

Inventory for the School Library: Do You Know Your Stuff?

Article

"The catalog system says the book is in, but I can't find it on the shelf anywhere." This is a common lament of students everywhere as they struggle to find books exactly where they should be in school libraries. One of the best ways a librarian can help students with this problem is through an inventory. Doing an inventory is an essential task that helps both students and librarians make sure that every resource is in the right place. Even though doing an inventory has many advantages, it is a job that many school librarians avoid or try to put off as long as possible.

An inventory is not only beneficial to patrons, but also to the library staff. A new school or veteran school librarian in a new location can easily become overwhelmed by the rows and rows of bookshelves filled with resources. Most school librarians in this situation have the same question, "How in the world am I ever going to learn this collection in order to make recommendations to patrons or decisions about new purchases?" The answer is simple: Inventory.

Inventory should be completed at least once each school year to keep an accurate record of a library collection. Contrary to what many believe, inventory does NOT need to be done at the end of the school year, but can be done at any time during the year. The best time to do inventory is during down times when your services to patrons will not be affected. These down times may be teacher workdays, before or after school, or short intervals between classes during the day. The library should never be closed to conduct inventory since resources can still be circulated during inventory. Books that are checked out will be marked as "accounted for," so there is no reason to ever stop checking out during the year.

Worth the Effort?

Although the thought of inventorying an entire collection can seem like an overwhelming task, automation has made the undertaking a relatively pain-free job. A small part of the collection or the entire collection can be inventoried, depending on current needs. Inventory allows school librarians to

- examine each resource and determine what items need to be weeded based on age, relevance, currency, and condition.
- inspect each resource to determine which books need to be repaired, cleaned, or replaced to ensure that attractive, up-to-date resources are available to everyone.
- ensure that the resources in a particular area cover a variety of formats and reading levels.
- note areas of the collection to add to with new purchases.
- correct incorrect spine labels or inaccurate records in the catalog.
- assess the age of the collection.
- provide accountability for the money that is spent on media resources each year.
- become familiar enough with the collection to recommend titles to patrons.

Inventories can help correct call numbers in the catalog and on book spines labels so that there is a uniform, accurate system. Often school librarians find they are living with a collection that a variety of people have set up. Spine labels can include multiple identifications such as F, Fic, FIC, and Fiction in the Fiction section to R, REF, and Reference in the reference section. Many books may also be incorrectly marked in the catalog system or labeled incorrectly on the shelf, making it impossible for anyone to find. Having consistent call numbers and labels will make resources easier to find and encourage more usage among patrons.

In these difficult economic times of school library budget cuts and loss of designated funds, it is more important than ever to justify where allotments are going and why. Printed reports about the number of lost and missing books or the age of a collection can be used to justify adding more resources to replace items that are lost or out dated.

Another advantage is that in the process of analyzing each row of bookshelves, school librarians can begin to collect a "must read" pile for themselves. Before inventory is finished, school librarians may discover that it is easier to make recommendations to patrons—all thanks to conducting an inventory. This is also a wonderful opportunity to pull forgotten books for special displays, thus increasing the circulation of those books.

Do You Know Your Stuff?

If you do not know your collection or can't find items, then it's time to do an inventory. Conducting an inventory of the school library is the best way to become familiar with what resources are available. Inventories can increase the efficiency of a library program by providing information about what exactly is on the shelves, thus, avoiding a wild goose chase to find a book that has been lost or stolen. By physically handling each resource in the library, misplaced resources are identified, books in need of repair or weeding are found, and the overall organization of the shelves can be assessed. As a result, the appearance of the shelves can be improved through the process. Inventory

also helps the school librarian focus on the scope of the library collection. Is the collection meeting the needs of patrons as well as aligning with the collection development policy and state curriculum standards? Once the collection is inventoried, the school librarian is in a better position to make acquisition decisions as well as recommendations to patrons.

Tips for Inventory

- The act of reaching high shelves, squatting to the low shelves, carrying around stacks of books, etc. makes the act of conducting an inventory a physically exhausting task. Before beginning, be sure to wear comfortable clothes and shoes since it requires a lot of bending, stretching, and walking. The good news is that it will provide plenty of daily exercise.
- The process of inventory involves tons of dust and hidden trash behind the books. Carrying some cleaning supplies such as towels and cleaner can help do a quick clean-up of shelves. A box of tissue will also help with the sneezing.
- The process goes faster if you can recruit people to help. If there are not two school librarians or a clerk available, then it is important to tap into available volunteer resources. Parents, community members, and others often are willing to lend a hand with shelving, mending books, dusting, etc. Students in middle school or high school may also be recruited to help. Or, elementary school librarians can contact feeder middle and high schools to see if any students need Community Service hours.
- A scanner can be connected to a laptop on a rolling cart for easier mobility. It allows for quickly scanned shelves. Another option is a hand-held device such as a Dolphin. However, a hand-held device will only store a certain number of records and, therefore, requires running back and forth to a computer to upload records.

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