Rethinking the Possibilities of Your Library

Creating a Library Without a Library Space

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As I write this, I am starting my seventh year as librarian at Pine Grove Middle School. You might expect that getting our school library up and running would be a routine process made easier with experience. Yet with each year, school librarians need to rethink, rettool, and reinvent to move forward and lead the way for teaching and learning.

This re-envisioning for the 2014–2015 school year is unique at Pine Grove; pieces of our school community will relocate to six different locations because of a major renovation starting in July 2014. Sixth-grade students will stay at several elementary schools for an additional year but be taught by Pine Grove teachers; our seventh-graders will move into a currently vacant facility, and our eighth-graders will enter high school a year early. At the elementary and high school levels, students will have full access to their school libraries and librarians already there. At the seventh-grade facility, there is no "official" library for students. I will advocate for my role to reflect the mission and vision of our program as we create learning commons areas across our temporarily fragmented school community.

Exciting as the prospect is, at times I feel like I could be a candidate for a reality makeover show that addresses the physical and emotional trials of a school librarian who has to sift, sort, pack, rethink, recycle, redirect, hold on, and let go! I know we aren’t the first who are going through this process, so finding a “been there, done that” network is not difficult. Many have had to transition due to natural disasters or other negative reasons, so moving as part of a strategic plan for our district is exhilarating. The learning commons of our library in the 2014–2015 school year will be a hybrid of sorts as we balance multiple brick and mortar spaces and a virtual library (Wallace and Husid 2012, 26).

Our action plan for these transitions must take into account the vision and mission of the program, physical space, virtual space, outreach, and leadership. Each of these areas and their impact on our users must be considered so that our decisions will have positive systematic impact during and after our move.

Vision of the School Library

All change requires a catalyst. Ideas for transforming can and will come from others, but the school librarian must lead the way. Though it certainly wasn’t my ideas that prompted renovation of an entire school, I am a part of the team that is contributing to all aspects of the planning and transition, especially as they relate to the library program.

In the last several years we have created several zones in our learning commons approach (Loertscher, Koechlin, and Zwaan 2011). We’ve formalized our student volunteer program, called “iStaff,” to better meet the needs of the entire school. Our virtual space is under ongoing change to make the richest possible connection to our entire community. My instructional leadership has seen major shifts to align with the Common Core State Standards, district and school initiatives, and technology integration. Where I teach and how I teach vary from day to day, class to class. Despite all these changes, however, my activities have always taken place under one roof. Now we must devise a plan to replicate the quality of our program and make sure it’s fully embedded in teaching and learning across the district.

We’ve had to start making a list of non-negotiable areas to ensure that lack of an official space doesn’t equate with lack of an official library. Though the constant queries of “What will you do?” and “Where will the library be?” during the renovation still cause some internal angst, I’m finding myself energized by the process and the opportunities that will surface before, during, and after the renovation process.

For some, thinking about an "alternative" library may be difficult. Conversations, exemplars, and brainstorming will help prompt potential solutions. For others, a flurry of "we could," or "what if," or "how about" will surface quickly and provide rich input to our roadmap.

Mission

Our mission is to continue to provide a strong school library program that teaches students to become effective and ethical users of ideas, information, and technology. Looking forward, our vision to create a student-centered program remains an integral part of the instructional culture during and after the renovation.
The mission and vision of the school library program must align with state expectations, district and school strategic plans, and fit with the community climate. What works for our program might not be the universal best plan for all school libraries. Formal and informal input into “what next” will support our creation of a plan that is representative of all of our stakeholders.

Varying perspectives must be invited, solicited, and encouraged as we develop a mission and vision that sustains an effective school library program for the years to come.

**Physical Space/Facility**

Our current school library is a large and flexible space. Despite minimal storage options, we have managed to amass a lot of “stuff” in addition to our physical library collection. My often “out of the box” plans for programming, displays, makerspaces, and learning zones have resulted in multiple shelves and closets resembling a *My Life as a Hoarder* episode. Fortunately, because much of that extended collection has come from donations and personal acquisitions, getting rid of items won’t cause an auditing nightmare.

On the other hand, our library often ends up being an “archival warehouse” of unused sets of district textbooks, equipment, AV supplies, instructional supplies, and other discarded treasures. This move will prompt the overall weeding and redistribution of our physical collections.

As a member of the leadership team managing the moving and relocation process, I must curate input and then make decisions and recommendations that reflect efficiency and the vision of our program. Similar to moving from one home to another, to ensure an effective transition, I must have a plan in place long before moving day.

Our print collection is in need of its own renovation. Our move will cement many decisions. Times have changed, and having a large print collection of materials users might need is not possible or necessary (Johns 2011, 26). Our new plan must address a more “on demand” access to quality materials. Last year we color-coded five zones of nonfiction books in a basic “genre-fication” of our collection. In addition to helping with student access, this creation of broad categories will help us relocate smaller collections off site. Print magazines, newspapers, and media will need a redesigned distribution plan that will range from a minimal change in mailing address to a more comprehensive shift to electronic access.

**Virtual Space**

Maintaining a virtual presence is a given for a school library. Making sure, however, that the virtual platform is effective and allows for self-directed interaction is critical. For example, if I can guide students to a portal of resources, but they have difficulty doing the same without my directions, we have failed to create an effective virtual platform. If a teacher wants to integrate media from a database into his instruction, but the steps to access the resources are cumbersome or unclear, the effectiveness is lost. Through effective platforms, tutorials, directions, FAQs, and online communities, a library can provide 24–7–365 support.

As we face a school year with students in six locations we will also need to be proactive as we consider ethical access to resources and address issues like IP authentication, password sharing, and budget allocations. Conversations with district librarians, vendors, our
business office, and IT department will be necessary for a smooth transition.

This year, I have started using LibGuides so that I can centralize, yet personalize, resources for both general and focused user groups. For example, all users will want access to our Destiny Quest catalog, but perhaps only the sixth-grade teachers and their students will care about our collection of resources on the Middle Ages. LibGuides, and other similar platforms, allow access to general and content-specific portals for users.

Multiple access points and log-in information that will allow for 24–7–365 self-directed access is a necessity. Promotion and marketing will be essential to connect patrons to resources, tools, updates, and digital opportunities. Exposing users to the benefits of opting in for automatic updates via RSS feeds, Remind101, and e-mail can also increase connection to resources (Harris 2012, 14).

Outreach

A strong school library program needs to be systemic. Collaboration within and beyond the walls of the facility are needed to reach a healthy level of user engagement. This outreach will take place during instruction, special events, community programs, and professional learning. When stakeholders feel their input and participation matter, their levels of investment for sharing input, contributing time, and advocating increase.

As we prepare for the move, our top priority focus in our transition plan is on instruction. We must move beyond a traditional face-to-face model and incorporate delivery through virtual channels. Because we haven’t been forced to go this route, we typically tap into the “live” version or a guided tour of virtual resources. We must diversify our instructional toolkit so teaching and learning remain the primary focus of our program but are not limited to a “live” visit. Webinars, Skype, Google hangouts, FaceTime, podcasts, blogs, wikis, Twitter, Remind101, and other digital platforms can enrich instruction regardless of physical space. The library must become embedded through collaborative planning, instruction, and assessment; a virtual platform can support those connections (Henry 2013, 23).

Another key component of our current outreach is access to the

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having engagement opportunities within our programs and devise ways to better connect to resources beyond our own space. We have several public libraries, community centers, and parks near several of our schools, so maximizing those partnerships can be advantageous for all.

**Leadership**

We have been very successful over the last several years in providing leadership through many aspects of the school library program. Our iStaff program has empowered an average of seventy-five students each year to take on a leadership role in the areas of collection development, facility management, technology integration, and public relations. One of the biggest worries about our temporary situation is “What about iStaff?” Because this initiative has had such a significant impact, we must make student empowerment during the renovation year a priority and find a way to integrate a student work program.

Our plan is to have an iStaff program at each of our six locations. This program will operate under one umbrella but allow for participation at each school. This model could allow for student managers to help oversee the entire program, brand a district-wide implementation of a recognized student leadership program, scaffold the format for different age levels, and create partnerships with other existing service leadership programs like DECA (Distributive Education Clubs of America), student council, and YDL (Youth Development and Leadership). Training and support will enrich the experience and empower these student leaders with a transferable skill set.
Support staff may find their roles will shift when a library is temporarily displaced. An assistant, for example, who spends most of her day managing drop-in traffic, will not be in the same position when a designated library space doesn’t exist. Advocating for this person’s expertise, however, to maintain electronic portals of resources, manage a focused online book request system, access digital tools, and create decentralized mobile libraries will maximize staff talents and put the focus on priority tasks for teaching and learning.

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**Plan and Sustain**

Sometimes changes are thrust upon us, and we have to adjust quickly. At other times we have ample warning that changes loom ahead in our library world, and it’s our role to take the lead in transformation. School libraries will experience changes in management, staffing, funding, schedules, support, and facility. Some changes will cause hardships that will be difficult to overcome. Others will create opportunities to rethink, retool, and reinvent. Having a plan in place that prioritizes the mission and vision of the school library will empower the librarian to guide a successful transformation.

As Pine Grove Middle School continues its transformation, I am proud to lead the way as we travel through some unknown territories en route to our destination. Surely we will face obstacles to overcome, but I’m excited about making the shifts needed for our school library program to survive and thrive during our renovation and beyond.

**Works Cited:**


**Recommended Resource:**

Loertscher, David V., Carol Koechlin, and Esther Rosenfeld. 2012. The Virtual Learning Commons: Building a Participatory School Learning Community. Salt Lake City, UT: Learning Commons.

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