



Collaborative Relationships with Principals

by JUDI MOREILLON

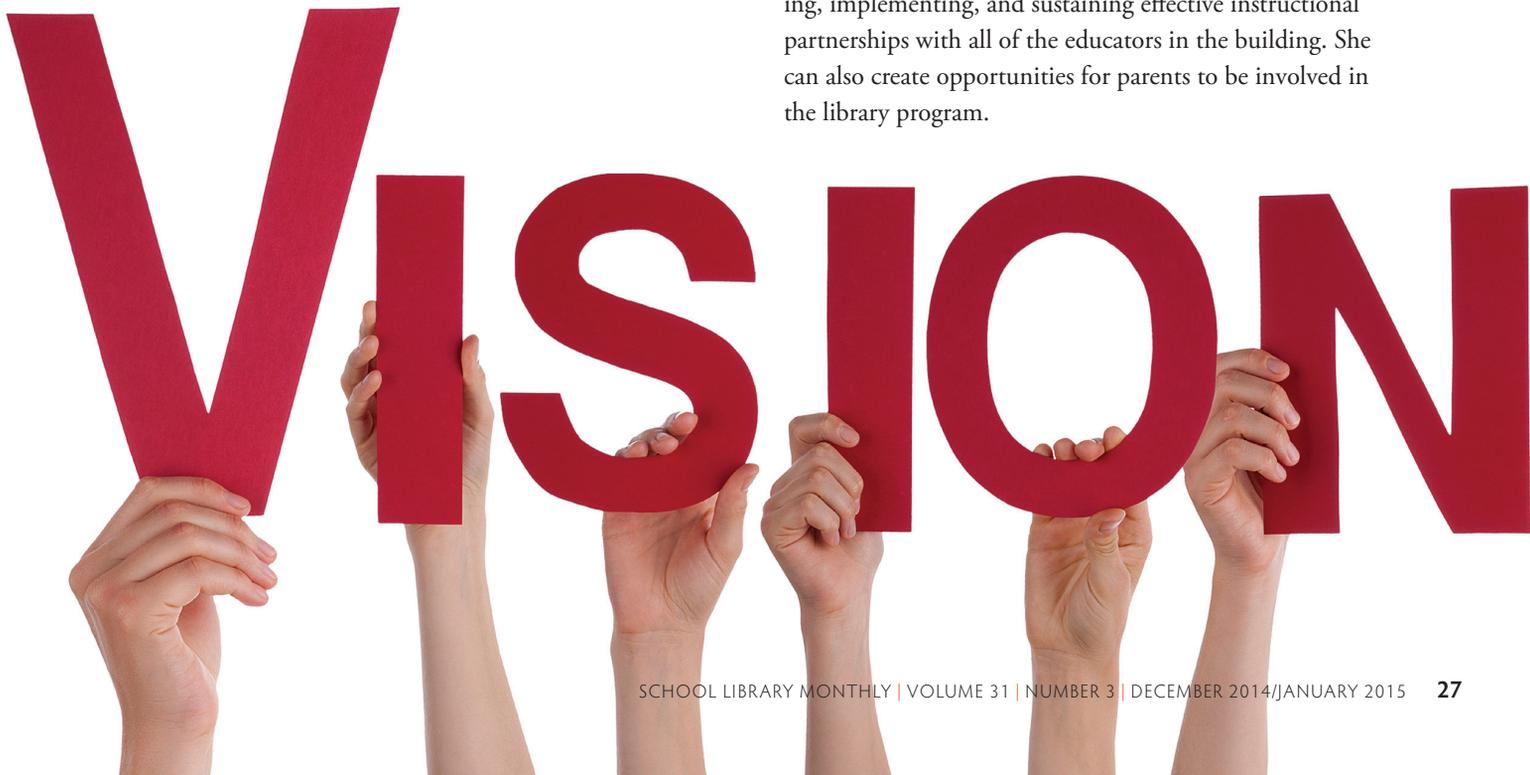
AS GARY HARTZELL says, “We all like and support those who make us successful and make us look good” (2012, 31). When we school librarians hear this advice, we should immediately think of administrators, especially principals. Whether or not the principal who currently leads the school is the one with whom you interviewed for your position, she or he should be the staunchest advocate in your learning community. How, then, can you create an opportunity for your administrator to consider you a co-leader alongside her? What kind of groundwork can you lay to ensure that your professional work is perceived as support for his success?

SCHOOL CULTURE AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Begin by observing your principal. As the head of your school, the principal is responsible for laying the foundation, then building and nurturing the school culture. Is

your school a warm and welcoming learning environment for children, youth, and adults alike? Is your school a place where people have a shared sense of commitment to the learning community and to each other? Do you and your colleagues have a high level of trust in one another and in the administrator? Hopefully, you can respond in the affirmative to all of these questions.

If these features describe your school, you have the necessary foundation for building a culture of collaboration in which the principal can achieve her goals and the school library program can thrive. In a collaborative culture, all educators are invested in each other’s success. People are prepared, willing, and even eager to work together to improve student learning outcomes and cooperatively solve challenges as they arise. Families are viewed as partners and are involved in decision-making processes in the school. A school librarian serving in this environment can help the administrator nurture a collaborative culture through initiating, implementing, and sustaining effective instructional partnerships with all of the educators in the building. She can also create opportunities for parents to be involved in the library program.



If these features do not describe your current school culture, ask your administrator what you can do together to help move your school in a collaborative direction. Strategize what efforts you can make to support the development of an effective working environment for everyone in the building. Work with your principal to make the morning announcements funnier, faculty meetings more friendly, and learning more fun for everyone. Co-develop ways to get families more involved in participating in their children's education. Let your principal know that you have her back and will support her agenda to improve school climate.

A SHARED AGENDA FOR ACADEMIC IMPROVEMENT

Beginning with the first days or weeks of school, the principal makes clear the curriculum initiatives and student learning targets for the academic year. Some of these improvement efforts may be instituted at the district or state level; others will originate in your building. Regardless, the message and support from the principal's office must be consistent. The wise librarian looks (hard, if necessary) to find the silver linings and takes all opportunities to align the library program with the school's initiatives.

It is also important for school librarians to remember that principals work within a system of accountability that extends beyond the school walls. Directives from the central office are a large consideration for building-level administrators. School librarians who attend district-sponsored professional development or in other ways prepare themselves to serve as teacher leaders at the site level can help their principals achieve these goals. These priorities must be foremost in your mind if you want to be seen as a co-leader with your principal. When the school librarian shares an agenda with the principal, she can help chart the course and support faculty in achieving school and district goals.

EDUCATING PRINCIPALS

There are many ways to tell your principal about your leadership abilities. Invite your administrator to participate in a co-planning session with you and a colleague. Make sure he evaluates you during a co-taught lesson and bases his evaluation, in part, on the student learning outcomes from that lesson. Remind the principal that you are engaged in informal, job-embedded professional development each time you co-teach with another educator. Ask to provide formal professional development opportunities for the faculty. Volunteer to chair a site committee or lead a study group. Show your principal what you can do.

When you are invited or encouraged to assume a leadership role with your principal, she can see that you share her global view of the learning community; she will also see

your commitment to achieving her vision for the school. In fact, some principals may realize that the librarian's position as an informal leader may provide additional information and understanding not readily accessible to even the most beloved principal. A wise leader will welcome the eyes, ears, heart, and hands of the school librarian who can extend the administration's reach and impact in the building and in the larger learning community as well.

PAYING IT FORWARD

At some point in your career, you may have the opportunity to speak to principals at the district or state level or in a principal preparation course at a university. Allison Zmuda discusses talking points in her article "Where Does Your Authority Come From?" In the article, she focuses on the kind of evidence school librarians should share to demonstrate the leader role (Zmuda 2006). Do your homework for such a presentation. Come prepared with data to show improved student learning outcomes that resulted from classroom teacher/school librarian co-teaching. Bring testimonials from students, co-teachers, administrators, and families regarding the positive impact of your professional work on the academic program in your school. Be a role model for administrators in other schools, so they can measure the success of the librarians in their charge and help them grow and develop.

ADVOCACY

Advocacy has been described as creating the necessary conditions that encourage others to speak on your behalf. School librarians who practice the leader role identified by the American Association of School Librarians in *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs* (2009) create multiple opportunities for principals to notice, recognize, and respect the work of a school librarian. Help your principal achieve success; make him look good. Ensure your principal's support for your professional contributions and his advocacy for the central role of the school library program in a collaborative, effective learning community.

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