is not a primary motivator for the funder. The funder wants to improve the lives of kids. Choose your words carefully; it is not about the school librarian. Picture in your mind a room full of grant readers sorting through proposals and sifting them quickly into two piles. One is for spending that is beneficial for students, and one is a stack of proposals that are intended to make life easier on the school librarians. Guess which stack gets the more serious reading? Be the wind beneath the wings of your students and you will help them achieve great things.

**Honey, Not Vinegar**

You have heard it before, but it is still true. You get more grant or gift funds with a can-do, energetic, positive, collaborative attitude than you do with all the strident voices you can raise and picket-line signs you can wave. Whether it is the administrative team, the school board, or a local museum board making funding decisions, people want to place their faith and funding in the easy-going, gets-along-with-others, cheerful go-getter, not in the Lack-of-Funding Ann or Andy.

**Tie It to Learning**

If you are not on your school’s improvement team or on the data analysis team, sign up today. Grant money goes to those who have a specific goal, a specific plan to achieve that goal, and a way to measure the achievement of that goal. The goals that are most often funded are the ones that are designed to improve student achievement. Once you are serving on those school improvement and data analysis teams, you are privy to knowledge about specific learning goals in your school. Sit down and go through the high-stakes test results. Do your students need improvement in persuasive writing skills? If they do have a deficit in that area, how can you help from the school library? Do you have some prime examples of persuasive writing? Or are you fresh out of anything of interest to help teachers present strong examples of persuasive writing? If that is the case, collaborate with a teacher and develop a plan to teach persuasive writing skills. Start searching for what materials might help students improve persuasive writing skills. Get a list together of materials you could purchase if you had the funds. That would be a short, easy-to-write proposal and a great place to start developing or honing your grant-writing skills.

**Be Prepared**

Like any good Boy Scout, you need to be prepared. Be ready with the mental summary of your dream library. What would that look like? Be ready to paint a verbal picture of that dream in language your potential funder can understand.
If you had that grant, what would students and teachers be able to do that they can’t do now?

Get your resume ready. Most grant proposals require a current resume from the person or people requesting the grants. Keep a current version of your resume in your computer. Be ready to modify a copy of the file to include specific information that might appeal to the potential funder you have identified.

Do your students need some type of technology gizmos? If so, what are they? How much do they cost? What is the shipping cost? Do they need any peripheral devices or software? Would your instructional technology team agree to support these gizmos if you had them? Be sure you know exactly what the request package would look like. Be ready to pull that information out with just a moment’s notice when a grant opportunity shows up. Be sure the technology powers that be would support your new technology if you had it. Don’t surprise the technology team with a new set of Apple products when the team will support only Windows computers.

**Be Compatible**

Your goals need to be compatible with your potential funder’s goals. Look for a good match when you seek a funder. Think Match.com and e-Harmony. Do a compatibility test. Don’t apply to a funder whose mission is to help at-risk students if your students are not at-risk. Your mission must be compatible with the funder’s mission, or you are wasting your precious time.

**Grant Writer’s Best Advice**

If your school library is your field of dreams, write it (the grant); the money will come. Start small.

Learn from others. Keep your eyes open for the prize. Put kids first. Collaborate. Cut your teeth on small grants before you tackle a big federal grant. The more grants you write, the better you get at it. Polish your enthusiasm and let it show through in your proposals. You are doing meaningful, life-changing work. Keep on keeping on. For your young patrons, you make a difference that lasts a lifetime.

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**Cynthia Anderson**

is associate superintendent emeritus in Shawnee Mission, Kansas. She has served as teacher, school librarian, school principal, library director, and as district administrator. Her most recent book is Write Grants Get Money, 2nd ed. (Linworth 2008).

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**Enter contests:**

Winning a contest is much like getting a grant. Enter as many as you can and get recognition for your students, teachers, school, and library. Winning something is a great resume enhancer.

**Volunteer to be a grant reader:**

That is the best way to learn what makes a winning grant proposal.

**Plan ahead:**

Keep a file by months of when particular major annual grant proposals are due. You usually get this year’s notice too late to pull the proposal together. Plan ahead.

**Use everyday language:**

Write your grant proposal using everyday, understandable language. Do not use edu-speak in the grant. While ELL = English Language Learners is in your book, it won’t be in the funders’ unless you reveal the code.

**Start at district level:**

Does your school district have an education foundation? That is a great place to seek your first grant. Take a look at [www.newtrieralumni.org](http://www.newtrieralumni.org) or at [www.smef.org](http://www.smef.org) to see what an education foundation looks like. Maybe your district has one.

**Be prepared to evaluate:**

Be prepared to say how you will measure the grant money’s impact on student achievement. Evaluation is one of the most important components of a grant.

**Check professional publications:**

Look for upcoming grant opportunities by reading journals like Library Media Connection [www.librarymediaconnection.com](http://www.librarymediaconnection.com) and School Library Monthly [www.schoollibrarymonthly.com](http://www.schoollibrarymonthly.com), and other education journals like Education Week [www.edweek.org/ew](http://www.edweek.org/ew).

**Recycle:**

If you write a grant and it is not funded, get it back out, revise it, and try again with another potential funder.

**Start small:**

Try [www.ezra-jack-keats.org](http://www.ezra-jack-keats.org) for a perfect mini-grant start.

**Try these resources:**

Keep an eye on [www.grantnews.org](http://www.grantnews.org) for news of foundation and government grants. Try [www.technologygrantnews.com](http://www.technologygrantnews.com) for technology grants.

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TIPS!
THE MAXED OUT LIBRARIAN

HOW I LEARNED TO KEEP SMILING AND REMAIN EFFECTIVE AS A SOLO LIBRARIAN

Anne Busch
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Not so long ago the library at the high school in my semirural community was perking along every day with the help of one energetic and dedicated library clerk, a few student staffers, and me, the professional school librarian.

About 700 students, and 50 teachers and paraprofessionals access the library on a regular basis. We averaged around 250 student contacts per day, including students working in the attached computer lab. Life was good. We were an organized, efficient machine.

My clerk took care of clerical duties, assisted with students when appropriate, and generally worked in sync with me at all times. We had a few student aides who ran the circulation desk and shelved books, along with handling miscellaneous tasks as needed. At the end of each day we knew we’d provided services that helped both students and staff. Kids and teachers got the help they needed. Teachers were able to schedule time in the school library, and even though collaboration was still a work in progress for many teachers, progress was being made on planning projects that included information literacy standards. I had time to work with students individually on search strategies, ethics, and technology issues.

The ominous cloud of budget cuts was looming over the entire school, but we’d hoped that—since the school library was obviously always in use and integrated into the entire curriculum—perhaps we’d stay under the radar as administrators searched for ways to cut costs. We were wrong. One fine spring day the principal called us into his office and explained to us individually that my clerk would be reassigned to other buildings (three to be exact) and I would be a solo school librarian.

Let me take a moment to recognize and salute all of our professional brothers and sisters out there who have always flown solo in school libraries, many times in K–12 schools with tiny budgets. In addition, too many school librarians are currently being reassigned to multiple schools or losing their positions entirely. Overall, the situation is dire in many states, so I realized that even though our school library program would suffer, we could take solace in the fact that we still had a program!

The “desired” Missouri standard for staffing is 1.0 certified library media specialists for a school with our student enrollment (Missouri 2009). Technically, our school library was overstaffed. But it was that “extra” staff that made possible a program that engaged every student and teacher in the building. In light of national and state standards, and the numerous studies that have demonstrated the correlation between effective school libraries and high student achievement, it just made sense. More access meant higher test scores, more reading, more opportunities for students to grow academically. I argued respectfully that our school would be taking a giant step backwards, that teachers were finally willing to collaborate after years of coaxing, that students relied on the school library to be open early and late for assignments, that we needed a professional and a clerk in our facility. Not surprisingly, those arguments didn’t change the decision. At least, I was told, we still had jobs.

After the initial shock, I had a summer to figure out how the school library program would survive intact, and how we’d continue to serve our students and staff in the manner to which we’d all become accustomed. If this was my new reality, then I had to adapt—and quickly. With adequate staffing, we had created an atmosphere that was welcoming and academically important to the student body. Cutting staff meant cutting services, so what features of the school library program would have to change to accommodate the shortfall? What were the top priorities for me as the professional (and only) school librarian? What personal strengths and weaknesses did I have that would enable me to keep things going without becoming frazzled, bitter, and, subsequently, ineffective? How could the school library function efficiently with half the adult staff?

Consider all the small daily tasks done in the background that contribute to the overall maintenance and outward credibility of the school library program. Computers up and running, books on shelves, equipment ready and available, furniture in place, databases and books selected and acquired, well-trained and helpful staff—all those ingredients and more create a school library that is ready to accommodate student research, recreational reading, best use of Web 2.0 applications, and student/teacher contacts. So many of my former clerk’s responsibilities enabled me to address the instructional needs of students and staff. How would those jobs be accomplished without losing the instructional component of the school library? How could I maintain the outward components of the school library, the image of a well-run and necessary part of the school’s curriculum without sacrificing the
The first big change was shortened library hours. Previously, the library had been accessible eight and a half hours every day. Unfortunately, that’s been reduced to seven and a half hours daily; kids have about an hour less time to use the library. It’s also closed during my short lunch period because students are not allowed in the school library without supervision, and whiny as it may sound, I need a break, even if it is only twenty minutes. I believe that my time conversing with other teachers and staff at the lunch table is valuable professionally and personally. Much as I love the school library, the change of scenery is good for my overall disposition and, therefore, good for everyone. The change in hours disappointed students, and my principal has urged me to continue to open earlier and stay later even though he wasn’t able to pay for extended hours. I pointed out to him that the extra hours provided access to students, which we all wanted, but those hours were on my own time. An exhausted librarian is an ineffective librarian, so—for my sake and the students’—cutting hours was a necessary casualty of cutting staff.

Even though my adult staff was gone, I still had student library aides who earn a half-credit for working in the library. When we returned to school in August, I had revised the library aide curriculum to reflect new duties and responsibilities. Students had always been trained in the use of the software and in the Dewey Decimal System so that they could run the circulation desk, shelve books, and generally do odd jobs as needed. The new reality meant that everyone had to step up and work harder. Students went through an application process, much like the one for a job, and with this approach I managed to “hire” some very good help. I require that student aides have at least a 2.5 GPA, be in grades 11 or 12, and have regular attendance. They are my best resource if the school library is going to continue to run efficiently. I explained to all new student staffers that grades would be earned on the basis of the quality of their work, general attitude, public relations skills, willingness to try new things, and dedication to the job. I asked them to consider their work in the school library as they would a “real” job in the outside world and encouraged them to take ownership of their work in the school library so that they would be proud of the program they were helping to maintain. Scoring guides assign a numerical value to the level of work quality, and quizzes help to assess measurable skills. Aides know in advance what the expectations are and know what it takes to earn an A. Each student, having mastered circulation desk and shelving, was assigned a specialty job. These included materials processing, bulletin boards and displays, computer troubleshooting, office technologies, and more.

Granted, not all tasks were completed with the accuracy and care of my former clerk, but the students accomplished many of the tasks that would have gone undone without their help. They were required to participate in freshman orientation, just to refresh their basic skills and to see what kinds of questions freshmen and new students might have when navigating a new facility. By the middle of the first quarter, when teachers were really gearing up for research projects, it was possible to leave student staff in charge of the circulation desk so that I was able to work more closely with teachers and students on classroom projects. Students love to be experts, and the library job makes them feel like they are an integral and valued part of the school library program. (They are!)

In addition, I made sure that student aides are catalog searching wizards who can easily assist other students with using the OPAC and locating materials. Two of them are returning for a second year in the library. The veteran student staff will have more challenging jobs, possibly working in the library database and maintaining the school library webpage. One student is especially interested in young adult literature, and she will have the duty of keeping my consideration list updated with the best new books and materials.

Streamlining the chores of collection maintenance became a necessity with the staff shortage, but some jobs simply must be the professional responsibility of the certified school librarian. During the normal school day, it was impossible to squeeze in time to weed the collection, responsibly discard old materials, and maintain access points in the catalog. I made a prioritized list of these chores at the beginning of the school year, and stuck to it, simply attending to these chores as time allowed. I am blessed with a very competent library substitute/volunteer who loves big projects. With very specific instructions, she was able to accomplish some collection maintenance jobs much faster than I because she had fewer interruptions. I still maintain control over the catalog, and most of my catalog-related chores are done after school, when the doors are closed. My expectations regarding the timelines for many of these activities had to be lowered, but the most important things got done, and whatever is left can wait till next year.
I found that if I am patient, and doing my best to cover all the bases, most of the teachers and students will be patient, too.

Another responsibility that had to be streamlined was selection and acquisition of materials. I’ve always kept a running list of considerations, but without as much time to read reviews and keep up with professional literature, it was a challenge to stay current. In years past I consistently kept an updated spreadsheet that included titles, authors, review sources, prices, ISBNs, and publisher information. Sadly, my consideration list was much shorter than it would have been in previous years, but since my books and materials budget had also been reduced, the number of books and databases I planned to purchase or renew came pretty close to the dollar amount that was allocated, an unfortunate coincidence. Next year, I will rely on a student staffer to enter the information on that spreadsheet. There’s nothing sacred about accessing online selection tools, so why not share those resources and open up to young staff one of the most enjoyable areas of librarianship? Additionally, since we have a suggestion box for students anyway, those suggestions can be entered onto the spreadsheet, even if the review information isn’t completed.

I had to use one vendor for two large orders, and purchased full processing, which expedited the process of getting books into the hands of students. When orders come in we finish processing as soon as we can, but I’ve learned to live with carts of books parked for awhile in the workroom. Student aides work with me to check off items, note any discrepancies, and complete local processing. One of the perks of being a student staff member is first choice of new titles. This has at least a two-fold benefit. Students are thrilled to have a special privilege, and they become ambassadors for the school library, sharing news about the latest titles and booktalking to their peers.

Even with the help of dedicated student staff, in an understaffed facility I still don’t have enough time to do justice to the instructional role of the school librarian. With a wide range of socioeconomic levels, our student body still reflects a digital divide, so we are in many ways helping students catch up to 21st-century research and problem solving every day.

Many teachers were reluctant to expect the level of service to which we’d all become accustomed. The class periods not covered by a student aide meant running back and forth to the circ desk, answering questions on the fly, hoping that students would be patient while I worked with others. It’s exhausting. I found that if I am patient, and doing my best to cover all the bases, most of the teachers and students will be patient, too. We are all doing our best as demands on time and labor increase.

So many important skills are going untaught because there just isn’t time. The teachers who understand the value of information literacy work with me, but many others are satisfied with Google searching alone. I work with teachers who “get it,” and I keep trying to educate others every chance I get. It’s hard to be creative and innovative in a digital world when I have so little time to learn and then teach new technologies. My role as a consultant in technology tools and standards is limited by time constraints and availability. All I can do is hang in there, and continue to teach at every opportunity.

Solo school librarianship is a challenge, and that’s not likely to change anytime soon. I’m still adapting to the new reality of downsizing, but what I’ve learned so far is to get plenty of sleep, know my limits, allow others to help, streamline whenever possible, know the standards so that I can provide a lesson at the drop of a hat, and—above all—keep smiling. We still have a school library, and I still have a job.

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Works Cited:
FEATURE

one

school librarian

plus

positive attitude

equals

A QUALITY
SCHOOL
LIBRARY
PROGRAM
You could hear a pin drop if you enter the Davis Middle School library today.

It is 9:21 a.m., and the library is closed for the seventh day of SOL (standardized state) testing, with only three more days to go. Having two computer labs in the school library means that two groups can do online testing at once. When the first testing session is over, the school library is used to give makeup tests in the afternoon and after school for homebound students. Needless to say, this is not my idea of a great school library program at this time. I would much rather be instructing students and having them check out books; however, I know that I have to be flexible and support the decisions of the administration.

Embrace change as an opportunity to grow

School librarians must be willing to adapt to change, and, boy, have I had changes this school year. When school started last year, our school had two full-time school librarians, one full-time library clerk, and one full-time instructional technology resource teacher—all housed in our school library. Anytime a student, parent, or staff member had a need or concern, we could address it immediately because we had adequate staffing. In November my co-librarian was permanently transferred to an elementary school to complete the school year. With the remaining staffing we were still able to keep the school library open all day and provide quality services. I established a procedure at the circulation desk for students to stamp their books’ due dates in their own agendas. This procedure helps to keep checkout flowing quickly and gives students some responsibility in knowing when their books are due.

Delegate tasks to others

Students love to help out, and I appreciate their willingness to learn new things. The “Adopt-A-Bookshelf” helps me to keep our bookshelves neat and clean. Each student in the Team Read Book Club selected a shelf for which he or she would accept responsibility, keeping it neat and making sure that the books were in order. I printed labels with the students’ names and affixed each to the appropriate shelf so other students could see who was responsible for it. This went over so well that other students wanted to adopt a shelf too. Having students understand the importance of having books in their right place has cut down on misplaced books.

"Getting books in the hands of my students was of utmost importance to me, so I had to look at areas that took away from my time for working with the students."

Nancy Terrell
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You could hear a pin drop if you enter the Davis Middle School library today.
Be prepared for anything

Budget woes then fell upon our district, and I learned that I would be losing the library clerk and the instructional technology resource teacher. I reflected on the situation, knowing that I would be flying solo the next year and thought about ways that I could prepare for this change.

I became diligent in preparing and organizing the many stations, digital note cards, pathfinders, and digital book commercials that I have created (see figure 1). I knew that there would not be any downtime to get those things done during the school day. As the school webmaster, I also collaborated with teachers and the administration to update our school and library websites (see figure 2).

I knew that I wanted additional funds to purchase books, so I started making preparations for writing applications for the four grants that I received this year. Through applying for and winning grants, I was able to provide a free book for each student in our school, along with books, t-shirts, and treats for my clubs. Planning, organizing, writing, and providing an assessment for each grant is time-consuming; however, I feel the investment of my time is worth it for our students.

Be kind to everyone, even when you don’t feel like it

Because I knew that my teachers and other staff members would not realize the significance of losing so many library staff members, I also had to prepare them for the change. Getting books in the hands of my students was of utmost importance to me, so I had to look at areas that took away from my time for working with the students. Managing the Accelerated Reader (AR) and the Standardized Assessment of Reading (STAR) program can be time-consuming, so I decided that this was an area in which I could train my teachers to take over. In May I met with the language arts teachers by grade level to go over the program, and to explain how to add and set up their class lists. I knew that by August they would not remember these instructions; however, I needed to prepare them for this change.

"One of the most difficult things to which teachers must adjust is the fact that they have to plan ahead for the materials they need for the day."
When the next school year started, the Language Arts Department decided to try a new reading program. Students had a grade-level minimum of books that they were required to read from a variety of genres. Some of the teachers were not thrilled with the idea of doing something new because AR is so easy for them to assess; however, they did not want to handle the management. I still hear comments from a few teachers who miss the AR program, and I just smile and say that it is time to try something new.

Simplify and un-clutter your library

In August when I returned to school, I went through all the cabinets and closets, getting rid of unneeded items. I moved some of the audiovisual equipment into an empty office so I would have easier access and could provide better service. After our opening meetings, teachers then waited patiently in line to pick up their video projectors and AV equipment. I didn’t stress over the long line—just treated each staff member with a friendly welcome back and got the needed equipment.

Seeing a need for assistance, one of our physical education teachers agreed to volunteer each morning to help with checkout. Her generosity allows me to assist students with the morning news show that is broadcast from the library. She also stops by after lunch to shelve books. What a blessing to have someone see a need and follow through each day.

Get organized

As part of the school library orientation I use student–made video clips, which I post on my library webpage. Instead of hearing me talk, seventh- and eighth-grade students viewed the clips to remind them of expectations. I conducted the sixth-grade orientation in person so I could start to develop a relationship with the new students. I provided the teachers with labels that had the username and password for programs such as BrainPOP, TumbleReadables, and World Book. By placing these labels, along with students’ library barcodes, in the students’ agendas, teachers and I easily provided students with vital information needed to access those resources at school and at home. Students stamp the URL for the school website in the front of the agenda so they always know how to access the resources available for our school. Taking the time to prepare the labels and develop a plan for orientation worked beautifully, and the teachers stepped up to provide some of the clerical help that I needed, allowing me to focus on the students.

I created several reading blogs to provide our students with opportunities to reflect on lessons or what they are reading. Blogs make it easy to stay organized with student work and responses (see figure 3).

Listen more and be flexible

After orientation I began teaching students how to use appropriate sources and provided a workshop on plagiarism. While I was instructing classes, there was no one to check out books for the students. The teachers complained that I was teaching too much and needed to have more checkout time. I collaborated with the language arts instructional leader to develop a plan that would meet the need for instruction and provide more time for checkout. We decided to try having the school library open for checkout every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Tuesdays and Thursdays would be set aside for instruction. After giving the new schedule a try, it seemed to be working. Students still wanted to come to the school library every day to check out books, but learned that if I am in the middle of instruction, they need to come back or wait for my cue that I am almost finished. With this new schedule in place my book clubs (Team Read, Leaders Are Readers, Battle of Books) could continue and meet regularly during their lunch period.

Be prepared to say NO

Answering the telephone is a service that I am not always able to provide. I feel that my priority is to help the people that are here in the library. If I am helping a student or teacher find a resource, then I will not stop to answer the phone. If I am in the middle of instruction, I do not answer the phone. Thank goodness for the “Do Not Disturb” button. While I know that I am not meeting the needs of the caller, I know that I am providing quality service to the patrons who are in the school library.
Figure 4. Davis Middle School library as a construction zone.

Figure 5. Installation of ceiling tiles and new lights.

Figure 6. Nonfiction section of renovated Davis Middle School library.

Figure 7. Side view of the reading and computers.
One of the most difficult things to which teachers must adjust is the fact that they have to plan ahead for the materials they need for the day. They were used to having immediate service, and sometimes now I am not available to help them. I keep a clipboard at the desk for teachers to sign out what materials they are taking from the library.

Pace yourself

Spread out big changes and difficult projects over time; don’t lump the hard things all together. In November I was informed that over the winter break our school library was going to have asbestos removed, and a drop ceiling and new lights installed. This meant that I had to remove all items from the nonfiction section, half of the fiction section, along with the two offices and audiovisual closet. What an exciting time as I developed a plan on how to make it all happen. I immediately e-mailed my fellow school librarians in the district to ask for empty book trucks to borrow until the end of February. Everyone was generous, and I soon had thirteen book trucks delivered to my library. I decided to weed the library collection to remove any worn or out-of-date items that weren’t being used. I removed them from our library database and crossed out identifying information in each book. I put the weeded books on a cart and stored them in an empty art room, which also became my storage facility for the computer lab and AV equipment that had to be removed. Library instruction and book checkout was still going on at the time, as I tried to keep the school library open as much as possible. The technology department sent a team to help dismantle the computer labs and remove equipment to store in a classroom. When we returned from break, the asbestos removal was complete, but the new ceiling and lights were not (see figure 4).

Contractors then came to put in the drop ceiling (see figure 5). Since the school library was not safe for students at this time, I loaded library books on carts, put on my coat and gloves, and set up a checkout station in the hallway. While I could not provide instruction at that point, I could make sure that our students had books to read. The new lights were wired and put in place, followed by the heating crew that made sure the heat vents were moved into their proper places. Ceiling tiles were then replaced, giving the school library a new look. New floor tiles replaced the asbestos tiles. The electricians came next doing their part to install the new power poles for the computer labs. The networking and technology crew returned to run the wiring needed for the computers.

Getting the library back in good shape (see figure 6) took a great deal of effort by so many people—contractors, electricians, heating and tiling experts, and our own technology, administrative, and custodial staffs. I made sure that I provided some treats for the workers to let them know that I appreciated all that they were doing to get my school library back in shape. I also sent a letter to all of our school board members and district leadership team showing pictures of the construction and finished library (see figure 7).

Pray, get sleep, and start your day with a positive attitude

I go to bed on time, usually about 10:00 p.m. because I am too beat to stay up later. I also get up on time, thanks to Spanky, my yorkshire terrier (see figure 8), who, eager to eat and go outside, wakes me early each morning. I also take a moment to relax and thank God each day for the opportunity to serve the students and staff at my school.

Hurrah, today is day 10 of testing, and yes, we are still having makeup tests in the school library. Oh, good news! I just found out that the school library will be painted over the summer. That means I need to take down all of the signage and displays, and prepare for the paint job. I will need to cover all of my bookshelves with newspaper to protect the books. It is never a dull moment in a school library. It has been a great year, and yes, I could have done even more with adequate staffing. A fellow librarian once told me an adage that I keep close to my heart, “Work smarter, not harder.” With preparation, organization and a positive attitude, I work smarter to provide a quality library program to meet the educational goals of my students.

Nancy Terrell is currently serving her sixth year as the teacher-librarian at Davis Middle School in Hampton, Virginia. She also spent thirteen years as an elementary school librarian in Hampton City Schools. A National Board Certified Teacher since 2004, she currently serves the Virginia Education Association as a “Jumpstart Trainer” for candidates seeking National Board Certification. Recent publications include her article, “Speaking Up,” published in the August/September 2010 Library Media Connection.
Solo But Not Separate

Preparing 21st-Century School Library Professionals Who Can “Go It Alone”

Becky Pasco
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Preparing school librarians for a diverse array of 21st-century educational environments is a daunting task. Faculty in school library preparation programs send candidates out into sparsely populated rural areas, dense urban settings, and everything in between. Some candidates will provide services and resources in updated, modern facilities, while others will operate in tiny, tattered little corners. Some new professionals will ply their trade in technically rich arenas, while others will work in technically starved settings. Regardless of place and space, resources and services must be developed and delivered in a proactive and productive manner for the P–12 community. School library preparation programs are charged with getting all candidates ready to operate effectively in any and all of these scenarios. This is no small endeavor, as many, if not most, of today’s school library candidates will “go it alone.”

The “solo librarian” is a bit of a misnomer. School librarians are first and foremost teachers, and “teacher–librarians” are surrounded by and work with educational professionals of many flavors. Daily, school librarians teach, coach, demonstrate, interpret, inform, and enlighten P–12 students right alongside faculty colleagues. Faculty in school library preparation programs work hard to enhance their candidates’ ability to integrate themselves into the instructional fabric of the school. School librarians who understand the importance of collaboration in its many forms will never “be alone.”
Where "solo" does come into play is when one acknowledges other roles and realities—beyond that of teacher—required of 21st-century school librarians. While a school librarian’s colleagues might recognize, appreciate, and even applaud a school librarian’s skills as a master teacher, they often don’t know or see the myriad of activities going on behind the scenes or even right in front of them! Skilled school librarians run their programs in a manner that renders the “scaffolding” invisible, and our mythical propensity for having things in order often results in professionals “going it alone” for parts of many journeys.

The ALA/AASL Standards for Initial Preparation of School Librarians (AASL 2010) provide school library faculty with a series of skill, knowledge, and dispositional targets to ensure candidates are able to design and direct school library programs that provide the kind of engaged learning and information environments that will help make the Standards for the 21st-Century Learner (AASL 2007) a reality for P–12 students. Faculty in school library preparation programs who align their coursework with current indicators of “quality school library preparation programs” will address five standards that require them to develop candidates who:

- Teach effectively (Standard One: Teaching for Learning);
- Promote reading in all forms, formats, and for all reasons (Standard Two: Literacy and Reading);
- Understand the impact of access on knowledge creation (Standard Three: Information and Knowledge);
- Articulate passionately the value school libraries add to their P–12 patrons’ lives (Standard Four: Advocacy and Leadership); and
- Manage their information, human, and fiscal resources (Standard Five: Program Management and Administration) in support of the academic, personal, and professional growth of all stakeholders.

To communicate, model, and promote in candidates the skills and dispositions in the new ALA/ AASL Standards for Initial Preparation of School Librarians, faculty are called upon to continue a strong emphasis on collaboration between school librarians and their school and community stakeholders to ensure candidates leave with a heightened resolve to be an integral part of activities that impact P–12 students’ academic achievement and personal success. If it does take a village to raise a child, 21st-century school librarians will position themselves in the middle of the town square—not “just outside” in the suburbs or alone on the outskirts. Well-prepared candidates might find themselves logistically solo, but will know to proceed with a strong commitment to never “work solo.” Educators of future school librarians are called upon to:

- Produce candidates who embrace a team approach to developing literacy in all its many forms through the use of information resources, information tools, and a robust and relevant information literacy curriculum—Well-prepared candidates might find themselves as the sole information expert on the team, but will resist the complacency of “thinking solo” and proceed with a commitment to create an entire community of information experts.
- Develop candidates who have not only an appreciation for, but are driven to provide ethical and equitable access for all members of their learning environments—Well-prepared candidates might find themselves as the "sole" individual assigned to make decisions about the access to and use of information resources, but will move quickly towards an inclusive, collective approach to the development of policies, procedures, and services that support their patrons’ needs.
- Demonstrate how networking can provide important and meaningful support by requiring candidates to interact with a variety of other information professionals in public, academic, and special libraries, as well as with members of their state, regional, and national library organizations—No school librarian needs to “feel solo” when leagues of professionals are willing, able, and waiting to lend an ear and a hand as needed.
- Help candidates think strategically and lead with purpose by providing them with the knowledge, tools, and motivation to conduct community and other types of analyses to ensure decisions are based on data that accurately reflects the characteristics of their diverse communities—Well-prepared candidates who “go” into their communities won’t “grow” into solo librarians.

Faculty members often serve the dual roles of both teacher and mentor in preparing 21st-century school librarians, and both roles are crucial in the development of candidates for the complex
and political world of library and information work in today’s P–12 schools. The two roles represent a continuum of preparation and support for frontline candidates who need strong partners in their professional journeys to diminish any perception or feeling that school librarians work “alone.”

Faculty members, in their role of teacher, carefully cultivate the public-service and technical skills necessary to direct a productive and proactive school library program. Faculty members, in their role of mentor, can nurture the mien of locus, leverage, and leadership that are equally important to their candidates’ success. Faculty who think “outside their campuses” and extend their reach beyond their classrooms to establish formal and informal networks for candidates after they graduate can be part of the solution to “solo.”

For school libraries to not just survive, but to thrive in the slippery educational, economic, and political terrains of the 21st-century, candidates in school library preparation programs must come out of the chute with the skills and dispositions necessary to help P–12 students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other community stakeholders successfully negotiate today’s dynamic information environments in pursuit of high-stakes personal, academic, and professional targets. Diminishing federal, state, and district support tied directly to shrinking budgets may increase the chance that today’s school library candidates might have to “go it alone” to provide the services and resources important to their patrons’ success.

To ensure school libraries retain their “place at the table” (McCook 2000), school librarian preparation programs must resolve to turn candidates able to move from adequate to accomplished in a short period of time. This challenge will require passion, resilience, and determination on all our parts, but school library preparation programs whose candidates join the frontline embracing their chance to be unique, autonomous, and independent will have a more meaningful and enjoyable professional journey than those who see themselves as solo, isolated, or alone.

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McCook, Kathleen. 2000. A Place at the Table: Participating in Community Building. Chicago: ALA.
As schools across the country face increasing fiscal restraints, school library professional positions are being eliminated at an alarming rate. As a result, many school librarians are becoming the only certified library professional in a district, serving multiple schools and grade levels. Suddenly, each is a solo librarian.

If you are the sole school librarian in a school district, where does intellectual freedom rank in your list of priorities? With so many responsibilities, how will you protect and advocate for students’ First Amendment rights and privacy of their library usage records when YOU cannot be in all school libraries all the time? What can one person accomplish?

Three K–12 librarians—Marcia, Elaine, and Cheryl—all working in rural communities in the Midwest, were queried by the author on the facets of intellectual freedom on which they focus. Although their priorities vary, their enthusiasm and passion for students’ access to school library resources is evident.

Marcia’s Intellectual Freedom Priorities
As a solo school librarian responsible for school libraries in two buildings, Marcia focuses on student privacy, collection development, and assistant training and expectations. She shares, “In a smaller educational community, rumors travel quickly. I guarantee students confidentiality about the materials they check out. Additionally, the kids feel free to ask me for information about anything and trust that I won’t ask why they want to know and won’t share their inquiry with others” (Marcia 2011).
Marcia spends considerable effort on collection development and is aware of the potential for concern about books perceived by some as including controversial topics. In her experience, “Small communities can pose challenges that can quickly become causes for the good of the children.” One person or a group of adults should not make choices for what all students in the community can read or research” (Marcia 2011).

Marcia depends on library assistants to manage two school libraries in her absence. From her perspective, “Library programs often require using paid or volunteer assistants. Anyone that works in these programs must be adequately trained not in just library maintenance jobs such as checking out or shelving, but in the fundamental beliefs of intellectual freedom and privacy. It must then be conveyed that these translate into expectations that hold true for every student or adult patron” (Marcia 2011).

Elaine’s Perspective on Intellectual Freedom

Elaine places a high priority on selection of resources, especially those that provide students with diverse viewpoints. “In rural districts with a particularly homogeneous population,” she states, “students need more information about the world beyond the county line or State Fair, and to know they have choices and options regardless of their situation or circumstance. We do not have a lot of cultural diversity among our student population, so I think it is essential that students have access to more than stories and magazines about farmers and small towns. I make it a point to include fiction from a variety of perspectives, including stories about inner-city urban students and people from other countries. I booktalk titles like Parvana’s Journey, Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, and quality fiction from the perspective of African American, Hispanic, and Asian American characters or writers. I also include The Economist and Foreign Policy magazine on the rack with Seventeen and Thrasher” (Elaine 2011).

Elaine works in three different schools, each with its own challenges. She explains, “When I came to the district, I found And Tango Makes Three hidden in a book closet. The elementary library associate [aided] said the former librarian was concerned about the themes expressed in the book. I put it on the shelf and said, ‘Let’s see what happens.’ So far, nothing has come of it despite the book being prominently featured in many challenges statewide. At the middle school, I battle with an associate who hides books in her desk rather than put them on the shelves. At the high school, I have been aggressively weeding the entire collection, particularly all the books that have been ‘donated’ by people in the community and that a kid wouldn’t touch with a ten-foot pole” (Elaine 2011).

In many schools, excessive filtering beyond the requirements of the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) blocks much constitutionally protected online content for students. Elaine says, “I fight a constant battle with the technology coordinator and the filtering system over access. Students cannot get information on Babe Ruth, and teachers cannot contact anyone in the Essex Community School District because the filter has targeted the words ‘babe’ and ‘sex’ as automatic blocks. Related to this are social media. I recognize that Facebook and Twitter are huge time-wasters for many students, but they are a fact of life. We ought to be advocating for appropriate use and best practices for protecting user privacy, but I cannot demonstrate the value of social media because all of it is filtered. YouTube access is also blocked, despite there being a vast amount of legitimate educational material that our teachers would like to use. I spend a lot of time teaching them [teachers] how to download videos to MP4 files at home to play on their [classroom] computers later” (Elaine 2011).

Cheryl’s Choices

Cheryl works in a single K–12 facility with four-year-old pre-kindergarten students on one side of the school library, and seventeen- and eighteen-year-old seniors on the other, but her intellectual freedom priorities do not differ substantially from those of Marcia or Elaine. She is focusing her efforts on collection development and the need to update library policies. She states, “In a small rural community, I know that exposing our readers to a vast variety
of reading materials, genres, and topics is extremely important, and I am working on adding even more variety to the fiction collections for the middle and high school readers. Since many of our students are not exposed to different lifestyles and choices, I am taking on that responsibility of providing richer reading experiences. I ask for suggestions from students, and I encourage teachers to request topics and materials to accompany their curriculum. As their teaching changes, I want the collections in the library to accommodate student needs.” (Cheryl 2011).

One means of protecting students’ intellectual freedom is through formally approved policies in such areas as materials selection, reconsideration of a library resource, circulation of resources, confidentiality of library records, interlibrary loan, and Internet use. “Our current library policies,” Cheryl declares, “need updating and clarification, and this is one area I plan to tackle this fall. If books are challenged, we need to be ready and have everybody (administration, board, and library staff) in agreement about the [reconsideration] procedure. Being proactive will assure that any challenges will be handled fairly, respectfully, and in a timely manner” (Cheryl 2011).

The intellectual freedom issues that Marcia, Elaine, and Cheryl face are common to all librarians, but the responsibility seems even greater for the solo school librarian. The protection of students’ First Amendment right to access information and the confidentiality of their library use records rest with one person. Yet in practice, a library assistant or volunteer, who may not have sufficient knowledge, may be making decisions on how these critical rights are accorded.

As Marcia pointed out, all school library workers must be educated to understand intellectual freedom principles and legal requirements.

Setting Priorities
Marcia, Elaine, and Cheryl highlighted their priority areas, but there are other components of students’ intellectual freedom to consider. School librarians are champions of providing equitable access to library resources and services to all students including those with physical and learning disabilities. School library professionals welcome and provide resources and encouragement for English Language Learners, and find ways to support the learning of homeless children and young adults. As teachers, school librarians educate students to “Respect the principles of intellectual freedom,” a student responsibility within Standard 3 of AASL’s Standards for the 21st-Century Learner (AASL 2007, 6). Through the school librarian’s proactive advocacy efforts, principals, teachers, and parents may begin to understand the various facets of intellectual freedom and support students’ rights.

A solo librarian has many competing interests, and priorities must be established in all areas of practice. Elaine notes, “As the lone teacher–librarian, I have to pick my battles” (Elaine 2011). Which is more important for protecting students’ rights to access materials in school libraries—working toward a board-approved selection and reconsideration policy or advocating against over-zealous filtering beyond CIPA’s requirements? Should a school library professional begin to educate the principal in one building or work with all administrations as a group? With limited time, what is the most critical need, and which strategy is best? Because every school situation is different, the most practical answer is “it depends.” The solution lies in analyzing local circumstances and making the best choice possible.

Finding Allies
One person can accomplish a lot, but recruiting allies increases the likelihood of protecting students’ First Amendment right to access library resources. Marcia facilitates her focus on collection development by making certain teachers and administrators know what resources are being added to the library. She sends targeted e-mail about new materials of interest to specific faculty, and hosts “breakfasts” to allow teachers and administrators to peruse the new materials (Marcia 2011).

Elaine uses another approach. "I spend time getting to know people. When I am in a building, I often check with my associate and then make my rounds visiting teachers with whom I have worked in the past and those whom I am trying to convince that working with me on..."
a collaborative assignment would be an excellent idea” (Elaine 2011). While developing collegial relationships, Elaine also has the opportunity to assess which faculty members may become allies in case of a challenge or who may actively support her efforts to lessen the level of filtering.

Marcia works closely with administrators. “I take care to never be a complainer,” she says. “If I have a problem, I talk to the administrator involved, lay out the issue, and list my suggestion(s) for dealing with it. As a result, Marcia notes, “If there is a complaint, the principals have always come to me first, even before talking to parents. I can give background information, and the principal feels confident rather than being put on the spot” (Marcia 2011). Marcia’s proactive approach is creating strong relationships that are useful if a challenge to a library resource occurs.

The three school librarians all experience the need to connect with other school librarians. Marcia is actively involved in her state’s school library and technology association, and chairs its intellectual freedom special interest group. Elaine uses Twitter to follow the ideas of others, is exploring personal learning networks, and relies on her state’s teacher-librarian e-list to exchange thoughts with fellow library professionals. Cheryl, too, has reached out, participating as a reading team member for a state book award and learning about the latest in YA literature.

Taking the First Step

No solo school librarian can focus on all intellectual freedom issues in a single year, but as evidenced by the comments of Marcia, Elaine, and Cheryl, it is clear that solo school librarians can take positive and substantive actions...
to promote students’ rights in a school library. To avoid being stuck in a reactive mode, consider Cheryl’s strategy of focusing on the most critical issue (in her case policies) for the upcoming school year. Uncertain about the breadth of intellectual freedom issues? Check the Intellectual Freedom Priorities chart (figure 1) and use the resources accompanying this article for quick assistance and for educating yourself about best practices that affect students’ use of a school library.

Helen Adams, former school librarian and technology coordinator in Wisconsin, is currently an online instructor for Mansfield University, serves as chair of the AASL Intellectual Freedom Committee, and is a trustee of the Freedom to Read Foundation. She is coauthor of Privacy in the 21st Century: Issues for Public, School, and Academic Libraries (Libraries Unlimited 2005) and author of Ensuring Intellectual Freedom and Access to Information in the School Library Media Program (Libraries Unlimited 2008).

Works Cited:

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM RESOURCES FOR THE SOLO LIBRARIAN

ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF)
The ALA OIF provides assistance for school librarians facing challenges, local filtering issues, and privacy concerns. ALA/AASL membership is not required for assistance.

PHONE: 800-545-2433, Ext. 4220
HOURS: 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Central Time, Monday–Friday
E-MAIL: oif@ala.org

ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom website
<www.alla.org/oif>
The OIF website includes a wide range of resources on such issues as challenges in schools, CIPA and Internet filtering, and privacy in libraries. Banned Books Week information and toolkits such as the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Toolkit are available. Visitors can also sign up for the IFAction news-only e-list, report a challenge, or read the OIF Blog.

ALA Intellectual Freedom Manual website
<www.ifmanual.org>
Complementing the eighth print edition of the ALA Intellectual Freedom Manual, this site features a growing collection of resources, such as retired school librarian Pat Scales’ essay “School Library Media Centers and Intellectual Freedom” and ALA policy statements including the Library Bill of Rights, its twenty-one interpretations, the ALA Code of Ethics, and other related documents.

ALA Privacy Revolution website
<http://privacyrevolution.org>
At ALA’s one-stop website on privacy, school librarians will find multiple short videos, including the 2011 “Choose Privacy Week” video with a downloadable video study guide <www.privacyrevolution.org/images/uploads/VideoLibrarianGuide.pdf>, lesson plans for teaching students about privacy, and information about the May 2012 Choose Privacy Week.

What IF? Questions and Answers on Intellectual Freedom
<www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/freedom/whatif/default.asp>
Maintained by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, “What IF?” is an online question-and-answer service for teachers, and school and public librarians. Visitors may submit questions confidentially, and staff will answer them by blending principles of intellectual freedom with practical advice. The archive of questions can be sorted by relevancy to classroom, school and public library, self-censorship, and “other” issues.

FIND THE GLBT TOOLKIT AT
<www.alla.org/ala/aboutala/offices/sif/iftoolkits/glbttoolkit/glbttoolkit.cfm>
Definitely **NOT** Alone!

*Online Resources and Websites Help Keep School Librarians Connected*
Audrey P. Church
churchap@longwood.edu

When I began my first library position in 1980 at a rural, primary school, I was truly a solo librarian.

If I needed assistance, I could call (landline) or write (postal mail) to my library science professors, or I could call one of the other six librarians employed in the school district. To keep up-to-date professionally, I joined my state professional association and attended the conferences that they sponsored twice a year. I was, for the most part, isolated and on my own with limited access to other professionals and to professional information. Being a solo librarian today is certainly challenging; however, because of our technological interconnectedness, today’s solo librarian is definitely not alone.
Web Sites

The Web allows librarians instant and constant access to professional information. By visiting the Web site for the American Association of School Librarians (www.aasl.org), we can learn about awards and grants, conferences and opportunities for continuing education, guidelines and standards, issues and advocacy. We can access online research publications (www.alala.org/aasl/slmr), position statements (www.alala.org/aasl/positionstatements), and essential links (http://aasl.alala.org/essentiallinks).

Web sites for state professional associations provide a wealth of information as well.

From the Alabama School Library Association, “dedicated to the improvement of instruction through the utilization of media and technology,” to the Minnesota Educational Media Organization, “serving school media and information technology professionals in Minnesota,” to the Wyoming Library Association Teacher Librarian Interest Group whose mission is “to network, encourage and disseminate information helpful to the school library media community in Wyoming,” state professional association Web sites provide valuable information.

Email

Professional colleagues—in a school district, across the state, or across the country—are only an email away. Subscriptions to listservs provide an email connection to thousands of colleagues. As AASL members, librarians can subscribe to the AASLForum (www.alala.org/aasl/aaslforum), LM_NET (http://lmnet.wordpress.com) “is the original discussion group open to school library media specialists worldwide, and to people involved with the school library media field. LM_NET provides an excellent way to network with other school library professionals, connect to new ideas in school library practice, seek advice, and ask library related questions.” Post a query here, and you’ll get immediate and plentiful responses from all over the world.

Additionally, state professional organizations offer listservs to facilitate communication within the state: for example, CALIBK-12 (www.calibk12.info) is the official discussion list for the California School Library Association; the Michigan Association for Media in Education offers MAMElist (www.mimame.org/membership.html), “an active online community for sharing resources and information,” and the Virginia Educational Media Association (www.vemaonline.org) “provides a forum for professional communication.”

Web 2.0

Facebook offers additional opportunities for librarians to connect and communicate by joining groups. Stay up-to-date and informed about happenings in the field by joining AASL’s Facebook page (www.facebook.com/aasl/ala). Frequent postings from The PALM Center: Partnerships Advancing Library Media at the Learning Systems Institute and Florida State University (www.facebook.com/PalmCenter) highlight key current issues. State level organizations offer Facebook connections as well: the California School Library Association (www.facebook.com/4CSLA),
the North Carolina School Library Media Association (<www.facebook.com/ncslma>), and the New Hampshire School Library Media Association (<www.facebook.com/NHSLMA>) are examples.


Or follow the great thinkers in the field on their blogs:

Diane Chen, library information specialist extraordinaire at a Tennessee elementary STEM magnet school <http://blog.schoollibraryjournal.com/practicallyparadise>

Kristin Fontichiaro, clinical assistant professor and coordinator of the school library media program at the University of Michigan School of Information <http://blog.schoollibrarymedia.com>

Carl Harvey, Indiana elementary school librarian and current AASL president <http://carlharvey.com/libraryties>

Doug Johnson, Director of Media and Technology for Mankato (MN) Public Schools <http://dougjohnson.squarespace.com>

Joyce Valenza, high school teacher-librarian, technology writer, and blogger, <http://blog.schoollibraryjournal.com/neverendingsearch>

**Online Learning Communities? By All Means!**

Join the TeacherLibrarian ning <http://teacherlibrarian.ning.com> “a community for teacher librarians and other educators...for those of us who connect, teach, share, and lead in new information landscapes.” Take advantage of online professional learning communities to interact with colleagues, network, and discuss topics of interest.

Consider joining a professional network such as LinkedIn <www.linkedin.com> where you can connect, not only with old friends and colleagues but also with new professional colleagues to “access knowledge, insights and opportunities.”

**Other Sources of Helpful Information**

Remember, too, that there is a plethora of information and support available to you:

If you should have a challenge to material in your library, the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (<www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif>) is only a click away. Their goal is to “is to educate librarians and the general public about the nature and importance of intellectual freedom in libraries.” From providing resources about initiatives and projects such as Banned Books Week and Choose Privacy Week to providing information and documents about intellectual freedom issues, the ALA OIF assists.

If you are searching for educational literature, information about best practices, or the latest educational trend, remember ERIC, the Education Resources Information Center (<http://www.ed.eric.gov>). As “the world’s largest digital library of education literature,” ERIC offers 1.4 million citations on educational literature and includes over 335,000 full text documents.

Looking for data about libraries? Take advantage of AASL’s national longitudinal survey, School Libraries Count! (<www.ala.org/aasl/slsurvey>). Here you can find data from 2007 forward which will allow you to compare your library to others for staff activities, hours and staffing, collection size, technology, visits, and expenditures. Another excellent source of data for libraries is the National Center for Education Statistics (<www.nces.ed.gov>). Numbers, facts, tables, and figures regarding school libraries abound.

The moral of the story is that, while you may be the only librarian in your building or your district, you are not a lone librarian. Technology allows you to immediately and constantly connect and interact with other school librarians. Making full use of these resources will allow you to remain connected.

Audrey Church is an associate professor of school library media at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia. She is the author of Leverage Your Library Program to Help Raise Test Scores (Linworth 2003), “The Instructional Role of Library Media Specialists as Perceived by Elementary School Principals” (SLMR 2008), and “Secondary School Principals’ Perceptions of the School Librarian’s Instructional Role” (SLMR 2010). She currently serves as the Educators of School Librarians Section representative to the AASL Board of Directors.

Audrey will present a Webinar for AASL members on the challenges facing solo librarians on December 13 at 7:00 PM CST! Visit www.ala.org/aasl/knowledgequest to register.
The Elko County School District in Nevada has elementary school librarians that are "solo" librarians. Over the last several years we have worked to collaborate on meeting monthly—even though our district covers 17,100 square miles—and on providing professional development face to face and online. Sharing and collaboration help us to problem solve, meet student needs, and extend our resources.

The Elko County School District has a mix of school types, from K–12 combination schools to K–4 elementary schools. The district has a certified school librarian in each of the schools with the exception of the two smallest K–4 elementary schools (student count 332 and 321), which share a school librarian, and the four rural K–8 one- or two-room schools (student count combined totaling 36), which are each covered by a school librarian from one of the larger nearby schools. There are two library aides in our district. One is at a K–12 school with a K–6 elementary building and a 7–12 secondary building; the other aide works with the elementary school librarian who covers two elementary schools.

Our school district librarians currently try to meet once a month during the school year using the Elko County School District’s interactive video equipment. The district is large and covers two time zones. Although in the past the district provided for two to three face-to-face meetings, with shrinking budgets this is no longer possible. The school librarians have found technology helps us keep in touch. Our district technology coordinator sets up the schedule for us, as the video-conferencing equipment is shared between the school district and Great Basin College. Each year we round robin chairing the monthly meetings, setting agendas based on requests from the school librarians and on the host librarian’s ideas. This way we can ask questions and share concerns, ideas, and lessons, and not feel so isolated. The meetings are attended by a mixture of elementary, middle, and high school librarians, although the elementary school librarians are in the majority. With sixteen school librarians in the district, our highest attendance at the monthly meetings this past year was nine. This year we hope to use Elluminate Live!, a web-
conferencing program, for some of our meetings. This software may enable more librarians to participate than in the past.

Our elementary school libraries vary in student count from 331 to 685. The district provides for fixed schedules for grades K–6 in the schools, and this is where the “solo” librarian effect is felt most heavily. Looking at the roles of the school librarian as discussed in Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs, the challenge for elementary school librarians is to balance our roles. On a fixed schedule, each school librarian works to balance the teacher role with the other responsibilities. With a “solo” school librarian, as the school’s student enrollment increases, the number of classes on a fixed schedule increases, and often access to the school library in off–class times becomes more limited. Again, having a monthly meeting that allows us to share our solutions to provide as much student access to the library as possible sometimes helps to create new scheduling ideas, such as providing trained upper elementary students to help with checkout to free up the librarian, or having students work off payment for lost books, so they do not lose checkout privileges.

Each school librarian fits his or her own personality and strengths into the position and works to fit professional skills into specific individual school situations. In a recent article, part of a series done by the Elko Daily Free Press about elementary school librarians in Elko, Bobbi Sutton, Southside school librarian, stated “There’s huge variety in my job.” But what struck me most was her comment, “I love turning kids on to books” (Wooten 2010). Bobbi has a knack for searching out the right book for a student, for developing displays to entice readers to pick up a new type of book, and for modeling the love of reading.

At one of our meetings this year we had a discussion about time management, lesson planning, collection development, and priorities in our school library programs. One of the benefits of these monthly meetings is the professional discussions and the support we receive from each other to keep focused and target important issues.

This year at another one of our meetings, we discussed the lack of credit–based classes that targeted the needs we as school librarians have. So we investigated creating our own course. Our district technology coordinator helped us with the ins and outs of setting up a one–credit course, including the paperwork, the syllabus, and other details. We wanted the course to be versatile and based on expressed needs our colleagues had mentioned.

Two of our school librarians had been to a Nevada Reading Week Conference and attended a session on book repair. Working with that information and our school district, one of the sessions of our custom course was a half–day seminar on book repair that was open to all school librarians, and even one of our local public librarians attended. This session was the best attended and had librarians from every level.

The other sessions, attended by elementary librarians and one K–12 school librarian, were a combination of Elluminate Live! sessions and Saturday face–to–face sessions that allowed us to share websites we use, discuss professional articles, share lesson planning ideas, and cover some issues with the library software that we use. We also had a member of our district professional development staff come and give us some tips on using interactive whiteboards, which we all have in our school libraries. Our efforts helped us tailor material to support our school library programs.

In exploring resources, the availability of district resources and staff, company webinars, statewide databases, and the AASL website provided the material for the course. We are considering creating another course this year, with some tweaking, and are always on the lookout for new sources of material.

The benefits of the course will be applied this coming year as we fit the ideas we shared into our individual curriculums. One of the class participants has already created and shared new lesson activities that can be adapted to fit into our district library curriculum. I showed a teacher in my building one of...
So, the monthly meetings and the course have helped us meet program and learning standards despite limited funds and resources. Sharing our ideas, lessons, knowledge of software, and programs helps us to better our own schools’ library programs. District school librarians from all school types have collaboratively developed curriculum guidelines to standardize the material we teach, and align it with state and national standards. Currently, some school librarians are constructing and testing rubrics for our curriculum to assess library skills for a standards-based report card our district is developing. To help share resources, we interlibrary loan professional materials to one another, as well as sharing other collection materials. Our district grant writer provided some funding at the end of the year for professional materials that will be housed at one of our school libraries, but will be cataloged and available for lending to professionals throughout the district. Again, collaboration and sharing are key to our library programs and to making us as solo school librarians less isolated.

Robbie Nickel, a practicing school librarian, was assistant editor for Assessing Student Learning in the School Library Media Center, edited by Anita L. Vance (AASL 2007).

Works Cited:
School librarians in the Mesquite Independent School District have been operating solo on their campuses since the 1970s. As a “property-poor” school district thirty miles east of downtown Dallas, we receive less state funding than other districts of comparable size. Campus clerical assistance in the school libraries was (and continues to be) a luxury that we couldn’t afford. District administration, however, was farsighted enough to provide a certified school librarian on each campus and to view that librarian as a teacher. Since the district’s vision was of a teaching librarian, a Library Processing Department was established in 1972. Back then, Library Processing took care of ordering, cataloging, and processing of materials. In the days before vendor-provided MARC records, having a centralized department to do all of the catalog cards and spine labels took a huge clerical burden off of the school librarian and allowed time for teaching. As years passed, school library programs evolved and our Library Processing Department turned into Library Services. Currently, this department’s staff consists of a director, a library technology facilitator, an acquisitions manager, and two materials processors.
This group now offers a full array of services to assist campus school librarians who are still flying solo.

**Acquisitions, Cataloging, and Processing**

Library Services staff work with the school district’s Purchasing Department to secure vendor bids for library books, AV materials, and online resources. Our staff evaluates each vendor’s submission for the quality of the product, as well as the quality of the cataloging and processing. To get materials to the campuses as quickly as we can, we have standardized our processing procedures. Vendors must be able to meet these requirements to be accepted. After reviewing the bids, we put together a list of approved vendors for the school librarians to use when compiling their orders.

School librarians select materials to be ordered and compile a list, most of the time using the vendor’s electronic ordering system, if available. When the list is ready, the school librarian notifies our acquisitions manager that an order is ready to be submitted. The acquisitions manager and the materials processors handle it from there. The acquisitions manager assigns a P.O. number and places the order, contacting the vendor representative as necessary. All materials are delivered to Library Services and received by the materials processors, who route the invoices back to the acquisitions manager. At this point, the acquisitions manager generates paperwork to pay the vendor. The school librarian never has to deal with the order again until the books—ready to shelve—arrive on the campus.

The acquisitions manager also helps school librarians monitor their materials budgets. From a central account, the library director allocates funds for books and AV materials for individual campuses. The acquisitions manager makes sure that these individual budgets are not overspent.

Once an order is received at Library Services, the materials processors load the MARC records for the items into the automated system and spot-check the vendor’s processing to make sure it meets our specifications. If MARC records are not provided by the vendor, the processors use a variety of tools to help them locate records in another library’s catalog. They also add property labels, security labels, spine labels, and Mylar covers when these are not provided by the vendor. When the items are shelf-ready, they are boxed up and put out on the dock for delivery to the school.

As materials budgets get tighter, we help our school librarians look for cost-effective ways to add new books to their collections. One way we do this is through our Review Library. Library Services works with most of the major publishers to receive review copies of their new books. These books are displayed on shelves at Library Services and entered into a database. Campus librarians can view the database and select books from this collection to review. When the review has been completed, the book may be processed and added to their library collection.

Library Services staff members also facilitate the purchasing of supplies and periodicals, contacting vendors and dealing with the paperwork required for purchasing these items.

**Technology Assistance**

Technology has become ubiquitous in our school libraries. It is used by school librarians and library users to access information, circulate materials, and create products. Through technology, our school libraries have extended their reach into the classroom and the home, so it is imperative that our systems stay in working order and everyone knows how to use them. The daunting tasks of systems maintenance and training are handled by the library technology facilitator, who

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**Mary Woodard**  
mwoodard@mesquiteisd.org

**Our goal in Mesquite ISD Library Services is to provide whatever service we can to give campus librarians as much time as possible to focus on instruction and student learning.**
assists campus librarians with any and all types of technology used in their library programs.

Management of the automated system and union catalog is another of the library technology facilitator's responsibilities. As a certified school librarian, she supervises and consults with the materials processors on cataloging and processing decisions. She sets up report templates in the automated system to assist school librarians with overdue notices, bills for lost books, item counts, bibliographic lists, etc. These templates are a real timesaver for campus librarians, who typically need this type of information quickly. She also works with the automation vendor on system upgrades and implementation of system features to meet the needs of our school librarians and patrons. She does face-to-face training on the system, in addition to writing instructions and creating screen-capture videos to help librarians with system procedures that aren't done very often, such as paying for lost books or getting a list of items still out at the end of the year.

MISD libraries offer access to an extensive array of online resources. These databases are purchased by Library Services at the district level, and access to them is maintained by the library technology facilitator. She works with our selected vendors to set up the appropriate authentication for school and home, and then with the district webmaster to create webpages where links to these resources are posted. She maintains an online resources page for each level (elementary, middle, high school) as well as a district resources page of links to all of the online resources we have available at <www.mesquiteisd.org/instruction/library/OnlineResources.htm>.

In the twenty-first century, libraries must not only maintain a physical space for users, but also a virtual space. Our school libraries are no exception. Each of our campus libraries has its own school library website that is updated by the campus librarian with information specific to that campus. At the district level, the library technology facilitator provides training on how to update these pages, gives advice on what type of information to post, answers questions, and assists when school librarians encounter a problem. She also maintains the webpage for Library Services, which provides links to resources and all of our school library websites <www.mesquiteisd.org/instruction/library/index.asp>.

Several years ago our librarians completed a "23 Things" program where they learned about various Web 2.0 tools, such as blogs, wikis, online documents, and social media. The library technology facilitator serves as a technology help desk, providing assistance to school librarians as they integrate these tools into their library practice.

In November 2010 we ventured into the world of downloadable e-books and audio-books with the creation of the MISD Digital Library <http://digitallibrary.mesquiteisd.org>. The library technology facilitator led this initiative, working with the vendor on the technical aspects of setting up the Digital Library website, and with a small group of school librarians on selection of the e-books and audio-books to fill the collection. She provided training for the librarians in the use of iPads and Sony eReaders to access the Digital Library. She also made presentations promoting this service to PTA groups, district administration, the district Curriculum Council, and others.

**Additional Assistance**

Library Services provides campus librarians with other assistance on an as-needed basis. School librarians have the option of sending weeded materials to Library Services to be removed from the catalog. Our staff also removes all library labels and markings from the materials before disposing of them. When needed, Library Services staff members have visited campuses to help with shifting books or packing up a collection in preparation for renovation. Library Services staff members also assist with unpacking and shelving books at new or newly renovated libraries.

As director, I provide consultation and advice on time management, options for setting up self-service checkout, and other ideas for making the “warehousing” function of the school library run on its own.

In this era of budget and staff cuts, it is imperative that school librarians spend their time working with students. School librarians with no clerical assistance must do whatever they can to limit the time spent on non-instructional tasks. Our goal in Mesquite ISD Library Services is to provide whatever service we can to give campus librarians as much time as possible to focus on instruction and student learning.

Mary Woodard
is director of library services for the Mesquite (TX) Independent School District. These services include MISD Digital Library of downloadable e-books and audio-books for Mesquite ISD students and staff at <http://digitallibrary.mesquiteisd.org>.
Talk Me Off the Ledge

Surviving Solo Librarianship

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Solo school librarians are the air traffic controllers of the library world, serving hundreds, if not thousands, of students. We are responsible for a book budget, technology resources, orientation and research classes, book talks, and reading promotions, as well as professional development for teachers, guiding them in effective integration of all of the above in students' learning. What else can be done to support our teachers and students given limited time and limited budgets? How can we create greater value for our schools, while keeping our library programs secure, and our expertise valued by colleagues? Let's consider how to leverage less tangible resources.

In 7 Habits for Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey (1999) asserts the importance of putting first things first, while blog writer Leo Babauta (2008) insists that effective leaders must identify high-impact tasks. The idea is the same. By identifying high-impact tasks, school librarians can conserve resources, energy, and time. Whenever faced with a decision about where to place priorities of time and budget, ask the right question: "How will this impact my staff and students?"

For example, a spare hour could be used cataloging new books, planning a book club meeting, or spent at the weekly department chairs' meeting. Which provides the most value? Which best supports our school's mission?

Committee as Resource

In his School Libraries Worldwide article "The Principal's Perceptions of School Libraries and Teacher-Librarians," Gary Hartzell (as summarized by Wendy Steadman Stephens 2011) analyzed why our building colleagues don't automatically seek us out. "Our specialized skill sets and isolated professional development, Hartzell suggests, also render the school librarian as independent from the rest of the faculty, less likely to be called upon for assistance with instructional design and planning." We must shift our viewpoint that serving on a building or district School Improvement Programs (SIP) Committee is time away from our school library, to looking at that time as a chance to reach out to our
teachers and administrators, and to embed our programs within the curriculum. Thus, we free ourselves to support a high-impact task.

“[E]very librarian must be a self-starter and be visionary enough to delegate clerical tasks whenever possible and to avoid the temptation of scheduling micromanagement. To truly function as leaders in the educational world, we will have to sacrifice personally, moving outside our school libraries and our comfort zones as we forge new instructional alliances with individuals and organizations” (Stephens 2011).

Every committee meeting is a potential chance to forge alliances—to show teachers and administrators how we can help them reach their goals more effectively and make their lives easier.

If not yet invited to routine building administration and department chair meetings, school librarians should request invitations immediately. It is important to be aware of new course proposals, grading issues, discipline tracking, and curriculum initiatives, to name a few.

We listen to new course proposals in the spring, and order nonfiction titles to support those studies, and review books for new AP topics and interesting new fiction related to these topics, just for those students who might be inspired to explore a little further. In addition, we order new AV titles requested by teachers, and constantly forward information to teachers and department chairs on new titles we’ve noticed that are relevant to instructional topics. When Pluto was no longer a planet, we suggested new references and DVDs that include that updated information. When there’s a medical breakthrough, we suggest online biology sources that will have updated articles on the research. By being in at the ground floor of new courses and curriculum proposals, we’re able to anticipate which classes we’ll need to develop class project pages for, select resources for, and collaborate with teachers on.

Another key committee is the Professional Development Committee. We can provide resources that will make PD most effective for our staff. We can get the drop on new SIPs by providing books, websites, and templates for our staff to use. Since Response to Intervention (RtI) requires “regular and rigorous” professional development, our knowledge of Tier 1 supports will make us valuable presenters. If we don’t know enough yet, then being on the PD Committee gives us a chance to suggest presenters who will increase our own knowledge along with other teachers’. Sarah Houghton-Jan, in the foreword to Char Booth’s new book, insists that “…the responsibility falls to us librarians to engage both our users and ourselves in continuous learning, so that we might remain a crucial resource in our communities’ pursuit of learning” (2011, ix). Just as important as resources is the willingness to develop workshops for teachers and to model effective teaching using these resources. In addition, if our school library has e-readers, we can supply recommended professional titles to our staff on the same day we hear them mentioned!

Remember, although serving on building and district SIP committees or spending time on professional development is time away from our school libraries—it’s also a chance to advocate for our school library program, and to get honest feedback on how we can improve our program to support our entire school community. More importantly, investing time in committee work and professional development provides an opportunity for research, literacy, and technology to be more deeply embedded into the curriculum. When deciding how to prioritize our precious time and specialized expertise, we must remember to ask ourselves: Does this support the school’s mission? How many of my users does this potentially impact? Is the mission of the school library supported by this task? When given the choice of a high-impact task vs. an urgent task—always choose the high-impact task.

Leadership as Resource
In Librarians as Learning Specialists we were interested to read:

“Through the authors’ informal survey of job descriptions posted for learning specialists around the country, three fundamental expectations were evident: (1) assessment and instructional work with students; (2) curriculum, assessment, and instructional development with staff; and (3) program development, leadership, and management” (Zmuda and Harada 2008, 24).

Understanding curriculum development is crucial to our role as leaders within our school and district. If we know what our teachers need, we will be able to have resources ready for them. We have discussed how we can support Understanding by Design, RtI, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, and other school improvement programs. To take our involvement a step further, we can and should take the lead in any of these efforts.

We will already find ourselves taking the lead while collaborating
with classroom teachers. As embedded school librarians, we will be instrumental in planning curriculum and implementing new tech uses. However, when there is only one of us in a building, we must always consider how to best leverage our talents. Providing development to individual departments is a quick and easy way to advance our school library programs, as well as to provide targeted development. Another alternative is to start with individual teachers, with the hope that they will go on to teach colleagues, and thus we will “create more of ourselves.” This is another chance for leadership.

As we build confidence, we can volunteer to present at faculty forums, “Teachers Teaching Teachers” institute days, and summer Teacher U. classes. Summer is the ideal time to hold Tech Boot Camp events for our staff. For inspiration we can explore the many library “23 Things” blogs and wikis, created for self-selected staff development at both public and school libraries. Recent ALA presentations on how to conduct unconferences, boot camps, and summer camps for library staff could just as easily be applied to the educators in our schools!

Most administrators are begging for teacher-leaders to volunteer for their RtI Committee. Go ahead, volunteer! It’s hard to imagine a better place for a school librarian to showcase what the school library program can offer. Since RtI Tier 1 requires differentiation within the classroom to make the subject matter accessible and understandable for 80% or more of the class, school library resources to supplement classroom instruction are a must. We can remind the committee that we offer audio, large-print, and graphic versions of classroom novels—Spanish-language versions, too. We offer plain-language versions of Shakespeare (such as _No Fear_ or other parallel-text editions) for our English students; access to online textbooks for science classes; instruction in searching online newspapers, historical archives, and current-issue databases for our social studies colleagues; and modified tech for special-needs learners. These resources all benefit the classroom teacher, make the administration look good, and secure our reputations as the “go to” people for both groups.

This kind of leadership will also solidify our linchpin status. Linchpins, according to Seth Godin, in an interview with Hugh MacLeod, are “…people who bring art to work, people who reach out, make a connection, cause change to happen. The linchpin is the person who is indispensable, because they refuse to become an interchangeable part, someone who merely follows the manual. In the hardware store, the linchpin is a lightweight little piece that holds the wheel to the axle. Very difficult to live without” (2010). MacLeod continues in an Amazon.com review of Godin’s book _Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?: “Her role is just far too unique and valuable.” And then [Godin] goes on to say, “Well, seriously folks, you need to be one of these people, you really do. To not be one is economic and career suicide.” (2010)

**Network as Resource: Your Support System is Crucial**

Our connections are resources in our day-to-day work. It’s crucial to have someone who can “talk you off the ledge” when you feel overwhelmed. In our district, we are each other’s most obvious source of support, but we go beyond that as well. We join local school librarian articulation groups, both for our grade level and across levels. The face-to-face support provided by meeting regularly with other school librarians is a great boost, and we can leverage the time by sharing resources and work.

One of our groups has been creating and posting video “trailers” for books on our state reading list. Each school librarian creates a trailer, and then posts it on a group wiki where it is shared by all of us—each librarian gets twenty-two book trailers to use, in return for the time spent creating one or two! An articulation group can also often influence vendors as a group—perhaps even arranging consortium-type prices for products and services. When one district contemplates a policy that would be detrimental to its school library program, we all help gather data and information to support a justification for changing that policy. Should the worst happen, it helps to have friends who will understand what we’re going through.

We shouldn’t limit ourselves to school librarian groups for networking; remember to take part in more widely focused educator groups as well. One of us started as an English teacher and has presented at Illinois Association of Teachers of English, for example. She maintains awareness of what’s going on in English classrooms, and also provides an important school library viewpoint at English department meetings and discussions. Likewise, membership in instructional technology professional groups helps to extend our reach and expertise in that area. As solo school librarians, we may also find ourselves to be solo tech trainers, so this type of membership can be extremely valuable.

Similarly, to exponentially expand our instructional toolkit, our personal learning community...
should reach even beyond local colleagues. We join online articulation groups such as TL Virtual Cafe, edWeb, etc. From them, we gain support networks from the entire country and all around the world. More importantly, while our local articulation group meets only three or four times a year, our online network is always available to answer questions and suggest resources, just in time for more immediate issues, to prevent us from taking that leap off the ledge.

Once we become comfortable providing professional development within our schools, we must take a deep breath, gather our courage, and begin presenting to our peers at local and statewide conferences. By presenting, we often gain full or partial registration, thus gaining the benefit of a conference while costing our district much less. Further, we bolster our credibility with administrators and colleagues, and learn new approaches to supporting student achievement. We finally began to present after sitting through one too many sessions thinking, “I know all this; why aren’t I up there instead?” Surely we’ve all had the same experience.

What about the Students?

Time away from the school library is time not spent directly on students. Is that good or bad? What do we provide our students that no one else does? Their English teachers encourage them to read and conduct literary analysis; we, on the other hand, promote recreational reading. Not only does recreational reading support comprehension and fluency, according to Stephen D. Krashen, it supports a “more mature writing style” (2004, 8). Krashen goes on to state that “better school libraries result in more reading” (2004, 58). Anecdotally, we delight that our book club readers claim that reading is more fun than lunch! Indeed, since we have diverted more of our book budgets to recreational reading programs, our circulation statistics have skyrocketed. Our principals are impressed by our increasing circulation statistics, and recognize that what we provide is important.

We all know about the supposed “digital divide,” and that libraries help bridge that gap by providing students with access to technology they don’t have at home. But even for students who have all the latest tech gadgets at home, we provide guidance, and a framework for integrating them as tech tools in ways they aren’t used at home. School librarians provide online tips, webquest lists, and pathfinders to vetted links for homework help. In addition, we have become the de facto video-editing experts in our schools.

As we consider how to acquire resources in a time of contracting budgets, we must consider ourselves as our most precious resource. By investing time professionally, both in and out of the building, we will become embedded in a network of learners. We will become integral to initiatives, collaboration, and student achievement. In such a scenario, we will no longer need to advocate overtly for our school library programs. Instead, others will deeply feel the value that we bring to our classrooms, our students, and our schools, thus keeping our feet firmly away from that ledge.

Pam Pleviak and Cynthia Karabush are solo librarians in the two schools of Grayslake Community HS District 127. They have published “Assessment in a 2.0 World” in the Illinois Computing Educators’ July 2010 newsletter, and are popular presenters at the Illinois Computing Educators and Illinois School Library Media Association conferences. Pam also presents at Illinois Association of Teachers of English events. Cynthia recently presented for the YALSA Teen Technology Committee at ALA Annual Conference 2011.
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Using National Decisions

A Conversation with NCES

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“A helpful strategy for individual school librarians is to fill out the survey themselves and then to relate it to the state and national averages.”
School libraries have increasingly seen the number of school librarians in each school decrease, creating more solo librarian positions in schools. While this is not a new dilemma, it is one that requires initiative and persistence on the part of the school librarian to accomplish tasks and make decisions.

Making decisions about individual school library programs, facilities, and usage can be difficult for solo school librarians. How do we decide on what the budget should be? Is the collection large enough for the student body? How many school libraries use a combination flexible/fixed schedule? Are school libraries using video streaming? Answering these questions and others is important for decision making and advocacy. Comparing an individual program to other programs and facilities can help in that process.

This article outlines some of the national surveys that are of importance to school librarians and focuses on the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) School Library Media Center Questionnaire. Kathryn Chandler from NCES talks about the role of NCES in supplying data to school librarians.

Many of these surveys look at a range of topics, while others focus on one issue. Regardless of the scope, surveys and questionnaires help to provide information that improves our understanding of the current state of school libraries.

The School Libraries Count! survey was begun in 2007 by AASL. The survey is a longitudinal study that includes specific questions on staff activities, hours, staffing, collection size, technology, visits, and expenditures. The survey is accessible through a website and is promoted through a variety of venues including state associations, electronic discussion and e-mail lists, conferences, and blogs. The results from the survey can be seen as national averages or as school library individual reports.
While the survey’s focus is on the standard set of annual survey questions, each year a set of topical questions that address a current issue are asked. These questions are not longitudinal but rather provide a snapshot of the issue (AASL 2011b). On a regular basis, School Library Journal publishes a spending survey. The latest survey was conducted in 2009–2010 by Lesley Farmer. The survey participants are limited to SLJ subscribers, but the results do allow for a comparison between individual schools and the national average. The 2009–2010 survey results illustrate the decreasing funding of school libraries nationwide. The analysis of the survey shows results by elementary, middle, and high school groups allowing school librarians to compare their own school library budget by grade level. This type of comparison is useful in making budget requests and advocating for more resources (Farmer 2011).

A variety of taskforces and committees collect data about school libraries and national trends. AASL and ALA are continually researching and sharing data. In 2007 AASL conducted a survey of state-level departments of education to gather information on state-level laws and policies. Questions were asked about the standards and guidelines related to school library programs (AASL 2007). The data can be accessed at <www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/aasl/researchandstatistics/doeslms/default.cfm>.

The ALA report, The Condition of U.S. Libraries: School Library Trends, 1999–2009, contains information on the status of school libraries; the data was derived from the NCES surveys and the School Libraries Count! survey. This report attempts to provide an overview of the status of school libraries in regards to staffing, expenditures, and services. Access it at <www.ala.org/ala/research>.

The AASL Urban School Taskforce Survey Report contains the findings of two national surveys on urban school libraries and schools. This report provides data to help in making recommendations about best practices for urban school libraries (AASL 2011a).

The National Center for Education Statistics <http://nces.ed.gov> conducts a Schools and Staffing Survey that includes a component survey called the School Library Media Center Questionnaire. The School Library Media Center Questionnaire is conducted every four years. The latest survey was conducted in 2007–2008; the next will be conducted in 2011–2012. The questionnaire is revised for each cycle, and provides policy makers and researchers with data that helps in decision making. The items addressed in the 2007–2008 questionnaire include:

- Facilities, services, and policies
- Staffing
- Technology
- Information literacy
- Collections and expenditures (NCES n.d.)

The 2011–2012 version of the questionnaire eliminates questions regarding use of the school library as a classroom but continues to ask about scheduling type used (flexible, regular scheduling, or a combination). Questions were added about community use of the school library. Minor changes occur throughout the 2011–2012 questionnaire; most are organizational, with “Technology” and “Information Literary” combined into one section and the staffing questions formatted as a chart. These changes clarify some of the questions and make answering them easier (Chandler 2011).

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Kathryn Chandler serves as the program director for the Elementary/Secondary Sample Survey Studies Program in the Elementary/Secondary and Library Studies Division at the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). She oversees the development and collection of data for a number of surveys, including the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), which contains the School Library Media Center Questionnaire. SASS is conducted every four years. Kathryn works with Kerry Gruber who is the project director for SASS. The Census Bureau conducts the survey, and a contractor is responsible for data analysis and double-checking the accuracy of the data collection. NCES, the Census Bureau, and the contractor work closely to ensure accuracy.

Kathryn and I discussed the role of the NCES in helping school librarians with decision making and program improvement.

An Interview with Kathryn Chandler

SANDRA ANDREWS: What does NCES offer school librarians to help them in their roles?

KATHRYN CHANDLER: NCES’s primary mission is to collect statistics on the condition of education in the United States. Its Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) provides a snapshot on the condition of schools and provides information about the principals who head them and the teachers who work in them. The surveys set the context for what’s out there. All datasets that are released have a “first look” report. The first look report for the 2007–2008 Schools and Staffing Survey School Library Media Center Survey can be found at: <http://nces.ed.gov>. We have also produced some tables by state, and you can find those in our table library. Start here: <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables.asp>. Under the Search Tables area, tag SASS, use the dropdown menus to get to 2007–2008 (“Search a Year”) and library media center (“Data Regarding”). That will get you links to some freestanding tables that we have added relative to school library media centers. NCES produces a number of compendium publications in its Annual Reports program, and those publications draw heavily on all the NCES data sets.

With fixed resources, the NCES tends to concentrate on producing high-quality data sets, and often relies on others to take the data to do other types of research with...
it. The surveys are designed to obtain data that addresses current policy issues and gives a picture of the condition of school libraries.

**SA:** School librarians are often solo librarians. How can NCES help in improving programs for the school libraries with only one professional?

**KC:** The surveys help set the context for what is out there in the field. A helpful strategy for individual school librarians is to fill out the survey themselves and then to relate it to the state and national averages. They can download the questionnaire (which contains the questions and some needed definitions) from: <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/questionnaire.asp>. The survey results describe what the average library looks like. How then does your library compare to the average?

The raw data from the Library Media Center Survey is available to researchers as a restricted-use data set. That means that a researcher must be licensed to get that data. We have not released it as a public-use data set because we are required to protect the confidentiality of the schools in our sample, and we are finding it more and more difficult to do that as more and more data become publicly available on the Internet. Researchers interested in getting the restricted-use data should start by going to <http://nces.ed.gov/statprog/instruct.asp>. The survey provides data at the state level but not at the district level. Districts can generate their own data and compare to the state and national averages.

**SA:** Do you see a change in the type of data that NCES will collect in the future related to school libraries?

**KC:** NCES offers training for different data sets. This past month [June 2011] training was offered for the Schools and Staffing Survey. Usually, training for SASS set is offered three out of every four years. NCES pays for the training including travel and lodging, but interested parties have to apply, and it is competitive. The training is very directed, and participants are asked to arrive with research questions and a direction in which they want to use the data. Specialized training is offered at different times when a need from the user community arises. For example, focused training has been given on the private-school data in response to requests from users. There are online data analysis tools available for some of the NCES data sets. The post-secondary groups invested heavily in the tools because the community that uses the data wanted the ability to manipulate the data.

**Conclusion**

The national data available to individual school libraries can be used to help in making decisions at the local level. A variety of surveys are conducted by associations, organizations, and the National Center for Education Statistics. Often the data is reported in averages, but those averages can provide a picture of the current state of school libraries. This information gives individual school librarians points of comparison and allows for informed decision making.

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One Librarian’s Experiences Flying Solo in an Independent School’s Library

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In my library, one of the most common, non-library questions I hear is, “How do you do your job alone?” Many times I will, in jest, answer, “Very carefully.” As I think about it, however, that answer may be far more accurate than it seems.

As the solo school librarian in a modestly sized private school, I am responsible not only for managing the school library, but also for many other things that come my way throughout the school year. A typical day for me begins around 6:45 in the morning and ends somewhere between 5:00 and 10:00 in the evening, depending on what might be happening at school. Many people have described my day as the most incredible juggling act that they have ever seen, and I am inclined to agree. Among the many balls I have to keep in the air are budgeting, collection development, weeding, lesson planning, fundraising, and professional involvement. To round out my responsibilities, add the balls of teaching a half-day of United States history in middle school, completing internal projects assigned to me, and directing the middle school play. The real trick for me hasn’t been keeping the balls in the air, but rather how long to hold on to any one individual ball before throwing it back up and focusing on catching the next.

Budgeting

My chief goal on the financial side is getting the biggest return on every dollar I spend. I am fortunate to work in a school that believes in its library program and the benefits it provides to the school. With that
I track on a spreadsheet every purchase I make during the year. Faithfully keeping a running total prevents me from having any surprises when budget meetings come around. Having this information on hand also ensures that the figure for my available funds is up to date, and reduces the possibility of going over budget. In four years of managing my library I have been over budget only once. I have found that spending thirty minutes to an hour looking over my budget every one to two weeks has made all of the difference in keeping the school library funds on track.

Manage your money well. Look at your budget and any spending reports you receive every year so that you can see exactly where your money goes. I spend at least two weeks near the end of each school year going through my budget to see if I need to reevaluate any expenses. The budget ball may be one of the more difficult ones to keep in the air, but it is one of the most important balls the solo school librarian must juggle.

Collection Management

One of the most difficult parts of my job is collection development and management. I have a hard time letting things go. I’m not a hoarder, but I continually hear myself say, “What do I do if I remove this and later someone needs it?” An up-to-date collection that meets the needs of your patrons is vital to the success of your school library program, but how do you determine what stays and what goes? In my school library, I have a written policy that governs collection management. With the policy in place, it is very easy to point out why collection management decisions are made.

Donna M. Fisher advises those working in small libraries to “maximize [their] print collection” (2004, 23). I constantly struggle with the development of my print collection because my library serves all students from Pre-K through eighth grade. One of the toughest decisions is how much money to allot to each grade level. I try very hard to ensure an equitable distribution of funds across the entire library collection, from picture books to middle school biography. I also make sure that the materials I purchase are ones that will be used both for personal enrichment and as part of the curriculum our teachers are designing.

Another struggle is keeping aware of the teachers’ needs. Many times a teacher calls me and asks, “Do you have any books about ________?” the day that the material is needed. It is frustrating to have to say that I don’t have anything in the print collection, and when I point them to the electronic collection, teachers tell me they don’t know how to adequately use it. Had I known a few weeks in advance, I could have tried to add titles on the subjects needed. Had I known sooner, I would also have had ample opportunity to show the teacher how to access our electronic resources. To that end, I am making a point of surveying teachers in the fall and being more proactive on my end about getting the titles that teachers need to enhance their own classroom objectives.

The last collection management topic to address is weeding. I spend almost three weeks after school is out meticulously weeding my collection. This is undertaken in addition to “spot checks” of items throughout the year as they are borrowed and returned. I take care to remove dated and damaged material. I try to focus on at least half of the Dewey classifications each year, and I weed the fiction and
picture books sections every year. I have the most trouble with these two sections because I constantly see titles I remember from my own childhood. I try not to let nostalgia cloud my judgment, but there are occasions where I simply could not put a book on the discard cart because the title had been special to me as a child. Good memories notwithstanding, taking the time to weed your collection is one of the greatest services you can provide your teachers and students.

**Lesson Planning**

I am the only one responsible for the school library curriculum. When I arrived, I found a curriculum that was very user-friendly but, unfortunately, extremely out of date. I have spent the last few years really refining and polishing my curriculum so that students receive instruction in the skill sets that they need to be better information seekers as they move through elementary and middle school. I want them prepared when they leave my care, and go on to high school and college. I have collaborated with the elementary computer integration teacher to begin a program that allows students to take the skills that they have learned in the school library and put them to use in the computer lab. While still in their infancy, the programs that she and I have discussed should help students put these skills to good use and retain them better than do students who “just saw it in the library one time.”

I give this example as encouragement to solo school librarians to seek collaborative opportunities within the school. If a grade is writing a research paper, make yourself available to the students and teachers to show them what resources the school library has available. Encourage students to get a public library card to gain access to electronic and print resources that are available outside your school library. Get to know public librarians at branches in the area. I did, and the effort has paid unexpected dividends.

Build your curriculum and lessons from the ground up. Lay a strong foundation with your youngest students and continue building as they move through elementary and into middle school. Start with the youngest students you see and help them establish good information-seeking habits. Bad habits are hard to break, so seize the opportunities you have with your students to get them on the right track. Squeeze every instructional moment you can from the interaction you have with your students. Good habits are far easier to teach and maintain than bad habits are to break.

**Book Fairs and Fundraising**

With budget cuts being requested in every department, fundraising has become increasingly important for my school library program. I have found the first rule of putting on a successful fundraiser to be: Find someone extremely capable to plan it. I am not at all saying that the school librarian should completely remove himself from the process. What I mean to suggest is that the school librarian rely on outside help to put the big picture together, and, once the early planning has been completed, the librarian can help the committee to really fine tune the event to ensure its success. Any decision that the committee makes, though, must be approved by me before they move forward.

The planning phase, at least in the case of my annual book fair, belongs to the event cochairs. I have been fortunate to have outstanding committee members every year I have put on a book fair. We have our first meeting early in the school year, and then I let them begin the planning phase. We meet regularly between the time school starts and about mid-October, and then begin meeting as many as three times a week between late October and November as we prepare for our event. The biggest challenge for me has always been letting go, but because of the many hats I wear at school, I simply cannot be involved every aspect of the planning stages.

I trust my committee to put together a fabulous event. I use our meetings as my time with them to approve or change their planning and really get ready for an event. Because the heads of the committee were on the committee the previous year, they already know what I expect and very seldom do we spend time reinventing the wheel. I have now had four successful book fairs, and we have added a spring fair so our students can purchase their summer reading. The keys are trust and a willingness to let go. Having the ability to trust and let go allows me to focus on the things that need my full attention while still getting everything done.
Professional Involvement and Volunteer Recruiting

At first glance, these two issues may not seem related. As a solo, however, I cannot leave the school library for conferences without having volunteers back home to run the show. I am extremely involved in professional organizations. I am a member of ALA/AASL, Texas Library Association (TLA), and Houston Area Independent Schools Library Network (HAISLN). This year I will be serving as president of HAISLN, and for the two years prior to my presidency, I served as one of the editors-in-chief of HAISLN’s recommended reading lists for grades Pre-K–12. I was also appointed to serve on TLA’s Highsmith Library Award Committee., which awards a cash prize to two libraries for outstanding and innovative programs.

Professional involvement has been vital to my growth as a school librarian. I honestly believe that my professional involvement and conference attendance have made me a better manager. My involvement does require that I leave the school library on occasion to participate. As a solo school librarian, that means leaving the school library in the hands of someone who is not a trained librarian. I am fortunate to have a corps of volunteers that is, bar none, the best in the world, and leading them is one of the most capable people I have ever had the opportunity to work with. When I leave the school library for as little as a day or as long as week, I have no doubt that everything will run smoothly until I return. Find good, solid volunteers and take the time necessary to train them. All of my volunteers know what I expect of them whether I’m in the school library or not, and I have faith in their ability to get done the jobs that I have trained them to do. In my absence, I also trust my coordinator to make decisions she is trained for. As a result, I don’t have any unpleasant surprises when I get back.

I have the most rewarding job in the world, and I would be remiss if I didn’t say I love what I do, from managing my collection to going to conferences to teaching classes. I am also grateful to every one of my volunteers, those who come once a month and those who are there every day. As a solo in an independent school, I am fortunate to have a community of parents and administrators who believe in what the school library stands for.

The best advice I could give to a solo school librarian would be to get involved—both in the community you serve and in the professional community in your area. Doing both of these, as well as increasing stakeholders’ awareness of the needs of the school library, has made a big difference for me. I may be the solo librarian at my school, but with the steps I have taken and the policies I’ve put in place I very seldom feel alone.

Wayne R. Cherry, Jr., is director of library services at the First Baptist Academy in Houston, Texas. He is the former editor-in-chief of the Houston Area Independent Schools Library Network (HAISLN) Recommended Reading Lists that have been referenced by libraries all across the nation.

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When I interviewed for my first school librarian position, it was in my hometown elementary school where I had been a library aide in fifth grade. Although the old school had been torn down and the new building was very modern, I still felt as though I had come full circle. The principal spelled out the problems with the situation I would be entering—the school library was the least favorite of the resources, many policies and procedures were antiquated, and the collection needed updating. The K–5 school, with a population of 650, was a Title I school using Accelerated Reader as 25 percent of a student’s reading grade—not to mention a fixed-schedule environment where teachers’ planning periods were sacrosanct. As a condition of my employment, I would agree to become lead technology teacher, instructing some grade levels in technology curriculum as well as fielding help desk requests. It was a tall order, but I gleefully accepted, and, as with all first-year school librarians, I had a whirlwind year.

Dream Team

When I think back on that year the one thing that was always stable and predictable was the full-time library secretary. She had started out like many support employees as a stay-at-home mom, and as her children started school the job was a great situation. The pay was low, but there was no need for before- and after-school care, and she was able to stay involved with her children’s activities during the day. After her children were grown she stayed on staff. As a result, I came into a school library that had an experienced employee to guide me through that crazy first year.

After the first year of getting to know each other, I gently encouraged her to take on duties she thought were out of her area of expertise and to let go of some of the labor-intensive methods she had become so accustomed to using. In other words, we threw out the typewriter and shelflist cards! As time went on, we fell into an easy rhythm and worked well together as a true team.

I figured if my principal never had to worry about the school library I was doing my job. If my collection and circulation were in good shape, and there was a steady flow of students in my school library, I was doing my job. It turns out I was wrong.
Even with open circulation in the mornings and afternoons, and back-to-back classes all day, having a secretary meant I could concentrate on instruction. Since each class’s library time with me was also the teacher’s planning period, typically collaborative projects were divided up so part would be completed in class and part with me. The inability to have the teacher in the school library with the class was challenging and oftentimes frustrating, but when true collaboration took place the results were impressive. I never had to worry about the circulation end of library time because the secretary was always handling that, allowing me to spend the entire class time working with the students.

When I wasn’t with the students, having a secretary allowed me to spend more time developing the collection. When placing an order, I would meet with vendors, and then go back and forth online until I was sure I was getting the most value for every precious dollar. I had time to select and train fantastic student helpers, and I streamlined many of our Accelerated Reader and computer lab procedures. Having full-time help meant the school library didn’t have to close for Book Fair, testing, or any of the other events I was required to attend. I might be at an assembly with a class, but students could still check out books and use the computers. I lobbied (unsuccessfully) for flexible scheduling, but all in all, it was hard to complain when things were going so smoothly.

**New Reality**

Then the recession hit. In early spring the superintendent attended our regular faculty meeting and presented a proposed budget highlighting three secretarial positions up for attrition, which, for a small division such as ours, concerned me greatly. He stated it was a worst-case scenario, but nonetheless possible. I asked around and was told that the three positions were not school library positions, but at the central office and secondary schools. I breathed a sigh of relief and didn’t give it another thought. The last week of school I took a personal day to spend with my youngest child, a recent high school graduate. My cell phone rang, and it was my secretary. She sounded confused and told me Personnel had just offered her a main-office job at another school, but she had declined. Since this was the first time in all her years of employment she had been offered another position, she was justifiably puzzled. While I didn’t know for sure, I had a sinking feeling the worst had occurred.

The following week things unfolded rapidly as the plan of attrition was put in place. Presented with limited options, all of which were unacceptable to her, she opted to retire. In a flash, I watched 20+ years of experience walk out the door. The three elementary schools were left with one part-time person to share, and she could be placed in another position at any time. I felt betrayed and angry. How could this have happened? More importantly, how was this going to affect the students?

I considered resigning my contract for the following year, which I had already signed. Instead, my anger spurred me on towards a fight. I would rally the other school librarians! We would generate data together and plead our case to the school board! We would make the members understand the awful impact this would have on our burgeoning readers!

I started by e-mailing the other school librarians to schedule a meeting with the central office supervisor in charge of secretaries so we could at least have some say in how the remaining secretary would be shared. The response I received from the other two school librarians involved was tepid. They were both close to retirement and had no desire to rock an already shaky boat. They agreed to the meeting but once there said very little, and I couldn’t blame them. As the meeting progressed it became clear the supervisor had absolutely no clue what we did each and every day. She did not understand the nature of our work, nor did she seem interested in learning.

**Harsh Lesson**

When I left the meeting I realized that, as easy as it was to blame the economy or the school board or my principal, there was one very good reason I had lost my secretary—I had never advocated for my school library program. I never gave my principal or anyone at the central office the ammunition they needed to defend our library.

Advocacy was something I became familiar with in graduate school. I’m sure I completed an assignment on methods of advocacy, and I probably did research on the various associations available to our profession, but I never really took it to heart. Advocacy was something for other school librarians—the ones who were in larger systems, with big budgets and their own supervisor. Advocacy was for the school librarians who were politically inclined or who liked speaking in public. It was somebody else’s job. Other than submitting a year-end report on my circulation statistics to my principal and a collection analysis to my central office supervisor, I never let anyone...
know about the success our little school library program was having. I figured if my principal never had to worry about the school library I was doing my job. If my collection and circulation were in good shape, and there was a steady flow of students in my school library, I was doing my job. It turns out I was wrong.

**Missed Opportunities**

I now realize I could have easily invoked some “guerilla” advocacy tactics and with little or no extra time I would have given the decision makers real pause before they took the budget knife to our school library program. I think back to the beginnings of a book challenge I handled several years ago. A parent sent me note stating her objection to a passage in a book her child was reading and wanted the book pulled. Fortunately, I had developed a policy manual including a challenge form. I had my secretary send her the form and that was the last we heard from the parent. When we pulled the manual we noticed items regarding circulation policies that needed updating. That made me think of our division-wide library manual, and I discussed it with the other school librarians at our next meeting. My secretary and I congratulated ourselves on a job well done and that was that. I now realize instead of keeping it to myself, with one quick e-mail I could have let my principal and central office supervisor know that together the secretary and I had warded off a potential challenge, updated our manual, and identified the need for the division manual to be updated, and were working towards that. That would have been a lot of advocacy for one short e-mail!

The missed opportunities are endless. Collaboratively, the instructional technology specialist, the math specialist, the fourth-grade teachers, students, and I completed research on the fifty states, culminating in projects rather than written reports. The effort took many weeks, but the results were phenomenal. I took pictures, but didn’t share them outside of our group. Again, with minimal time and effort, we could have easily shared our success with the central office as well as the public. Book Fair comes with publicity built in, but I never thought of it as an advocacy tool, only as a sales generator. Sharing the fun and success our student library helpers were experiencing is yet another area I missed—the list goes on.

I suspect the reason I shied away from these opportunities is that by nature I do not like to bring attention to myself. Part of being a school librarian is working in the background. It is often said the school library is the heart of the school, and I didn’t like wearing my heart on my sleeve. When I look back at the things mentioned above, I realize by placing the emphasis on the program and students, I could have been an advocate without becoming an attention-seeker. Unfortunately, this new outlook didn’t dawn on me until too late.

**Treading Water**

As the new school year began, I had high hopes and aspirations, but the reality of the daily schedule soon set in. The remaining shared part-time secretary quickly became overwhelmed and was let go, ending any hope I had of having a reliable backup. Although my class schedule was loosened up a bit, it was filled with open circulation time so when I wasn’t instructing students, I was manning the counter. I was given two excellent aides to help with shelving and circulation, but only for limited time. Any “free time” I had was spent doing the necessary secretarial work in addition to all the regular activities and events that occurred during the year—RIF allocation, budgeting, Book Fair, yearbook, Accelerated Reader, etc.

It was a survivable situation, but I spent the whole year treading water, not making the kind of impact I felt the students deserved. I knew if things were going to improve I was going to have to completely reinvent the way I worked.

**Cutting Bait, but Planning to Fish Again**

When contracts for the following year came out, I opted not to return. On the heels of my mother’s passing, my father’s Alzheimer’s worsened, and he had died in January. I now had an estate to settle with a house to clean out, and, between the stress of work and personal life, leaving was the correct decision for me. As I told my principal, I had to “fish or cut bait,” and it was time for me to move on. Leaving my childhood school was difficult, but, I hope, the new school librarian will have that giddy energy I experienced there my first year.

Instead of feeling as though I failed, I have a renewed sense of empowerment by way of my newfound appreciation for the power of advocacy. I look forward to the challenges of my next school library and will not concern myself with the budget, staffing, or the economy. It turns out, I already had the tools I needed—I just thought I was too busy to use them.

Laura L. Slusser, a former elementary school librarian, is active in the Virginia Educational Media Association.
Most of them hated school; they wanted no part of phonics, or decoding, or of books themselves. But if I leaned forward, lowering my voice, I could entice them into listening to a story—any story—as long as I could make those characters come alive.

My Irish grandmother’s house is still there in County Longford. Thatched and whitewashed long ago, it stands empty and forlorn now. But my ancient cousin, Mary, tells me stories about that four-hundred-year-old house and the fertile fields that surround it, almost as if my people still lived there.

"Fire glowed in that hearth for centuries," she says, "sometimes with just one ember to keep it going. At night, the family crouched there, listening to the wail of the sidhe outside."

Mary and I walk down the road to Ballinamuck. "Right here, there was a terrible battle." She waves her arm over the field. "Five hundred of our own died to the English that day."

She shakes her head mournfully. "The Americans had just won their freedom. Why not us? Why not?"

I spend time in the gray stone church searching through the baptismal books for my grandmother’s name. Strangely, I can’t find hers, but I find those of her brothers and sisters, nine of them, Margaret, Thomas, John, and the others. On the right side of each page, there’s a column labeled "present at the birth." And for each there’s a neat X and, in parentheses, "her mark."

Who drew those careful Xs, I wonder. My great-grandmother’s mother? One of her sisters? I’ll never know.

They couldn’t read or write; I do know that. Not newspapers, not signs on the road, not a word in a book.

I was four when I learned to read. I sat with my father in the chair in the living room, while he read from my grandmother’s books: The Song of Hiawatha, Evangeline, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. I listened to his beautiful voice, happy to be with him in the warmth of that chair, captured by the stories that emerged from those silky pages.

In the kitchen on winter afternoons, my head rested on top of the small white radio under the window. I felt the vibrations as the stories came through, a new one every fifteen minutes. The characters and their problems were entirely real: Just Plain Bill, Lorenzo Jones, Ma Perkins, and ah, the long-suffering Portia who faced life while her husband Walter was far away in a Nazi prison camp.

And sometime during those years, I learned to put the wavering lines and circles together that became letters, that became words. And then I was writing, telling improbable tales of princesses in castles and
animals that spoke. I was in love with those stories. I felt the power of clothing my characters, of putting words into their mouths.

It was no surprise that I became a reading teacher, working with kids who couldn’t read, some of them eleven and twelve years old. Most of them hated school; they wanted no part of phonics, or decoding, or of books themselves. But if I leaned forward, lowering my voice, I could entice them into listening to a story—any story—as long as I could make those characters come alive.

It was much later, after my first books were published, that I began to tuck in family stories, not only the Irish stories from Longford, but the ones my Nana told about my German great-grandmother’s arrival in this country and her shocking realizations that there were no diamonds in the streets of Brooklyn, that she’d never see her mother again. I wrote about my own childhood, the fears associated with growing up during the Second World War.

My latest book My Name is Rachel is a story about the Great Depression because I’d heard about it often enough: I saw my mother turning out lights as she left a room, never turning on the oven unless it was for more than one dish. She’d sit at the table with me, telling stories about the disruption in people’s lives, a time that she remembered before I was born.

I gathered books together in my growing library: books that were memories from my childhood, my children’s books, dog-eared and sometimes crayoned over, books that I loved and wanted my grandchildren to read and love, too. The feel of the paper was sensuous under my fingers, the dust jackets vibrant, the gilded edges of my
grandmother’s books beautiful. Books fill the shelves now; they’re stacked on tables and some, I admit, cascade from piles onto the floor.

But so much changes in life. From the stories passed down by my cousin in Longford, from the ones told by my mother and Nana, from the radio stories and the television specials, from the books on my shelves, there’s a progression. Now on my desk there’s a slim e-reader. I have one of the first—antiseptic, gray with black letters on the screen. With a touch of my finger, I turn the page.

Change brings anxiety. What will happen to the books I love to hold in my hands, to the ones I read to my children and grandchildren? I can’t imagine that there won’t be a place for them.

But isn’t it story that really counts? Shouldn’t the method of delivery be a secondary consideration? Does it make a difference if I stand arm in arm with a cousin who passes down a story about a four-hundred-year-old house, or a battle that dealt destruction two hundred years ago, rather than reading about it in a book? And wasn’t the radio warm as I dreamt over the lives and problems of Ma Perkins or Portia Blake?

What is story anyway, if not an emotional attachment between giver and receiver? Certainly as I write, I never think of the delivery of my story. I’m obsessed with problems, with joys and sorrows, with the growth of characters as I search for resolution in their lives. What I want to be—need to be—is the teller of tales.

I have to hope that books will always exist; I can’t imagine that they won’t. But e-books are the beginning of an era, a new way to provide story. “Welcome,” I say, or as my granddaughter might put it, ”Bring it on!”

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Statement of Ownership and Management
Knowledge Quest, Publication No. 483–860, is published five times per year by the American Association of School Librarians, American Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611-2795. Annual subscription price, $50. Printed in U.S.A. with periodical class postage paid at (Ohio). As a nonprofit organization authorized to mail at special rates (DMM Section 424.12 only), the purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes have not changed during the preceding twelve months.

Extent and Nature of Circulation
(“Average” figures denote the average number of copies printed each issue during the preceding twelve months; “actual” figures denote actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: September/October 2011 issue). Total number of copies printed average 8,633; actual 8,756. Sales through dealers, carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: none. Mail subscription: actual 7,806. Free distribution actual 950. Total distribution average 8,653; actual 8,756. Office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled after printing average 65; actual 65. Total: average/actual 9.124. Percentage paid: average 97.68%; actual 89.15%