What School Administrators Think About Their School Library Programs

By Debra E. Kachel

In today's "do more with less" environment, educational leaders strive to find better ways to leverage existing resources and programs to improve student academic growth and mastery of essential 21st-century learning skills. School library programs provide a leverage opportunity. A federal research project being conducted in Pennsylvania is providing some insight about maximizing the instructional impact of school library programs. Many savvy school administrators already recognize that the school librarian and the library program can be the hidden "silver bullet" for boosting literacy and academic achievement. From an online survey of almost 300 Pennsylvania public school administrators, comments such as these reflected that sentiment:

Our librarians are regarded (as) an integral part of our school community. The library is in the center of the school, literally and figuratively. (Assistant high school principal)

I can't imagine teachers not having the expertise of a certified librarian to provide assistance and guidance, especially with the element of research. (Elementary school principal)

During the spring of 2012, Dr. Keith Curry Lance of RSL Research Group surveyed administrators online about their perceptions of their school library programs to learn what they valued about their programs. This research is part of a larger study of the impact of school library programs on student academic achievement and of the investments that are needed to increase student learning. Participating administrators were queried about how their school library programs and librarians are helping teachers and students meet the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards and the Standards for the 21st-Century Learner from the American Association of School Librarians (AASL). The researchers then matched these opinions with the scores of each administrator's school on the 2010-11 PSSA Reading and Writing tests. The average PSSA scores proved to be consistently higher in schools where administrators self-assessed and valued their library program as an essential component in students achieving academic standards. More detailed findings will be presented in forthcoming publications.

Eighty-five percent of the participating administrators assessed their library program as "excellent" or "good" in teaching Common Core English Language Arts Standards. The administrators ranked their library programs even higher in teaching of 21st-Century Learner skills (See Figure 1 below).

Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AASL Standards for the 21st-Century Learner</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursue personal and aesthetic growth</td>
<td>87%</td>
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In 2010, AASL prepared a cross-walk between the Common Core English Language Arts Standards and Standards for the 21st-Century Learner that demonstrates a strong alignment in both focus and content.

The Lance survey also asked school administrators to rank what roles they desired their librarians to play in their schools. The most valued roles are those of reading motivator and instructional resources manager, followed closely by the roles of teacher and co-teacher. (Visit www.paessp.org/publications.html for Figure 2 - Librarian Roles Desired by Administrators.)

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As one high school assistant principal stated, "Our librarian has tremendously helped continue technology integration and support even after Classrooms for the Future funds went away. She is seen as a lead teacher with online learning, Blackboard, Web 2.0, Research and Writing, as well as serves on the technology committee and graduation project committee. The administration and librarian have worked closely to implement, organize and manage an 'in-house' technology training program.

The researchers asked the administrators to rank six practices, regardless of whether or not these occurred in the administrator's school, as a measure of their importance. The largest percentage of administrators ranked these four practices as either "essential" or "desired":

1. Librarian is appointed to key school committees (88%).
2. Librarian and teachers design and teach units together (82%).
3. Librarian provides in-service, professional development to faculty (78%).
4. Access to the library is scheduled on the basis of instructional needs rather than a regular or required fixed schedule (74%).

Two-thirds of the administrators ranked regular meetings between librarian and principal as essential or highly desirable.

Administrators also ranked the level of desirability of specific infrastructure components for a successful school library program. Pennsylvania administrators supported findings from previous statewide school library impact studies that consistently find that in schools with full-time, certified school librarians, students score significantly higher on standardized language arts tests while fewer students score at the "below basic" level. This tendency of scores cannot be explained by socio-economic and other school and community factors. Two-thirds of the administrators ranked these four infrastructure components as essential or highly desirable (See Figure 3 below).

Interestingly, findings from phase one of this project, which closely looked at 2010-11 PSSA test scores, showed that the impact of library staff on student writing test scores is stronger than on student reading test scores. Test data from the student sub-groups assigned by the PSSA testing program show that school library programs can help in closing the achievement gap for students who are economically disadvantaged, students who are African-American and Latino and students with IEPs. These students benefit proportionally more from having a full-time school librarian than students in general. For example, the percentage of Latino students who are in a school with a well-staffed library have triple the percentage of advanced writing scores than those Latino students who do not have a well-staffed library. Consistently, students from these sub-groups in schools with full-time librarians are at least twice as likely to have advanced writing scores as students without full-time librarians.

According to Lance, the results of this study of Pennsylvania administrators are important in that the perceptions of these administrators gathered were validated by the PSSA tests scores of students in the administrators' schools. When administrators endorsed their school library program as being an essential component in raising student academic achievement, PSSA test scores of their schools were consistently higher. Lance referenced similar research he had conducted in other states and concluded:

We see over and over that the leadership and support of the building principal is a key factor in the success of the school library program, which has a huge impact on the teaching and learning culture of the school.

In this survey, Pennsylvania administrators in their overall perceptions and individual comments consistently supported Lance's statement:

Their (the librarians) willingness to collaborate with all of our instructional staff and to have an 'open door' policy at all times have helped to make our library the 'hub' of our academic wing.

(High school associate principal)

Our school librarian provides essential instruction in reading, research skills and technology. On a daily basis she works with students to not only understand, but to experience, how technology can assist them with their daily functions . . . .

(Elementary school principal)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Desired School Library Infrastructure Component as Selected by Administrators</th>
<th>Essential</th>
<th>Highly Desirable</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certified librarian in every school</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development supporting collaborative teaching of 21st Century Skills for librarian and teachers</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State-negotiated and acquired collection of electronic/digital resources (e.g., databases, e-books)</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development for pre-service librarians about teaching 21st-century skills</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development for pre-service teachers about teaching 21st-century skills in collaboration with librarians</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
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Note: Choice options were Essential, Highly Desirable, Desirable, Not Desirable and Don't Know.
The next phase of the project will analyze data from concurrent but separate online surveys of teachers and school librarians and will be completed by the end of 2012. The project, a federally funded National Leadership grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, is unique in its collaboration among three partners: the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association, the Education Law Center and HSLC, a non-profit that manages state-funded library projects including ACCESS PA and POWER Library. In addition to examining PSSA scores and surveys of educators, four focus groups representing educator associations, parents and other community and business groups were held across the state. Facilitated by Dr. Mary Kay Biagini, University of Pittsburgh, School of Information Sciences, participants shared what components of school library programs they most valued. (Project results are being posted on the web site at http://paschoollibraryproject.org.)

In some ways, the preliminary findings from this research are not new. Similar statewide school library impact studies have been conducted in 22 states over the past two decades. A compilation of this research is available in School Library Research Summarized. This project will contribute new research by identifying those school library components of infrastructure most valued by educators, parents and other decision makers, and will show the most potential for helping in student achievement. Research will help determine what investments are needed in Pennsylvania to elevate student learning to prepare students with the 21st-century career and college skills they need to compete in a global, connected society. Could your school library program be the hidden "silver bullet" in raising student achievement? This new research suggests it could be. For more information, contact dkachel69@comcast.net.

References

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school year. The center provides students the opportunity to independently run: a copy center for the district's copying needs; a shredding center for the disposal of documents; and a scanning center where all non-confidential records are being transformed into digital format. Additionally, the Career Exploration program continued to expand in both the number of students and local businesses who participated.

The 2011-2012 school year brings the start-up operation of the district's Elementary Behavioral Support program. This will enable those students who had a history of educational placements in emotional support classes the opportunity to come back to their home district. To date, out of the district's 1,450 total student population, 33 of the 35 students with special needs, or 94%, who were being educated outside of the district, did return to their home school.

"While the savings in tuition that the district has noticed has been helpful during this very difficult budget season, the motivation has only been about educating every district student in their home school," Superintendent Reh stressed. Mehalick added, "The faculty of this district has demonstrated what the spirit of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) represents. Our board of education has provided us with the support and encouragement to enact the change."

Early analysis of the data resulted in the observation that since the 2006-07 school year, students receiving special education services, spending 80 percent or more of their instructional time in a general education classroom, increased by 7 percent; students spending less than 40 percent of their instructional time in a general education classroom increased by 5.9 percent; and, of the 24 new students entering the special education system 18, or 75 percent, received special education services in a general education setting with supplementary aids and services.

Superintendent Reh has been a strong advocate of management by data. In moving forward, it is critical to look back at the work, follow the data and plan for the future. Next steps are to validate instructional programming for students with IEPs. To help solidify the quality of the instructional process, the district will survey its learning community, especially parents and students, for input on the change process.

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