Library Power: A Model for School Change

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Look out! A quiet revolution in learning and teaching has been brewing for ten years in our nation's elementary and middle schools through a school-change initiative called Library Power. The DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund has invested $40 million in nineteen communities across the country to transform school libraries into centers of learning. Approximately seven hundred schools and more than four hundred thousand children have been affected.

Although the national evaluation results will not be available until 1998, participants in Library Power have been assessing the power of the program in their local communities. These Library Power directors and school district supervisors have identified the major effects of Library Power on learning, teaching, school culture, the library, the library media specialist, and the community. The effects of a national scale are remarkably congruent from one Library Power site to another, although their relative strength varies according to local emphasis.

Effects Of Library Power

Learning

Library Power has empowered students to become independent learners. Information literacy skills are embedded in the curriculum, and students have had flexible and continuous access to the library to use those skills. Students are expected to find in-depth information about topics that interest them; they are encouraged to follow up on their own questions and to share that information with their classmates. Learning has become a process of discovery for these students.

Students have developed ownership of their learning because they are making decisions and finding information independently. As their ownership has increased, so has their motivation for learning and their sense of responsibility. Library Power directors in several sites have commented that students who have been trusted to go to the library respond with responsible behavior and higher self-esteem.

Teaching

The Library Power model is built around collaboration. Teachers are working with each other and with the library media specialist to develop and teach units that integrate content and information literacy skills. Many of these units are interdisciplinary. Teachers have learned to give up absolute control over the learning process and to help students take control of their own learning.

Culture

Schools that have successfully implemented Library Power have experienced a change in the culture of the school. The library is recognized as the instructional center of the school. A number of instructional approaches have been enhanced by Library Power, including inquiry learning, literature-based teaching, integration of skills and content, phonetics, collaboration, and various forms of assessment.

Library

Through Library Power, reading and literacy have become important focal points for the whole school. The library is now a center for both curricular and personal reading, resulting in greatly increased circulation rates. In some Library Power sites, the school library has become an educational resource for the entire community, with materials and programs available on technological literacy, careers, and parenting.

Library Media Specialist

Library Power has affected principals and teachers, but the most profound personal impact has been on library media specialists. Library media specialists have developed a new, more professional vision for librarianship. They have increased their self-esteem, leadership ability, political awareness, ability to advocate, and human-relations skills.

Communities

Communities have become involved with their school libraries in more substantive ways. Community members (particularly parents) collaborate on library programs, offer tutoring and special help to students, share their expertise, and reinforce the learning of information skills with their children. Library Power has helped create a public desire in some communities to offer children the best in learning opportunities through the library, and it has even prompted changes in public libraries.

Elements of a Model for Whole-School Change

Just as the effects of Library Power have been consistent in sites across the country, so have the elements that have helped Library Power function as a school-change initiative. These elements provide a model for whole-school instructional reform.

Focus on Integrated Vision

All of the members of the school community should agree on what they expect children to know and how children will show that they have learned successfully. Then the school has to come to consensus on strategies to help children reach these learning goals. This is the school's vision. The school should analyze and evaluate the different strategies it has used to change its teaching and learning in the past and should integrate the successful strategies into its vision.

Impetus and Environment for Change

External pressure can provide impetus for change within a school. Parents, business leaders, local education funds, grant makers, legislatures, higher education institutions, economic realities-all can offer a real-world mandate for raising student achievement.

Even with impetus, the physical and mental environments of the school have to nurture change. School size makes a difference; at least tow Library Power sites discovered that small schools are significantly easier to change. The physical environment must also be flexible. Flexible scheduling and open access to the library are fundamental to any effort to make the library a center of learning for the whole school. Attitudes in the school community form an environment that fosters change if members of the community are willing to take risks and are open to new ideas.

Collaboration

The collaboration required for school change goes much beyond "going along to get along." Members of the school community should expect to work through different points of view, to capitalize on various strengths, and to compensate for individual weaknesses. Collaboration requires full commitment from every member of the school community.

In many Library Power sites, collaboration with the community has been especially critical. Although often difficult in the early stages, this community buy-in has proven to be essential for continuation of the change process beyond the grant-funding cycle.

Leadership and Support

Leadership is particularly important for any whole-school change effort. The Library Power requirement that each school has a full-time library media specialist has been fundamental to the success of the initiative; however, the librarian is not the only source of leadership. Leadership should be allowed to emerge from the school community; the effort could be led by the librarian, principal, teachers, parents, business leaders, or a combination.

Administrative support for the work is critical, especially from the school principal. Those involved in a school change effort need ongoing professional development, the opportunity to participate in and be supported by a collaborative team, and the peer support provided by continuous networking.

New Roles

During a change process, those participating discover that they have to learn new roles Principals, teachers, library media specialists, parents, and even students have assumed new responsibilities as they have focused on raising student achievement. Principals delegate management tasks in order to assume the role of instructional leader. Library media specialists accept responsibility for improving students' content learning and information literacy skills. Parents participate in the evaluation of student work.

Resources

The effect of additional resources on facilitating change cannot be denied. In Library Power, the grant funding has allowed schools to purchase collections that match the curriculum and make independent learning possible. New or renovated library facilities invite students to discover new ideas and information on their own. Technology and electronic resources have taken a prominent place as integral components of the library program.

Time

Time is a critical element in any school-change process. Schools will evolve at different rates, depending on where they are in the process. Every school will have times of seemingly rapid change when several structures or strategies are implemented as once. At other times there may be no visible signs of change because participants are learning, adopting, and adapting the ideas. School change pivots on the modification of attitudes and that takes time.

Accountability

Inherent in any school-change effort is the necessity for evaluating results. Most Library Power sites have discovered that reflection adds an essential component of thoughtfulness to the change process. Sites have tried different evaluation methods, including surveys, written comments, portfolios, evaluation scales or rubrics, examination of collaborative units, collection of data by schools, and research conducted by nonparticipant researchers.

Once the evaluation has been completed, accountability demands that the public be engaged in an examination of lessons learned. Public engagement and dissemination of results are integral to any school-change process.

A Model for Change

If a school is committed to enhancing student achievement by changing its teaching and learning, then Library Power offers a model for the elements that lead to effective change. The dynamics of each situation will determine the sequence and relative importance of the elements, but no lasting change can be achieved without full commitment to a shared vision or learning.

Library Power has been evolving for the past ten years; this quiet evolution has become a revolution. The impact of Library Power extends beyond the nineteen communities involved, beyond the life of funding from DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. The lessons learned have the potential for guiding and inspiring school library media specialists across the country as they lead their schools to improved teaching and learning.