

## Stepping Up. Using Research & Data to Improve Advocacy

Article

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Successful advocacy will often appeal to both the head and the heart. Research on school libraries can be a powerful tool for demonstrating the impact of your library to your stakeholders, but to be effective, it must be presented in a way that harnesses that power. There are a few easy things you can do to be more effective in the integration of data and research into your advocacy messaging.

### Use Social Math

Social math is the practice of translating statistics into a form that is more meaningful to the audience by situating the math in a way that is more likely to provoke an emotional response. This can be done by restating large numbers in terms of time, place, people, or by making comparisons with similar things. For example, instead of stating 33% of families, you might say one in three families. Or, instead of stating that your book budget is \$4,000, you might say \$7 per student. Better yet, you might translate that to its buying power. If the average cost of a book is \$21, you could restate this as 1/3 of a book per student. This type of comparison makes the data more meaningful and tangible to the audience.



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### Use Infographics and Other Visual Comparisons

Visual comparisons can be just as, or more, powerful than social math. A visual comparison takes social math a step further by translating the data into a visual format. For example, you may have survey results that demonstrate that 50% of your students spend 2 hours per day reading for pleasure. You may wish to visually represent this as a clock face with a key to represent how students spend their time.

### Tie Your Message to Shared Values

Logic alone is unlikely to win the day. However, if you can create a message that your stakeholders already feel connected to, you are that much closer to convincing them of your cause. For example, parents, administrators, and school board members want their students to be successful. Common success outcomes include high school graduation and college acceptance rates, but they can also include values like empathy, diversity, and community. For example, you may mention that research shows that makerspaces help students build teamwork skills, which are critical to workplace success. As you use data and research to craft your message, tie it to your community's shared values to gain better traction with your audience.

### Language Matters

Be careful about framing your message as an either/or argument. It's not whether we have certified school librarians or smaller class size, it's about the power of the certified school librarian. If your decision makers and stakeholders have already started the discussion this way, you'll have to work even harder to frame your message in a positive way. Avoid refuting their argument by repeating what they've said, and instead reiterate the positive in what you have to say. For example, rather than saying "our goal is not to have larger class sizes," you might say "our goal is to provide our students with a quality education by ensuring they have certified librarians." Try to avoid negative phrase, like "I/we don't intend to..." or "It is expensive, but..."

### Where Data Comes From and What Sort of Data Can You Use

Data and research can be both internal and external. To start with, read school library publications and journals for the newest research and related data. However, you will also want to use data unique to your library, school, and community. This may be data you have collected yourself (e.g., student surveys or assessments), retrieved from your library management system (e.g., circulation or weeding statistics), or gotten from your school or district office (e.g., budget figures, school enrollment, or diversity figures).

What types of information you use in your advocacy efforts depends on your unique situation, but there are some common questions data can answer such as:

- How often do teachers collaborate with the librarian?
- How does the library budget compare to other department budgets per capita?
- How diverse is the library collection compared to the student population?

No matter what data you collect, where you collect it from, or what your advocacy goal is, remember to keep your audience first and foremost in mind as you craft your message. Try to reach your audience from a logical and emotional perspective by aligning your message to shared values, and using common language, social math, and

infographics when presenting data and research.

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