At Pine Grove Middle School we pride ourselves on providing a school library program run by an invested team of students, staff, and our entire school community. Through a multifaceted approach we are continuing to increase the level of engagement from all groups of stakeholders. Because of these active partnerships, our school library program continues to expand our influence in many directions.

THE PLAYERS ON THE ROSTER

Pine Grove Middle School has a population of eight hundred students in grades 6 through 8. As we embrace a flexible library schedule, we balance collaborative full-class team instruction in and out of the school library, smaller work groups, and patrons who choose to come during study halls, planning periods, lunch activity periods, and before and after school.

To manage all aspects of a multipurpose learning commons, leadership and shared commitment by all are needed to keep operations running effectively. We strive to create an integrated school library program that supports teaching and learning while also delivering quality service to each of our patrons. All members of our library team, including students on our iStaff (described later in the article) are expected to give every one of these patrons satisfactory service.

Some patrons need a quick fix solution, but others seek collaboration and a higher level of engagement in the program. For example, a student might...
perfectly by our iStaff team, while others best align with the school librarian or our support team.

**Success Starts with Staff**

To thrive, a successful school library program needs active participation from all members of its community. Initially, my goal was to make school staff members aware and informed about our library’s programs and services. Though this is a key step to stakeholder engagement, I have realized it is also the lowest level of engagement; simply receiving information or being aware doesn’t necessarily require any action or involvement. Yes, sharing information about subscription services, print and nonprint resources, and overall collaboration possibilities is important, but, if the library leader stops there, most likely the interaction will, too. Occasionally, a teacher or administrator will say, “I read your e-mail, and I would like to know more about…” but realistically, this type of communication, though well intended, becomes one-sided and is less likely to yield an automatic “win-win” result for both parties.

**Reaching Out—Repeatedly**

As an instructional leader, the school librarian must be the one to raise the bar, not just informing other educators about resources and services, but empowering all adults to become engaged in the school library program. For example, working with the art teachers at the beginning of the school year to select and order books that align with their needs is important. However, becoming aware of what the art curriculum will include in a marking period, and making ongoing connections about resources and including the teachers in planning for a library program is even better for them—and for the library program.

I try to do more consistent outreach with our art and other special areas, for example, to bridge the gap between what we have and what they could use. Collaborating with the art teachers to set up a series of videoconferences with local artists, museum staff members, or other experts in the field results in an even higher level of engagement for the art teachers and their students—engagement with the curriculum and with the library program. Additionally, showcasing student artwork throughout the library not only enhances our atmosphere but celebrates student talents. It’s this type of rich collaboration that will serve as a healthy foundation for sustainability of the school library program.

Many school librarians will likely experience the feeling of being “stuck” at the lowest level of engagement. This situation can be frustrating, especially when we’ve tried multiple approaches to move our engagement with colleagues to the next level. At times it may be necessary to reprioritize or revise our outreach strategy. Perhaps our timing to connect with Mr. Jones might be bad for reasons we can’t control; instead maybe Mr. Hudson is completely open to the library initiatives now. Connecting with Mr. Jones later might result in a different outcome. Maybe your initial e-mail outreach doesn’t align with Ms. Smith’s style, but an in–person exchange might be the connection that works.

Persistence pays off when finding allies and willing collaborators. One may be a teacher who has

come in to pick up a specific book (quick fix) or might want a book recommendation based on personal preferences (engaged conversation). At times a teacher needs to use the space for writing (quick fix) or wants to develop a collaborative plan that will provide a rich inquiry-learning experience (engaged conversation).

We have a type of “triage” management and use our levels of staffing (student, paraprofessional, librarian) to address all needs efficiently. Some jobs can be handled
been a tried and true example of collaborative spirit or perhaps a teacher who has decided it’s time for a change. Maybe a rookie teacher will become an ally or maybe one rich with experience who is seeking a new instructional partner. Though outreach won’t always be easy or successful on the first attempt, it is the role of the library leader to provide the necessary outreach, connections, modeling, and direction to continue to raise the quality of participation by staff members. However, creating healthy working partnerships doesn’t happen overnight. Continuing to make connections that stimulate conversations, exchanges of ideas, and planning is key. Creating these partnerships will require pushing into classrooms, attending planning meetings, offering demonstrations, modeling, offering professional development or even issuing a personal invitation. Reaching the highest level of staff members’ engagement will take some initiative and persistence, but the result will have positive impact that will result in successful advocacy by satisfied patrons and improved learning outcomes for students. Remember that word spreads quickly, so when one teacher or team or grade level experiences satisfaction with the school library program, others will share the feedback for you.

Two years ago I was working with a sixth-grade teacher on a research project. Not far into the project, which focused on fact-finding, we both agreed, “There has to be a better way.” We changed the focus for the next project; we redesigned all aspects of the project with a focus on the Big 6 problem-solving model. Not only did our emphasis switch from fact-finding to inquiry, but also from product to process. We shifted from focusing on quantity of sources to focusing on a quality selection of credible and appropriate options.

We have continued to revise, reshape, and refocus how we coteach, and each time we’ve increased student investment and learning. The spin-off benefit is that as those students went to seventh and eighth grades, more teachers sought out collaboration on the recommendation of the sixth-grade teachers. Currently, I work at varying degrees of collaboration with multiple teachers across content areas and grade levels. With each connection, however, my goal is to increase the level of engagement by these teachers so our input and benefit is mutual. Though we haven’t achieved complete consistency with our approach, we have made incredible strides toward the development of a unified approach toward the research process through collaborative instruction with the school library program. The research process students now employ is based on input from almost all ELA teachers in the building and more accurately reflects the entire school’s culture instead of just my view from a librarian’s perspective. Our planning now has greater impact for more stakeholders.

Ideally, collaborative teaching is the norm in a school library program. The reality is, however, that healthy partnerships need to start somewhere, and the school librarian must stay in hot pursuit of these invaluable connections, even when they don’t come easily. Each collaborative connection may build at a different pace. If the librarian surfaces in a project only to teach about databases or citations, the teaching process becomes fragmented, and the
Simply informing colleagues of our events is GREAT, but raising the bar by getting them to be part of the events is more powerful.

Many of our programs and events have become annual traditions and make an impact in a variety of ways. Our SOUP-er Bowl Buffett, for example, is held the Friday before Super Bowl weekend. Thanks to staff members who are willing to bring in crockpots of soup and all who pay a "canned-good admission fee," staff members enjoy soup and snacks while benefiting our local food pantry. Bookapalooza is our annual literacy campaign to engage all members of our school community in the same book. This initiative is rich with opportunities for student leadership and participation as we promote literacy, community service, thematic discussions, activities, contests, and real-life tie-ins relevant to the messages in the book. Some of our programs have become such a tradition that folks are ready to participate as soon as the events get started! We know our events have more impact when students and teachers are involved in their planning and implementation.

Innovative leadership requires a librarian to pull out all the stops. Through creative problem solving and effective communication, the school librarian can break down barriers, circumvent obstacles, and establish new avenues for delivery of all aspects of the program. For example, our school library is extremely busy during the fifteen-minute slot before our school day starts. We have a diverse crowd of students and staff members who need to accomplish a range of tasks before the start of the school day. One decision to better manage this time slot was to have iStaff students deliver the technology (wireless laptop carts, mobile projectors, TVs) to classrooms so that our adult staff is available in the library to handle other service issues. Since that slight shift in time management, our morning rush is handled almost seamlessly, and I have more time to interact with students and teachers—my top priority during this time slot.

We have to look beyond the obstacles, both genuine and perceived, and create an avenue to collaboration that is mutually beneficial to all investors. If either side is getting short-changed, then it’s time for a change. Genuine obstacles that are standing in the way of student achievement need to take top priority, and the librarian and teaching partners need to pursue some alternative solutions. Sometimes stakeholders in the building view the school library’s mission differently than we do. The library is sometimes viewed as a "holding tank" for students who have been banished from class because of their behavior or their inability to participate in a range of events. Sometimes students are sent to the library for their "free time," sometimes as part of a student’s personalized incentive plan or as a "reward" for a job well

Including Faculty in Library Events

At the Pine Grove Middle School Library, we engage staff members in our programs and special events. Not only do folks know about our annual holiday sale in the school library, but they are the ones who donate the gently used and regifted items that become our sale’s inventory for students to purchase for 25 cents. Likewise, when we collect gently used books, bags, canned goods, or pennies for charity, it is the faculty that makes our events successful.

Minimizing Obstacles

Scheduling and other factors can impact the level of collaboration and service. Innovative leadership that increases the active role of each partner, however, can still raise the level of engagement.
done. Sometimes we get a class that lacks a substitute teacher.

We do our best to balance a flexible approach to customer service with maintaining an environment that aligns with student success. Sometimes we succeed and manage this range of traffic with finesse, and sometimes I have to revisit what is going on and make changes that are in the best interest of the program. Too much flexibility might compromise what we want to accomplish; too little flexibility can alienate a school community. Finding the balance can be a challenge, but to have a successful school library program, conflicts with our mission must be managed as they surface to keep our mission at the forefront.

Give Students an Opportunity to Engage

Engaging students in the school library program is nonnegotiable. If students are just passive members of the audience in a library, then we have failed to connect in a way that benefits them. We need to empower students, at all ages, to take on active roles in the school library so they can meaningfully contribute to this collective space. Having an open door policy that empowers individuals and is built on expectations for student responsibility will provide a positive framework for student choice. The more students understand their role in the program, the more successful they will be as they select books, use technology, choose their seating, manage their time, and interact with peers.

Students come to our school libraries voluntarily on their own time and involuntarily with classes; students’ goals and objectives may vary from visit to visit. We all have our “regulars” and we get to know what they like to do, want to read, and where they prefer to sit. We also have our guests who seem to be testing the waters and haven’t really established a niche yet, but have chosen the library for a myriad of reasons. We want their repeat business, and the more ways they can be involved, the more likely they are to feel connected, welcomed, and valuable.

Each and every student who enters should have opportunities for engagement. If students perceive that library staff has an “us vs. them” attitude, students are unlikely to feel a connection strong enough to make them want to invest more than minimal time or energy into the school library program. When students see themselves as “patrons,” they will expect a certain level of service. In exchange, they have chosen the school library for a specific activity, class, or task, and with their choice comes a need for active participation and responsibility. Students (and staff) who come our way have a variety of needs; it is their role to communicate effectively, demonstrate some initiative, and seek staff support as needed to complete their tasks. Passive patrons who just hang by the door or front desk, and show little or no active role in their own success will have a less satisfactory experience.

Students need to be educated and guided so they understand their role in the successful business-customer relationship. Signage, demonstrations, direct teaching, iStaff help, and online tutorials can all help patrons find books they want, print their documents, find or access online sources. Our goal is to increase initiative while providing positive support for students’ library experience. Similar to when a student heads to the Gap, students can achieve some level of success on their own based on their active role, but a sales staff is around to help as needed.

Supporting Involvement at Various Levels

All students are different; some see the library as their retreat from active involvement—a place to just be and not have to engage in a structured way. At the other extreme, some students clamor to be a part of something, to be involved, to be active in a program.

Middle school students especially are at a unique and unsettled stage of their lives. The pressure to secure a peer group, to have a niche like sports or music or arts or theater, and to feel comfortable physically and emotionally is intense. Though we know no one has it all figured out, the perception of some students that others have achieved success, but they haven’t leaves them feeling left out, alone,
and lacking worth. When schools and communities offer a range of opportunities for students to thrive, students can branch out in different directions. If those opportunities are limited, however, because of funding, transportation, demand, or scheduling, students have fewer options to pursue involvement. The more meaningful opportunities for engagement and leadership we can offer during the school day, the more we can benefit students. The library can play a key role in filling a void for students who haven’t yet found their niche. Programs like our iStaff initiative empower all students to take on a leading role. Students know when they are having a real impact and making a valuable contribution. These positive experiences can be the foundation for a boost in confidence and involvement in other areas as well.

The school library team has the unique opportunity to create an environment for active participation that challenges and supports students. A quiet student who keeps to himself might shy away from a group project, but be willing to give you a recommendation for another book in his favorite series. This willingness to share might be the foundation of similar interactions for him. Students who are likely to be leaders amongst their peers can often be invited to rally his/her own group to accomplish a task like making a banner, sorting supplies, or helping some younger students. Recently our middle school library volunteered to help automate the library in our Pre-K building. All those books have been shipped to our library. Though adult staff members are doing the cataloging, students are playing a key role in attaching spine labels, sorting books, and even designing bookends for the upcoming grand reopening of the Pre-K library. They are proud that they are contributing to this community project, and it is typical for one student to get three or four others involved on the spot to complete a job related to this project.

When students are part of the library program’s planning team, they spread the word; they recruit other students, and they become spokespersons and participants to make sure the events are successful. For example, at our annual Barnes & Noble book fair, students perform music, take photographs, and serve as hosts to this popular community event.

**Going Beyond Making Resources Available**

Just like with staff, when engaging students we must do more than post, share, or display information and resources. We need to "walk the talk" and engage in conversations with students—as many as possible. A flyer about Teen Book Festival might go unnoticed or seem intimidating to a student. A friendly conversation that provides a personal view of the information, however, might be just what's needed to capture a student's interest. A list of passwords for remote use of library resources may have been in the same place with the same message all year. However, a student might pay no attention until he or she is in the middle of a research project, and then—with a little nudge from someone on the library team—realize "This is just what I was looking for!"

If messages and information seem to go unnoticed, engage a student to help your rethink and personalize your promotion strategy. Sometimes books fly off the displays; other times we must actively bridge the gap between reader and book.

At our school library we are currently in the development stage of a Google site designed by students for students. Our goal for this project (managed by an iStaff member) is to have a collaborative virtual presence that will promote online resources like our Destiny catalog, databases, and e-edition of our local newspaper. Additionally, the site will showcase student work, special events, student-created tutorials, public-service announcements, appropriate social-media connections, and a monthly calendar of school library programs.

**Structuring Student Involvement**

Over the years, I’ve had many students who asked if they could do a job or help. The requests were sporadic; the jobs I had ready to go were often menial (push in chairs, straighten books, organize supplies), and the volunteer experience was at the low-middle level of engagement. Generally the students were helpful, and sometimes the experience was empowering for them, but too often it lacked long-term impact for the students or the library program. As I felt the need to have a “plan” to manage the students who wanted to help, we developed a program called “iStaff.” This single program has had exponential impact, evolving over the last year and continuing to expand. Students (forty-three iStaffers, with seventy-five applications pending) apply and are interviewed for shifts that they will work during their study hall, lunch, or activity times.

The main goal of the program is to empower students to use initiative and leadership to integrate their talent areas (technology, literature, public relations) into all aspects of the school library program. Students help manage the facility, offer input on collection development, deliver mobile technology, provide feedback on grant applications, and support instruction. Some iStaffers,
for example, have provided direct instruction, technical support, and classroom assistance for classes using NoodleTools for research. When a teacher and I are working with a class of twenty-five students at various levels of abilities, having three or four iStaffers work the room with us to offer help and guidance is priceless.

Since the iStaff program was formalized, we have had an increased number of students coming our way to get involved. In addition, I always seek out students who might be a good fit for the various programs in the library and/or encourage them to join our student work team. I try to find a “hook” to get learners invested and encourage others to do the same. Teachers, administrators, and parents will often hear about our events, programs, and iStaff, and give me names of students who might need an invitation or a gentle “nudge” to give it a try.

The energy of the iStaff members has a direct, positive impact in the school library. Like any volunteer group, we sometimes have our issues that require people and situations to be redirected or modified. Overall, however, we have created a program that is having an impact throughout the school and the larger community. Members of the iStaff team have become the eyes, the ears, and the voice for the library program, and their advocacy is powerful. Promotion coming from these students has a bigger punch than just my outreach.

Our iStaffers have attended New York State Library Legislative Day, participated in training with Dr. David Loertscher, served as tour guides for visiting educators from around the state, presented at a luncheon for school administrators for our region, participated in a regional video conference run by our superintendent, and are
Students who are actively engaged as leaders, as our iStaff members are, have become a presence in and out of the library through their involvement. Often iStaff students will offer to assist a classroom teacher with technology, deliveries, or any connection related to the library. Teachers will use these students as their liaisons to the school library program and rely on iStaff members to bridge that gap. For example, an iStaff student might come to the library and say, "Mrs. Smith needs eight copies of a certain book; can we order those?" In turn, the message gets sent back with this student to firm up the arrangement. Technology support and requests are often shared via iStaff students. Griffin might come down and say Mr. Brown needs a cart of laptops next Wednesday and ask to check the sign out book for him. Even indirect feedback from iStaff has incredible value. These students might share that Ms. Fields said she doesn’t like using the laptop cart because it never works right. That feedback allows us to troubleshoot and improve this teacher’s experience with our technology.

Participants directly benefit, too. Tim S., age 12, was recently interviewed by our local paper about his role on the iStaff. When reflecting on having been chosen to be a guest speaker at a luncheon for school administrators, he shared, “I really never talked in front of a big group before, and now I think I could do it again and not be nervous.” Last week, Kayla D shared her thoughts on being an iStaff coordinator with a visiting group of middle school teachers. “We don’t just help out; we’re like a family, and we work like a team.” Kayla heads to the high school currently working on an article about their iStaff experiences.
next year and is already making plans for how she will impact the school with her leadership ability. She coordinated this year’s trip to Teen Book Fest in Rochester, NY for fifty students and staff, and is already making plans to do the same next year.

Advocacy arising from the iStaff program goes beyond the school building. Parents and guardians of iStaffers are aware of their children’s roles, and visit the school library to see and hear about their children’s jobs. We are in the process now of creating an iParent group as a spin off from this successful initiative. My vision is that the iParent group, formed by the families of our current iStaff members, would provide us with another valuable level of input and feedback, and empower families to be engaged as we develop policies, coordinate events, pursue grant funding, and extend our outreach.

Supporting Student Clubs
Though iStaff is one method of engaging students, it’s not the only avenue we travel to empower leadership and involvement. Many students create clubs that meet in the school library. Presently we have an “SBN” (Stop Bullying Now) team, a Virtual Magazine Club, and a Wii club. We’ve also hosted talent shows, Star Wars clubs, game clubs, craft groups, and a variety of other groups created by students for students.

Some students have a natural talent for leadership, while others need our support as they move their groups forward. However, all students involved in clubs benefit from our validation of their interests and their interactions with peers who have similar interests.

Don’t Go It Alone
Personal touches and constant outreach to create a high level of stakeholders’ engagement have limitless potential. Providing this level of outreach, however, can take a lot of time, and you are only one person. Students, staff, and community members can be the support and advocacy team that you need. People who are actively engaged as part of the school library program will become natural advocates for the aspects of the library program for which they are most passionate. The more passionate investors a library has, the more exponential the advocacy becomes!

The current climate for school libraries is a challenging one. These times, however, provide exciting opportunities for school librarians to provide instructional leadership and engage an entire school community in the development of a collaborative and multifaceted school library program. Close the doors to partnership in the school library and the influence of the program weakens. Open the doors to the possibilities that exist when all stakeholders are actively engaged, and create a program with exponential impact.

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VALIDATION OF OUR LIBRARY TEAM’S MISSION
In our school library, it’s not unusual to hear questions and statements like:

“You know what WE should do?”

“You know what I was thinking WE could have?”

“I was wondering if you would be up for…”

“I have someone WE should hire.”

“How about WE order volumes 6–10 of this series?”

“Do you think WE could ever…”