

How School Librarians Can Partner with K–12 School District Leadership to Support School Libraries

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When I was hired for my first full-time school librarian position at a high school, I was tasked with providing leadership to all the school district's library personnel since the school district did not employ a full-time district library supervisor. This proved to be a challenging task. I always felt like something was falling through the cracks as I juggled to manage the needs of each of the school libraries while running my own with only a part-time paraprofessional to assist me.

Unfortunately, I found my experience was not uncommon. As I got to know the school library personnel in my state, I learned that schools tended to employ only one school library staff member per school site (either a certified school librarian or a classified paraprofessional) or just one district library supervisor to serve the entire school district. This motivated me to explore why this was the case.

While completing my dissertation research with school districts that employed school librarians, I found none employed full-time district-level leadership for their school librarians. Only one of the six district administrators I interviewed had extensive knowledge and experience working with school librarians, yet that administra-

tor had little time to work with the librarian due to other administrative responsibilities. Most of the administrators I interviewed either had little knowledge of school librarians and/or didn't know how to help them (Lewis 2018; 2019). At the conclusion of my study several administrators requested guidance in how to support their school librarians.

As a follow-up to my dissertation research I implemented a study to explore how to equip district leaders to support their school librarians in the absence of an official district library supervisor. I collected data during the fall of 2020 at a PreK–12 public school district consisting of approximately 15,000 students. The district employed twenty-three building-level school librarians but no full-time library support staff (library clerks) and no official full-time district-level school library supervisor. Four district-level administrative personnel and seven building-level school librarians agreed to participate in a series of interviews, focus groups, and observations (Lewis 2021).

The results revealed several issues of concern:

- School librarians are generally functioning as building/resource managers. During the COVID pandemic their primary role

consisted of serving as IT support to teachers and students.

- The lack of full-time library clerks prevents school librarians from serving as instructional leaders.
- There is a lack of clear expectations and alignment to current school library standards at the district level.
- District leaders tend to provide school librarians with training on digital programs (to assist others with navigation) rather than professional learning designed to advance student achievement through the school library.
- There is a lack of consistent, positive working relationships between school librarians and site principals. (Croft 2021; Lewis 2021)

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Although these findings are not generalizable beyond this study, they do raise concerns for the broader school library field. The preferred solution is to employ a full-time district library supervisor and full-time library clerks in each school library. However, school budgets often are not able to support this, and alternative solutions must be considered.

Implications for Practice

If school librarians without full-time district library supervisors encounter these issues within their school districts, there are several steps they can take to help their district leaders address them. First, assume that district leaders have limited knowledge of school librarians and potentially few positive experiences with school librarians. Assume also that most district leaders tasked with overseeing school librarians are interested in learning how to support them, do not know where to start, and would appreciate some expert guidance. Administrators are more likely to respond positively to requests when they are aligned to district and school site improvement plans and make a clear connection to improving student achievement.

Second, school librarians should locate and review the following documents within their school districts:

- Board policy/regulation for school libraries
- School librarian job description
- Evaluation process for school librarians
- District and school site improvement plans

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Examine the degree to which the documents are aligned to current school library and literacy standards. Note whether the school librarian is specifically included in the literacy, technology, and curriculum and instruction initiatives in the improvement plans. Make a list of suggested revisions—administrators greatly appreciate it when potential solutions are proposed (it makes their jobs much easier!).

Third, think about what your greatest needs are for specific professional learning. Investigate options and determine how these might align with the district and school improvement plans. Do you need or want more time for your district's school librarians to collaborate with one another? If yes, think about how to organize this. Would you like to meet monthly? For how long? A few hours or a full day? Will you need substitutes to cover libraries while school librarians meet? Are there online professional learning sources that would benefit your school librarian population? If yes, curate and maintain a list of these sources. Do you feel it would be helpful to belong to professional organizations such as your state's school library organization, AASL, the International Society for Technology in Education, or the International Literacy Organization? If yes, create a wish list that identifies and prioritizes your preferred organizations and the costs associated with membership,

attending conferences, and participating in other professional learning activities. Do any of your local colleges or universities offer school librarian preparation programs? If so, contact their faculty to inquire about potential professional learning opportunities. Would you find it helpful to attend professional learning provided for teachers within your school district? If yes, identify those times of the year and specific events with which you would like to engage.

Fourth, make one or a series of appointments to meet with the district leadership responsible for overseeing school librarians. Make it your goal to address the following during your meeting(s):

- Review the district's documents related to school libraries, share your suggestions, and offer to work with leadership to revise each document and educate site administrators about the district's expectations for school librarians.
- Examine the current learning environment and available resources. Discuss the district's priorities for school librarians within this context. Offer to work with leadership to revise expectations accordingly.
- Inquire as to whether funding and support is available to cover the professional learning wish list. Offer to work with leadership to plan specific professional learning opportunities throughout the school year.

Finally, work on cultivating a positive relationship with your site administrators. I previously addressed this topic at length in a previous *Knowledge Quest* article titled “Advocating for the School Library through Relationships” (Lewis 2020). One of the most impactful practices you can develop is to invite your administrators to spend time in your school library on a regular basis. The more opportunities they have to see exemplary school librarians in action, the more likely they will provide support to advance student achievement through the school library.

My research has indicated that school leaders clearly need a starting point on their journey to learning about the school library. With time and careful planning, school librarians can partner with these leaders to provide the knowledge and experience they need to build effective school libraries.

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Works Cited:

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