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School Librarians ARE Teachers and Instructional Leaders

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Welcome to the 2023-24 publication year for Knowledge Quest. I am excited to go on this journey with all of you as we continue to learn and grow together through the words and experiences of our colleagues shared throughout the pages of the KQ issues this year.

My presidential focus is on one of the core foundations of school librarianship—building relationships. For many of us, the professional world we are experiencing now is vastly different from the one discussed during our school library courses and from the existence we knew just a few short years ago. As such, we need to do one of the things that school librarians do best—flexibly adapt to what our school communities need from us based on what is happening in the world around us.

The way we connect with others to advocate for the vital role school librarians play in uplifting their communities needs to pivot to not only address current rhetoric but also engage community members both inside and outside our schools and districts. Misinformation needs to be countered with true stories of the learning, exploration, and community building that happens every day in school libraries worldwide.

One thing that remains true today is that what a school librarian does all day long is still a mystery to the communities we serve and the wider world. While many of us do enjoy a nice cardigan (it’s hard to regulate temperatures in one of the largest classrooms in the school), we do not spend our days sitting behind a desk shushing people and checking out books. While many of us would enjoy lounging about reading during the workday, I cannot remember any time when that was the case.

Now, more than ever, we need accurate narratives of what happens in the school library and what school librarians actually do to spread across platforms, forums, boardrooms, and political conversations. While we once battled pop-culture stereotypes or being ignored, we are now facing some of our most heinous foes—mis- and disinformation.
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Though much of the present focus on school libraries and school librarians has been on collection development, school librarians take on many roles in their schools and districts. They are collection curators but also technology leaders, program facilitators, and so much more.

One of the most important of these roles, in my opinion, is centered on instruction. There is a reason why two of the American Library Association (ALA)/AASL/Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) School Librarian Preparation Standards focus on the learner and learning and preparing for instruction—we ARE teachers. School librarians are in the unique position to provide instruction to all learners—students, classroom teachers, administrators, parents, and beyond.

**What Is True:**

We have the opportunity and ability to see and serve every student. We build inclusive lessons that address learning needs for a variety of student populations, including those identified in special education, English Language Learning, and gifted programs. We can connect reading, information literacy, technology, and inquiry instruction to content in any curricular area at any grade level. As such, we are uniquely situated to identify connections across curricular areas and grade levels and can bridge concepts and skills through instruction that builds over the time students are in our buildings.

**The Challenge:**

Even before the onslaught of adverse policies and legislation relating to books and online resources, not only the general public but also those working within our school walls and parents of the learners we teach were unclear about the instructional role of the school librarian. Many based their knowledge on their own experiences while in K-12 education or on what they could see when passing through our physical spaces—a room full of books and a circulation desk.

Early in my school library career, unless someone was required to observe me teach for evaluative purposes or happened to be one of the few people who took me up on my offers of collaboration, even the classroom teachers and administrators in my building did not realize the full scope of what I could offer instructionally. I had one teacher who was shocked when my response to his “What are you working on?” question was “I’m working on lesson plans.” He had no idea I held a teaching certificate or knew how to write lesson plans.

Now, we not only need to address unfamiliarity with what school librarians can do, but actively work against inaccurate information about what school librarians are doing.

**The Solution:**

The best way to counteract this misinformation landscape is to do one of the things school librarians do best—build relationships. We already have people within our school walls who know the value we provide and appreciate the many roles we play. The number may be small, but it can grow. As that number grows, we are also growing advocates who can speak out against misinformation spreading throughout our communities.

Continue to do the work you’ve always done—meet with Professional Learning Communities to discuss how you can support their instruction; present at staff meetings or record videos to share with the entire staff; post newsletters with offers of instruction and explanation of resources; join content area curriculum writing teams; share lessons you’ve created with your teaching staff so they might “see” you in action; share the cool learning opportunities you’ve provided in parent newsletters or on social media. Basically, get the word out in as many ways as possible.

Add to the work you’ve always done to provide advocates with clear talking points and examples: Create one-pager documents that highlight instructional...
benefits provided by certified school librarians, send these and information about lessons you provide to your district leadership and/or school board, strategically use social media to highlight the learning happening in your school library, and be sure to include statements from those you are serving as their comments are often more powerful than ours alone.

AASL has provided a wealth of resources to support school librarians. You can always look to AASL’s National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries (2018) and the competencies in each of the three frameworks; member-created position statements; and articles that appear in both the print and blog versions of Knowledge Quest. Please feel free to use and adapt these as needed. The Instructional Role of the School Librarian position statement asserts that, “As information specialists and instructional leaders of both learners and fellow educators, school librarians are uniquely positioned to teach every student and the school community through traditional, blended, and distance learning” (AASL 2018).

Also, remember, you are not alone. One of the most amazing aspects of being a school librarian is the school librarian community. We are one of the most giving and supportive professions. If you need help and support, reach out through AASL’s Member Forum on ALA Connect to have your questions answered in a safe and secure environment.

And, finally, I and the AASL Board of Directors hope that we can continue to build relationships with all of you. We are all better together, so if you have any suggestions about how to advocate for the instructional role of the school librarian or ideas on other important topics, please feel free to share them through the member forum or contact me (aaslpresident@ala.org).

**Courtney Pentland** is the high school librarian at North Star High School in Lincoln, Nebraska. She is adjunct faculty for the University of Nebraska-Omaha School Library program and has served on the Nebraska School Librarians Association (NSLA) board as member at large, president, and chapter delegate to AASL. She is the 2023-2024 AASL President. Follow her adventures on Twitter @liveluvlibrary.

**Additional Resources:**


**Works Cited:**