

The Media Center: What Are Your Challenges?

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What are the most pressing challenges facing school media specialists? The answers are as varied as our jobs and schools. Some of us are new to the media profession and wondering how to survive the first year of day-day to media program management; others are trying to cope with technology and the demands of a changing profession. Others are challenged by developing the textbook example of the ideal program. As a veteran I believe our greatest challenges are not mastering new technologies, conquering network problems, becoming familiar with our book collections or anything tangible. Our challenges deal with the less tangible and less easy to master situations inherent in the educational system.

Media Specialists from coast to coast are concerned about the gaps between media specialists and information systems or technical support staff. It's a divide as old as the gaps between the AV men and the library women; a gap that may have diminished when media specialists assumed audiovisual roles in their schools. It's also a problem that appears to have escalated again as technology and its support systems become more complex, requiring media specialists to quickly gain high levels of technical expertise. A large part of this results from the differences in the training for those positions, the instructional role compared to the working with equipment role. Another reason may be our personalities and perceptions. People choose careers that match their interests and talents. Technical people often perceive media specialists as too "booky," media specialists often perceive technical people as too concerned about wires and stuff. As media centers acquire more technology and media/technology programs become school wide, the two groups need to work as a team. It's quite likely that information systems staff can function without media specialists; media specialists and media programs cannot function without technical support. Even finding time to talk about common issues is at a premium.

If you are an information systems or technical support person, invest the time to talk to media specialists, learn about program standards, program goals and curriculum needs. The return on investment is impressive! Media specialists need and like to share; our jobs cannot be done in isolation. If you are a media specialist, remember that technical support people are spread thin trying to meet the needs of a building or district. Continue learning and embracing technology, don't abandon it. Reach out; set up regular times to discuss common issues, communicate formally and informally. We all need to talk to each other and work together to establish a shared learning environment that is best for teachers and kids.

Continuing conversations with administration, school boards, and higher education are a challenge for everyone. Media specialists can never stop communicating, never stop advocating, never stop sharing. Even the most supportive of administrators has a limited knowledge of media program standards, funding, information literacy and other issues critical to our profession. Potential administrators receive little or no background in media programs other than listening to an occasional guest instructor or conference speaker. School board members come from diverse backgrounds and cannot be expected to know unless we inform them. Sharing and advocacy must be ongoing; program and budget cutting time are not the time to begin.

Communicate and share continually; the cumulative effect will be informed administrators and school boards who can advocate for you. Advocacy and communication paid off for Macia Berbeza, a Delaware

media specialist. "My first year, I came in all gung-ho and full of advocacy issues, and the ways and means to achieve them. And guess what? I got EVERYTHING that I asked for. Everything! This year I spent dealing with my good fortune." (Marcia Berbeza, Email communication, July 24, 2001). Never stop sharing and communicating.

Collaborating with teachers who are stressed out, burned out and short of time presents a unique challenge. Teachers may be skeptical and see reaching out as interference rather than assistance. Some media specialists sense a hospitality between themselves and the teachers they work with; some believe the problem is more difficult if the media specialist is not a licensed teacher, or perceived as a teacher. Media specialists cannot help teachers or be effective alone. Don't hesitate to tell teachers you need them and are there to help.

Experience and understanding are essential to successful collaboration. Media specialists must understand the people they work with, know whom they can work with, and how to work with them. In "Teacher-Librarians: Mirror Images and the Spark" Brown and Sheppard, argue that media specialists are most likely to be credible and work well with teachers if the teachers and media specialists are mirror images of each other. These traits include a knowledge base, technical skills, team skills, interpersonal skills, and values and beliefs. Additionally media specialists must have "the spark," the ability to work with other professionals and be leaders within the school. These skills are of greater value than technical and management skills and necessary for working as part of a school's instructional team. Possessing the skills that are the mirror image of teachers will also gain the media specialist gain the support of the principal. (Brown, Jean and Sheppard, Bruce, "Teacher Librarians: Mirror Images and the Spark," Foundations for Effective School Library Media Programs, Ken Haycock, Editor, Libraries Unlimited, 1999). Effective media specialists also take time to think about the other person's viewpoint and "experience and realize that this is a window into an experience that is not mine...and find it good...find it interesting...want to work and succeed with the person because it is different." (Jane Prestebak, email correspondence, July 24, 2001)

Never be too busy to help teachers! Work with the living, reach out, and be patient. remain positive. Do not abandon your efforts if your collaborative successes are few. Small successes naturally lead to bigger collaborative efforts. It's a win-win situation for everyone.

Challenges within our profession. Complicating all of these challenges is the constraint of time. Some media specialists say they do not have time for advocacy, communication, or collaboration. Veteran media specialists may not have been trained to advocate and collaborate. Other media specialists are not comfortable speaking out and reaching out. Or, they find the day to day management of a media center all they have time for. Some do not want to take time away from past practices and traditions within our profession.

Spending too much time on some past practices because "that's what we were trained to do" can be detrimental. In one district media specialists spoke out about their instructional role when they faced staff cuts. The administrative response. "When we see a media specialist doing clerical jobs that's what we think you do." What others see or perceive matters.

As Prestebak noted, tradition is also a window to help us gain insight. "I see our tradition, especially as expressed in the standards, as a tradition of exploring the best around us. I look to tradition for inspiration. When I see people failing to raise to the cause, I see a lack of alignment with our tradition, not people being traditional." Examine the best in your traditions and those of our profession; use what is the best and productive. If it is not contributing to effective program management or continue developing a program for today's learners and today's schools it may be worth discarding.

Some of your challenges will be similar, others vastly different. These thoughts merely reflect what I see and here; there are no solutions, just thoughts to stimulate thinkiing. What are your challenges? I'd love to hear from you.

Thank you to LM_NET members who responded to the original question "What do you see as the biggest, most critical challenges facing our media/technology profession?" Their insight also was helpful. (School Library Media & Network Communications, LM_NET@LISTSERV.SYR.EDU. July 21, 2001)

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