

**The Media Center:
From Musty Old Library to 21st Century Program**

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Contrary to popular belief, musty libraries haven't disappeared; they are there, waiting for media specialists who love challenge and change.

Perhaps you've been hired to upgrade a 1950s-era school library into a media center and program for the 21st century! A media specialist who worked in a rural Southern school district wrote to me that there were no computers in the media center or any of the classrooms there. With the exception of an automation system, an elementary media center I visited last spring could have been the '60s-era library I inherited more than 30 years ago. Those places still exist, even in schools with state-of-the-art technology and a strong technology integration program. Perhaps you inherited a musty library or were hired to make change. Maybe you are the school's first media specialist. Where do you start?

Defining Your Objectives, Finding Your Partners

What end results do you want to see? Quite likely, it's an updated, inviting facility with enough technology to support student learning, an up-to-date-collection, and a program that meets the needs of today's learners. Talk to people at your school. Ask what they like and what they would like to see changed. You can do this even while deciding whether to take the job. Begin preliminary planning. Temper your enthusiasm and ideas with an understanding about the very slow pace of change in education. It doesn't matter how eager and energetic you are. Ultimately, it's up to you and the relationship you establish with others in school.

Consider the people who approach you with ideas to be your first partners. Carol, a special education teacher, bounded in with an idea my first day at work. Her contagious enthusiasm contributed a great deal to the change process.

Work with the Carols in your school. Get to know the movers and shakers. Reach out to people your predecessor may not have worked with. One of my best partners in change was a "shop" teacher. Be sure to get to know and involve the information systems and technology support staff. They should be among your allies and partners as you plan for change.

Be mindful that many teachers don't know what kind of media program they want. I experimented with "focus groups," but quickly learned that people unfamiliar with anything but a '60s-era warehouse didn't know what they were missing. One-on-one conversations and modeling change went a lot farther. Many media

specialists I've communicated with have commented on the positive responses to their new ideas. One noted, "Teachers and administrators have told me point blank on numerous occasions that they are so glad their 'last' librarian is not at our school and how shocked they are at what I do."

Trust your instincts and the people who hired you. If they want you to make change, trust that they will support you as you plan for change. Principals often know the existing program isn't what it *should* be, but don't know what it *could* be. The principal who hired me wanted a kid-friendly place. We moved in that direction when we set up the media center's first computer lab. The media center was no longer just a place to find information, but a place to produce and communicate information. Recognize that principals are busy people who might not be able to provide the hands-on, detailed support you want—or know how to support you when it's something new to them. Communicate often with the principal to educate, gain support, and ensure there aren't any surprises.

Attack the physical environment. Get rid of junk and clutter that so often invades libraries. Remove items that smack of the outmoded. Throw out battered old cardboard storage boxes; replace them with brightly colored banker-boxes if you can't afford nice cabinets. Put up bright posters, colorful displays, plants, flags, or whatever you can to spell out "inviting."

What about weeding? A secondary media specialist said she's worked in four media centers and began her job in all four with a thorough weeding. By all means weed, but stash things a while before throwing them away. Most likely no one will ever miss them—and many will be glad you are finally weeding. Weeding also means ditching old technology. Perhaps there is a lab full of Apple IIe's or PC juniors that need to go just as badly as any old books. There might be a few relic filmstrip viewers, headphones, or record players lying around. (Caution: Watch out for any items of historical significance and don't forget to ask about school and county policies for discarding equipment.)

Let people know a change is going to happen. Introduce new procedures and change perceptions. One change we implemented in the '80s was the establishment of a policy that the media center would *never* be closed for inventory. Was your predecessor rigid about hours and what could take place in the media center? Loosen up a bit. Display student artwork; invite students to display their collections, and provide a book display and list of Web sites for those who want to find out more. Invite school groups to use the media center for meetings and programs.

Create a reason for staff to come to the media center. If "AV" and "library" live in two separate parts of your school, it might be time for a merger. (Of course, consider building politics and staffing.) One initial change for us in the 1970s was integrating nonprint with print; in 1987, it was moving in a laminator and computer for staff to use; both situations sent signals that times were changing.

Production, computer, and audiovisual equipment all provide a catalyst for more interaction with staff. A coffee pot and a staff reading collection add a softer touch. Once staff feel welcome and have a reason to come to the media center, they will be more likely to share ideas and be receptive to change.

Become involved in outreach and areas your predecessor didn't. Take on a staff development role so people start to come to you for help with technology. In-services will help teachers finally understand what is happening and what the possibilities are. The list of potential options is endless: curriculum writing, running the in-house student broadcast system, helping with the school play, taping an athletic event, actively participating on the technology committee. Do jobs that need to be done even if they aren't part of the job description or something your predecessor did; it all makes you more valuable and signifies a different kind of media program is in the works.

Stop! Don't forget the media staff who already work there and have invested time and emotions in the program you are about to change. A good working relationship with them is essential. It's not unheard of for current staff to feel threatened by your proposed changes. Be prepared for the "We always did it this way" comments and involve them in planning and decision making. Solicit their opinions and advice often. Listen. They will have a lot of valuable insight.

Don't let an inadequate facility be an excuse for inaction. Our first lab in that 1920s-era school was on a former stage; the rest of the media center was originally an auditorium. Media center furniture was makeshift, and electricity was inadequate. The school was in two buildings across the street from each other. Bees, wasps, and even a bird or two flew in when we opened the windows during hot weather. It was clearly an "If we can do it here, you can do it anywhere" kind of place.

Take on a curriculum leadership role and encourage collaboration. These will likely be the most difficult pieces of the change process, because they may be totally foreign concepts for people used to a traditional program. It may be even more difficult if teachers are accustomed to working with a technology integrationist or computer teacher instead of the media staff. And while collaboration may be hard for the principal to grasp, support of your principal is vital.

One of my fondest memories of collaboration is one of my first, occurring long before the word "collaboration" entered our professional vocabulary. The new technology in the media center was filmstrips; the activity was students individually viewing filmstrips and completing activity packets. Why did it work? The teacher wanted to do something different ... *and* he was a coach who needed some free time. We worked together to provide a new way for our students to learn while he drew football plays on yellow tablets. The reason might not have been the

best, but it worked; the idea spread to other teachers and the musty library was changing.

Today the path to collaboration might be Web Quests, iMovie production, photo analysis with primary sources, or even something as traditional as book talks. What is needed is whatever is good for kids and good for curriculum, whatever helps teachers *and* is educationally sound.

Grade level restructuring can be an opportunity to implement change. When our junior high became a middle school in 1990, there were suddenly 16 new teachers to work with. It was a chance to introduce flexible scheduling, which in turn led to opportunities for technology integration and collaboration, an entirely different model for program delivery in vastly different environment for the new teachers.

Media center automation goes with the territory of bringing an old-fashioned library up to speed; it offers opportunities for changes in information delivery and lessens clerical tasks. But automation may also bring fear. Teachers are sometimes horrified when a card catalog is discarded and they are forced to use a computer to locate a book. An automation system should be part of a modernization process, but today's financial climate may make it difficult. And the presence of automation does not magically update the program. A musty library *can* become a modern media program without automation. A small school in our district does not have an automated media center, but the media center is a beehive of student activity and technology use. It has changed tremendously in 3 years because the principals, teachers, and media staff wanted it to change.

Change can happen! Celebrate and spread the news. Two or 3 years into the process, take a good look back. Change is hard to see when you are part of it or when it's all around you. But most likely, you have made a difference. You can have any kind of program you want to have.

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