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Sarah Searles

sarah.searles@knoxschools.org

Sarah Searles is Academic Resources Supervisor for the Knox County Schools. She was a Lilead Fellow and served on the AASL Board of Directors 2016-19. Sarah's book *Explore*, part of the Shared Foundations series, was published by ALA Editions in 2021. Her articles on school librarianship have appeared in *Knowledge Quest* and *School Library Connection*.

Growing Leadership and Advocacy Skills: For Hard Times and For Good

As the school library supervisor for a large school district, it's my pleasure and privilege to lead and advocate for effective school libraries at a high level.

LEADERSHIP AND ADVOCACY are, of course, critical tools on the belt of every school librarian. We've all known this for a long time, with the expectation ingrained in our graduate school experiences and enshrined through multiple predecessors to the current *National School Library Standards*. However, depending on each of our particular career learning journeys, we haven't always all had a concrete understanding of exactly what leadership and advocacy entail.

It is no secret that in the post-Covid years, there has been an increase in tussles over intellectual freedom in school libraries. And so, with those examples looming vividly over our lives at this particular time in history, many of us tend to think first of leadership and advocacy as what might happen on Capitol Hill: meeting with elected officials, calling legislators, speaking at public microphones, and so forth. It's natural for us to imagine advocacy in this way, when it's so easily available to our minds via our social media feeds.

Just a few years ago, though, most of us would have been more likely to picture leadership and advocacy as something more like a meeting with a building- or district-level school administrator, often related to funding levels. Many a professional development has been offered on the best ways to pull our collection data and circulation statistics into a tidy principal-facing newsletter, so that we could pitch for a bigger budget,

the help of a clerk, the benefits of a flexible schedule, or other resources to help us support learners. We might also think in terms of how everyday leadership and advocacy come through our strong collaborative instruction and programming, building trust and value with others through our working relationships and the evidence of our effective daily practice.

For my district, a silver lining of this era of heightened civic attention has been the opportunity to create new School Library Councils for our district's schools. Each school librarian now has a formal structure to gain stakeholder input to inform their work, with a Council membership composed of administrators, classroom teachers, and parents, plus others depending on their school needs. These stakeholders provide school librarians with feedback to inform their collection development cycles, as well as assisting with any other program planning initiatives important in their building. While the impetus for launching these Councils is certainly related to some difficult scrutiny from the community, we've been deliberate about using them in a way that is positive for our school librarians, such that they are truly a vehicle for leadership and advocacy. After all, school librarians WANT stakeholder input; it's all over our AASL Standards! And even just in the first year of implementation, we've seen the fruits of that labor: leadership and advocacy through our Councils has led to multiple school library renovations, new opportunities for collaborative partnerships, increased understanding of our work from administrators and evaluators, and additional funding, with one school receiving a whopping \$65,000 to update a badly aged collection.

The authors for this issue have done an outstanding job offering a variety of perspectives on how to return our views of leadership and advocacy back to the core of effective school library practice. Our content expert, Deb Kachel, lays out research from all over the country showing what individuals can do to advocate for our profession, using lessons learned from districts that have "bucked the trend" of school library position loss since 2010, and actually added positions in the last several years.

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Christie Kaaland describes the long term efforts of school library advocates to reinstate elementary school librarians in Eugene, Oregon. During their extensive advocacy journey, they acquired leadership skills such as establishing key stakeholder relationships, communicating through well-polished presentations, developing assessments and key outcomes, designing their efforts for sustainability across superintendent turnover, and testing multiple pathways for success.

School librarians often run into the frustrating challenge that effective advocacy is based on data, which can be lacking in a subject area without its own standardized test scores. Keith Curry Lance and Caitlin Gerrity offer a timely response: the SLIDE data tools. They provide handy how-tos for using this data and a local example for implementation in dialog with school and district leaders.

For those who are eager to roll up their sleeves and start growing their leadership and advocacy practice, Immanda Bellm offers an ultra-practical take on the subject. She details six strategies for exactly what a school librarian can do to create perceptions of value, from fresh starts to long-term planning and marketing, with plenty of implementation examples drawn from real life in her district.

Rounding out this issue, Kimberly Ray offers another ultra-practical take on leadership and advocacy, this one centered on building that single most critical pillar of success for a school librarian: a strong working relationship with the principal. She details six strategies a school librarian can apply to strengthening this partnership, from alignment of vision to empathetic and strategic listening, to ensure that it is mutually beneficial and ultimately strengthens the school in support of its learners.

In his 2023 book *How Trust Works: The Science of How Relationships are Built, Broken, and Repaired*, Dr. Peter H. Kim explains that trust is built (or undermined) in two main ways: competence, or the belief that someone possess the necessary skills for a task, and integrity, or the belief that someone is acting coherently with acceptable principles. For school libraries in recent years, book challenges have been used on a national stage as a way to attack both of those pillars. The everyday advocacy and leadership described in this issue, though, provide us ways to strengthen and rebuild trust with our communities in a way that can long outlast this period of conflict. The more we cultivate and grow these skills in ourselves, the more we will be able to pour these strengths back into the growth of the learners we serve.