School librarians often write mission statements that include the goal of students becoming “lifelong learners.” This is also one of the goals of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Learning4Life (L4L) program that is designed to help implement AASL’s new Standards for the 21st-Century Learner and Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs.

Turning students into lifelong learners is not easily accomplished. How do school librarians ensure that students have a zeal for learning? How do they encourage, cajole, or entice students to want to learn? The answer lies in empowering students with the skills they need to enjoy researching as well as reading for information and pleasure. Allowing students to take control of their own learning may be intimidating, but the L4L program and new standards provide a framework to help accomplish this goal. This month, Management Matters continues its focus on the new L4L initiative by asking how school librarians can empower learners.

An Environment for Student Learning

The first step is to make sure the school library program is the best it can be. This includes making the facility inviting with enough appropriate resources for all students to find information for academic or leisure needs. It also includes making sure that administrative tasks are secondary to the teaching role of the school librarian. School librarians should have student-focused goals for the program—with a plan for every student to improve research skills.

Through collaborative partnerships, the school librarian can make curriculum connections and forge collegial friendships with classroom teachers to create learning opportunities for students. Through these efforts, teachers also discover that the school librarian can provide resources, lessons, and an environment to help students learn. In addition, these collaborative efforts demonstrate to students that many adults are invested in their learning interests and needs.

School Librarians as Lifelong Learners

To encourage and enable student learning, school librarians must have up-to-date teaching strategies and methods to teach students to find information in meaningful ways. They must work with teachers to help empower students in developing critical thinking skills. Internet search skills and interaction with appropriate software and resources bring a much more meaningful and engaging learning experience to students than taking notes and parroting facts back to teachers.

It is, therefore, essential for school librarians to model the dispositions found in the AASL standards by pursuing professional development through coursework, collaborating with colleagues, joining study groups, and sharing what is learned with staff and students. School librarians must know what appeals to students; they must research Web sites that pertain to future class assignments; and they must know Web 2.0 technologies so they can apply them to student learning. School librarians who are constantly learning can effectively create school library environments needed for learning by both students and other staff members.

Fulfilling Standard 3

A well-organized school library with current resources, led by a well-informed school librarian certainly helps to lay the groundwork for empowering learners. In addition, the new AASL Standards with skills, dispositions, responsibilities, and self-assessment strategies provide easily identifiable traits that lead to student empower-
Making Community Connections

The school librarian can also collaborate with community members as a way of addressing their concerns and interests. Many community members contribute to schools by participating on School Advisory Councils or Parent Teacher Associations. By joining these groups, the school librarian can exchange ideas about student learning and help the group identify effective fundraising goals. Participation by the school librarian helps community members understand the characteristics and role of a quality school library program and how the mission of the school library addresses the goal of lifelong learning for students. Community members also learn how they, in turn, can support the school library to better meet the learning needs of all students.

In Summary

Marco Torres, speaking in the closing session of the 2009 AASL national conference in North Carolina, asserted that reading is a result of interest and interest is a result of exposure. When the first word of this statement is changed to learning the result is learning is a result of interest and interest is a result of exposure—it easily reflects the central meaning of student empowerment. Becoming an empowered learner does not happen overnight. It results from careful exposure to ideas, concepts, and skills that nurture curiosity, creativity, and interest in students. By carefully piquing student interest on all levels, school librarians empower them to become life long learners.

Students in elementary school can find information and ascertain facts from what they read to draw conclusions and develop higher thinking skills. Middle school students can investigate school environmental issues and create a recycling program as a result. High school students can produce a video on the power of one vote after they investigate the democratic process.

Each of these examples represents the actions of empowered learners who have gained valuable skills and learning dispositions. With school librarians and teachers working together, students can find information to intrigue them and lead them to further investigations. That is what L4L is all about. Students who ask questions and are capable of seeking and finding answers will be successful in the 21st Century. That is why it is important for school librarians to be part of the effort to empower students with the skills necessary to seek information they need to answer questions and solve problems in both school and society.

References:


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AASL Standards for the 21st-Century Learner are free to download at http://www.ala.org/aasl/standards