

To: The administration, faculty, and staff of _____ Elementary School
From: Amanda Hitson, Media Specialist

The _____ Elementary School Library: A New Beginning

Introduction:

Working at _____ Elementary is a highly rewarding experience. Though our students and school are largely underestimated in our community, WE know the truth: Our students are beautiful, bright, strong, intelligent, and highly capable of meeting a multitude of challenges most children will never have to face. Our teachers are professional, dedicated, hard-working, and caring individuals who strive to meet the needs of these students every day. But while our work comes with many rewards, we also face a large number of challenges:

- 98% of our students are minorities
- 95% are of a low socioeconomic status
- 20% take part in the English as a Second Language Program
- 4% are non-English speakers
- 15% have one or more learning disabilities
- Our neighborhood has, by far, the highest crime rate in _____ County
- Many of our children are living in foster situations

The last few years have been a struggle for our library, particularly due to inconsistent staffing, but that does not mean we have to restart the program from scratch. Figure 1 illustrates one of several things our library program is doing well—connecting with the community—but there is still much room for improvement in this and many other areas. Research consistently proves that good school library programs and highly qualified media specialists increase student achievement on standardized tests (Scholastic, 2008). Since students at our school have traditionally struggled with these tests, it is imperative that we make some changes to ensure our library makes a positive impact on student achievement. With these ideas in mind, I have created the following outline to illustrate areas in which the library and media specialist can contribute to the school community and enhance student learning.

The Future of Our Program:

Two important factors have guided the development of this outline. First, I believe the school library and the media specialist must become a fully integrated part of the larger communities in which they are situated (i.e. the school, neighborhood, city, district, etc.) and strive to meet the needs of all of these communities in various ways. Second, I believe the media specialist must take on a leadership role in the school in addition to contributing as an active member of the instructional staff.



Figure 1: Third grade students listening to “Ben Franklin” read aloud, courtesy of the Friends of the _____ Library

Information Literacy:

While the traditional role of the media specialist has been to teach information literacy skills, some confusion exists about what these skills actually are and how they are important to the students. The University of Idaho defines information literacy as “the ability to identify what information is needed, understand how the information is organized, identify the best sources of information for a given need, locate those sources, evaluate the sources critically, and share that information” (2011). These skills are important to students as a foundation to other forms of literacy, such as textual and visual literacies, and are necessary for reading development and critical thinking skills. Media specialists, with knowledge of information seeking processes and armed with information literacy standards developed by the American Association for School Librarians, are set to lead the way in teaching these important skills. To do this properly, however, we must rethink our established ideas of learning and incorporate an inquiry based approach to our lessons.

Inquiry Based Study:

Harada claims, “Learning is not a fixed world of knowledge that the student must come to know. Instead, it is dynamic, constantly morphing, and filled with both uncertainties and possibilities” (2010: 14). Our role as educators then becomes one of helping students construct knowledge and teaching them the processes needed to learn on their own rather than passing on a series of facts designed for memorization. If we look at learning and teaching in this way, we see the students take on a much greater role in the learning process, requiring them to develop the skills needed to continue learning and adapt to various situations they encounter in secondary school and adult life. We also give the students a feeling of control over their education, and even their lives, that they desperately need given the issues many of them encounter in their home lives. Stripling defines understanding as “...the end stage of a continuum of learning: facts to information to knowledge to understanding” (2007: 38). Our guiding question must then be: How do we get there?

The simple answer is that our instruction needs to shift, becoming more inquiry based. Inquiry based instruction is grounded in constructivist theory and is, according to Stripling, “...an essence of teaching and learning that places students at the heart of learning by empowering them to follow their sense of wonder into new discoveries and insights...” (2003: 4). To guide this teaching and learning, she has identified an inquiry process that includes the six phases explained in fuller detail in Table 1. It is important to note, however, that while the process may seem linear with a definitive beginning and end, it should actually be viewed as a spiral since “...each inquiry experience should lead to new understandings and new questions and, therefore, new inquiry” (Stripling, 2003: 7). This may seem quite complicated, but we have already made steps in this direction. The Learning Focused lesson plan format we currently use corresponds well with Stripling’s framework (See Table 2).

Table 1: Stripling’s Linear Description of the Inquiry Process (Based on Stripling, 2003: 7-17)

Connect:	Wonder:	Investigate:	Construct:	Express:	Reflect:
Connect to prior knowledge and/or create background knowledge	Develop questions and make predictions	Plan investigation, identify sources, evaluate information	Construct new understanding based on prior knowledge and investigation	Apply new understanding and communicate it to others	Reflect on learning and learning process, adapt process as needed

Collaboration:

To achieve this goal of increased inquiry based learning, we must place great emphasis on collaboration. Cox tells us, “Collaboration is one of the defining characteristics of the 21st century, but many educators are still searching for ways to embrace this idea in their schools” (2009: 11). This is a

perfect opportunity for media specialists and teachers to work together for the benefit of students. As Scholastic explains, "School libraries have the most significant impact on learning outcomes when they are supervised by a library media specialist, who works collaboratively with teachers..." (2008: 6). While our school has made great efforts to increase collaborative efforts, the role of the media specialist has been limited to one of cooperation so far. In cooperating with teachers, the media specialist has been teaching lessons that contribute to the school's curriculum but are separated from the actual content that has been taught in the classroom. The media specialist has also cooperated by finding resources for teachers related to topics of classroom study. To truly collaborate, however, the media specialist and teachers must work together to create inquiry based unit plans, with the media specialist taking an active role in planning, implementing, and assessing units designed around grade level content standards and incorporating the development of information literacy skills. We could begin to accomplish this by having the media specialist participate in grade level meetings whenever possible and begin strategizing collaboration opportunities with the teachers.

Family and Community Connections:

These collaboration efforts should also be extended to our larger community as well including the families of our students. To begin, we need to increase the library's visibility and communication with parents through newsletters and by further developing the school's website. While our school's resource coordinator and the resource library are doing an excellent job of providing family literacy programs and connecting the parents with the operations of the school, our library has not been used to its full potential in this regard. Mackey and Pitcher (2007: 84-85) have made several suggestions of ways the library can promote family literacy that could be incorporated into our program, such as:

- reading nights, in which families read together then come to school one evening for group discussion
- computer nights, in which families learn computer skills together (this could be particularly helpful to many of our families who don't have home computers)
- allowing parents to check out books from the school library in addition to the resource library

Our connection to local organizations such as Friends of the _____ Library, The _____ Sea Turtle Center, and The _____ Theatre have always been one of the major strengths of our library program and should continue to be developed in the future.

Open Access to the Library for a Variety of Resources:

To reach out to our students and communities, our library needs to provide more open access to resources that meet the need of all of our learners. The number of books students are allowed to check out should be increased since they are currently only allowed to have one at a time. Many of our students do not have access to other sources of books, so this limit can be very detrimental to their reading development. Since our school is based in a community where most of the students are able to walk, it would also make sense to increase our hours to allow students and family members to visit the library before or after school. Additionally, our online presence needs to be increased to give students access to multimedia resources at school and at home. We could do this by developing pathfinders (essentially annotated online resource lists) for various standards and place links to them on our library webpage. Though Cox laments, "Schools are plagued by policies and budgets that stifle the use of Web 2.0 resources, the very ones that enable collaboration to blossom" (2009: 11), many of these resources are also free and would integrate very well with our existing classroom technology including interactive whiteboards and mobile devices.

The diversity of our student population should also be influencing the selection of library resources in many ways. At the base level, this means more effort should be placed on purchasing resources that reflect the cultures, ethnicities, races, religions, abilities, and languages of our student

population. It also means that students should have some input in the selection process. Selected resources should not be limited solely to traditional books and should reflect the reading preferences of our students as well, possibly including e-books and audio books. In addition, Zambone, et. al. explain the importance of the library to students with special needs:

The school library media center allows students with disabilities to disassociate from the failure or frustration of the classroom. It provides access to a variety of materials that complement their learning strengths; presents opportunities to work independently or in smaller groups; and empowers choices, such as working at an area other than a typical classroom desk and/or making selections from varied resources (2009: 264).

The needs of these students must also be taken into account, possibly requiring the incorporation assistive technology including specialized software into the library program.

Applying a Research Model:

As of this school year, the _____ County School System is requiring us to place more emphasis on the research aspects of the English/Language Arts curriculum so students will be better prepared for secondary and post-secondary education. For our efforts to be successful, it is imperative for us to adopt a school-wide research model to provide students with proper training in research skills and give them needed consistency between grade levels. Additionally, the adoption of such a model will provide teachers with the necessary training and professional development resources to teach these research skills. In the selection of a research model, it is important that we choose one that is developmentally appropriate for our students and corresponds well with program concepts already established, such as the importance of information literacy, inquiry based instruction, collaboration, and assessment.

The Big 6 Research Model:

I believe the best model to serve this purpose is The Big 6. With only six stages and a variety of developed visual models available online, this model can easily be adapted to be developmentally appropriate for all of our students. In fact, the authors of the model have already adapted it to a simplified three step process known as The Super 3 for younger children such as those in Prekindergarten through 2nd grade. Using the adapted model will assist us in providing consistency for the students and will help them when it's time to make the transition to The Big 6 model. In addition to the two models' connection with each other, they also easily translate to the stages identified in Stripling's model of the inquiry process and the stages of our Learning Focused lesson plan formats as is demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Comparing The Big 6/Super 3 research models, Stripling's inquiry model (see Table 1), and the Learning Focused lesson format

Super 3	Big 6	Stripling's Model	Learning Focused
Plan	Task Definition	Connect/Wonder	Activating Strategies
	Information Seeking Strategies	Investigate	Teaching Strategies
Do	Location and Access		
	Use of Information	Construct	
	Synthesis	Express	Assessment
Review	Evaluation	Reflect	Summarizer

Table 2 shows that both models clearly relate to the inquiry process, which in turn, relates strongly to information literacy. Eisenberg, one of the authors of The Big 6, even goes so far as to claim

his program “...is information literacy” (2010). Referring back to the University of Idaho’s definition of information literacy, it is easy to apply the stages of The Big Six:

- the ability to identify what information is needed [**Task Definition**]
- understand how the information is organized and identify the best sources of information for a given need [**Information Seeking Strategies**]
- locate those sources [**Location and Access**]
- evaluate the sources critically [**Use of Information**]
- share that information [**Synthesis**]

One drawback to the model is that as it’s presented, it seems very linear and therefore difficult to adapt. Harada claims, “[Learning] is a nonlinear and messy process that involves invention and self-organization on the part of the learner” (2010: 13). Milam assures us that the model can be seen and used as “...a non-linear process that is applicable to a variety of information problem-solving situations” (2004: 20). Table 3 provides examples of both versions of the model in action.

Table 3: Examples of The Big 6 and The Super 3 in Action

<p>BIG 6: During a writing workshop in which students are focusing on informative writing, Ke’Myah, a third grader, decides she would like to write about sharks.</p> <p>TASK DEFINITION: She uses a thinking map to brainstorm a list of things she wants to know about sharks, including how they sleep, what they eat, and how big they can be.</p> <p>INFORMATION SEEKING STRATEGIES: She determines that she can look for books in the school library and on the internet.</p> <p>LOCATION AND ACCESS: With the assistance of the media specialist, Ke’Myah is able to locate two books about sharks in the library. She also makes plans to use her afternoon free period to conduct her internet search.</p> <p>USE OF INFORMATION: Using a tree map to record her findings, Ke’Myah begins reading her books and searching the Web for information. She finds several articles and two videos she can use.</p> <p>SYNTHESIS: Back in writing workshop, Ke’Myah uses the notes from her tree map to write an informative essay about sharks. She also elects to read this essay aloud and take comments and questions from her peers.</p> <p>EVALUATION: While she feels satisfied with her essay, Ke’Myah tells her teacher that the amount of information she found in her search was overwhelming and not all of it related to her topic. She and the teacher strategize ways to filter information in the future.</p>
<p>SUPER 3: Four-year-old Zachary is preparing to select his workstation for his class’s daily center time.</p> <p>PLAN: His teacher, Ms. Johnson, asks him what he plans to do during his work time. Since the class has been studying insects, Zachary thinks for a minute and tells Ms. Johnson he would like to go to the art station to build an insect costume. Before going, Zachary decides he will need a book with pictures of insects so he will know what to include in his costume.</p> <p>DO: In the art station, he begins to construct his costume based on one of the book’s illustrations. He glues several pieces of paper together and uses pipe cleaners to fasten them to his arms as wings, then creates a headband out of paper strips and attaches bendable straws as antennae.</p> <p>REVIEW: When the class comes together after center time, Zachary proudly presents his costume to the class, explaining each part and comparing it to the illustration from the science book. As he is reflecting, he notices the six legs of the insect and considers using the next day’s work time to make them as an addition to his costume.</p>

Conclusion:

Though our school is faced with many challenges, one research proven method for increasing our students’ achievement is through the development of strong school library program that focuses on the needs of the community and is developed collaboratively by teachers and the media specialist. The focus of this program should be to provide inquiry based instruction to enhance the school’s standards based curriculum and teach information literacy skills through the use of a research model, such as The Big 6.

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The Elementary School Library Program

Positively Impacting Student Achievement

