

Take Action! Advocacy = Building Stakeholder Relationships

Article

Now that the school year has begun and students have settled down to the business of learning, it is time to evaluate and rejuvenate your advocacy plan for the year. How will you engage your stakeholders and what will be the message you craft to garner support for your library program?

Most school librarians acknowledge they need to advocate for their programs, but few can agree on what, exactly, it means to be a school library advocate. Some are afraid that advocacy might mean participating in activities that fall along the lines of political lobbying and they do not have the time or legislative inclination for such activity. Others assume advocacy must be public relations for their program and they launch into a detailed account of the various activities they will complete to demonstrate they run an engaging program. While advocacy can include a bit of both political activism and public relations, advocacy is best described as building stakeholder relationships. Advocacy is achieved when school librarians focus on building relationships with others in the school community who then become vocal advocates for the library program. It includes raising awareness and increasing knowledge of the position of the school librarian and the school library program. There are key areas to focus on in your advocacy plan that can help you immediately in building better relationships with stakeholders and gaining their support.

Be Sure Others Know What You Do

First, build better relationships by demonstrating that the position of the school librarian is of value. This is achieved when old stereotypes are laid to rest and a new perception of the school librarian is created. Forming collaborative partnerships with teachers and engaging in leadership roles within the school and district helps administrators and teaching peers understand the position of the school librarian within the school. Collaborative teaching partnerships that integrate library skills with curriculum content are one of the easiest ways to demonstrate your role as the school librarian in your school. The positive learning experiences that come from lessons co-planned and co-taught with classroom teachers create school library supporters. Others in the school can then articulate the benefits of having a strong school librarian who works as an instructional partner making an impact on student learning. Additionally, serving in leadership roles helps build relationships with others across the school community. Participation in leadership groups provides a platform for library issues among decision-making bodies. This ensures others are informed about issues related to school libraries.

Be Sure Others Know the Value of Your Program

Next, build better relationships by showing the value of the school library program. This can be achieved by sharing the goals of the library program and regularly communicating data that demonstrate how the school library program and library initiatives support student achievement. All stakeholders want students to be successful. Work with others to identify areas of specific need and demonstrate how the school library, with the unique expertise of a certified school librarian, supports their mission. Ensure that your goals have a measurable result that reflects the influence of the school library program. Finally, share your goals and their outcome with multiple stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, administrators, and students. By showing the library's impact on student learning, school librarians build positive relationships with key stakeholders.

Like any good relationship, gaining library supporters and advocates is something that grows over time. Advocacy efforts do not happen just once, but rather are a planned continuum of efforts designed to advance your library program. The school year is just beginning, so start creating your advocacy plan for this year. Start setting up collaborative projects with your teaching peers, identify key leadership positions that allow you to be the voice of the library, and think of the data you may share to demonstrate your impact on student learning as a school librarian. Advocacy requires sustained effort to build educated supporters. An advocacy plan based on building relationships educates others within your community about how the school librarian transforms teaching and learning.

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