

Leadership: What Makes Us Tick?

Mary Alice Anderson

Published in *Library Media Connection*
March 2006, Linworth Publishing

Whether it is within the library media center, the district, or the community, library media specialists accept leadership roles that expand their influence. What drives people to become leaders and move to the forefront? What makes them tick? Meet some of today's leaders and upcoming leaders and learn what they see as top issues facing our profession.

Leaders see a job to do be done and do it! They go beyond their job description and beyond the expectations others have of them. They're busy, but they get things done. Wendy Larson and Sue Wilmes, Minnesota library media specialists, demonstrated leadership in the district by taking their desire for improved district book collections to enviable heights. Budget cuts had hurt their collections and programs, but they knew what to do and where to go for support. They became proactive leaders instead of complainers. Using local, state, and national standards and data, they methodically met with key district officials and committees to lay the groundwork for requesting significantly increased funding for collection development. They were "inspired and nourished," accomplishing something far beyond what they had initially imagined when they received "over a half million dollars to meaningfully improve our media center collections in order to serve our students."

Wilmes, like other leaders interviewed for this article, willingly serves on key district committees. She is a "member of [the] district media/technology committee, which includes school board members where vision is developed and decisions made on direction of technology and media centers. She is also a member of the union executive board, working to investigate, organize, and communicate issues and information to members, administration, and residents."

New Yorker Carolyn Gierke supports library media specialist involvement in teacher associations. "People appreciate that you do something for the greater good, and librarians especially should have an active part of the teachers' associations. Who better to explain the nature of library concerns? Classroom teachers live in different worlds, and there are more of them in any school district. Librarians sometimes have a tougher time getting union representation. But not if you are a part of the system. You need to be active in some form that you are comfortable with."

Karen Muronaga from Hawaii co-chairs a Family Involvement Committee, which plans and coordinates "monthly activities for families to attend with their children. Families learn about content standards and ways they can help their child at home. Some of the topics include technology, parenting skills, family musical talents, test-taking skills and strategies, holiday crafts, math and science fun activities, and a family picnic and movie on the lawn."

Indianian Carl Harvey concludes, “A school library media specialist has to be willing to give the time on school committees to help articulate the library media program’s mission, goals, and services. Eventually, once you’ve proven the worth of the library media program, the staff will start to be that voice for you, too, which will multiply the sphere of influence. To have a successful library media program, I don’t have a choice but to be out there leading the way. It is just part of the job.”

Technology provides diverse opportunities for leadership. Library media specialist leaders are involved members of district technology committees, participating in long-range planning and policy development. They are at the forefront of introducing new technologies, trends, and ideas in their buildings and districts. They oversee the implementation of new technology-based resources in their schools, often coordinating 21st century tools and resources such as streaming video.

A Midwestern library media specialist described an efficient idea she proposed. She had a vision for a system for one identification card for student ID, library card, and lunch card. She had presented the idea to the right people, found answers to questions, and figured out how to make it work, coordinating efforts between the lunch program, library media center, and attendance/grading program. It was a huge step for the school and gave her a leadership edge. Gierke notes, “Being a person who finds the answers or gets results doesn’t hurt. When you know something that is of value to another person, your stock goes up. When you can teach it to them in a way that makes them feel empowered, you are on the road to educational leadership.”

School Web sites can be a catalyst for modeling a leadership role. Examples include creating library media center Web sites, serving as school and district Web masters, and helping teachers create their own classroom Web sites. New York library media specialist Will Haines created an “ask a librarian feature” on his middle school library media center Web site <www.greece.k12.ny.us/ath/library/askalibrarian/default.htm>.

Online learning is another avenue for leadership. It’s rapidly growing, offering opportunities for library media specialists to teach classes for K–12 and post-secondary students, coordinate online learning experiences for their students, or use tools, such as Blackboard®, to deliver instruction.

Staff development is a familiar path to leadership and provides a high level of visibility. It may involve one-on-one teaching, group instruction, or coordinating building and district training initiatives. Wilmes is on the district leadership committee “where decisions are made on how to allocate and expend district staff development funds to meet the needs of both the majority and the minority of the teaching staff.” Jim Glazer, also a Minnesota library media specialist, completed a doctoral dissertation on the role of library media specialists in staff development. The bottom line: If library media specialists don’t do it, it doesn’t get done.

Leaders extend their leadership role into their communities: participating in diverse community organizations, from public library boards to civic organizations and museums. Some library media specialists have partnered with their county historical societies to create

museum Web sites and plan educational programs. Others coach neighborhood or community athletic teams. Georgia library media specialist Pam Nutt leads in a unique way: She is on a school board in one county and a library media specialist in another. “Being on the school board has helped me see just how much money is needed in the media centers, but with cutbacks, it is hard to fund. Because of being on the board, I’ve helped to fund media centers at a higher rate. Our new media centers get a start-up budget spread over three years. That means money over and above their state allotment. [. . .] If we are to change education, then we are going to have to be the change agent. It is not easy to work all day and then go to board meetings. But [. . .] I’m helping to improve the educational system in my county.”

Judy Bull, a district coordinator in Minnesota, is serving her fourth term on a city council. She views this role as somewhat natural since library media specialists “administrate a program, see the big picture, and, like elected officials, are servant/leaders. I think my **education;**, experience as a teacher, media person, and musician; and birth order (oldest) gave me the confidence to run for office. [. . .] Decision making was not threatening.” Since city council meetings are reported in local newspapers and are on TV, Judy is also creating visibility for her and the library media specialist profession.

Leaders are responsible, credible, and professional. If we conduct ourselves in a professional manner, we will develop a strong professional reputation. Gierke observed, “It’s like money in the bank. Every interaction you have with a student, parent, teacher, or administrator is a public relations opportunity for yourself and your library. Handling it professionally will build strength for your program, and your role as a school leader will establish itself.”

Leaders have a sense of follow-through. They make decisions; they can be counted on to get things done. Having good organizational skills helps. Carolyn Kirio from Hawaii explains, “Through the years, I’ve learned to keep things simple by using a planning process (assess, analyze, set goals, plan activities, implement, evaluate) to keep meetings organized and to lead with the heart and mind. I respect time, accept different personalities, delegate, and share responsibilities.”

Leaders are passionate, energetic advocates for our profession. Peggy Milam encourages us to “do more than speak about the roles we play in student achievement to become indispensable. [. . .] We must be vocal, visible, and vociferous. My work is my passion. I want to make a difference.” Claire Sato, a retired library media specialist from Hawaii, believes advocacy is no longer an option but a must: “Advocacy is everything you say and do.”

Gierke publishes a column in her school’s parent newsletter. “This began as a way to shamelessly promote the library program to counteract a less than supportive former principal. As it turned out, the teachers loved it! [. . .] Teenagers don’t tell their parents much about what goes on in school. This does. The Board reads it. While on the surface it might be the library article, it really promotes the whole instructional program, so the teachers support it. Nobody views it as me bragging about my program.”

Leaders are involved in professional organizations at state, regional, and national levels. Professional organizations provide camaraderie and opportunities to hone leadership skills that

can be applied in the daily job setting. Many people start out just wanting to be involved, but one thing leads to another. Carl Harvey wrote, “In the eight years I’ve been a library media specialist, I’ve been a committee member, committee chair, conference chair, and president of our state association. None of these were things I set out to do, but rather that first step of volunteering for a committee led to another opportunity, which led to the next, and so forth. Part of being a professional is giving back and being involved in the profession. It certainly takes time and we’re all busy people, but the rewards have made me a better library media specialist for my students and staff.”

Leaders lead committees that benefit the organizations, the profession, and students. For example, many are involved in legislative committees or groups studying the impact of library media center programs on student achievement. Kirio co-chairs the Hawaii Association of School Librarians’ School Library Public Relations committee. “The goals are to gain support for legislative action, advocate our mission and goals, and survey school librarians for gathering evidence that we are impacting student achievement.”

Diane Chen from Tennessee encourages “every individual to do two things this year to proactively impact our field. Write a letter or phone your representative concerning a library issue, and send someone, even a parent, from your state to represent libraries during National Library Legislative Day in May. The ALA Washington Office will provide you the leadership tools and words to communicate. You provide the passion for our students and their need for libraries.”

Dedicated leaders continue their organizational leadership into retirement. Last spring I attended the Wisconsin Educational Media Association’s annual spring conference. The number of retirees who were involved was impressive. They were contributing to the conference, their organization, and the profession as speakers and advocates, online instructors, fund-raisers, and conference worker bees.

Claire Sato is typical of active retirees. She works with the Hawaii Association of School Librarians’ Buddies Program. “[. . .] we match experienced librarians with new librarians so that the new librarians have someone to call on when they have questions. For the first time this year we hope to build a stronger program.” She conducts a Beginning Librarians’ Seminar through the University of Hawaii’s Outreach College and Library School. “The seminar is built around the needs of the participants. [. . .] we cover management and address the importance of people skills.” Claire also conducts a professional development course on Inquiry Learning that continues throughout the year, speaks at university classes, and works with the State Department of Education.

What drives us? Familiar reasons are a passionate desire to help the profession, help students, and grow personally and professionally. New Yorker Sara Kelly Johns noted that *Information Power* (1988) and a deep personal need inspired her. She explained, “I’ve been promoting librarians being leaders for a very long time as Educational Leadership Chair of our state affiliate since the early ‘90s because I know it is important and not always an innate personality trait of librarians. *Information Power* was the fuel for my crusade, but it fit right into my own ‘story’ of

needing to be more assertive and making myself assume leadership positions when I was in my late 20s and felt I had a handicap in my profession by being shy.”

Leadership is a natural part of our jobs. Gierke noted, “Other than the principal, the librarian is the only person who sees the entire educational program of the building in context. [. . .] Librarians are the original team players, and their knowledge and expertise is valuable to teachers and students who have to pack so much learning into their school day and school year. [We] are a different breed to begin with, my colleagues seem to be more gregarious than other types of librarians, and are more willing to deal with people [. . .].”

On a personal level, leaders hate to be left out or uninformed. Kirio commented, “Unless you are a leader or part of the leadership team, information is not always disseminated and shared. By being active, you’re constantly in the know and are aware of everything that is occurring within the school. Because of our involvement, we are highly visible.” Needing to be involved also drives Carl Harvey. “There are so many exciting things happening in my school and in the profession, that I want to take every opportunity available to be a part of it. I want to create a culture that it is just natural for the library media program to be a part of the decision-making process. The only way to do that is to be proactive and demonstrate what the library media program can do and how it can support teaching and learning in the building.”

Leaders want to leave a legacy. Several library media specialists said they want to be remembered for positive achievements and their professional contributions. Whether it’s teaching, technology, collaboration, facilities planning, encouraging students to read, or impacting change, we want to make our mark on the world. And, while not always publicly admitted, many leaders privately admit they are driven by their egos and the need to exert influence and be recognized.

Family members, or experiences early in life, often supply a positive influence that encourages library media specialists to seek a leadership position. Several students in the online class I teach have described how their mothers encouraged them. Laurie Conzemius, current co-president of the Minnesota Educational Media Organization (MEMO) and editor of the state media journal, wrote: “When I was a young girl my mother used to say, ‘To those whom much is given, much is required.’ I have been afforded the luxury of the opportunity and enough time and money to be able to attend meetings and conferences. My administration and my family have been supportive of my involvement in MEMO, and that makes a big difference. Of course, my mother also used to say that she knew how things should be done—but people didn’t always listen to her! And I guess that shaped me as well! I knew that if I wanted to affect change, and have it resemble what I envisioned, I had to be a leader in that change!”

A hospitalized son influenced Diane Chen. She planned to cancel attendance at a conference. “My son told me, ‘NO! Go make libraries better!’ His commitment inspired me and enabled me to take up the leadership mantle on his behalf.” She was elected chair of the AASL Affiliate Assembly and will lead this group of representatives of every state-affiliated organization this year. Diane also gained inspiration from experiences as a young adult. “I attended a girls’ state leadership camp, then became a presidential fellow during college to hone

my leadership skills. Each of these opportunities were offered to prepare me for life because someone else cared.”

Leaders are influenced by mentors. Laurie Conzemius “had wonderful mentors as I developed my skills as a teacher and media specialist. These mentors instilled in me the responsibility to help others and also the courage to become a mentor to others. As a new member in MEMO, I received the support and information I needed to help me do my job well, and I felt an obligation to give back to MEMO.”

Leaders are on a mission to improve student achievement. Library media specialists know they and their programs have much to offer; by working with others they can accurately plan material acquisition, curriculum strategies, and staff development workshops that help students achieve. Eric Bodwell, who works at an Illinois high school, was hired when administration learned that increased library media center staff and funding could lead to student achievement. Bodwell sees collaboration as key in his role of improving student achievement. “Without it, the work that my staff and I do would be irrelevant. To me, that means leadership from the middle, that is, helping teachers and everyone else, including students, do their jobs as effectively as possible.” Bodwell observed that we don’t “always take this concept far enough. I sometimes see colleagues take this to mean matching our current services and collections with the needs of our patrons. I think we have to move beyond that. My job in the school is to be a partner teacher. We are working on developing a collection development plan that will include collection mapping... My job is to help teachers get the resources and skills they need to most effectively help their students excel even if I can’t help directly. [. . .] And in a more traditional vein, it has meant starting to build special collections [. . .].”

What Issues Concern Leaders?

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and advocacy top the list. More than a few are concerned about the potentially negative impact NCLB is having on library media center programs. The pressures teachers face to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) shifts much of their energy into “drill and skill” teaching methods and test-taking strategies. Library media specialists say teachers are turning away from research and projects because it takes too much time. Another concern is the impact that online testing or practicing for state tests has on lab access, and library media specialists and library media center programs across the country face the danger of being seen as an extra instead of an essential part of the solution. Leaders ask, “What are *you* doing to help schools meet NCLB mandates?”

Advocacy is the concern that won’t go away. Too many administrators are still wondering what library media specialists do besides check out books. Too many administrators and teachers, and even some library media specialists, don’t see the possible roles in teaching and learning the library media center program can play. Many would agree with Harvey’s comment that “too many of us get stereotyped by bad experiences administrators and teachers have or their lack of experience with a library media program. It makes it much too easy for them to eliminate the library program because they don’t see the value and the worth. It becomes crucial that every library media program be a dynamic and active part of the school, not only to help our students succeed, but also so that when a teacher in their building becomes a principal in another district

without a library media specialist, he/she begins to demand it because of the positive impact they know it can have. Gierke added, “the constant issue is educating new administrators and the public. [. . .] It takes strong leadership and persistent effort. [. . .] Every bit of the effort is worth it.” But, it’s not always easy to make those efforts.” Claire Sato described “[. . .] that stonewall that is called the ‘culture’ of the school [. . .] each school has its own belief about the library/librarian. Often times the new librarian must face incredible hurdles to begin to implement some of the ideals he/she learned about in library school. [. . .] So often, they hit their heads against the wall and finally give in to the culture and lose the vision of what a library should be.”

Accountability and data collection are newer concerns. Kirio mentioned the need to “validate [our] impact on student learning utilizing effective data collection strategies. [. . .] At a time when budgets are being slashed and library positions are being cut, the only line of defense has been to present concrete evidence that directly correlates student achievement with library instruction. Although the issue is not new, librarians are realizing that an in-depth investigation and analysis is being required. Knowing how to conduct formative/quantitative methods of assessment, performing analysis, [and] interpreting and sharing our data has become not only a desirable skill, but also a job requirement.”

Shrinking budgets impact almost everyone. Loss of dollars erodes staff, collection, programs, and morale.

Technology continues to be an issue. Not all library media specialists have embraced technology or become comfortable with it—a situation that hampers the perceptions other educators have of us. Technology policy and planning is a concern shared by those who are less involved than they would like to be. It’s critical to proactively seek that level of involvement to ensure that the needs of library media center programs are not ignored. **Technology training and staff development needs still exist.** Bodwell noted, “[. . .] most veteran teachers have moved beyond the basics of Microsoft® Office. Our newly hired teachers understand the technology and have gone to college with the Internet and other technologies. But the next step for all is to move into technology integration. We also need to help teachers discover and take advantage of new and old technologies like Wikis, organizing information with tagging (del.icio.us bookmarks), bookmark managers, and selective subject directories.”

Partnerships with other areas of education are critical. Bodwell commented that it seems we are finally talking to others outside of our profession through efforts such as the 21st Century Literacy project by ALA or the Keith Curry Lance studies. But most teachers and other professionals don’t know the extent to which we can help in areas such as reading and literacy. We need to redefine our role in this area.

Conclusion

The why’s and what’s of leadership are intriguing and varied. Leaders give a lot and gain much in return. The leaders who generously shared their thoughts demonstrated an eagerness to share, motivate, and help.

- “[We] possess knowledge and expertise that can be valuable for our colleagues. There we CARE . . . Collaborate, Assist, Relate, and Encourage.” (Carolyn Kirio)
- Becoming a leader takes “putting your heart and soul into being a school librarian, patience, observation of good teaching practices, calmness, a happy disposition, and dedication to learn and persevere when leading others.” (Karen Muronaga)
- “From my own experience, I know that when I have been in leadership, my life has been much more engaging and connected with people and processes that are important to me. It adds color and dimension to a life that could be flat, boring, and insipid. You could say it changes water into wine.” (Wendy Larson)

The library media specialist profession has an abundance of opportunities for each of us to be leaders in our schools, districts, communities, and beyond. Get involved; each little step you take along the way makes a difference. Those small steps help build your program *and* your influence.

Mary Alice Anderson is a media specialist for Winona Area Public Schools in Minnesota. She has been an active, involved member of her state’s library media specialist organization for several years and has leadership roles in her district. She is a regular contributor to professional journals and available as a conference and workshop presenter. She is an online adjunct instructor with the Online Professional Development for Educators Program in the School of Education at University of Wisconsin–Stout where she teaches an advocacy class for media specialists and a course on using primary sources. Her personal Web site is www.homepage.mac.com/Maryalicea/Sites/Anderson/Anderson.html. Contact her via email maryalicea@mac.com.