Chapter 73

Increased Engagement:
Exponential Impact on School Library

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ABSTRACT

Rich collaboration with students has a powerful impact on a school library program, its students, and the entire school community. Strategies and best practices for the development of these collaborative partnerships are shared in this chapter. Leaders in school library programs should consider the following as they transform their program: Definition of student engagement in terms of collaboration with the library; Impact of high level of engagement on library program; Impact of high level of engagement on student; Strategies for increasing student engagement; and Best Practices that have increased student engagement in the past.

INTRODUCTION

According to the American Association of School Librarians (2009), "The mission of the school library program is to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information; students are empowered to be critical thinkers, enthusiastic readers, skillful researchers, and ethical users of information." Libraries that engage patrons in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of their programs will benefit from shared ownership. Engagement can and will look differently depending on the type of libraries and will inevitably vary depending on the age and abilities of its patrons. It is the role of the librarian and the library management team to find avenues for meaningful involvement from the entire library community.

Despite differences between library arenas, there are universal approaches to creating an atmosphere that sets the tone for active involvement in all types of programs. We need to look at our library programs through the eyes of our patrons. Similar to a business owner, we need to pay attention to our customers and tailor our delivery to what they need. Sometimes these needs will be apparent and other times we need to seek feedback through focus groups, observations, surveys, and conversations about what we can do differently to increase and sustain our clientele. Library managers must give strong consideration to

the return on investment in the area of financial and human resources. Library teams must evaluate the level of time and money spent compared to the impact in all facets of the library program. Comparable to a business, there are goods and services that are the staples of the operation and their loss would negatively impact customers. Conversely, there are times when making decisions about what to eliminate or replace is just as critical. Shifting how the library does business can increase the long-term viability of the organization when those paradigms align with customer satisfaction.

First, a management team must consider the scheduling and staffing as it impacts access to services and programs. Next, libraries need to implement services and programs that are in the best interest of the entire community yet still address more individualized needs. Library staff must be proactive and responsive to customer needs in both online and face-to-face environments. Through events, campaigns, initiatives, and promotions, libraries can provide leadership and build positive and sustainable connections with the entire community. Finally, assessing the facilities, both virtual and physical, will provide feedback about how to transform these spaces to maximize its operation. In each of these areas, there exist opportunities for authentic leadership from patrons to maximize current and potential partnerships. It is up to the library management team to facilitate a high level of involvement. Stakeholders can come from within and beyond the library program. Creating meaningful opportunities for leadership from all library staff, students, friends groups, parent volunteers, teachers, university programs, and many others in the extended community will increase the level and engagement in a library.

BACKGROUND

In the April 2012 issue of Teacher Librarian, the editors (Loerschter & Marcoux, 2012) recognize "Visionary Leaders of the Learning Commons Concept." Each of these leaders has made an impact on library programs by reinventing the role of the librarian, changing the perspective of the field, and transforming the way the library program is delivered. It is the willingness of these and so many visionaries to take risks, to explore pedagogical shifts, and to examine the library through a new lens that inspires change.

Library leaders are change agents. Creating a library program that empowers its users to be actively engaged in learning, creating, leading, developing, facilitating, directing, curating, and thinking is necessary to keep it vital and support student success. With effective school library leadership, libraries can develop mutually beneficial and authentic partnerships with user communities.

WHAT IS ENGAGEMENT?

Engagement refers to an emotional involvement or commitment (Dictionary.com, 2012). In essence, libraries are looking to develop this level of connection between their program and their users. In a school setting, students may be connected with one, two, three, or more libraries during their school career. If the connection with their school library is powerful, this can positively impact on their overall perspective of libraries in their school, work, and personal communities.

Fletcher (2005) states that, "Meaningful student involvement is the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community and democracy". Libraries can and should provide meaningful opportunities for students to be actively involved in their own learning in all aspects of the program.

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