

The Community's Heartbeat

Being a part of a community means so much to me because a person's sense of community brings with it a sense of belonging. As I mature as a librarian and develop a better understanding of the evolving nature of community, I find more and more of my think-time devoted to the idea of togetherness a community can provide. Dynamic and effective planning includes consideration for the community's interests, values, socioeconomic conditions, diversity, personal needs, career pathways, transportation, creative outlets, and much more. There are many factors to consider. What does community look like? How is it changing? Where does the school library fit in?

An effective library influences a community just as the community influences the library. A community's effect includes, but is not limited to, the people, the sense of place, what is valued, traditions, shared experiences, a code of ethics and morals, socioeconomic conditions, and more. I take time to deliberate over these factors. I visit the neighborhoods and businesses of my library's community. I note what remains constant and what changes. Population may be increasing or decreasing. The local economy may be floundering or flourishing. Professions may fluctuate or remain consistent for generations. In my district where twenty years ago there were fields, there are now fast food restaurants, strip malls, discount department stores, apartments, and family-run restaurants and groceries. What has changed with this newly urbanized area? My students can now walk to a store, are expected to help care for other family members or work in the family shop. They may have extended family living in the same home, live at or below the poverty line as parents or caregivers work long hours or part-time jobs for low wages, and often there is only one vehicle, if any, for a large family.

In order to be an essential part of our community, we must understand and stay abreast of community dynamics. We know how to research, accumulate data, survey and interview, and collect observational anecdotes. With advances in technology, it is easy to develop a survey and analyze the data in order to keep a finger on the pulse of your people. Local, state, and federal data is readily available: U.S. Census, Department of Education, Kids Count, and more. It was through analyzing all this information that I realized I could improve library services by hosting evening Community Think and Make workshops for families. It was a leap for me, as it was a first for the school, but the data was telling me it was worth the attempt, and once we tried, we found the events quite successful, filling a community need.

Developing a sense of community within the library, a library that is vital to the greater community, is critical to remaining relevant to that community. I find this one of the most challenging, invigorating, yet terrifying aspects of the job. Not because I don't understand how our community and sense of belonging impact a school population, but because I do understand how the community influences and affects a school library and how we must remain a constant in their lives while ever-changing.

The concept of community is one with which we struggle, because it requires attention and is so intricate and fluid. When communicating, developing programming, and selecting resources, I give considerable and considerable attention to the library's community. A school library is connected to the pulse and heartbeat of its people. Priorities change. Values adjust. Interests fluctuate. What was important five years ago is no longer our top priority. Yet we must remember that our community also anticipates traditions and consistency with excitement. It's a balancing act we embrace for the sake of those we treasure: our students, our staff, their families...our community.

About the Editor

Leslie B. Preddy, MS, has been the school librarian at Perry Meridian Middle School in Indianapolis, IN, since 1992 and has served as an adjunct professor for Indiana University, Indiana State University, and IUPUI. She has presented webinars and is a frequent speaker and consultant at local, state, national, and international education conferences and events. She has published many articles in professional journals, co-created online resources for educators, and is the author of *SSR with Intervention: A School Library Action Research Project*, *Social Readers: Promoting Reading in the 21st Century*, and *School Library Makerspaces*. Preddy is a recipient of many awards including AASL's Collaborative School Library Media Award and Perry Township Schools Teacher of the Year. She is Past President of the American Association of School Librarians and the Association of Indiana School Library Educators (AISLE). Preddy is a recent recipient of two grants for her school library makerspace from the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services, administered by the Indiana State Library.

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