

## Making Library Programs Count: Where's the Evidence?

*School Library Media Specialists can and do exert a positive and significant effect on academic achievement.* (Lance 2001) Current academic research applauds the work of teacher librarians and confirms what we already know in our hearts. Excellent school library facilities and programs enhance student achievement! Even though we know this to be true it has been wonderful to hear and read it over and over again at recent conferences and in school library journals. The research results have been confirming. They make us feel good even in these turbulent times in education.

Strong school library programs have never been needed more. Businesses, organizations and school districts realize that information handling is and will continue to be important. Information Literacy, the ability to access, process and communicate information is recognized as a universal life skill today. *The school library provides information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning in today's information and knowledge based society. The school library equips students with life-long learning skills and develops the imagination, enabling them to live as responsible citizens.* (UNESCO/IFLA School Library Manifesto, 2000) Yet we hear daily of schools and entire school districts in Canada that have decided they no longer need or can afford teacher-librarians. This dichotomy is not only mind-boggling but also very disturbing and wasteful.

- There is a globally recognized need for students to be information literate.
- The research identifies how school library programs improve student achievement.
- Our faculties of education offer high quality teacher training both face-to-face and on-line.
- Our teacher librarians are well skilled and highly qualified.
- We have many excellent information literacy skills continuums.
- We have access to the best professional teaching materials.
- Facilities worth great sums of money already exist in most schools.

Why does the decline continue despite our collective efforts to change the tide?

The time for tears and anger is past. It is now time for site based action. We must use the research findings to really make a difference. If we are ever going to be successful collectively we need to begin now by taking personal, individual action. Putting research findings to work for us entails more than lobbying for improved staffing, budgets, facilities and technical support for school libraries. Look closely at what the research is really telling us. The greatest positive impact on student achievement occurs in schools where the emphasis is on effective teaching and learning facilitated in the library. School library program makes a difference in schools where:

- The teacher-librarian is a curriculum leader.
- Teachers and teacher-librarians collaborate in the design of learning experiences.
- Information literacy is infused in all curriculum.
- Technologies are seen as tools to enhance learning.
- Technologies in the library are linked to classrooms and to the world of information beyond the school.

Sure improved staffing, budgets, facilities, and support, are goals we all need to lobby for. They make the work of the teacher-librarian more effective, more efficient, and lets face it, a lot more pleasant. These, however, do not make a significant difference alone. It takes a trained, creative teacher-librarian to make a real difference through purposeful collection development, careful planning, implementation, and evaluation of program in collaboration with teachers.

To make our programs count and to be accountable, we need to take a hard look at the research findings, assess where we are and decide what we need to do. We need to set some achievable goals, and develop an action plan.

We can't wait for someone else to do it for us. We have the academic proof now lets build the grassroots proof.

This article will, we hope, provide you with some starting points and a basic framework for change that reflects the implications of current research findings from the work of Lance, Loertscher, Woolls, Krashen, McQuillan and Haycock. We need to focus our energies on implementing the interpretation of these research findings so we can empower our students and teachers. We know "*what works*" (Haycock) in school libraries to make a difference in achievement. What we have to figure out is how to make it happen in our own schools. As Loertscher suggests in his book of the same title, "*Reinvent Your School Library* in

*the Age of Technology*". Take the research findings and translate them into action. Reflect on what you are doing. Rethink, rework, and redesign. Make it happen, even if only on a small scale at first.

The organizer, **Charting the Preferred Future for Your Library** will help you put some of the research findings into practice. This organizer is intended to be a catalyst for teacher librarians as we begin to diagnose, assess, and plan improved library programs. In the first column, **What the Research Says**, are some of the key research findings. The implications these findings hold for school libraries and school library programs suggested in current literature are listed in the second column entitled **Implications for Program**. The **Focus for Action** column lists some ideas for your school based implementation. These suggestions are by no means exhaustive. You will want to add many more for yourself. The last column, **Evidence of Success** will, we hope, help you to think about ways you can collect tangible data that demonstrates improved teaching and learning experiences in your school. When gathering evidence, collect both quantitative and qualitative data.

If we are going to make sure that libraries count, each of us must be accountable for improving our facility and program. The research suggests that at each school library site we must:

- Teach information literacy skills infused in classroom curriculum.
- Build a rich inclusive library collection.
- Enhance technology and expand links to classrooms and beyond the school walls.
- Collaborate with teachers to design, teach and evaluate learning activities.
- Teach Information Literacy strategies to staff and help them make connections to content subjects.
- Provide leadership in the integration of information literacy and technology in all curriculum areas.
- Report, advertise and celebrate our successes.
- Reflect on, rework and redesign tasks in a quest to create improved capacity for student achievement.
- Collect and share evidence of student and co-teacher success.

As we put a plan in place we must all start gathering the evidence of improved student achievement to share with other teacher-librarians, classroom teachers, administration, parents and of course our students. They also need to know that information literacy is empowering for them. That's what it is all about, improving student achievement. Let's put student results back at the center of our planning.

Use the chart we have developed or create a blank one of your own targeting the specific research findings that you and your school want to zero in on. Develop an action plan based on the research. Implement it and start recording all indications that you, your co-teachers and your students are experiencing success. Think about how and why they were successful. Keep in mind that assessment of student learning is not only to inform the student and parent of individual progress but also to inform us as educators so that we can improve our teaching and learning methodologies. When achievement is less than you had hoped for look for the areas of weakness and devise a way to provide students with experiences that will facilitate greater success next time.

Share the "secrets of student success" with co-teachers and administrators. Explain the different tasks and how each contributes to the ultimate success of the project. Make it work for you. Provide your school community with the "grassroots evidence" and then collectively urge all other stakeholders to work to improve staffing, technical support, budgets, and facilities. Keep in mind however, that this kind of improvement will register little impact, in terms of student achievement, without you, the teacher-librarian, to make things happen.

The teacher-librarian is the person who can really make a difference. Put the research into action and show the world that you "*can and do exert a positive and significant effect on academic achievement*".