

## Media Trends in the Midwest

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While I am flattered at being asked to write about what is happening around the Midwest, I have to say up front that you need to read this article knowing that:

1. my information about the things that are happening in states other than Minnesota comes primarily what I read on LM\_Net and from attending state library media conferences in Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois; and
2. I tend to be very much an optimist when it comes to school media programs and education in general. How much you read is generalization based on fact, and how much is wishful thinking is difficult for even ME to separate. Be warned, Readers!
- 3.

Media programs in the Upper Midwest overall are better than they have ever been, and the right kind of library/media specialist is more valued than ever before. There are certainly exceptions. School districts facing systemic economic distress (Rockford, IL, for example) find the axe raised above their media programs, and librarians who cling to a text-only mind set find themselves often at odds with their students, staff, administration and the rest of the profession.

While Elsie Husom, the Director of Media Technology for the Brainerd (MN) school district agrees that media programs are as strong as they have ever been, she reminded me: "We still have too many schools in (Minnesota) with media programs that are under equipped, understaffed and underfunded." She's right!

I would add that there are also still too many media specialists who are under prepared for the jobs they have to do." I believe that is true of other near by states as well. While conducting "inquiry" workshops for the state department this summer, the Minnesota media professionals serving as trainers unhappily found that too many classroom teachers, and indeed whole schools, tend to have low or different expectations of their "librarian" from what leaders in the field, the state department of education, and the media preparation colleges would like them to have. Too many teachers wouldn't even think of going to the "librarian" for help in curriculum development, unit and lesson planning, assessment planning, and/or technology support. The state department in conjunction with the state media association (MEMO) is working diligently to change/raise those expectations.

But in the job-applicant glutted field of education, well-prepared media specialists find themselves in somewhat short supply. There is even a legislative initiative in Iowa to recruit teachers willing to go into media driven by the large number of non-certified media specialists now employed in schools in that state.

Let me generalize about some trends I have been observing over the past couple years:

### **Roles of media specialists**

We are being asked to undergo a radical professional transformation in a number of ways. For many buildings and smaller districts, the media specialist is the ONLY technology person to whom the staff can turn for support. Our work with automated library systems, CD-ROM reference materials, and Internet access often gave us the earliest access to technology in our schools. Not everyone feels comfortable with this role, especially when it includes computer set-up, maintenance, trouble-shooting, and repair, and schools have been notoriously slow in providing support staff. In terms of general use, however, the media specialist is the person to come to when you want to create a HyperStudio stack, find out why your e-mail message bounced, or want to be taught how to find information on the Internet.

As education becomes more student-centered and constructivist-based, some media specialists have become instructional leaders in their buildings. In the past, who BUT the media specialist has been the guide-by-the-side, has been addressing multiple learning styles, and has been meeting individual student interests with a wide variety of materials? As all teachers are expected to teach in more individualized, child-center ways, media specialists become real role models.

This is showing up in many schools where media specialists are taking an active role in staff development activities, both formal and informal. "Formal" staff training responsibilities include teaching classes during workshops and on professional development days. "Informal" training often occurs when media specialists offer "mini-sessions" after school on a specific topic or work one-on-one with teachers as needs arise. Among districts which have had active staff development programs for technology, there is a move from offering classes in professional productivity to constructing experiences which help teachers use technology with their students in meaningful ways.

As some districts add district or building “technology specialists,” media specialists are finding themselves having to figure out their relationship with those folks. For some media specialists that person’s position can be quite threatening. Strong media specialists, however, bring their own knowledge of teaching and learning, research and information literacy, and good policy making to the table when staffing for effective technology programs in schools is being considered. Both the media specialist and the technology specialist must find ways to compliment each other’s roles for improvement of the total educational system.

## **Resources and facilities**

You won’t find many media centers with only text resources anymore. A large share of our districts have computerized library systems (often networked throughout the building), and an increasing number of districts are looking at creating union catalogs accessible via dial-in or the Internet. In Minnesota, there is a legislative initiative to provide funding to begin including school media collections in state-wide library systems. Our stand-alone SIRS, InfoTracs, NewsBanks, and Groliers are rapidly giving way to networked versions so that all school rooms can have access. On-line resources like the Electric Library and ProQuest are being tried by adventurous media specialists with fast Internet connections. The selection, acquisition and management of videotapes, audiotapes, and computer software as well as print has become the media specialist’s role.

Banks of computers or even full computer labs are becoming standard in most media centers, not just for accessing information, but for processing and communicating it as well. A student can find information, put it into a database or word processor document, and then print it out or send it by e-mail for others to read. Many media centers are becoming the natural place for computers capable of producing multi-media presentations as well. The equipment which can digitize pictures, sound or video and the software which organizes and displays it is often found and used in the school media center.

State-funded initiatives in several states, including Iowa and Minnesota, have given all districts at least a minimum level of direct Internet connectivity and Internet class licenses. Student access to the Internet has in many districts been initially through the media center and media program. Media specialists teach skills and acceptable use guidelines, students use the computers in the media centers to connect, and media specialists help see that Internet use is integrated into the curricula. The current pattern is to have Internet access first in the media center and then extend out to the classroom as the building networks grow, but main responsibility for teaching Internet use will remain with the media specialists for some time.

Often the same initiatives that are providing Internet connectivity are providing interactive television opportunities. Again the point of presence in a district is often the media center, and the media specialist facilitates the use of the resource. While many rural districts have used ITV for sharing regular classes among districts, lower telecommunication rates and equipment costs are allowing teachers and students to use interactive television on an activity or event basis.

For many districts, these new resources require remodeling existing media centers or building new ones. Modern media centers are reflecting the need for increased data and electrical access; spaces for computers, file servers, and routers; and adequate lighting and sound damping. Many districts are looking at schools as community resources and keeping media centers open in the evening and on weekends, allowing adults as well as children access to resources - especially the digital ones.

### **Curriculum and integration**

Library skill instruction is giving way to integrated information literacy curriculum. Wisconsin and Michigan both have model information literacy curricula, and other schools are working with the AASL or Big Six models. A strong technology component is a part of most of these new instructional programs. Integrating these skills into the content areas remains an on-going challenge, especially in districts which ask their media specialists to provide teacher prep time. Determining achievement benchmarks and devising student assessments are challenging many media specialists.

Finally, media programs are working to support the public demand for higher standards for all children and the search for new, more effective means of teaching and learning. Experimental programs that media specialists are trying support include the 4 period day, school-to-work transitions, constructivist/individualized learning, computerized integrated learning systems, and extended days and years. I am becoming more convinced that our professional success will not come because we run effective media programs and have met our individual goals, but that we meaningfully contribute to effective schools and help students, parents, teachers, and administrators meet THEIR goals!

As school administrators and boards, even the most reluctant ones, start getting on the "technology bandwagon," it is critical that we as media specialists let our voices be heard loud and clear. We need to remind decision makers that technology should be an empowering tool

for communication, creativity and higher level thinking which is available to all students, and that it should be effectively integrated into all subject areas, not taught as a separate subject.

Oh, and that really takes a professional in each building to see that it happens - a media specialist!