Six Steps to Saving Your School Library Program

by Allison Zmuda

What measurable difference do school library programs make in student learning? Let's cut to the chase, because you are running out of time. If you don't have a robust, quantifiable answer to this question, create one.

STEP 1.

Begin with a mission statement framed in terms of student learning goals.

A mission statement should be a handful of sentences or bullets that declare what students will be able to do as a result of their learning in the library space (whether they access it physically or virtually). Newport News librarians drafted the following statement in an afternoon:

> The mission of the media center is to develop the curiosity, creativity, and knowledge base of our students so they collaboratively build learning networks to analyze works of others and create and communicate works of their own. To that end, students will become effective, ethical, and discriminating users of information and technology" (http://www.vbschools.com/compass/index.asp).

Essential Question: What do I need to know? How do I find it? What do I do with it?

Essential Question: What do I wonder about? How do I pursue it? How do I share it?

Another example is from Ross Todd (Director of CISSL, Rutgers University) who says it is important to focus on the student learning and then describe your role as an instructional facilitator.

STUDENTS' primary focus is on building capacity for critical and creative engagement—giving emphasis to thinking creatively, critically, and reflectively with information in the process of building knowledge and understanding, and producing and sharing knowledge...They are moving from "finding information" to "doing something with the found information."

It is about clarifying the purpose for your existence: to promote student learning (not to be the manager of a collection of resources).
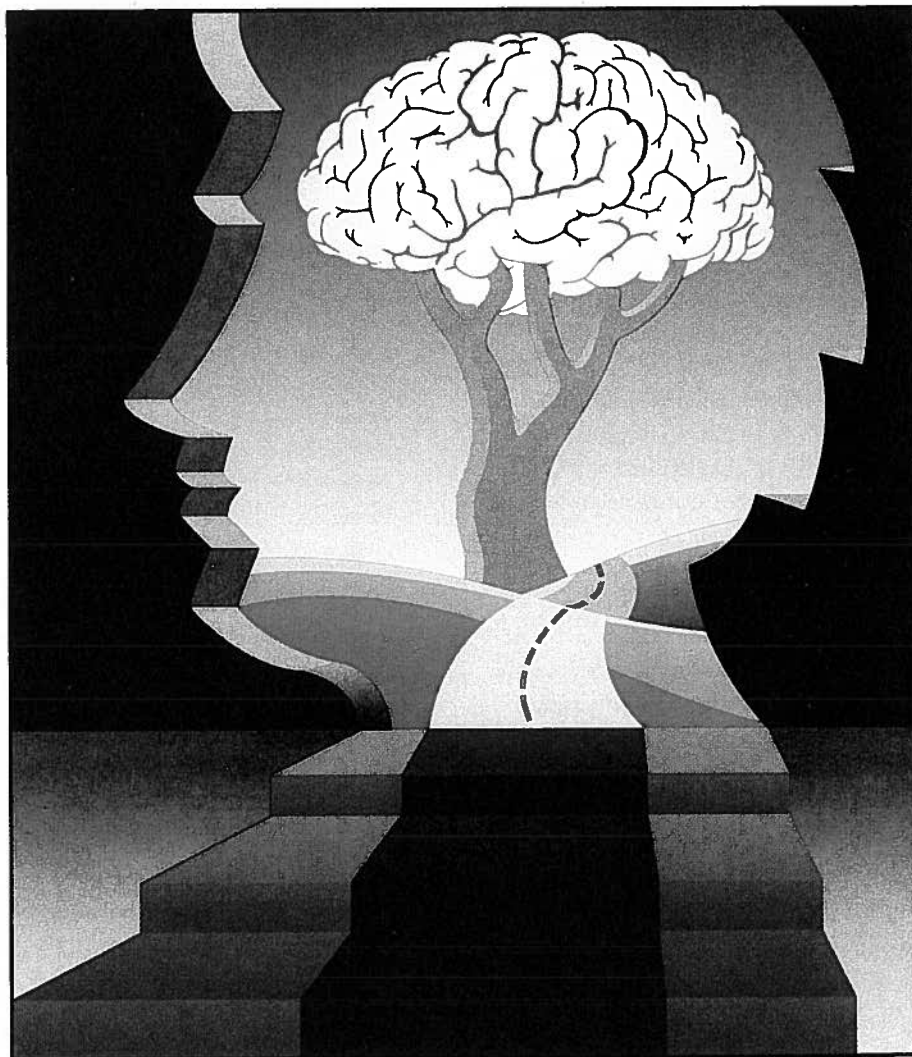
STEP 2.

Align the structures, policies, and practices to support the student learning goals.

Not only should you weed the library collection, but you also should apply that to the formal and informal rules of the space. What worked for you ten years or ten months ago (or ten years ago) does not necessarily work for you today. The following excerpt from *Breaking Free from Myths about Teaching and Learning* was drafted by the School Library System, Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES on behalf of the districts that they serve:

> **Organization of the Facility**
> - There are comfortable chairs that invite learners to stay and read.
> - Different spaces are provided for varying needs: collaborative space for dialogue and problem solving; solitary space for intense study, reflection, reading; conference space for mini-lessons, meetings, and forum; space for whole classes to work together.
> - A variety of tools are available for learners to use to facilitate their shared thinking and knowledge construction: laptop/LCD to project their thinking; flip charts/markers, post-it notes and scrap paper; access to copier machine; access to wikis, blogs, shared electronic resources; students have the ability to transport their work to and from school (portable media devices, email accounts for students, remote access to work from home); access to computers (lab, mobile laptops) (Zmuda 2010).

The notion of a Learning Commons by Loertscher, Koechlin, and Zwann has put forth a physical and virtual vision of what learning could be in a school and how students would thrive in that learning environment (2008). Focus on what makes the pursuit of inquiry and communication of ideas unique in your space.

STEP 3.

Take responsibility for student learning by coming up with a formative assessment model and encourage colleagues and supervisors to evaluate you.

Many supervisors conduct classroom walkthroughs or instructional rounds. Get on the docket. Show that you are committed to student learning by valuing what is happening in the space in real time and then trying to determine how to make it better. One such tool was developed by the School Library System in E2CC BOCES (see chart, page 47).

It is important not only to observe student learning, but also observe the work products that occur within your space.

- Design an essential questions wall (physically or virtually) that describes the most powerful questions that were explored in the library this week. For example, in a K-5 space, "What did you wonder about? How are you exploring that?"
- Collect 5-10% of the summative assessments that were done in the library and do annotated notes to model what great synthesizers, evaluators, and creators do.
- Create a companion to the electronic catalogue that is entirely governed by student reviews of materials in both podcast, video, and/or written formats.
- Design spaces that THEY own for book displays, models, or annotated bibliographies that can motivate student interest and improve the quality of student research.

Be passionate, be relentless, be transparent so that the quality of learning that happens in the space can be governed by students thinking and working; you are there to be a guide, facilitator, critical friend, and cheerleader. But you cannot think for them. You have to get out of their way when they do the work, not micromanage it. You have to be much better observers of their behavior and not rush to judgment or quick fixes.

STEP 4.

Take responsibility for the quality of tasks that inhabit your space.

If there is no connection between the student learning mission of the school library and the subject area curriculum that wants to use the library space, either collaboratively work to improve the task or just say no. YOU are the most precious resource in the library, not the collections, databases, or computers.

- Spend your time wisely by working with those teachers and students who are focused on improving learning not collecting facts for a "hit and run," low-level assessment.
- Show teachers that the work you do is a discipline that can be taught. For example, when a teacher asks you to compile Web sites related to a given topic, ask the teacher to go first and come up with an example of a Web site that satisfies the assessment or instructional intent. Not only will you have a good diagnostic assessment of the staff's current capabilities, but you also have a good opportunity to teach them based on their requests not yours.
- Create a 21st-century continuum that establishes a definition of "critical thinking" or "collaboration" and then describes how it becomes more sophisticated over time. Three powerful models I have had the pleasure to facilitate are Virginia Beach and Newport News (both in Virginia) as well as OCM BOCES in New York. Take a look at the K-12 continuum around Information Literacy developed by Virginia Beach, VA (see chart, page 48; downloaded from vbschools.com).

The next step is developing tasks along the continuum so that it is grounded in a natural progression, not cult of personality. For example, in Newport News, they classified four types of authentic assessments: create an annotated bibliography; set up a creative, novel, or innovative question to pursue; design a learning hub that is your personal collection of infor-

mation resources and technology tools for lifelong learning; and conduct research and analysis (within a text or across multiple texts) to persuade an audience.

- ▶ What would be challenging and developmentally appropriate for K-2 students to do in the production of an annotated bibliography? An example to get you thinking… Take one book you love already and write the name (last name, first name), title, and copyright date. Then find another book either by the same author and/or has a similar character that you haven't read. Again write the name, title, and copyright date. Then read. Do a Venn Diagram about what was similar and what was different in the two stories.
- ▶ How would this annotated bibliography change over time as students grow more sophisticated?

Each of these four tasks can be done at the novice, emerging, proficient, and exemplary levels and is a testament to not only information literacy but also to other 21st-century skills. Get students into the game of doing authentic work from their first days in elementary school to their graduation day.

STEP 5.

Think outside of the box and tap into the "instructional time" students are already spending after school.

According to a 2010 study from the Kaiser Foundation: "In the last five years, the time that America's 8- to 18-year-olds spend watching TV, playing video games and using a computer for entertainment has risen by 1 hour, 17 minutes a day. Young people now devote an average of 7 hours, 38 minutes to daily media use, or about 53 hours a week—more than a full-time job." Propose online course work that they can complete on their own for middle school or high school credit. Students can do it on their own, at the time of day when they best learn, and pursue the passions, curiosities, and inquiries

A Compliant, Dutiful Learner	An Inquisitive, Dynamic Learner
1. Follows oral and/or written directions with minimal prompting	A. Focuses on pursuit of the inquiry and/or deepening understanding of the content sometimes in lieu of completing task requirements and finishing in a timely manner
2. Completes explicit procedures and requirements in a timely manner	B. Moves quickly from one location (physical zone, Web site, book) to another because of the fast-paced nature of their thinking and what they want to explore next
3. Focuses on task completion not communication with others	C. Expands the boundaries of the inquiry based on what is personally interesting, relevant
4. Independently searches for answers to straightforward questions and seeks assistance for searches involving complex questions	D. Pursues own train of thought regardless of task at hand or feedback from staff
5. Seeks approval, credit, and/or high marks because of the amount of research found (not synthesis, knowledge construction)	E. Strives to fully understand an issue, topic, or problem through the exploration of the accepted/popular point of view as well as alternate/divergent points of view
6. Seeks approval, credit, and/or high marks because of the attention to visual details (not substance of message, content, connections)	F. Relies on personal preferences and/or tools to record and synthesize information
7. Elects to follow known procedures, explore familiar topics, utilize tools that they already have fluency with, and dismisses alternative points of view or approaches	G. Constructs knowledge through the creation of connections and deliberate use of evidence within and across sources
8. Asks for direct instruction from staff to complete tasks and/or navigate tools where they have already been taught multiple times	H. Seeks assistance from staff after exhausting all known strategies for finding information sources and/or investigating credibility
9. Conducts research with no expectation for personal relevance, connection, or interest	I. Shares interesting information, concepts, and sources with others without prompting or consideration for those around them
10. Dismisses information and/or points of view that don't fit with research collected so far	J. Demands immediate assistance, attention, and/or conversation based on their deep connection to their research
11. Records information regardless of credibility of source or relevance to topic or task	

Excerpted from *Breaking Free from Myths about Teaching and Learning*, 2010.

Information Literacy

Use digital technology (networks, databases, and print materials) in an ethical manner, to identify relevant sources, evaluate validity, synthesize, analyze, and interpret information.

Novice
Explore simple questions through the completion of a given procedure that requires location and collection of information through navigation of digital sources and/or text features in order to share information with others.

Emerging
Generate questions, locate and evaluate digital and other sources that provide needed information, analyze information to verify accuracy and relevance, categorize information using a given organizational structure, and report findings.

Proficient
Use an inquiry-based process that requires the development of questions, identification, and evaluation of a range of digital and other sources, analysis of information and point of view, identification of significant information and any conflicting evidence, categorization of relevant information using a self-selected organizational structure, and production and presentation of a verifiable synthesis of research findings that lays the groundwork for conclusion(s) drawn.

Advanced
Use an inquiry-based process that requires
- the generation and refinement of specific questions to focus the purpose of the research,
- evaluation of digital and other sources from a variety of social or cultural contexts based on accuracy, authority, and point of view
- resolution of conflicting evidence or clarification of reasons for differing interpretations of information and ideas
- organization of information based on the relationships among ideas and general patterns discovered
- combination of information and inferences to draw conclusions and create meaning for a given audience, purpose, and task.

while still learning the research process. Not only will they engage in independent research—independent from you, but you provide feedback based on a common rubric, so that they can revise their work. At the same time, you are giving them good practice for a post-secondary education world where they will have a blended option of taking online and brick-and-mortar courses.

STEP 6.

Keep the brain in mind and include students in your exploration.

Our understanding of how the brain learns has dramatically shifted over the past decade. There are a significant number of texts that are quite accessible to the nonscientist (*Brain Rules* by Medina and *How We Decide* by Lehrer to name two). For example, do you know that it is impossible to multi-task because we are "incapable of processing attention-rich inputs simultaneously"? Do you

know that when you have an emotionally charged event the "amygdala releases dopamine which greatly aids information retention"? Do you know that information is sorted based on hierarchy—large concepts first and details underneath that? (Medina 2008). Too often, students and staff do not know how the brain works and how to use that to everyone's advantage. In a keynote speech, Spencer Kagan described it as "swimming with the current or against the current"(Edmonton speech, November 5, 2010). When you move with the current, you are engaged, focused, attentive and, thus, you have a more joyful and powerful experience that will be much more likely to be stored in long-term memory. When you move against the current, you are going through the motions, but make little progress and experience little satisfaction.

Conclusion

Drastic times call for bold actions. Fundamentally, you cannot save your job if you do not own the learning environ-

ment. Be judged based on the work that YOU do, not by the people who wander through it.

References:

Kagan, Spencer. Keynote Speech, "Brain-Friendly Teaching Made Brain-Friendly." November 6, 2010.

Lehrer, Jonah. *How We Decide*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009.

Loertscher, David, Carol Koechlin, and Sandi Zwaan. *The New Learning Commons*. Hi Willow Research, 2008.

Medina, John. *Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home, and School*. Pear Press, 2008.

Virginia Beach Public Schools. http://www.vbschools.com/compass/index.asp (accessed December 7, 2010).

Zmuda, Allison. *Breaking Free from Myths about Teaching and Learning*. ASCD, 2010. ◄

Allison Zmuda is an education consultant who works across the United States and Canada on a range of school improvement and curriculum development projects. Email: zmuda@competentclassroom.com

Taking Action: Saving School Libraries

This chart is intended to help school librarians work with others to address the six steps outlined by Allison Zmuda in her article "Six Steps to Saving Your School Library Program" (pages 45-48). Each step will require a unique approach for every program. The questions and suggestions found in this chart will require revision for each setting. Resources should be identified that will assist in each step (e.g., current literature, expertise, research).

Six Steps: Saving Your School Library Program

1. To Do:	Review	Revise	Implement Changes	Evaluate
Mission Statement	What is the purpose? Is student learning the central focus?	What are the key words? What will students be able to do? Who will be involved?	Finalize. Share. Put it into action.	How is the mission statement used? How does it support student learning? What difference does it make?
2. To Do:	**Review**	**Revise**	**Implement Changes**	**Evaluate**
Program Alignment	What are the policies? What are the practices? What is the structure? How is student learning supported? Which policies are embraced/ resisted by stakeholders?	How can learning be better supported? What is a learning commons? How can space be used differently/better? What kind of access and tools are needed?	Identify needs (e.g., time, money, revision, re-envisioning, professional development, resources, etc.) and act. Follow a timeline.	How do new policies and practices support student learning? How is space used differently and better? What changes have resulted in addressing access and use of tools?
3. To Do:	**Review**	**Revise**	**Implement Changes**	**Evaluate**
Student Learning	What student assessments are used? What is the nature of student learning via the library? What input do you receive?	How can assessments be improved to examine student learning? How is learning meaningful? What will be done to gather input?	Identify inquisitive and dynamic learning. Determine assessments. Arrange for professional evaluation and feedback.	What are the differences in student learning? How are assessments appropriate? How has input and feedback been used?
4. To Do:	**Review**	**Revise**	**Implement Changes**	**Evaluate**
Quality Tasks in the School Library	How are tasks supportive of student learning? How do tasks support the mission statement? How do tasks align with curriculum and national visioning documents?	How can learning be improved? What assessments can be used? What is the instructional intent? What are quality tasks?	Work with teachers to improve student learning. Use defined learning tasks as a guide. Use appropriate assessments.	Is student work authentic? How are definitions being met? How are tasks meaningful? What needs improvement?
5. To Do:	**Review**	**Revise**	**Implement Changes**	**Evaluate**
Instructional Time	What is the online presence? How does the library extend services beyond the school day?	What tools are available? What have others done? What resources will help? What online learning options are possible?	Identify possibilities. Know the purpose. Identify learning benefits. Follow a timeline.	What is the impact for students? What do colleagues think? What works? What can be improved?
6. To Do:	**Review**	**Revise**	**Implement Changes**	**Evaluate**
Know the Brain	What do you know about cognition and learning? How can you learn more? What resources will help?	How can students be more engaged? How can learning be more meaningful? How can students be helped to focus?	Identify expectations. Identify strategies. Work with others. Involve students. Get feedback.	In what ways are students more engaged? How is learning more meaningful? In what ways are students more focused?