

When your job is on the line...

Strategies for Assisting Library Media Specialists Whose Positions are in Jeopardy.
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Nobody likes his or her job being the possible target of budget cuts or reorganizations. However, given the ongoing state of inadequate or reduced school funding, staffing reductions are commonplace; especially, it seems, in school library media programs.

As past-president of our state school library and technology association (the Minnesota Educational Media Organization), I helped develop these guidelines for library media specialists whose jobs might be on the line as their school districts cut budgets. May you never have to use them.

Guidelines for Library Media Specialists During Budget Reductions

If you are a library media specialist whose position may be reduced due to budget reductions or reorganizations in your school district, consider taking the following actions:

- 1. Learn the timeline for your district's budget adjustment process.**

Districts start planning for budget reductions for the next school year as early as November. (*Very* large districts may start budget planning in September!) Visit with your superintendent to see what the timeline and procedure for making budget reductions are. Don't rely on rumors – keep an open line of communication with your superintendent and building principal throughout the school year. If district budgets are the result of a collaborative decision-making process, make sure you are part of it.

Every school district is required by law to have written budget policies and procedures. (Look in your board policy book.) Find your district's official budget procedures and read specifically to find the timeline and which administrators have authority over budgets.

- 2. Let your state school library association president and any regional chair of that organization know as soon as possible when library staff cuts are considered in your district.**

State library associations are willing to help you if your position is cut. Some even have an "emergency response" plan in such cases. Besides reviewing and clarifying such plans, state associations can provide advocacy materials, testify at board meetings on your behalf, and suggest strategies you might use to reduce the likelihood of your position being cut. *Contact your association as early as possible!* If the budget adjustment recommendations in your district are already final or even just approved by the administrative staff, there is very little anyone, including a state association, can do. Also, contact the public library director in your region. They can be great allies.

- 3. Contact your teacher organization representative and check your state's laws regarding library media programs.**

Know what help your teacher organization is willing to give you. Understand your teaching contract in terms of seniority and layoff notification deadlines. Find out its role in the budget determination process.

Many states mandate a minimum level of library programming and staffing. Check to see if the proposed reductions run contrary to state law.

- 4. Distribute and discuss "library advocacy" information with your building administrators, superintendent, school board members and site teams.**

Compile and synthesize your local program statistics in a visual and easily understood format. While circulation, collection size, and usage numbers are important, also make sure to outline your information literacy curriculum and its specific skills, your literacy activities, and each of the collaborative units you team-teach within other teachers' curriculum. Discuss your role in teaching, supporting and integrating technology uses in your building. Outline specific activities and skills you teach to both students and teachers. (See Linda Corey's "Case Study" in the side bar.)

While the tools below are powerful, do not assume that just because the information gets in the hands of your school leadership that they read the material, understood it, or believed it to be applicable to your district. You need to find ways to *discuss* these materials with decision-makers, not just distribute them.

1. Familiarize yourself with the AASL Advocacy ToolKit at <<http://www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy>>.
2. Get research about effective school library media programs into the hands of administrators, including:
 - o Any statewide studies that may have been conducted.
 - o Any program or skills standards developed by your state.
 - o "School Libraries Work!" (A summary of the research done in 14 states on the impact of school library media centers on student achievement) <http://www.scholasticlibrary.com/download/slsw_04.pdf>

5. Begin developing a short statement outlining the consequences to students and staff of the potential cuts to your program.

As soon as you know the degree of budget cuts, create a statement that describes in concrete and specific terms how the loss of services, learning opportunities, technical services, library access, and support for curricular and building goals impact students and staff. *Do not* frame this in terms of how *your* job will be more difficult, but in terms of how students and staff will be affected. Emphasize your teaching role. (What skills will students not learn if your program is cut?) Again - the more concrete, the better. Distribute and discuss it with all decision-makers in the district.

6. Begin getting commitments from district teachers, parents and students willing to write and speak in opposition to the possible library staffing reductions.

Ask those who make use of your skills, your library's resources, and its services to speak on your behalf, either informally (to administrators), formally (at school board meetings), or in letters to the editor of the local newspaper. This is the most powerful advocacy you can have. Again, this action needs to happen during the budget reduction process, not after recommendations are already formalized.

7. Arrange for a state school library media association spokesperson to write and/or speak on your behalf to your superintendent, school board and community.

If you feel that a state association officer speaking on your program's behalf to your administrative team or school board would be helpful, contact the association. The expert (from more than 50 miles away) can be helpful under some circumstances, especially if the person speaking has knowledge of current research, best practices, and the state of libraries in your state.

8. Keep doing your very best despite the possible cuts. Your position may be restored if the school and community are aware that the roles, functions, and events you do may not happen the next year. Decisions and cuts are not always permanent.

Prevention

Of course, an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure. Ongoing efforts can make your library media program less likely to be the target of budget reductions. Make sure you are already doing the things below.

1. Build and maintain a library media program that teaches critical information and technology literacy skills,

- builds student literacy rates, and supports all classrooms and curricular areas.
2. Serve the needs of your teaching and administrative staff through instructional collaboration, technology training and support, and filling requests for professional materials.
 3. Establish a school library media program advisory board comprised of a wide range of stakeholders (including parents) that meets on a regular basis to discuss goals, policies, and budgets.
 4. Create long-term goals and annual objectives that are supported by the principal and teachers and are tied directly to your building's goals. Enacting long-range plans and multi-year strategies or projects makes it difficult to change horses in midstream.
 5. Build a mutually supportive relationship with your principal.
 6. Track and report to your administrator the use of your library media program, especially in terms of units of teaching, collaboration, and specific skills you, yourself, teach.
 7. Communicate regularly and formally with administrators, teachers, students, parents and the community about what happens in your library program, through newsletters and e-mail. Communicate through e-mails and notes to individuals on "I thought you'd like to know about this..." topics.
 8. Have an ongoing involvement with your parent-teacher organizations.
 9. Serve on leadership, curriculum, technology and staff development teams in your building and district.
 10. Be active in your teacher professional organization and remind officers that as a dues-paying member, you deserve as much support as the classroom teacher.
 11. Be involved in the extra-curricular life of the school, attending school plays, sporting events, award ceremonies etc. Be visible! (I think it helps to be an active member of the community belonging to a church or other religious organization, community service group, and/or volunteer groups. It's harder to fire a friend and neighbor than a stranger.)
 12. Be active in your state school library association by attending conferences and regional events, reading its publications, volunteering for positions in the organization, and attending its legislative functions.

You, as a school library media specialist, are too important to too many children to let budget reductions that affect your program just "happen." Get active and heed the words of Dylan Thomas – "Do not go gentle into that good night."

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-----SIDEBAR-----

A Case Study in Fighting Library Cuts

We have been fighting cuts locally for the past three years. Our best weapon has been the support of parent groups. Parents have written, called and appeared before Board of Education (BOE) members and at meetings in support of well-staffed library media centers. We involved no students, but parents speak eloquently on behalf of their children.

As a group, we presented each BOE member with a packet containing a brief outline of the research supporting library media programs - a collection of statements made over the years by school administrators and leaders indicating that the library media program is the central and crucial hub of the district educational program. We used a statement from our superintendent that was part of a nationwide teleconference on the librarian's role in keeping students safe on the Internet in a filter free environment. Not all administrators were happy with us but they did not retract their prior statements. We gave the Board of Education and administrators research done by the Association of American Universities and the Pew Charitable Trusts concerning what skills college freshman need to succeed. We also used the Department of Labor SCANS report on the skills needed in the

work place.

Library media specialists (LMS) attended every BOE meeting and every community forum on the budget. At times, we outnumbered all other groups. We were all ready to answer the question, "How does the Blue Valley library media program improve student learning and academic achievement?" We wrote individual letters to all BOE members and copied to district administrators. We wore buttons with hearts that read, "Save Our Unequaled Libraries" (SOUL).

However, we really began our battle before the cuts. We invite BOE members and district administrators to all events in the library media centers. They don't always attend, but they are aware we provide exceptional learning experiences for BV students. LMS hold leadership positions on building and district committees, task forces and working groups. We attempt to be very visible and support our building administrators. We do not view our administrators and BOE members as enemies. They, too, want what is best for the students. It's our responsibility to communicate to them the power of our integrated library media program. We didn't want cuts to the library media program to be the easy answer to a difficult situation.

The sad fact is that with all we do, library positions will in all probability be on the list of possible cuts for the 05-06 year. We have a new superintendent and a significant number of new administrators. We have very little time to build the necessary relationships and the understanding that a fully staffed library media program is critical to the learning experience and academic achievement of every student.

Linda Corey LCOREY@bluevalleyk12.org (Blue Valley Schools, Overland Park, Kansas)

CALLOUTS:

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