

Local Advocacy: Building Support from the Ground Up

School libraries have an image problem. Although they are more critical to teaching and learning than ever before, many people, including education leaders, don't see how much they have changed in recent years. The most important advocacy that you can do is to give your school community and the educational leaders (administrators and elected officials) in your area an accurate, up-to-date view of a modern school library and how it supports student learning.

The following guidelines will help you to use your library program itself as your most powerful advocacy tool. As you build on your local "fan base," you will not only gain a legion of supporters that will help advocate for you, you can directly influence policymakers and make fans of them, too!

Give Them Something to Support

The first step in building support is to make sure your program is one worth supporting.

- Make sure you have developed a program that is valued, one that is beloved by your students and teachers, and one that is tightly focused on the activities that drive student achievement. Make sure that your "customer satisfaction" is as high as it can be, and that your schedule is filled to capacity.
- Implement evidence-based practice. Start collecting data on how your program is doing and how much your program is used: How many classes visit, how many curriculum standards you are teaching, how many books you are circulating, how much usage your online resources are getting, etc.

Winning over Your Administrators

Nothing will do more to help your library program than making sure your principal and other school administrators see its value.

- Invite your administrators in to see you teaching and working with classes. Invite them for specific lessons you want to highlight, and do it often. Remember that their day is often hectic and unpredictable, so don't be offended if they only show up for one out of every ten invitations. Keep inviting them on a regular basis.
- Invite your administrators to stop by anytime throughout the day. The more often they visit, the more they will see how active and vital your program is. Use bait! Keep good coffee on the ready, subscribe to their favorite magazines--whatever it takes to keep them coming in!
- Send emails sharing the "good news" of your program: successful lessons, positive anecdotes, and most importantly, the data you have collected through evidence-based practice.
- Once your administrators start to see, with their own eyes, the good your program is doing, use the infographics, handouts, and the other materials in the GLMA advocacy toolkit to educate them about the larger potential for your program to impact student achievement.
- Before you ask an administrator for something, be it more staffing, more funding, or something as simple as being removed from the lunch duty rotation, make sure they have seen the positive

things your program does. When you make the request, be sure to convey how the change will allow you to better serve the needs of teachers and students.

- When your administrators ask you to “take one for the team” and do something that undercuts your library program, don’t react in an angry or otherwise unprofessional way, but share your concerns about how it will negatively impact your ability to support students and teachers. If possible, provide an alternative plan that solves the problem without limiting your program.

Protecting Your Relationships with Administrators

As you take your advocacy efforts to the next levels, be sure not to undermine your relationship with your administrators.

- **Don’t forget that your principal and other school administrators are key to the health and survival of your program.** The best way to protect your program is to build professional rapport and mutual respect with your administrators, so that you can discuss issues with them frankly without being seen as a “complainer.” Be careful not let your other efforts to build support and advocate for your program erode the trust and confidence your administrators have in you.
- If your program is facing challenges and limitations based on building-level decisions, it is best to address these with the building-level administrators. **If you discuss these issues with parents or policy makers, avoid directly criticizing or blaming your school administrators.** Instead of saying “I have to close as soon as school is over because Principal Rooney makes me do bus duty,” say “I would love to keep the library open for an hour after school every day, but unfortunately I have bus duty.”
- **Remember to copy your principal on any invitations you send to those outside your school building.** Principals love to showcase their schools, but they hate to be caught off guard.

Sharing the Success with the School Community

Make sure the parents and the public see what your program does for students.

- Hold a “Parents Night” that shows parents everything your program can do to support their child’s learning. Highlight your technology resources and your willingness to help students one-on-one. Forget telling them about library rules, circulation limits, etc. Talk about what students *can do* in the library, not what they *can’t do*.
- Invite your PTSA leaders, partners-in-education, and other members of your school community to visit, especially for lessons you are teaching. Focus especially on cutting-edge instruction that is infused with technology. (We are trying to change perceptions, remember?)
- Use the infographics, handouts, and the other materials in the GLMA advocacy toolkit to educate these stakeholders about modern school libraries and how they support 21st century education.
- Start a Facebook page, a Twitter feed, an email updates list, or other means of connecting with your students, teachers, parents, and community stakeholders.
- **Keep in mind the guidelines on “Protecting Your Relationships with Administrators,” above.**

Educating Policy Makers about School Libraries

Now that you are accustomed to putting your program on display, you can use the same methods to influence education policies on a higher level.

- Invite your school board member(s), superintendent, and other district officials to visit. Make sure they see the amazing things your program is doing with students, and use the infographics, handouts, and the other materials in the GLMA advocacy toolkit to educate them about the potential for your program to increase student achievement.
- Invite your state representatives and senators from the districts where your school is located. Why not also invite your school's U.S. Congressional Representative? The State School Superintendent? The Governor? (Remembering, of course, to let your principal know who you are inviting into the school!)
- Be sure to show these visitors a highly collaborative, standards-based, technology-enriched lesson. Again, the idea is to change any outdated perceptions they have and give them a more accurate picture of the range of things we do. However, you shouldn't "pretty things up" too much or make them look better than they are. Be honest about the limitations you face, including any service cutbacks you have had to make due to loss of staff, funding, or other support, but stick to discussing the challenges that result from policies at their level.