

The Media Center

Why Are Media Positions Cut? How *Not* to Survive!

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Let's examine practices that illustrate *how not to survive*. Only when we face the "fatal errors" that can be made can we get to higher ground. Have you noticed that there are fewer media specialists than in the past?

- * In an Iowa district, full-time elementary media specialists were replaced with half-time media specialists; in other schools clerical time was reduced.
- * In a large Illinois school district, cuts were supposed to be made at all levels, but the only cuts actually made impacted the media centers at each building. A media specialist who left was not replaced.
- * In a Southern state, elementary media specialists were given additional teaching assignments such as teaching reading an hour and a half a day, yet were listed as full-time media specialists in the building.
- * Almost an entire district media department, including its director, was eliminated in a large Minnesota district a year ago. In another district, full-time media program paraprofessionals have replaced media specialists in all elementary schools. This spring even more media specialist positions in Minnesota are in danger because of state funding limitations and the failure of many school districts to pass operating fund initiatives.

What's Happening? Why?

Cuts are typically made because of a district's financial situation. Exemplary, visible, and valued media specialists may be among the first cut. When budgets are especially tight, there might be little choice but to cut nonclassroom positions. In one district, media specialists were told after an hour and a half of discussion they didn't need to "justify their exemplary programs; we simply cannot afford you." *Data about successful media programs, or well-used media centers may mean nothing* when funding is limited. A nationwide shortage of qualified and licensed school media professionals makes it that much easier not to fill a position or cut non-licensed or nontenured staff. Throw in disappearing state mandates for licensed media and cutting media specialists becomes easier yet, as it has in Iowa where 88 programs or positions have been cut during the last 2 years.

Sometimes cuts are based on a need for improving technology and technical support, often at the expense of media programs and media staff. An Iowa district dissolved the district media coordinator and district IMC, replacing both with a technology director and department.

Site-based teams who make decisions that impact their building or an entire district sometimes make staffing recommendations. When push comes to shove, teachers are likely to choose a working computer and technical support over curricular support from a media specialist. Or, they will seek ways to fund smaller class size instead of keeping a media specialist. School boards and administrators are likely to choose working information management systems, data systems,

and accounting systems over media specialists and media programs. It is also worth remembering that most administrators have no training in school media programs other than what we and our programs model for them. As Gary Hartzell, professor of educational administration and supervision at the University of Nebraska, pointed out during a seminar at last fall's AASL, the average age of today's school administrator is 57; they formed many of their perceptions of school media programs during their own K-12 experience or in their initial teaching experiences.

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A Share of the Blame

There are many forces beyond our control, but these are not our concern in this column. Are there other reasons *within* our own profession that are contributing to painful cuts? Are media positions cut when there is a choice? Sadly, conversations with administrators, board members, and colleagues lead me to believe our profession shares the blame for the elimination of positions. We will look at some practices that may be harmful, making us more vulnerable to cuts. Looked at individually they appear harmless, but taken together they describe behaviors that hurt us. The purpose here is not to offend, but to encourage all of us to examine practices that illustrate *how not to survive*. Only when we face the "fatal errors" that can be made can we get to higher ground.

Operating in isolation. Good service and a good collection are not enough. If a media program is going to impact the entire school, it must be part of the entire school; the emphasis is on program, not place. In one school a teacher didn't even know who the media specialist was. She was quite technologically skilled, quietly moving the program forward. Quietly moving forward was not enough. Now more than ever, media specialists must be visible and proactive. The media specialist, the media center, and the media program must be integral to the operation of the school. Make an effort every day to go out of your way to talk to a staff member you haven't seen or worked with in a while. Reach out, be proactive, and don't wait for people to come to you or the media center. If we are the key to the school, providing kids with the keys to their future and education professionals with the keys to understanding the challenges we all face together, then we need to accept that and be relentless in showing others that's what we're doing, and inviting them in.

Emphasizing isolated traditional library skills rather than 21st century integrated information literacy proficiencies. A media specialist who was cut protested that library skills were no longer being taught. A principal said, "That's one reason she was cut." Core library skills are needed, but alone are not enough. These skills are only the beginning. With the widespread access to information that a majority of students have, library skills are meaningless. Begin by becoming very familiar with Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning (AECT, AASL, 1998) and other technology standards such as The National Educational Standards for Students developed by ISTE. Help teachers move beyond the "they can do it at home" mentality that often exists when they know many students have access to technology at home. Partner with teachers to integrate today's information literacy instruction on a continuing basis. It need not always be formal; incidental instruction is often the most meaningful. Help all learners make wise use of the abundance of information surrounding us. Provide access to the resources of the media center through your Web site or newsletters. Keep advocating.

Counting numbers instead of thinking about program value and learning. Statistics are helpful, but not if the focus is only on circulation and budgets. Board members or administrators do not really need to know how many books were checked out last semester. They *do* want to know if the media center is well used and what the students did when they were there. Gather the traditional statistics, and keep them handy to use when needed and for the appropriate reason. Routinely share information about instructional opportunities, anecdotes about student learning activities, and partnerships with teachers. What do you know about test scores in your school? What do samples of student work show you about strengths or weaknesses in the educational program? How do the programs and activities you design and provide get to the heart of these challenges? *Don't waste precious time counting the beans; instead spend time adding the ingredients to make the soup.*

Protecting resources instead of sharing them. Many still define themselves as keepers of "stuff," when we should share our knowledge and materials. A major gripe among teachers is closing a media center for inventory at the end of the year. A red flag goes up when I hear or see too much discussion about overdues, accession records, circulation procedures, MARC records, or prefacing mention of a resource with "my" or "mine." Don't spend too much time protecting the "stuff." Be accountable without giving the impression that it's the most important thing you do.

Whining and complaining. Administrators do not like whining; there's no point in crying wolf. Budget cuts are especially not the time to whine or justify your role and program. By then it's too late. It also does little good to call in the support of state department personnel or other outsiders. If there is not a program to support, their help can only be minimal. Save the complaining for something serious and then present your concerns carefully. Administrators *do* respect an appropriate discussion of concerns and problems, well-prepared, justified requests, and timely sharing of information.

Failing to embrace technology, or viewing it as extra work. Media specialists who do not acquire technology skills, provide technology for their students, or become involved in school-wide technology initiatives are hurting their own careers. A friend abandoned technology. Was that a factor when his position was cut to part time? A school board member asked a media specialist whose position was in jeopardy if she was the person a teacher could turn to if they needed help with PowerPoint. Unfortunately, she was not. Administrators everywhere want tech-savvy media specialists; they want media specialists who welcome and embrace technology and are leaders in their schools' technology and curriculum initiatives. They do not want people they perceive as only concerned about books. Pay attention to the California principal who said, "I want a media specialist to help my teachers with technology; the teachers can take care of the literature." Pay attention to Illinois teachers who begged for help with technology and also said they can handle the literature. If technology is not part of your job, *make it* part of your job. Become an expert to whom teachers can turn for assistance with technology that goes beyond the normal realm of databases, the Internet, the online catalog, or other technologies associated with a media center. If you know a teacher is looking for assistance with even one little aspect of technology, see what you can do to help out. That on-the-spot assistance can lead to future job security. Become involved with anything that will bring more technology to the media center and provide more access for students.

Displaying poor management skills and general incompetence. A school board member said she has never cut media positions, but has replaced them due to poor performance, including not keeping accurate records of money! Another school chose to cut its media specialist because it saw no benefits in maintaining the position. Elementary teachers in another district spent an entire year believing curriculum-related software would not work on their computers because the media specialist had misguided them. Teachers, administrators, and school boards who have not benefited from a good media program do not know what they're missing when they decide to cut positions currently filled by incompetent people. Incompetence doesn't provide job security or benefit the profession; accountability matters in today's educational environment. Strive to be and do the best at all times. Work every day to add value to student learning and the environment of the school. If a program is weak, it's easier to justify the cuts. Good media programs and good media specialists are inseparable.

Fostering or Tolerating Misperceptions. Even media specialists who *do* embrace technology and are instructional leaders can be encumbered by misperception. A colleague who is a technology leader in her district and beyond was referred to as "booky." That same district hired a technology integration specialist, failing to recognize that technology integration is something the media specialist was already doing. She is the person who can help teachers use technology *and* integrate it in the curriculum. Another type of damaging image is perpetuated in the popular press and literature. A major newspaper recently depicted a tech-savvy media specialist with her hair in a bun. Novels and magazine articles typically refer to us as austere, stern, or plainly dressed. Only we can change perceptions about our role and appearance. I once asked my principal why he was dressed in a suit on a casual workshop day. He replied, "I never know when a parent will come or I might be called to a meeting." Good advice. Professional appearance *does* make a difference in how others perceive our role and us.

The truth hurts. It all seems to boil down to three issues:

- * how we see ourselves
- * how we conduct ourselves
- * how we are seen by others

Let's all take a moment to examine our own behaviors and practices We need to avoid practices that make us less valued, learn from our mistakes, and move forward. Do what we do and how others perceive us contribute to developing top-notch programs that meet the needs of today's learners and schools? Are we responsive to the needs of today's schools, students, and staffs? Does what we do contribute to our job security and the future of our own media programs and media programs everywhere? After we've focused on what we do wrong, let's take a step toward becoming better and solving the problem. We all have a stake in keeping our numbers from declining even more.

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