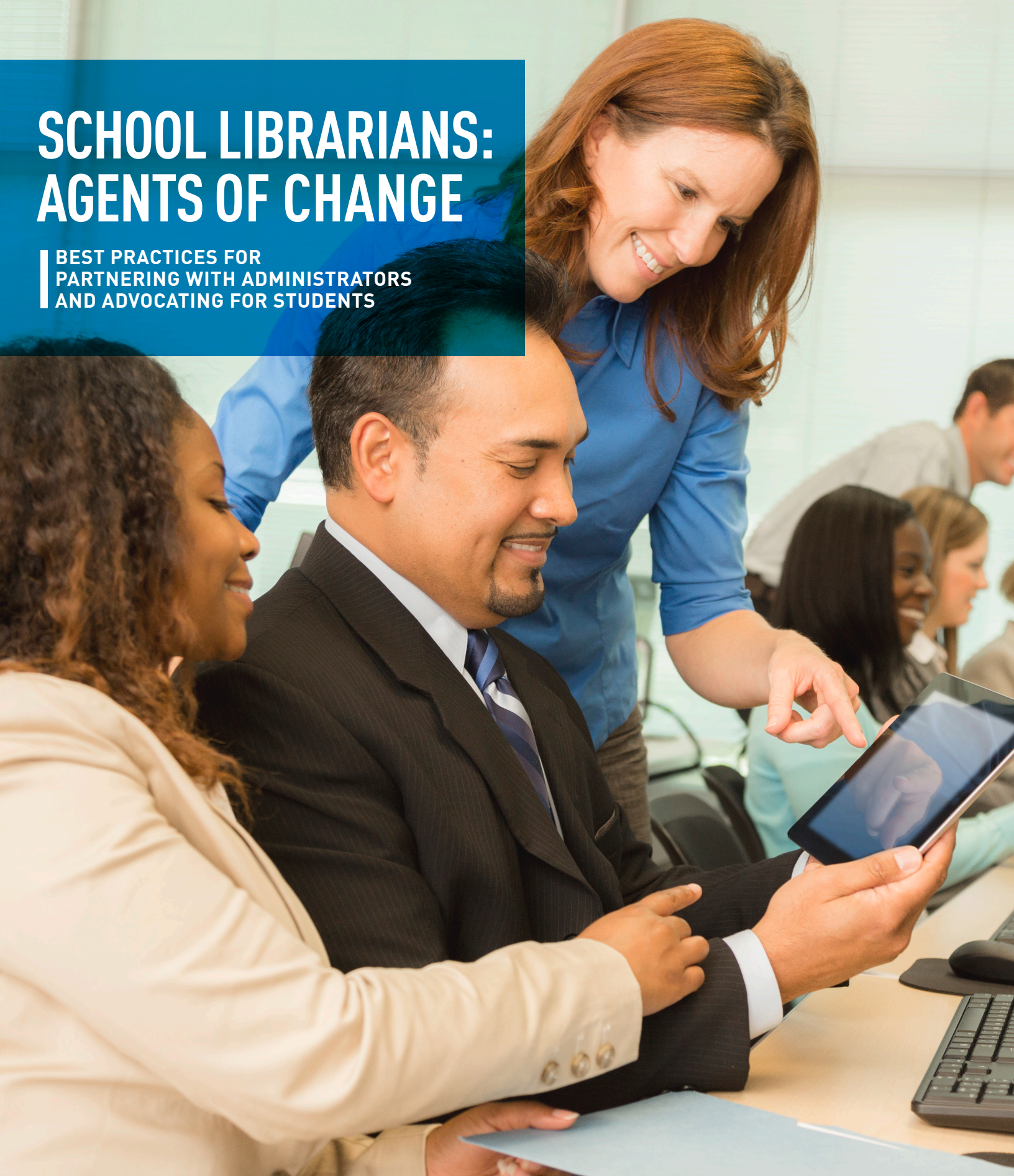# SCHOOL LIBRARIANS: AGENTS OF CHANGE

BEST PRACTICES FOR
PARTNERING WITH ADMINISTRATORS
AND ADVOCATING FOR STUDENTS

GALE
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"This is a renaissance period for school librarians."

Dr. Thomas Tucker
Superintendent
Princeton City School School District
Cincinnati, OH

LIBRARIANS ARE CHANGE AGENTS IN K-12 EDUCATION

As many school librarians and administrators will tell you, outmoded perceptions of libraries and librarians remain fixed. To reset them, librarians must be proactive by promoting their skills and spaces—then do it again and again.

"**This is a renaissance period for school librarians**," said Dr. Thomas Tucker, the superintendent of Princeton City School District in Ohio and the 2016 AASA National Superintendent of the Year, to a packed conference room at *School Library Journal*'s October 2017 Leadership Summit.

"This is your time to not be afraid. Go to your superintendents and talk about the tremendous role that you play now and you can play in the future." Dr. Tucker's call to action, which drew an enthusiastic response from the audience, was echoed by his co-panelist, Dr. Bill Chapman, the superintendent of Jarrell Independent School District in Texas. "A lot of your principals, a lot of your superintendents, don't know the skills that you may have. In their mind, they see the library of 20 years ago—come check your book out, come, leave, you're done. Show them what you can do with your staff. **You are a change agent. You're a curriculum person. You're an instruction person. You're a professional development person. Sell your value. Show your value. That's where you make a difference**."

"If you don't speak up for yourselves and your libraries, no one else will." While this might not be front page news, this is an important message for school librarians, one we have heard from both administrators and librarians themselves. "The advocacy and telling what we do never ends," says Stephanie Ham, the director of library services for Metro Nashville Public Schools in Tennessee. "It's just not something that you do and then you stop doing. You're always going to have a new administrator come along. There are always going to be new people. So being able to tell that story and what you can offer just needs to be second nature."
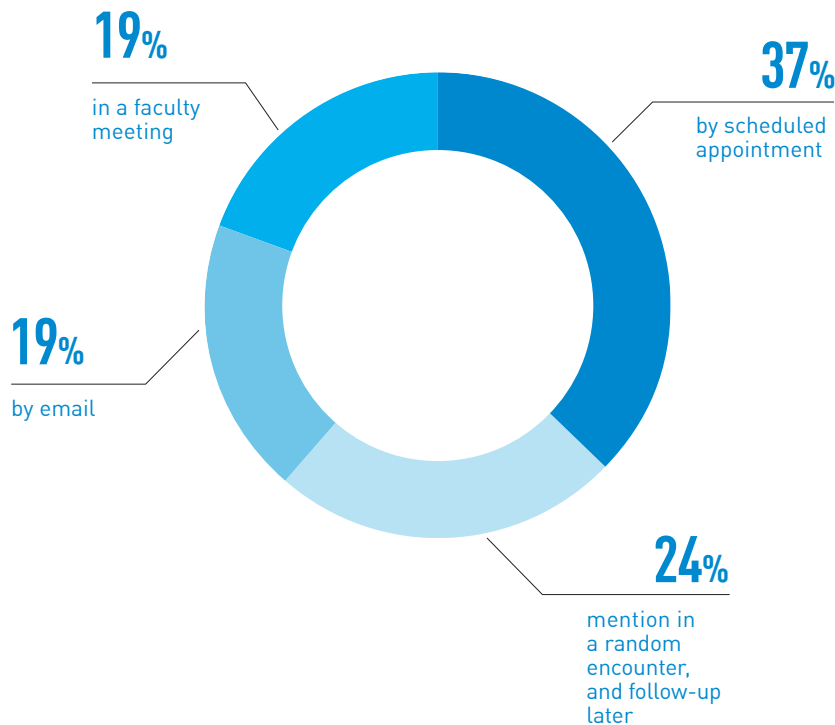
Adding another perspective was K.C. Boyd, the school library media specialist at Jefferson Middle School Academy in Washington, D.C., and a 2015 *Library Journal* Mover & Shaker. "[Advocating for your library] might mean tweeting or blogging or posting infographics every week in the teachers' lounge. It might also mean sitting through an hours-long meeting that has little to do with the library but offers an opportunity to speak to all the department heads in the district. It takes a lot of patience. It takes a lot of reeducation. It takes a lot of being present." When Boyd started her previous job as the lead librarian in Illinois's East St. Louis School District, library programs had been closed for eight years. "I recognized early on that I had to spend a considerable amount of time reeducating educators about how library programming and the presence of a certified, credentialed librarian can impact student achievement positively. And that was an uphill battle because people were still stuck in a certain mind-set and view about what we do."

Leading librarians across the country are doing just that: building relationships with administrators, changing perceptions, and sharing their stories, all in the service of students. To help you enhance similar efforts, we gathered survey responses from 355 randomly selected administrators* and interviewed a wide variety of dynamic administrators and librarians from across the country. As a result, we developed eight best practices and efforts you can start implementing today.

SURVEY TO ADMINISTRATORS ASKED:

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO APPROACH ADMINISTRATORS ABOUT POTENTIAL LIBRARY INITIATIVES?

ADMINISTRATORS ANSWERED:

19%
in a faculty meeting

19%
by email

37%
by scheduled appointment

24%
mention in a random encounter, and follow-up later

"It takes a lot of patience. It takes a lot of reeducation. It takes a lot of being present."

K.C. Boyd
Library Media Specialist
Jefferson Middle School Academy
Washington, D.C.

* *School Library Journal emailed a four-question survey to 30,000 randomly selected U.S. K-12 school administrators in early 2018. The survey closed on Wednesday, February 7 with 355 responses.*

STEP 1: EMBRACE CHAOS

"I do not want a quiet librarian. I want librarians who like controlled chaos and have 9,000 things going on," says Dr. Chapman. Judging by the reaction from the audience at the SLJ Summit, this was a welcome, and perhaps unexpected, exhortation from a top administrator. "In my middle school library, we've got a green screen in one room, we've got puzzles every-where, we've got LEGOs," he said. "Books are still important, but our kids know what's going on. They're in there before school, they're in there after school." His high school librarian serves coffee in the morning to draw students in; the elementary school library buzzes with activity. "I don't know it all," Dr. Chapman said, "but it's all focused on getting kids in there, making it a space where they want to be." That's what drives Allison Long, the school library media coordinator at Mooresville Middle School in North Carolina and one of two lead SLMCs. Her library, which she has rebranded the CAVE (for Collaborative, Active, Vital Experience), is a gathering place for students before school starts. "They just love to be in here and sit in the spaces. They don't see it as [a place where] they have to be quiet—I mean, they have to be respectful, but it's their space, and that's the way I've always tried to make it."

Mooresville Graded School District is "ten years into what we have termed a digital conversion, where we have embraced technology and the digital world in all aspects of everything we do, and that includes becoming 1:1," says Dr. Scott Smith, the assistant superintendent of elementary instruction and technology in Mooresville, North Carolina. "The focus has not been the technology, but giving every child a device really is a change agent when it comes to what goes on in the classroom and in the school." This also translates into a positive impact within the library. "Part of the challenge for us has been redefining [the librarian's role] so that these folks are no longer the keepers of the books but the inspirers of knowledge," Dr. Smith says. "And that knowledge comes in many different forms, print and digital."

This is not to say that books are no longer integral to the library. But Long has come to the realization that, in her building, "most kids want to hold a fiction book, but they're going to do their research on a laptop. So I've tried to purchase that way—to purchase better digital databases for them to do their research on and then teach teachers about those resources." Students don't always take the time to sort through search results to find the most authoritative, trustworthy content. They usually pick the first result they see and use it. Long sees the benefit of digital databases as a way for schools to provide better-quality resources without having to spend money on nonfiction textbooks. This has also allowed her to cull her nonfiction collection, which occupies roughly seven shelves but hadn't been circulating. Long weeded out the books that no longer served a purpose and stashed the others in a back room—clearing the way for more open, comfortable seating. Now a whole class can easily fit in one area.

ACTION ⊕ INSPIRE KNOWLEDGE

Appearances count. Despite similar transformations taking place in school libraries across the country, "people generally think books, wooden furniture, and that they have to be quiet," says Greg Hood, principal of James Madison High School in Vienna, Virginia. "And I think that's not what a library is today, nor should it be. It's a vibrant place for students to gather, for teachers to teach lessons, for the partnership to occur, and starting to look at the physical structure and layout of the library is a way to make changes." In the past year, his school made some investments in the library. For example, replacing old furniture with whiteboard tables and creating a variety of flexible learning spaces for both individual and group work. "There's also a maker space right at the entrance, which contributes to an inviting, stimulating environment—not just for students, but for teachers too," Hood says.

"I do not want a quiet librarian. I want librarians who like controlled chaos ..."

Dr. Bill Chapman
Superintendent
Jarrell Independent School District
Jarrell, TX

STEP 2: START SMALL, THINK BIG

Hood, like Dr. Chapman, sees the library as integral to fulfilling his school's mission "to develop creative and resilient global citizens." But, what about administrators who view the library as a relic of the print era? "First, **librarians have to own digital literacy,**" Ham says. "That is ours, and that's what we have to take, because it's going to have such a big impact on this generation." Another way librarians can chip away at calcified notions, she says, "is in the direct instruction you do in the library, really embedding the maker space." She suggests, "maybe do direct instruction for 20 minutes and then have stations and creation in the second half. The goal is to show that the library isn't a place where you would just get a lesson on the Dewey Decimal System and then check out books." The point is to give students and teachers a glimpse of the kind of learning that can take place in the library, then build on that.

ACTION ➡ REPRESENT SUCCESS

Shifting perceptions isn't going to happen overnight. Ham thinks people need to be realistic about that, especially from a manager's position. She found that school administrators don't like it if she goes in and says: "This is what your librarian does." The most effective way to advocate and show what you're worth is by the librarian doing it themselves. So what librarians can do first is make the best out of the situation that they're given." This is precisely what Carson LeMaster did in 2015, when she started her job at what is now Inglewood Environmental Sciences STEAM Magnet School in Nashville, Tennessee. She was eager to create a maker space in her library, but found it difficult to communicate the necessity for a maker space to the administration and difficult to get funding. At the time, Inglewood was in the bottom five percent for testing in the state, which had brought in an entirely new staff to try to turn the school around. The principal had her hands full, so LeMaster, who had left behind a brand-new, fully stocked maker space at her school in North Carolina, began looking for **ways to introduce STEAM activities in the library without spending any money.**

"The craziest thing that I did was start saving trash," LeMaster says. "Kids can make so much with found objects and materials. I started saving boxes, the little extra pieces of the laminating roll, toilet paper rolls, and paper towel rolls, bags, paper. I called it the 'Imagination Station.'" After the custodians threw out her first station, LeMaster wrote on the box, "This is not trash. This is imagination fuel." Once LeMaster showed the school what she could do with no funding, she was given a little money, which she used to buy—with the principal's input—a Sphero robot, a few whiteboard tables, and some rocking stools that kids can wobble around on while they work.

> "*The most effective way to advocate and show what you're worth is by the librarian doing it themselves. So what librarians can do first is make the best out of the situation that they're given.*"

Stephanie Ham
Director of Library Services
Metro Nashville Public Schools
Nashville, TN

STEP 3: WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

It's not just *what* you say, but *how* you say it. Janet Wile, the supervisor of library services for Central Unified School District in California, has learned this the hard way. "I have been using a form of messaging for years that has not been effective," she says. In Wile's district, the high school has a full-time certificated librarian and full-time library technician; the middle schools are now staffed with full-time librarians (that wasn't always the case) and techs who work six hours a day; and the elementary schools have six-hour techs, but no certificated librarians. When Wile moved into administration a few years ago, she advocated for eight-hour days for all library techs. When people asked why, she said, "Because the library should be open eight hours a day"—a statement that did not resonate with administrators. "What I failed to do," Wile says, "was make the connection for the school administrators that providing better access to our school libraries for our students improves their chances of being prepared in the future for college, career, and community. So the connections I made in my head, I had this assumption that administrators made that same connection, and they don't."

Wile, a 2017-2018 Lilead Fellow, credits the program with helping her reframe her argument and craft a message that administrators, who might not be as sold on school libraries as she is, can hear. "What I've had to learn to do, rather than just say, 'Your library should be open eight hours a day because that's the right thing to do,' is say, 'We need to improve the access for our students to have the ability to get to the resources they need. And to have a place where they can not only access those resources, but have a qualified, trained library staff member in place to help them with those resources,'" says Wile.

"

"What I failed to do was make the connection for the administrators that providing better access to our school libraries for our students improves their chances of being prepared in the future."

Janet Wile
Supervisor of Library Services
Central Unified School District
Fresno, CA

SURVEY TO
ADMINISTRATORS ASKED:

WHAT INFORMATION SHOULD LIBRARIANS INCLUDE WHEN PROPOSING A NEW INITIATIVE?

ADMINISTRATORS ANSWERED:
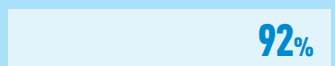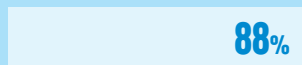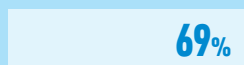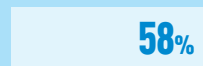
92%
explain why the initiative is needed
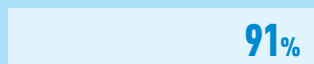
91%
provide cost estimates

88%
explain how the initiative fits into the curriculum and supports student achievement

69%
detail plans to accomplish the initiative

58%
have a strategy to measure outcomes

56%
identify other faculty that may be affected

56%
prove how similar initiatives have worked elsewhere

STEP 4: ZERO IN ON OUTCOMES

"Keeping the focus squarely on students is key," Wile and others say. When Priscille Dando, now the coordinator of library information services for Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, was a school librarian, she was saddled with outdated, excruciatingly slow computers. Anything students needed online would take forever to come up. This wasn't just an annoyance but an actual impediment to student success. Dando went to the technology specialist and the principal to request new computers, arguing that the library's machines were the most heavily used in the school and therefore needed an upgrade. The response? Perhaps predictably, "We don't have money."

ACTION ➡ CREATE STIMULATING SPACES

Rather than throwing her hands up, Dando reflected on the situation and identified ways she could help solve the problem. "One, I could do something to show good faith about the money — acknowledge that money was an issue. The other thing is, they didn't hear anything that I'd talked about. I didn't go to the furthest step, to talk about the impact on students."

She came up with a fundraising plan that would equal a few thousand dollars and had ideas for boosting awareness that would help raise more. While this alone wouldn't be enough to replace the computers, it would make a dent in the overall cost and, more important, **show a willingness to meet the administration partway.**

ACTION ➡ PRESENT SOLUTIONS

In addition to devising a fundraising strategy, Dando put clipboards next to all the computers in the library and asked the kids to record the time they logged in and the time they were able to start working; she also asked them to write what they were trying to accomplish. In a matter of days, Dando says, she "had all of this super compelling evidence that [the computers] were a huge barrier for our students. A kid would say, 'I don't have a computer at home. I can't stay after school because I have to meet my brother and sister at the bus stop. I only have as early as I can get to school and before school starts to print out my work for the day, and I can't do it half the time because the computers are so slow.'" The students' frustration was palpable—and the administration responded, replacing all of the computers on their own dime. What made the difference, Dando says, was being able to say, "I'm going to help you with your problem, and here's what it looks like in the real world and why I'm doing this. I'm not doing this because I want new technology. I'm doing this because our kids need it." Not only did she offer a solution—and how many times have we all been told "Don't bring problems, bring solutions"?—but she illustrated her argument with evidence that was concrete, personal and compelling.

> "What made the difference was being able to say, "I'm going to help you with your problem, and here's what it looks like in the real world and why I'm doing this. I'm not doing this because I want new technology. I'm doing this because our kids need it."

Priscille Dando
Coordinator of Library Information Services
Fairfax County Public Schools
Fairfax County, VA

STEP 5: SHARE YOUR SUCCESSES

Once a problem has been solved or a need addressed, don't retreat. It's crucial to follow up with administrators, not just to thank them but to let them know the effect of the action that was taken. Too often, says Dando, "people don't circle back and say, 'Because you were instrumental in helping this happen, this was the result.'" Doing so increases the likelihood that your next request will be met with a yes. "You start getting—like a confirmation bias—oh, this person's really on it," Dando says. "They're going to listen to you more, and they know that their return on their investment in you is worth it."

STEP 6: CONNECT TO SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

It's critical to communicate with administrators *before* a problem arises. "Make it so they have no choice but to pay attention to what you're doing in your libraries," urges Dr. Chapman. "Tag them in every Twitter post you put out there. Email them updates of what you're doing. Show them the things you're doing in that library that aren't being accomplished elsewhere." Linda Martin, the librarian at Sugar Hill Academy of Talent and Career in Gainesville, Georgia, drops by regularly for a quick chat with the principal. "I make a point of letting her know, 'This was a really successful lesson,' or 'This has been a great day because I was able to go into this classroom with this teacher.'"

ACTION ⊕ FOCUS ON WHY

As an example, Martin described the digital book club that she and a teacher planned and led together. Martin told the principal, "I was able to go in and co-teach with her, and we got the children in our learning management system. They're having book discussions online where they're all sitting together but doing it online, so it's getting them to practice the learning management system that the county is pressuring us to use more on the elementary level." Martin highlighted the librarian's instructional role, but she also addressed one of the principal's myriad concerns, helping ease some of the pressure the boss was under.

"

WHAT OTHER ADVICE DO YOU HAVE?

School Library Journal asked administrators to offer advice on how librarians can advocate for their library by initiating an open, positive conversation with administrators.

WHAT'S THE #1 FACTOR THAT INFLUENCES YOUR APPROVAL DECISION?
The initiative must support student achievement.

COME PREPARED

"Come with a plan, but also with an open mind, ready to dialogue and be flexible."

"Be prepared with enough information about the initiative. It's like being a salesperson for your library. You must be enmeshed in the process and you have to know its impact on students."

"Be prepared to speak about how you believe the initiative could be funded."

DON'T CATCH THEM BY SURPRISE

"Be excited about the initiative and give the principal time to think over what's being presented. If you ask for an immediate answer, it might be no."

"Don't just walk up and start talking about it in detail. Don't assume there is money. Ensure it promotes equity and access."

COORDINATE WITH FACULTY MEMBERS

"Do not forget to include affected faculty in the planning/change process. Since they are the ones whose students will use this as a resource, their opinion and ideas will help."

BE PERSISTENT

"Don't keep ideas to yourself. I want my librarian to share with me and with the school staff."

"Do not lose patience if the administrator does not see the vision immediately. Provide the vision, how it will positively impact student learning and growth, and lay it out for her."

STEP 7: REACH OUT TO TEACHERS

Martin also took the pressure off the teacher, who, she says, "was afraid of using the online classes because she didn't know how to set them up. I set up the class, made her a co-teacher, and this year she copied the class and did it on her own. She said, 'I've set this up, want to do it with me again?'" According to Martin, building this kind of relationship with teachers has taken a long time and not everyone has embraced the collaborative possibilities. "Joyce Valenza has a wonderful quote: 'Don't water the rocks.' There are people in your building who will never be willing to collaborate with you. But, I now have somebody in every grade who is willing to get in the sandbox and play," says Martin. Long, the Mooresville librarian, began knocking on teachers' doors during planning periods when her district went 1:1 back in 2008. "I started selling my space as a great place for them to come and just teach their class. It was all about getting them in here. Then I could say, 'Oh, here's a great resource for that,' or 'You should be using this, and you have me to help you with your class.'" This became a slow way to transform how teachers looked at the library's role in helping them get beyond the assumption that the librarians role is limited to encouraging students to check out books and do research. The goal is to help teachers realize that library materials and research are only part of it. **As a student and classroom resource, the library can be so much more.**

ACTION ⊕ SURFACE STUDENT REALITIES

In addition to tweeting daily about library goings-on, Long sends a weekly newsletter to the staff, spotlighting a teacher or something that happened in the library along with a literacy strategy and useful information from her own recent reading. Similarly, Martin carves out one day a month to visit all the grade levels during their planning periods so she can "hear what they're doing and say, 'OK, I can do this for you and try to get ahead of the curve.'" Kandis Lewis-Thomas, the media specialist at Chestnut Mountain Creative School of Inquiry in Flowery Branch, Georgia, has asked teachers to email her the minutes from their grade-level meetings. She then replies promptly, "'Hey, I'm working on this,' or 'I have this that you can use for that,' or 'You guys come to me and let me see what resources I have for you.'"

Whatever you do, says Nashville's LeMaster, "Support the teachers instead of weighing them down. If I'm doing something that I think is going to be a burden to teachers, I always make it optional or I shoulder the burden." If teachers need books, they can send her an email and she'll put the books in the teacher's mailbox or send one back with a student. "As a classroom teacher," Wile says, "I would have given anything to have someone come to me and say, 'Hey, Janet, here are all these great resources that I put together to support you in your lesson. And oh, guess what, I'll grade part of the papers. I would have fallen over!'"

> "*Hear what [teachers are] doing and say, 'OK, I can do this for you and try to get ahead of the curve.'*"
>
> **Kandis Lewis-Thomas**
> Media Specialist
> Chestnut Mountain Creative School of Inquiry
> Flowery Branch, GA

STEP 8: PERSEVERE

Some librarians might argue, "But, I'm already doing all of this and it's not making a difference." For those frustrated with the pace of change, Dr. Smith says, "I guess one piece of advice would be persevere and know that what you're doing is what's best for the kids. Your focus should not be what's best for the teachers or what's best for the library or librarians. It's about what's best for the kids."

NEXT STEPS

Now that you have read the best practices that school administrators and librarians have shared, what is next? First, keep students at top of mind. Be sure that every decision and action centers around what is best for them. Next, consider selecting, implementing, and testing just one recommendation mentioned in this brief—you might be pleasantly surprised by the outcome! Finally, take advocacy efforts to the next level by taking action today.

ACTION ➔ CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

Librarians are change agents.
The conversation—and the change—starts with you. **Continue the conversation at gale.com/changeagent** and:

1 **Tell us how Gale can help**. Not only do Gale education consultants understand the school library and librarian, they are more likely to have collaborated with others in the area—or nation—to bring library resources into the classroom, secure funds outside of the library, and more.

2 **Share how you are a change agent at your school.** It is important to recognize the value of the school library and librarian. Librarians have a great influence as educators and are able to evaluate the needs of the school and *all* of its students. We want to hear from you. Tell us how you are turning advocacy into action.

3 **Download your change agent award**. Now that you know best practices for partnering with administrators and advocating for students, display your award proudly as an official School Librarian: Agent of Change.

> " *"Your focus should not be what's best for the teachers or what's best for the library or librarians. It's about what's best for the kids."*
>
> **Dr. Scott Smith**
> Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Instruction and Technology
> Mooresville Graded School District
> Mooresville, NC

About Gale, a Cengage Company

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CONTRIBUTORS

The following people shared their expertise for this brief:

K.C. Boyd, School Library Media Specialist, Jefferson Academy (Washington, D.C.); Bill Chapman, Superintendent, Jarrell Independent School District (Jarrell, TX); Priscille Dando, Coordinator of Library Information Services, Fairfax County Public Schools (Virginia); Stephanie Ham, Director of Library Services, Metro Nashville Public Schools (Nashville, TN); Greg Hood, Principal, James Madison High School (Vienna, VA); Carson LeMaster, Librarian, Inglewood Environmental Sciences STEAM Magnet School (Nashville, TN); Kandis Lewis-Thomas, Media Specialist, Chestnut Mountain Creative School of Inquiry (Flowery Branch, GA); Allison Long, School Library Media Coordinator, Mooresville Middle School (Mooresville, NC); Linda Martin, Librarian, Sugar Hill Academy of Talent and Career (Gainesville, GA); Scott Smith, Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Instruction and Technology, Mooresville Graded School District (Mooresville, NC); Thomas Tucker, Superintendent, Princeton City School District (OH); Janet Wile, Supervisor of Library Services, Central Unified School District (California).