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Building Relationships Builds Strong Library Programs

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I received my Masters of Library Science degree 22 years ago. There are a lot of things I studied during my MLS program that I have forgotten. For example, I don't remember how the Library of Congress cataloging system works. That's probably because the only time in my life I actually had to know that was when I was taking my cataloging course.

But there was one piece of advice I received from an instructor in my school library program that was as useful as anything else I learned. The instructor, a longtime teacher librarian, told us, "The most important people in the school building are the secretaries and the custodians." At the time, I thought that was a strange piece of advice. After all, aren't the administrators the most important people?

As time passed though, and I embarked on my teaching career, I realized just how useful that advice had been. There were countless times when I needed furniture moved—or removed—or assistance in getting chairs and a podium set up for a program I was running. Or a lightbulb replaced, or someone to check into why the air conditioning wasn't working in the library. Not only was it helpful to have a good relationship with custodians for all those reasons, they also were a good source for what was going on elsewhere in the building.

As for the secretaries, I can't tell you how many times I had to ask one of them to track the status of an outstanding purchase order for me to find out why some urgently needed books or educational materials hadn't yet arrived. In my last few years of teaching, as substitute teacher shortages

were getting worse, I had nearly daily conversations with the office secretary to come up with a plan on which periods I could host classes in the library for which there was no sub, working around my instructional schedule for the day. Even more importantly, the secretaries were usually the pathway to the administrators, most of whom sadly didn't regularly make their way to the library media center, meaning I had to go to them to advocate for my program and to deal with crises.

I soon realized that no matter whom I was interacting with, relationships were the key to a successful library program. That's why instead of eating lunch alone in my library office (I was lucky enough to have one), I sought out different groups of classroom teachers to lunch with throughout the week. That's why, even though I am horrible at remembering names, I tried to greet as many learners as possible by name throughout the day, even if I would often get their name wrong. They still appreciated the effort! While I never had a yearbook dedicated to me, I was proud of the fact that for three of the five years I worked at a high school, I had my name mentioned by student speakers during the graduation ceremony.

These are just some of the relationships I tried to foster. I'm sure most of you are making similar efforts to forge relationships with as many people as possible in your schools. No matter how well we are forging relationships with our colleagues, it's always useful to learn from our peers about the successes they have had in building relationships. That's why the theme of this issue is Building Relationships Through the School Library.

The content experts for this issue, Rene Burress and Amanda Harrison, note in their article, “Building Bridges: Nurturing Meaningful Relationships with Stakeholders in School Libraries,” that relationship building is a form of leadership. They also emphasize that “connections will not just happen, they must be built with intention.” To help us build those connections, they provide a fascinating description of the different age groups we are working with, ranging from the Silent Generation to Generation Alpha. Their article ends with a list of DOS and DON'TS when it comes to building relationships.

Margaret Sullivan and Gregory Baum have a narrower focus in their article, “Building Relationships with Teachers, Administrators and Other School Librarians.” They advise that the key to a long-lasting successful library program is to make the library the center of the relationship, not the individual teacher librarian. “Librarians come and go,” they write. “Relationships with the library last forever.” The authors also share a success story that came of the pandemic, as the middle school librarians in their district started meeting on Zoom once a week and have continued to do so once the school buildings reopened. The elementary school librarians followed suit, and are meeting weekly in small-group professional learning communities.

Most school librarians try to make connections with their public libraries. But no one has done as good a job of doing so as the school librarians in Nashville, Tennessee. That partnership is the subject of the article, “Limitless Libraries: A School District and Public Library Partnership That Shines,” by Lindsey Kimery and Jennifer Winston. The Limitless Libraries program was initiated 14 years ago at the request of the mayor, and requires that school libraries be adequately funded and staffed. The school and public library catalogs are merged, giving learners access to thousands of materials. Requested materials arrive at schools daily in green Limitless Libraries bags, and include not only books but a wide variety of other materials ranging from CDs to bongo drums to pickleball sets. A pair of Limitless Libraries collection development librarians work closely with the school librarians to make sure the learners’ needs are met.

My favorite feature of this wonderful Nashville program, though, was the limo ride back to school provided for the winning team in the district-wide Battle of the Books. When I was running a Battle of the Books at the middle school where I taught for many years, part of the PTA grant I got for the program included funding for a limo ride for the winning teams in each grade level to and from a pizza place downtown, where they enjoyed a celebratory lunch. The kids just loved riding in the limo!

Another author in this issue, Amy Brownlee, is a lot better at remembering names than me. She sets a goal each year of learning the names of every learner in her district within the first two weeks. Even though her small Kansas district only has about 500 learners, that’s still an impressive accomplishment. That sets the tone for the way she tirelessly works throughout the year to build relationships with her learners, as documented in her article, “Building Bonds with Young Readers: The Power of Relationships.” Brownlee does much more than just learn her learners’ names. She tries to attend their extracurricular activities, gets them involved in the library with an activity involving Taylor Swift lyrics and uses literature circles to connect with her learners.

There’s a thread similar to Brownlee’s in the Question and Answer article featuring Katie Klein, “How to Build Relationships in Nontraditional Schools.” Like Brownlee, Klein’s library experience includes working in a small rural public school, but in her case it was also part of the same building as a vocational school and an alternative school program. Klein also shares her experiences working in a small all-girls boarding high school and finally in a combined middle/high school suburban charter school, where she was hired to establish a library program. One of my favorite parts of her interview was when she talked about how the vocational teachers were friendly, even if they weren’t interested in collaboration, as evidenced by the fact that the culinary teacher often brought pastries over to Klein and her clerk. That reminded me of my middle school experience, where my library was next to the culinary arts room, and that teacher often sent over pretzels or pizza that was just out of the oven. When I was teaching in a high school, I always volunteered to be a judge in the dessert competition held in the bake class. There are always benefits to building relationships with all types of classroom teachers!

Hopefully, the articles in this issue will inspire us to build even better relationships with the people we come into contact with, both in and out of school. As Brownlee writes in her article, “It takes time to build these relationships, but it is well worth the time and effort spent.”

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