By Michael B. Eisenberg with Danielle H. Miller

This Man Wants to Change Your Job

Photography by Rick Dahms
Mike Eisenberg offers a compelling blueprint for becoming a core player in your school

How can we ensure that students learn essential information skills? How can we partner with teachers to provide meaningful learning opportunities? How can we ensure that school librarians are central players in our schools?

The answers to these key questions lie in creating and managing exemplary library programs. As librarians, it's our job to ensure that administrators, teachers, parents, and decision makers fully comprehend that effective library programs are critical to boosting student learning and achievement.

Of course, changing perceptions is never easy. So we've developed a simple yet powerful strategy that school librarians can use to transform their programs into vibrant elements of a K–12 education. It is as simple as A (Articulate a vision and agenda), B (Be strategic), C (Communicate continuously).

Articulate a Vision and Agenda

The mission statement from Information Power (ALA, 1998) sums it up perfectly: The library media program ensures that students "are effective users of ideas and information." That statement defines the school library program's vital role and the importance of teacher-librarians. Refer to it as frequently as possible—in written, verbal, and electronic communication. Include it in the prologue of any report or presentation you distribute, and use it for self-assessment so other teachers understand what you're trying to achieve.

The statement should also frame the library program's most important contributions, or tangible outputs, to student education: information literacy instruction, reading advocacy, and information management. School librarians teach meaningful information and technology skills that can be fully integrated with the regular classroom curriculum. They advocate reading through guiding and promoting it. And they manage information services, technologies, resources, and facilities (see figure 1).

Let's take a more in-depth look at these roles. First and foremost, today's school librarian is a teacher, primarily of information literacy. But the school librarian also partners with classroom teachers. Information Power describes this dual role: as a teacher, the school librarian "collaborates with students and other members of the learning community to analyze learning and information needs, locate and use resources that will meet those needs, and to understand and communicate the information the resources provide." As a partner, the school librarian "joins with teachers and others to identify links across student information needs, curricular content, learning outcomes, and a wide variety of print, nonprint, and electronic information resources."

![Figure 1. Each key function has an associated role for the teacher-librarian.](image)

The school librarian also serves as a reading advocate. Reading proficiency is widely recognized as the number-one predictor of student success. In The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research (Libraries Unlimited, 1993), education researcher Stephen Krashen says free school reading programs are consistently effective—more than 90 percent of student readers do as well or better than those engaged in traditional language arts programs. Krashen adds that the California Assess-
ment Program (CAP) reports a direct correlation between the amount eighth graders say they read each day and their test scores on the CAP English and language arts test. Furthermore, the "independent learner" part of the Information Power standards for student learning states that the pupil "who is an independent learner is information literate and appreciates literature and other creative expressions of information."

The school librarian can run his or her program in collaboration with classroom teachers, reading specialists, and other educators, exciting students about books and media, as well as providing easy access to rich book and media collections. As a reading advocate, school librarians fulfill the teacher and instructional partnership expectations of Information Power.

Information management extends beyond building and managing library collections and services. As in many other organizations, each school needs a chief information officer or CIO. The CIO oversees information services, systems, and resources, while delivering information and technology facilities, resources, and services.

The CIO fulfills two roles outlined in Information Power: information specialist and program administrator. As an information specialist, the school librarian provides leadership and expertise in acquiring and evaluating all kinds of information; builds collaborative relationships with teachers, administrators, students, and others; and creates strategies for locating, accessing, and evaluating information within and beyond the library media center.

As program administrator, the school librarian works collaboratively with members of the learning community to define policies and guide and direct all related library activities. This requires proficiency in the use of information and information technologies; the ability to provide knowledge, vision, and leadership; and being able to plan, execute, and evaluate the program regularly and on different levels. This vision and agenda have a direct impact on student learning and achievement and ensure that students are effective users of ideas and information.

**Be Strategic**

Librarians seem to treat "strategic management" as a dirty phrase, something to be avoided or minimized at best. It should be just the opposite: strategic management turns vision into reality. As shown above, our vision is clear. But hard work alone isn't enough. Turning the vision of the school library program into reality requires two essential elements of good management: strategic thinking and strategic planning.

Strategic thinking is a way to approach problems and opportunities. Effective strategic thinking centers on attitude, insight, and political savvy, as well as flexibility. In many ways, attitude is everything. Success starts with attitude. A positive attitude breeds positive results, a negative one breeds failure. If you think you can't make something happen, chances are you won't. If you think you can, at least you have a fighting chance. Attributes of a positive attitude include passion, enthusiasm, optimism, and energy. Successful school librarians are often characterized by their positive can-do attitudes.

I'm not suggesting that school librarians be overly optimistic. Schools and libraries face changing demands, not to mention financial difficulties. But it's time to stop whining. Instead, start spreading the message that school library programs promote student achievement and well-being.

Insight and political savvy mean recognizing and taking advantage of opportunities, connecting with key players, and being seen as a positive and vital force within the school. Your library program must also have a direct link to school initiatives, concerns, and priorities (see figure 2 for some key questions to consider and actions to take).

Being politically savvy also means involving others in decision making. Create a formal library advisory committee composed of a key administrator and two or three classroom teachers who are "movers and shakers." Others, such as parents, technology or curriculum coordinators, and students, may be added.

A library advisory committee reinforces the view that the library isn't the personal domain of the school librarian—it belongs to everyone in the school community. A library advisory committee also provides a support base for the library program and librarian. Not only do its members lend clout, but it also creates a mechanism for setting priorities, troubleshooting, and long-term planning.

The library advisory committee should meet regularly to:

- Advise on the broad program.
- Set priorities for the library program.
- Help the librarian and staff determine where to spend most of their time and effort.
- Troubleshoot immediate problems.
- Engage in long-term problem solving and planning for major objectives and concerns.
- Establish policies.

Flexibility is central to strategic thinking. There are few absolutes in education: program needs and priorities change from year to year. This year, for example, your school's focus may be on improving reading scores through coordinated schoolwide efforts. This would likely call for an increased emphasis on your role as a reading advocate, while maintaining or perhaps reducing activities related to information
literacy instruction or information management. Next year, however, the school may focus on integrating technology into classrooms, and the library program will have to shift its emphasis accordingly. The library advisory committee can play a very useful role in these decisions, as well as getting the message out to the rest of the school.

Strategic planning deserves an article in itself, but here are a few core elements to focus on: a systems approach; analysis and planning; and implementation and documentation of outputs.

A systems approach means looking at an organization in terms of inputs, processes, and outputs. For example, inputs refer to the building blocks of the library program—the staff, resources, information technology systems, facilities, and budget. Outputs are the services, instruction, and resources that the program provides to students and faculty. When describing their programs, librarians frequently focus on the inputs when they should be promoting the outputs. Decision makers don’t care so much about inputs. They’re more interested in the results—what programs provide for students.

The three main outputs of a library program are instruction, reading advocacy, and information management. They can be subdivided even further, for example, into information and technology skills instruction, reading guidance activities, and information services, facilities, and collection services.

Processes turn inputs into outputs. They include analysis, decision making, implementation strategies, planning, managing, and communication. Formal processes are critical to achieving the ultimate output—getting students to become effective users of ideas and information.

Analysis and planning are crucial. Analyze what is currently real, what is desired, and then plan how to get there. Once the analysis is complete, implement a rolling five-year plan to get the desired results. This plan starts with specific objectives and shifts to a more general plan projecting into the future. The whole point is to make planning an ongoing process that requires continuous revision and reevaluation. A rolling plan does not imply never reaching one’s goals. In fact, you should be able to look back at any period and determine whether your original objectives, steps, and goals were attained.

Finally, some points about implementation and documentation of outputs. Many school librarians don’t adequately document the activities of their library programs. Anecdotal information is not enough. The name of the game is accountability. If any data collection and reporting is done, it’s usually based on inputs: size of the collection, numbers of books and other materials (including computers), or the facility itself. Usually, circulation statistics are the only output-oriented numbers reported. Circulation statistics, however, only tell a very small part of the library program story—and sometimes a misleading one. In many secondary schools, for example, book circulation is low simply because most students use electronic and periodical resources—not because they don’t read. Remember, the library program centers on three primary activities: information literacy instruction, reading advocacy, and information management. These are the areas that need to be documented with clear evidence of what the program is doing (see figure 3 for an example of how to document your teaching efforts).

Communicate Continuously

Let’s face it, school librarians do a poor job of getting the word out about the importance of their library programs. It’s critical for your principal and administration to fully embrace the vision of an active, engaged library program. Much more can be accomplished when you have the support of the entire school community.

A memo to the principal is a nice way to keep the administration apprised of the value, progress, and future of your program. A memo will enlighten the principal and others of the important work you’re doing with student learning. It should also emphasize the Information Power vision to ensure that students are effective users of ideas and information.

![Figure 2. Essential questions and actions to consider.](www.slj.com)
Documenting Your Teaching Efforts

Many librarians don't formally keep track of how their library programs contribute to student achievement. Here's an example of how to document your efforts. The first six columns outline the grade, teacher's initials, unit, subject, assignment, and quarter the subject is being taught. Tick off the remaining columns, which list the Big6 skills, if information literacy skills are being taught or if they are just touched upon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GR</th>
<th>TCHR</th>
<th>UNIT</th>
<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>ASSIGNMENT</th>
<th>QTR</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>COMMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>SEB</td>
<td>Current Events</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>Report</td>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>Addresses all Big6 skills year round.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>ARB</td>
<td>Poetry</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Short Written Assignment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>Encourages students to write creative poems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>MET</td>
<td>Graphs</td>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Product</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>Emphasizes various graphs and spreadsheet software.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>TCH</td>
<td>Recycling</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>Product</td>
<td>2 3</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>Introduces technology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>HJW</td>
<td>Map Skills</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>Worksheet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>Teaches how to use maps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>TMJ</td>
<td>Noise</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Written Report</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>Builds on students' understanding of technology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>CER</td>
<td>Diet and Nutrition</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Posters</td>
<td>1 3</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>A comprehensive health unit offered twice a year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>CER</td>
<td>Tobacco and Smoking</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>Test</td>
<td>1 3</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>✔️</td>
<td>Reinforces an understanding of the dangers of smoking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In your memo, describe the library program's major accomplishments for the year. Use an introductory sentence or two and then bullet or highlight the library's programs in terms of:
- Learning and teaching.
- Information access and delivery.
- Program administration.

Then emphasize the following outputs (teaching and other services):
- Information and technology literacy efforts.
- Information literacy standards.
- How they were integrated with classroom learning.
- Their quantitative impact on learning (i.e., number of classes and students taught).
- Reading advocacy efforts.
- Role of technology, including the Internet, networks, and other tools.

You can also supplement your regular communications by setting up a Web site with quarterly updates and highlights on your and your students' accomplishments. Consider putting together an online discussion group for administrators and parents.

Make sure this vision is embraced by students, administration, other teacher-librarians, and parents. And meet with them regularly. Make the task of producing information-literate students a community-wide challenge.

By embracing this vision and strategy, we can transform library programs and the role of the librarian. Remember, be active and engaged: you are an information literacy teacher, reading advocate, and chief information officer. Think strategically and politically. By taking a systematic approach, you will not only improve your own program, but also gain attention and widespread support. Wherever you are, and to whomever you speak, make sure you communicate the vision of the 21st-century teacher-librarian.

Michael B. Eisenberg is dean of the Information School of the University of Washington in Seattle. Danielle H. Miller is an assistant to the dean and a student in the Master of Library and Information Science program at the university.

Adapted from The New Improved Big6 Workshop Handbook (Linworth, 1999).