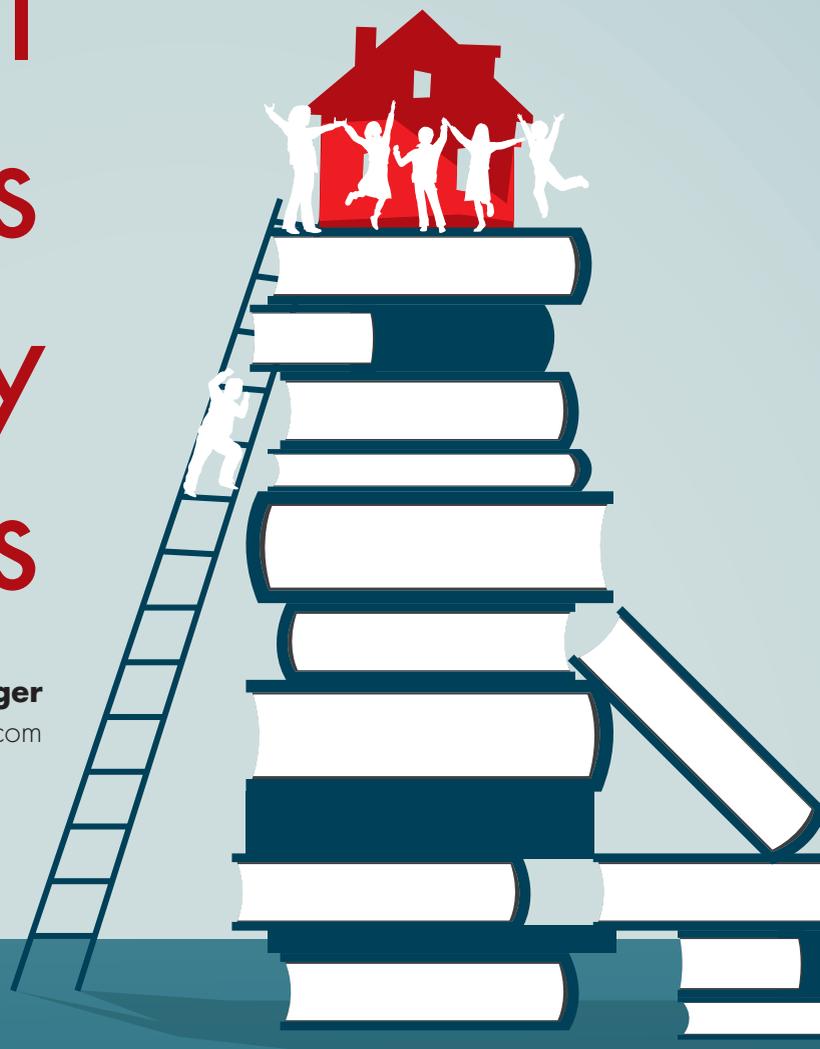


# School Librarians as Equity Warriors

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School libraries build futures and can change lives in deep and impactful ways. Every day I see students hold books like they have found gold. I witness a palpable joy that cannot be measured. A seventh-grade boy wrote:

The library is not only a place...but a home for some of us. It's a quiet, calming area that expands my education the second I step in it. With technology I can reach an education beyond our current one. Researching for history reports, writing documents, and creating new ideas that could better ourselves and the world.

As a school librarian at Hyde Leadership Charter School (HLCS) in the South Bronx, this one small note changed me and fueled my relentless drive to provide my students with access to information, resources,

and opportunities. Our inspirational director, Peter Anderson, calls us "equity warriors," and school librarians are at the center in the fight for equity in education.

Currently, hundreds of urban school libraries serve over sixteen million students across the nation who live in high-risk communities. As a school librarian working in one of the poorest congressional districts in the United States, deemed one of the "least promising places to grow up" in New York City, the challenges are undeniably hard (Bellafante 2015). Our community,

like so many others, is beset by poverty, crime, homelessness, hunger, child abuse, drug abuse, and an achievement gap.

Despite these challenges, every day I see an overwhelming amount of human potential in bright, talented, and creative students. When given access to the right tools and opportunities students show enormous growth. Strong libraries fuel this growth by guaranteeing that every student has the right to read and receive (or have access to) information and educational opportunities.

## Filling the Gaps: Turning Obstacles into Opportunities

### *Closing the Word Gap*

“The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3,” a study conducted by University of Kansas researchers Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, found that children from low-income households are exposed to thirty million fewer words by the age of four compared with their more-affluent peers (2003). Follow-up studies show that this difference has lasting effects on a child’s later academic performance.

Being cognizant of this “word gap” is critical in creating a library that meets a wide range of reading levels. School libraries must be designed to serve students of all reading levels, including those reading below their grade level and English language learners developing their vocabularies. School librarians should provide high-interest, low-level books like those from Orca Soundings, Saddleback Educational Publishing, and High Interest Publishing, so that everyone can find books that they can read. Providing multicultural books that speak to your students’ experiences and stories is crucial. ALA President Courtney L. Young has



Figure 1. Two enthusiastic library users who are proud of their reading skills.

stated that there is “the need for all children to have access to materials that reflect their experience” (Landgraf 2015). To close the word gap, we must support diversity in our collections.

Here’s one success story. A student who entered HLCS as a struggling sixth-grade student reading below grade level came from a school that did not have a fully stocked library. Seven months later after successful reading interventions and frequent visits to the school library, she had read over 1,500,000 words and 23 books (measured by Accelerated Reader), and her appetite for reading just kept growing! The school library gave her a huge range of book levels, so she began with easier books and worked her way up to some of the most challenging.

### *Collecting Data to Fill the Gaps*

In addition to offering a wide range of literature, collecting and using student data are important as school librarians help close the word gap. It

is crucial that I know every student extremely well. Discovering learners’ passions and interests is one of the best ways to support academic growth. Knowing their reading levels and how they are performing academically allows me to give differentiated support to every student who walks into the school library. As I look around our library, I see familiar faces. I know that the student in the corner loves biographies, that the two having an animated discussion work best with audiobooks, and that the student making notes thrives in poetry book clubs.

School librarians have an advantage over teachers; we can monitor student progress over many years. We can observe students having a successful year and then struggling the next year. We can advocate for struggling students and also help them set goals for reading growth. School librarians can identify ways to help close the word gap. Through collaborating with administrators, teachers, and students, and by being familiar with all curricula, school librarians can



Figure 2. Happy readers with new books.

identify programs that have the potential to address high-need areas. Last year we created a STAR (Students Targeted for Additional Resources) mentorship program. Every staff member is paired with a student who has been identified—based on state test scores and other academic assessments—as being in the lowest third of his or her class. We are excited to see deeper relationships being built and needs being identified and addressed.

### Resource Gap

Strong school libraries fill a huge resource gap for low-income students. Leanne Ellis, Bronx Library Coordinator and Destiny

District Manager, explained it best when she said:

School libraries are a great equalizer for student learning because they provide students with direct access to a diverse collection of high-quality books for independent reading and growth. Many students may not have books in their home environments or opportunities to go to their public library branch because they are uncertain where it is, they may not have someone to take them, or they may not feel comfortable going there since it could be an uncertain environment. (2015)

For some students, a school library may be their only way to access books and technology. Getting as many books as possible into the hands of children is a huge priority for me. Two little girls currently living in a shelter are always running to the school library to check out books or to find out if I'm giving away discarded books. Every book matters; all weeded books are offered to students to help create important home libraries that not only impact the students but their families.

Partnerships are critical for filling the resource divide. Many of the books in the school library were provided by outside support from national and local companies and nonprofit organizations. With limited funds, turning outward is necessary.

One partnership that is helping to remove barriers to resources is the New York City program MyLibraryNYC. As Ellis says:

All too often, students are unable to borrow public library materials because fines incurred have blocked further checkouts and families cannot afford to pay the fees. MyLibraryNYC gives students a fresh start with a library card that does not charge fines for any lost or damaged items. (2015)

MyLibraryNYC takes away all excuses for why students cannot check out books. It also has created a program that builds partnerships between schools and public libraries and ships public library books directly to schools. This is an innovative solution that can help close the resource gap.

# For some students, a school library may be their only way to access books and technology.

## *Bringing the Bookstore to Students*

With very few bookstores in the Bronx, students don't have a local place to buy books, so Scholastic Book Fairs are a huge success. All year long students ask when the next book fair will be. Even though family resources are limited, buying books is made a priority. Earlier this year, with the financial support of City National Bank, we took over one hundred students to a Barnes & Noble store in Manhattan to buy books for their home libraries (see figure 2). Many students had never been in a bookstore, and some said it was the "best day of their life."

## **Digital Divide**

School libraries play an important role in bridging the digital divide or connectivity gap that separates various demographic groups. A White House report concluded that the divide is very present in the United States, with lower rates of home broadband access among African American and Hispanic residents (Sperling 2013). Limited access to the Internet prevents students' being able to access information, which many see as a human right. In a world where it's projected that 80 percent of jobs will require digital skills (Lever 2013), it's important that students have access to computers and that trained school librarians teach essential digital-literacy skills.

In the last year I have seen how access to the Internet and learning computer skills can open a world of knowledge and opportunities

for students. Through the work of the library advisory committee composed of students, teachers, and staff, our library was able to secure funding to move from four old computers to twenty-seven new machines. Through regular instruction, as well as an after-school technology club, technology skill levels have greatly improved. The lab has supported curriculum goals by incorporating the Empire State Information Fluency Continuum and has allowed students to create multimedia projects that will prepare them for 21st-century demands as specified in AASL's *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner*. The lab also has allowed students to listen to audiobooks and use resources like TumbleBooks, BookFlix, and Reading A-to-Z to better access literature.

## **Inclusion by Design**

Another essential way that school libraries are closing the resource gap is by servicing all types of learners in the most inclusive way possible. One of the best examples of a leader in library inclusion is Minerva Aponte, who works for a Bronx "campus school," CS 102, which serves over one thousand students in four different schools from pre-K to fifth grade, focusing primarily on special-needs students. Aponte fights for the best learning environment for every student who walks (or wheels) through her doors and finds solutions so every student can access information. Aponte applied Universal Design strategies to create a space that is accessible to everyone, especially people with disabilities. Everything

from the layout and furniture to the shelves and technology was adapted to fit all learners. For a student born with shortened limbs, she found funding to buy a specialized wireless computer mouse, and her library's flexible floor plan allowed this adaptive tool to be easily accommodated. Another student arrived with a back injury, and Aponte found funding to purchase a special chair. For students who have difficulties turning pages, Aponte purchased special board books that allow them to experience the feeling of reading. She truly shows how libraries can serve all learners.

## **Powering Opportunity**

School librarians can use their experiences and knowledge to identify programs that fill gaps and impact futures. I noticed that many of my students do not travel outside of their neighborhoods. Although the Bronx has many wonderful things to offer, students who stick to their own neighborhoods miss out on local attractions and resources. Also, the students rarely travel into Manhattan, missing out on numerous cultural and historical opportunities a short train ride away. For the library I've chosen books that match opportunities in all areas of New York City.

The library also sponsors trips to fun and educational places. Students' eyes beam with excitement when asked about some of their favorite library-sponsored trips. A seventh-grade girl starts humming a hauntingly beautiful tune from "Phantom of the Opera." She loved reading the Phantom book and then going to see the play on

Broadway. She said it gave her hope that “I can be those things, do those things.” More than fifty students who read over a million words during the school year traveled to NYC’s Book Con in Manhattan. The Phantom fan and a male classmate enthusiastically discuss traveling to Book Con, where they met famous authors and even got Jeff Kinney’s coveted autograph (see figure 3). They said that meeting authors face-to-face showed them how they could one day be authors.

When asked about their favorite library trip, two boys agree that their most memorable trip was to the 9-11 Memorial after they read *I Survived the Attacks of September 11, 2001* by Lauren Tarshi. Both students talk about the transformation they felt after seeing a devastating part of history up close. Students also examined the Holocaust as they discussed the novel *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak and toured the Museum of Jewish Heritage. Library book club trips have even given some students an insight into their future. Though one of our eighth-grade boys was reluctant to join the *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story* Book Club, he was deeply moved by the story. When we traveled to the Body World exhibit to learn about human anatomy, he said, “I never considered being a doctor, but the story and exhibit made me interested in learning more.” These life-changing opportunities are made possible by our supporters at City National Bank and by money raised from Scholastic Book Fairs.

When working in high-risk communities, the most important things to remember are setting the bar high for students, helping them dream big, and providing constant love. In a community where opportunities and resources are limited, school libraries are important tools to open doors and power potential.

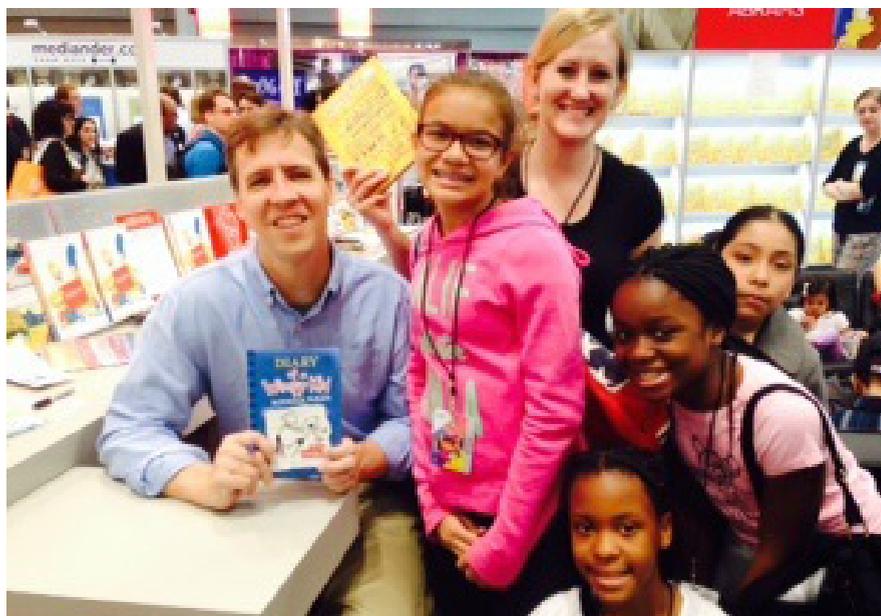


Figure 3. HLCS students with Jeff Kinney, author of the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series.



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*Bokoko African Literacy Project in the Bronx, New York. She is a member of AASL and a member of the ALA International Relations Committee—Africa Subcommittee. She was*

*a recipient of a Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program Scholarship. She wrote the article “Going for the Gold: Transformative School Library Partners” for the May/June 2014 issue of School Library Monthly. She is also an executive committee member for the Day of Knowledge Conference in the Dominican Republic.*

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