I love sports. I have been an athlete, coach, or fan my entire life. For this reason, I view most of life through this lens. This includes my understanding of the school librarian’s place in education. School librarians serve as the quarterback, catcher, goalie (choose your sport) of the school, with a view of the entire field and a complex understanding of the strategy that leads to victory. They understand specific instructional skills or resources to place in a classroom teacher or student’s hand at just the right time to move the ball down the field.

Welcome to the September/October 2023 issue of Knowledge Quest. This issue is dedicated to highlighting the role of school librarians as instructional leaders. In this issue of Knowledge Quest, Jennifer Cooper, a Virginia school librarian and past president of the Virginia Association of School Librarians, serves as our content expert. In her feature article she shares a variety of practical ways to develop relationships with stakeholders that ultimately lead to opportunities for students and teachers. Her introduction emphasizes the importance of school librarians serving as instructional leaders through active engagement with various stakeholders. She begins these conversations with “How can the library help you?” This question is powerful in leadership meetings, technology committee meetings, and during hallway conversations.

When stakeholder needs became urgent community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, established relationships helped her help teachers and administrators continue to meet the needs of every student. Her adjusted services included technical support of teaching and learning, online learning facilitation, online and virtual readers’ advisory, and even door-to-door book deliveries. Despite the shift to remote learning, she maintained relationships with the school community and extended library resources to learners and educators in their homes.

In true school librarian fashion, Jennifer ends her article by highlighting partnerships cultivated by school librarians across the country. Some of these partnerships were a part of her programming, but most highlight the work of school librarians across the country and illustrate how the relationships she developed with professional librarians across the country help all of us learn.

At West Maple Elementary School, Carrie Betts’ carefully designed school library helps drive student success. Classroom read-alouds are carefully selected to align to district curriculum and library activities. Rather than focusing exclusively on classic texts, Betts believes her role is to be an “introducer of new texts” to students. In her school, read-alouds introduce literacy skills, explain empathy skills, and are illustrative of the larger community in which her school is situated. All of this is intentional—highlighting her instructional expertise and time spent developing relationships with her faculty and administration.

Carrie’s students developed websites designed in the style of Zillow to promote the houses they designed with their teacher. Working closely with the fifth-grade classroom teacher, she identified Google Sites as the best tool for this project, developed instructional materials for the lesson, and guided the students through the process from beginning to a final parent showcase at the end of
the school year. During this process, she modeled the ongoing learning skills inherent in all effective educators and taught the fifth-grade classroom teacher how to use a new tool in her classroom. Instructional expertise is not limited to helping only students learn. Carrie meets with classroom teachers during their weekly Professional Learning Communities. She curates high-quality resources for classroom teachers and teaches students how to use them. Every part of her leadership highlights her instructional leadership skills and hard work.

In her article titled “Creative Conversations for Student Learning and Advocacy,” Tamara Cox introduces the importance of highly effective school librarians and school libraries as an advocacy tool. She begins by offering practical suggestions for working with the larger school community and expands outward by sharing how she works collaboratively with other district schools and programs, the public library, local businesses, local and state agencies, professional school library organizations in her state and in other states, and, finally, professional education organizations in her state and in other states. Each added concentric circle of support helps Tamara improve her school library and her practice.

Of particular interest to readers is how the South Carolina Association of School Librarians was able to create an Emerging Leaders program for the newest librarians in the state after receiving an ABC-CLIO grant from the American Association of School Librarians. The program was created in conjunction with the University of South Carolina and is yet another concentric circle of support, not only for Cox, but for school librarian growth and development for the entire state.

In 2021, the Oklahoma School Librarians (OKSL) division of the Oklahoma Library Association received the ABC-CLIO Leadership Grant as well, marking a significant achievement for the organization. Amanda Kordeliski, our final featured author and a member of the OKSL leadership team, has been working tirelessly for years to address the need for leadership and school librarian development in her state. They faced challenges in recruiting school librarians to leadership positions and lacked a cohesive plan. To overcome these obstacles, they started small by adding a social media/marketing chair and streamlining their bylaws and awards. They also leveraged technology, such as Google Meet, to increase their frequency of meetings and involve school librarians who couldn’t attend in person.

The OKSL team didn’t wait for leadership opportunities to come to them, they actively sought partnerships with the University of Oklahoma School of Library and Information Studies and the Oklahoma Department of Education to make it happen. They conducted surveys to identify the professional development needs of school librarians, focusing on areas like standards, mentorship, advocacy, making, and collection development. With this data, they developed tailored workshops and a School Librarian Summer Institute, which provided much-needed professional development and support for librarians across the state. The success of their initiatives led to an increase in membership and involvement in OKSL.

Over the course of two years, the OKSL team built on their achievements. They hosted virtual institutes and a job fair, and focused on mentorship, a key need identified by recent graduates. The collaboration between OUSLIS (OU School of Library and Information Studies student organization), and the University College of Education (University of Oklahoma) strengthened, fostering a better understanding of the role of school librarians and inspiring future educators to consider joining the profession. The team’s efforts have laid a solid foundation for the growth of school librarianship in Oklahoma and have empowered new librarians with the necessary tools and instructional expertise to excel in their profession.

This issue-focused on school librarians as instructional leaders is essential reading at this time. In the closing session of the 2023 International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) conference, Richard Culatta, the ISTE/ASCD chief executive officer, suggested that educators needed to focus on joyful teaching to help students overcome the educational and societal challenges we face in a post-COVID world. School librarians know a great deal about bringing joy to a school. Placing the perfect reading resource in a student’s hand (or Kindle) is a source of joy as is introducing learners to the power of AI or coding or answered questions. Knowledge of instructional best practices is how this is accomplished, and school librarians are ready to take on the challenge.

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