

# Own Your Political Jedi Skills

What are the skills and strengths that make you a good school librarian? Maybe it's a knack for matching literature and readers, or the tech savvy that you turn into innovative instruction? Perhaps you're driven by the curiosity of young people or find energy in the dynamic atmosphere of the library space. A bevy of talents and motivations shape an effective and agile school librarian "work force," and this month, we examine professional qualities and activities pertaining to "political literacy." Now, as editors, we shape each issue of SLC by brainstorming theme ideas and possible directions for articles, and from these concepts, our sharp and insightful managing editor crafts an efficient, enticing little blurb that we editors use to seek out authors and topics.

Regarding the elements of political literacy, this issue's write-up suggests, "the good news is that the skills needed are not difficult to learn and play to librarians' natural strengths as cultivators of relationships."

As I read this, I was struck by what seemed a notion of ease in learning the foundational skills of political literacy and the idea that this capacity might be right in the school librarian's wheelhouse. I'll be honest: when I was a new school librarian, it seemed downright scary and intimidating to pick up the phone to contact a legislator, represent the library in a school board task force, or take part in a national school library advocacy committee. I would have rather booktalked novels to thirty eighth graders or sat down with my principal to go over budget planning than tackle education policy and all its inherent politics and processes. Yet, over my career, I've actually participated in those those "scary" political activities—and more—in service of advocacy, and along the way, in the development of my own political literacy. (I should add that this remains an ongoing effort!)

It's important to note that I didn't have to go it alone. Kind of like a Jedi knight, I was guided by my training and the mentorship of school library leaders who had seen good times and bad, learned valuable lessons, and accomplished great things. If political literacy is a natural strength of school librarians, or at least one that can be cultivated successfully across settings and eras, it would seem some set of skills or understandings allow a school librarian's political literacy to bloom and flourish. To try to identify what these competencies might be, I revisited the writing of some school library leaders, and three such capacities rose to the top—with a bonus fourth that underlies them all.

First, in order to build and employ political literacy, school librarians seek to understand school culture. Jodi Howard explains that learning about the school culture or "the way we do things around here" (citing Bart 2007) is critical in establishing and growing a successful school library program. An organization's culture is made of assumptions, values, and artifacts. When school librarians take interest in such evidence as the student learning displayed on the walls, the emotional support teachers extend (or don't) to one other, and the school activities that are valued, they are noticing examples of school culture that feed into what they need to know in order to serve their students and teachers, and potentially, contribute to improvements in the culture and student learning (Howard 2017).

Next, politically literate school librarians are advocacy leaders. As Deborah D. Levitov describes,

Through the leadership efforts of the school librarian, stakeholders can be drawn into not only understanding but also defining the purpose of the school library to match the local school needs, reflecting how it contributes to student learning and how the school librarian can be a partner in teaching. In this way, through their own firsthand experiences, stakeholders become advocates who speak about school libraries and the role of the school librarian, acting for and with them (2017, p. 32).

Advocacy might be the activity we associate most closely with political literacy, and much of that effort involves change: change in such things as perception, budget, schedules, and the value placed on people and programs. Appropriately, and third, school librarians must be change agents, as "change is the norm in education today" (Hughes-Hassell and Harada 2007). To participate in and attend to education policy and reform is to acknowledge that change is afoot. This is the very nature of change agency: "being self-conscious about the nature of change and the change process" (Fullan 1993, in Hughes-Hassell and Harada). The core characteristics of change agents, such as collaboration, capacity of inquiry, and interpersonal skills, are also core skills of school librarians.

And with that mention of "interpersonal skills," I've revealed the bonus skill set underlying political literacy! All three of these authorities name interpersonal or communication skills as essential to their respective dimensions of school librarianship: school culture, advocacy, and change agency. School librarians have, and continually work on, interpersonal skills like teamwork and conflict resolution. They use these skills to cultivate relationships with stakeholders. Interpersonal skills enable librarians to bridge effectively their content knowledge with the needs of people whom they serve, and to do so with care and intention. Political literacy may not sound like something that you wake up raring to go to work and practice. Yet, by being an advocacy leader, cultural observer and participant, and change agent, and by employing strength in interpersonal skills, you are being politically literate. Now, own that strength—and consider the guidance and experiences of our authors this month to lead your next steps.

## Recommended SLC Resource

[Soft Skills for School Librarians workshop.](#)

## Works Cited

Levitov, Deborah D. "The School Librarian as an Advocacy Leader." In, Coatney, Sharon and Violet H. Harada, eds. *The Many Faces of School Library Leadership*. Libraries Unlimited, 2017: 31-46.

Howard, Jody K. *The School Librarian as Curriculum Leader*. Libraries Unlimited, 2017.

Hughes-Hassell, Sandra and Violet H. Harada. "Change Agency: An Essential Role for Library Media Specialists." In, Hughes-Hassell, Sandra and Violet H. Harada, eds. *School Reform and the School Library Media Specialist*. Libraries Unlimited, 2007: 3-16.

About the Editor

**Rebecca J. Morris**, MLIS, PhD, earned her master's degree and doctorate at the University of Pittsburgh and her undergraduate degree in elementary education at Pennsylvania State University. Rebecca teaches graduate courses in school librarianship and youth library services. Rebecca has published articles in journals including *School Library Research*, *Knowledge Quest*, *School Libraries Worldwide*, *Teacher Librarian* and the *Journal of Research on Young Adults in Libraries*. She is the author of *School Libraries and Student Learning: A Guide for School Leaders* (Harvard Education Publishing Group, 2015). Rebecca is a former elementary classroom teacher and middle school librarian.

Email: [rmorris@schoollibraryconnection.com](mailto:rmorris@schoollibraryconnection.com)

Twitter: [@rebeccajm87](https://twitter.com/rebeccajm87).

COPYRIGHT 2020 ABC-CLIO, LLC

**MLA Citation**

Morris, Rebecca J. "Own Your Political Jedi Skills." *School Library Connection*, February 2020, [schoollibraryconnection.com/Home/Display/2234912](https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Home/Display/2234912).

<https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Home/Display/2234912?topicCenterId=1945913>

Entry ID: 2234912