

Why do libraries need all those support people?

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*It is not enough to be busy, so are the ants. The question is: what are we busy about?*

*-Henry David Thoreau*

Consider these two scenarios:

*Each time Principal Jane walks by the media center in her school, she sees a busy media specialist. Jim is always fixing a computer with problems, checking books in or out, compiling overdue lists, or installing software in the lab. Jim often works late after school, takes home materials to read, and comes in during the summer to help lay cable or process new books. Yet faculty and parents question Jane about the need for Jim's position asking if he is really necessary to the educational process.*

*Each time Principal Bob walks by the media center in his school, he sees a busy media specialist. Laura is always busy teaching a class, tutoring a teacher, reviewing new materials, or supervising a volunteer. Laura also works late after school, takes materials home to read, and comes in during the summer to help write curriculum or plan for staff development workshops. Faculty and parents never question Bob about whether Laura is needed. No one can envision how the school can run without her.*

The question good school leaders need to ask of media specialists is not whether they are busy, but as Thoreau puts it, what they are busy about. In the examples above, the media specialists are working, but they are busy doing two quite different kinds of tasks.

Jim is busy doing technical and clerical work. Fixing paper jams, installing software, reshelving books, and maintaining circulation and cataloging records are all tasks that do not call for professional expertise. Laura's activities all revolve around teaching or planning for teaching - professional tasks. Pretty easy to make the determination which type of activity has a more direct impact on the educational program.

So, as administrators shouldn't we be figuring out ways to straighten out the Jims of the library world? Sure.

But first we should be asking why media specialists are doing clerical or technical work. To be sure, there are media specialists who don't really like to teach, who given any opportunity to do other things will gladly do so. (Unhappily there are classroom teachers like that too.) But a more common reason we have professionals performing non-professional tasks is that there is no one else to do them.

Clerical and technical tasks are usually imperative to the day-to-day operation of the media program. Computers have to run if children are to use them. Software must be installed. Books

have to be reshelfed and newspapers put on sticks. New materials need to be added to the catalog if they are to be found and students in the library need to be supervised. When these things don't happen, important things can't happen either. It's sort of a Maslow's hierarchy of library needs. You can't teach a student how to use a book or use a computer unless the book can be found or the computer is running.

Media programs and media specialists need good support personnel of two types: clerical and technical.

Media centers need clerks (or secretaries or paraprofessionals) who handle things like circulating materials, processing new materials, checking in magazines, answering the telephone, and supervising students using the media center independently. Again, if there is not a clerk to do these tasks they will still get done, but unfortunately by the professional media specialist.

Media centers also need good technical support. Technicians install, troubleshoot, and repair hardware and software. A sample job description for a building computer technician can be found at: <<http://www.isd77.k12.mn.us/district/media/compjobde.html>>. Schools too often have looked at computer maintenance as something that could be done as an extra curricular assignment by a computer literate teacher. That kind of worked when technology consisted of filmstrip projectors, an Apple II lab, and a single computer at the school secretary's desk. With the complexity of networks, the increased importance of student management systems, and the infusion of machines into classrooms and offices, the technology has become too mission-critical for such staffing. Buildings need access to a trained technician on a regular basis - preferably one housed in the school itself.

In some cases, schools are lucky enough to have volunteers who are reliable and long-term enough to do some of these tasks, but I have always liked seeing volunteers doing more important and interesting work like individual tutoring, creating special learning centers, or preparing wonderful displays. Most of us do not like to rely on folks whose presence on the job is discretionary performing non-discretionary duties.

So how do we afford these support positions? It seems to me they should get funding priority. If we don't, aren't we just paying professional salaries for non-professional work? If a building can't afford both library professional and support staff, it should consider sharing a professional among buildings who will be doing what teaching, planning, and supervising he or she can do at each building.

The better question is how can we not afford such positions when having them means allowing the

professional media specialist do teach students and staff critical information literacy and technology skills? Without improved learning as the media program's primary purpose, it really doesn't matter whether the books are shelved or the computers work or not.