

Full Voice. Underserved Populations: We have the Power to Imagine Better

Article

by Anita M. Cellucci, February 2020

More and more librarians and libraries are faced with the reality that communities have extreme gaps in equity of resources to meet the needs of students. Traditionally a school librarian has seen their role as one of providing resources for information literacy, reading, and research. In the past several years, as demographics and the political landscape continue to shift, librarians have needed to become well versed in effective and creative ways to provide services for students, parents, and teachers. Far too many states are lacking leadership at the state level to advocate for school library standards and resources. Far too few librarians are employed in elementary and middle schools and far too few general educators know what they are missing. Far too many students are at risk, marginalized, or part of an underserved community. Far too few librarians feel empowered to recognize the need and respond with effective strategies and programs. According to the AASL *Resource Guide for Underserved Student Populations*, Students who are underserved are often foster children, children of incarcerated parents, homeless youth, migrant worker families, and non-traditional families. As the guide describes, "many underserved youth have limited access to academic resources and are a greater risk of not graduating high school, not being functionally literate, and not becoming productive members of society" (2016). The toolkit, developed by the 2016 ALA Emerging Leaders-Team A, gives important definitions and a general understanding of the challenges facing each of the five groups, as well as further reading, lesson plans and programming and collection development strategies. In a time when many librarians are focusing on diversifying their collections, this thorough toolkit offers much to reflect on. Depending on the school district, the school librarian may or may not receive information about a student that would assist in ensuring that the student's particular needs are being met. This has long been the case for students on education plans as well.



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All of these issues present an opportunity to open conversations with clinical staff, teachers, and administrators while also educating ourselves about at-risk populations and the services that are already provided within the school as well as in the community. It is often possible to collaborate with the public library and with the department of youth and family services. These town (or city, regional, county, etc.) departments are well versed in the needs of the community and can offer training, resources, and assistance for school librarians to fill their gaps in knowledge and also offer a wide range of resources for families.

Providing safe space for students also means ensuring that we are mindful, intentional, and aware of the issues our students are facing in their day-to-day lives. If we are truly mindful of the challenges faced by our students we must focus on the real world issues that impact their lives.

There are ways we can focus on the students who are at risk, marginalized, or part of an underserved community while also ensuring that we are following the expectations of our administrators and legislators that govern the ways in which schools must provide for all students:

1. Ensure that your collection development is not only diverse in race and gender but also in socio-economic, family structure, and the challenges faced by underserved populations.
2. Educate yourself in the specific challenges faced by your community members.
3. Be mindful of judgement.
4. Check your implicit biases in relation to the challenges faced in your community.
5. Encourage conversation with other educators and your administrators.
6. Learn more about the social and emotional connection of socio-economic, family structure, and the challenges faced by underserved populations.
7. Admit when you don't understand and seek to understand.
8. Utilize the resources in your community and from AASL.
9. Notice more.
10. Imagine a better world for our students.

Resources:

AASL Toolkits: <http://www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/tools/toolkits>

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