

Transparency and Trust

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Don't take it personally, but teachers and administrators often distrust librarians. Why? Is it the shifty eyes? The possibly subversive attitude toward school policies? The suspicion that after reading all the books in the library, the librarian really does know more than everyone else in the school?

No, it's not quite so dramatic. Unlike classroom teachers, school librarians have both discretionary time and discretionary funds to spend. They may not have either in huge quantities, but most librarians do have these resources. Knowing about them engenders questions from other school staff members like "Just where does all the money in the library budget go?" and "What does the librarian do all day anyway?"

Educational change guru Michael Fullan makes transparency one of his six "secrets" in *The Six Secrets of Change: What the Best Leaders Do to Help Their Organizations Survive and Thrive* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008) Here is what he says:

5. Secret Five: Transparency Rules

The first reason that transparency rules is that it's going to, whether we like it or not. Easy access to information means that the public's appetite for accountability cannot be thwarted.

The second reason it rules is that transparency is a good thing; in fact, it is essential to success. Yes, we all know that data can be misused. Public reporting of student results can lead to unfair or destructive actions. However, the alternatives—to keep information private or to refuse even to collect it—are neither acceptable nor useful.

Effective organizations embrace transparency. We know that people will cover up problems if the culture punishes them. So one thing we must do is develop cultures in which it is normal to experience problems and solve them as they occur. When data are precise, presented in a nonjudgmental way, considered by peers, and used for improvement as well as for external accountability, they serve to balance pressure and support.

Knowing that transparency is both inevitable and desirable for successful organizations makes it far less threatening.

How can school librarians develop a culture of transparency and build trust, helping insure the effectiveness and success of their programs? Let's open some windows:

- **Open budgets:** Put your budget in an online spreadsheet that is available for *anyone* to read - teachers, administrators, parents and the community. The format does not have to be complicated: list the vendor, the purchase order number, the amount of the order, and a short description of what was acquired. Invite everyone to the budget making process.
- **Open calendars:** Put *every* library calendar online and share it. This is your personal calendar, your library calendar, your collaborative teaching calendar, and your computer lab calendars. The question might change from "What does she do with her time?" to "How does she manage to get everything done?"
- **Open goals:** Your long-term goals and annual short term objectives should be available on-line with a means for your stakeholders to comment and discuss them. Again, transparency means letting others have a role in creating your vision, plans and goals as well.
- **Open statistics:** Don't wait until the end of the year to file an "annual report." Keep a running list of total numbers of items circulated, students using the library, classes you've taught, and other things that "count." Make the numbers public - right on your library home page. If the statistics raise questions by other school staff, be open about finding the answers to them. "Our fiction circulation is down this year. What might be the reason?" Open up both the face-to-face and online conversations about such data.
- **Open doors:** Take every opportunity to have parents, administrators and teachers come into your library both during school hours and outside school hours. Let people watch you work; watch you teach; watch you assist students and teachers. Think of making your library *walls* transparent.
- **Open opinions:** People ought to know where you stand. If you think both kids and adults should have access to a divergent set of opinions about issues, say so. If you see that teachers and students are not taking advantage of fair use guidelines, say so. If you believe student reading test scores will improve if they are given more opportunities to read voluntarily materials of their own choice, share the research. If you are concerned the principal has made a choice that will harm students, tell him (privately). Trust is built when a person acts in a consistent, open manner. Our stakeholders may agree or disagree with us, but they should certainly know our fundamental beliefs.

I've always thought that if somebody is not going to like me, I'd like it to be for something I've actually done, not just something I've been suspected of doing.

Make increased transparency a goal of your library program and practice.