

The Media Specialist in the Millenium: *The Challenge*

by Marilyn Miller

There is an imperative for change in school library media programs today. The subject is indeed a serious one because media specialists should be thinking about preparing themselves to function as twenty-first century media persons in school systems that are themselves restructuring. Some of what is stated here will be reflected in the new national guidelines that are scheduled for publication in 1998. I hope that, after reading this, school library media personnel will be encouraged to (1) consider their priorities for involvement in the instructional program so that students may be more effective learners; (2) think about their role in the integration and the administration of technology in the curriculum; and (3) be motivated towards more personal professional development in the learning of new skills and abilities necessitated by their efforts in points one and two.

As my years in school librarianship have drawn to a close, I have done a great deal of thinking about developments and trends in the field. For 43 years I have devoted the majority of my waking hours to running a school library, to trying to motivate others to change their practices, and to preparing librarians, the majority of whom have sought positions in school library media centers. I have done this as practitioner, supervisor, teacher, researcher, and activist in professional associations. What I have learned after these 43 years is that the bell is tolling the

end of the school library movement as we have known it, and, perhaps, as some of us had wished it would remain.

We have to deal with the fact that not only are we coming to the end of a century; we are coming to the end of an era. Until now, ownership of capital goods has been the designation of power. In the future, however, power will come from knowing how to access information, how to use information, how to create information, and how to disseminate information. If it is true that preoccupation with information and with its access, transmission, and creation will shape the new era, then there will be captains of information, not captains of industry, because although there is talk of information being a commodity, no one can own information.

Futhermore, I would like to think that the power brokers of the twenty-first century will be the information specialists — the librarians — and not the bankers and the stock brokers of the world. If we recognize and adjust to the idea of a new era, a cultural shift, and a revolution of great import in which the masses become the creators as well as the consumers of information, then we will have our work cut out for us. For a while we may continue to live in the world of books and in the expanding world of the Internet where 25 mil-

lion users now reside. The world of the Internet and/or virtual library access will certainly dominate in the twenty-first century. It is my belief that school library media professionals could make a difference in how effectively these technologies are used in schools.

What do we use for a road map as we prepare for the twenty-first century? Since the appearance of the first school library standards in 1945, our library media programs have used national standards to define our philosophy as a set of goals towards which we strive. The statement of school library philosophy which is being developed now will be expressed in two basic parts: one will be an updating of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL)/Association for Educational Communications and Technology's (AECT) *Information Power*; the second will be a set of models and

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strategies that will assist library media professionals as they collaborate with teachers in designing instructional programs. It is my privilege to serve as coordinator of two of the committees that are involved with the standards: the Vision Committee, charged with writing the guidelines, and the Implementation Committee, charged with devising tools and strategies to help us implement and promote the new guidelines. These committees are heavily involved with the philosophy of the guidelines, which will direct the preparation of the next national position statement about our field.

The guidelines are being designed to address the information explosion that has altered dramatically the knowledge and skills required for pro-

ductive and critical expertise to this new educational context.

Central to these developments is the concept of the "learning community" — a vast assembly that is student-centered and that also encompasses teachers, administrators, and parents as well as the local, regional, state, national, and international communities in which we live. The learning community of the twenty-first century is not limited by time, place, or disciplinary borders, but rather is linked by interest, need, and a growing array of telecommunications technology. The student at the center of this community is connected to the world not only by physical means and shared experiences, but also by information needs that are ever-changing and

transdisciplinary. Basic to the productive functioning of the community, then, is the student's proficiency in information access, evaluation, and use.

As the human interface who connects students, teachers, and others with the information resources they need, the library media specialist already plays a unique and pivotal role in the emerging learning community. As information specialist, the media professional provides skill in locating, accessing, and evaluating information within and beyond the media center. Working in an environment that has been affected profoundly by technology, the media specialist must both master sophisticated electronic resources and maintain a constant focus on the nature and quality of the information available in these and in the more traditional tools.

As teacher, the media specialist analyzes the learning and information needs of members of the community, guides them to resources that will meet those needs, and helps them to understand and communicate the information the resources provide. Like any effective instructor, the specialist is knowledgeable about current research on teaching and learning, and skilled in applying its findings to a variety of situations.

As information consultant, the media specialist joins with teachers and others to identify links across student information needs, curricular content, learning outcomes, and a wide variety of print and electronic information resources. Committed to the process of collaboration, the specialist

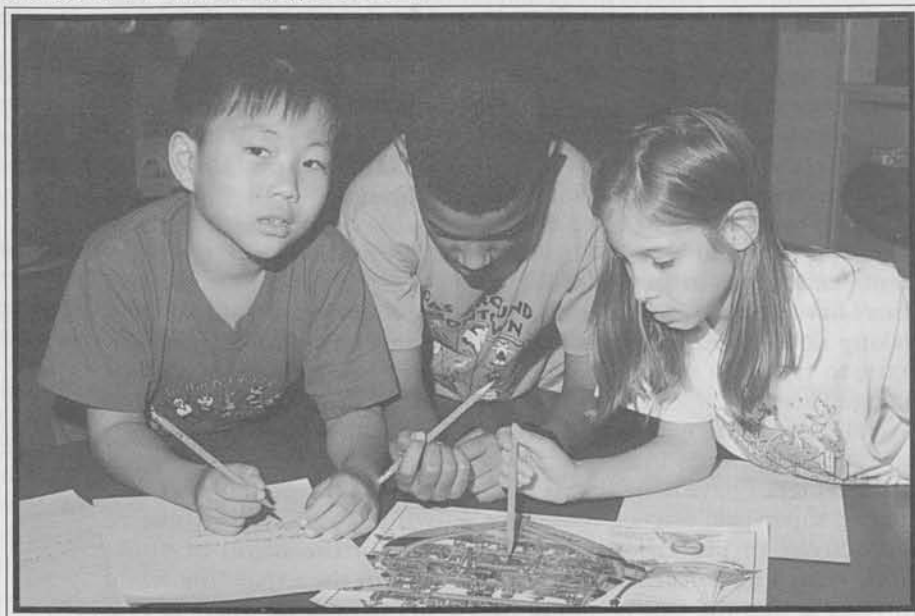


Pictured above: Students produce outstanding projects when they work collaboratively.

Pictured below: While creating meaningful projects, students work with many types of media.

ductive living in the twenty-first century. Today's and tomorrow's students must become efficient and effective users of information from a variety of sources and in multiple formats, if they are to thrive in the emerging "information age." Indeed, the student resides at the center of an educational context that has been radically transformed by the ready availability of vast stores of information.

Library media specialists have been immersed for years in the rapid and continuing expansion of information, and our profession has pioneered in identifying and meeting the learning needs brought about by these developments. Now, as the new century looms directly ahead, the library media specialist is poised to bring distinc-



works closely with teachers in the critical task of helping students master the information-use components inherent in disciplinary standards.

As a full participant on the instructional team, the media specialist brings skills in both leadership and group membership to a variety of professional challenges involved in working with the entire school community to guide students to develop the abilities they need to thrive in the classroom and in the world beyond. Facilitating students' growth in these abilities is the key to creating the learning community, and this task provides the primary focus of a student-centered library media program. Accordingly, the library media specialist's work begins with promoting skills in reading, listening, and viewing. It expands to include fostering the full range of information concepts, strategies, and skills students must master to profit from the global resources that are, quite literally, at their fingertips. Further, it includes developing the critical thinking skills that students will need to understand the complex ethical issues related to intellectual freedom, copyright and intellectual property, and equitable access to information in an age of global interconnectivity.

Such concepts have long been the concern of the library media specialist, who is uniquely positioned to serve students and teachers as the new century dawns. Drawing upon the field's traditional emphasis on the critical evaluation and use of information, the library media specialist has a vital role to play in establishing the learning community of the coming century. The library media specialist's role and program are key to helping students, teachers, and other school and community leaders develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to flourish in the information age.

This discussion puts the media specialist and the program at the intellectual heart of the school. But is our profession ready? There are

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always obstacles to moving forward. Some of the challenges, along with possible strategies for meeting them follow:

1. There is a prevailing attitude that schools are failing. We as media professionals can help teachers be successful, and we can help students become engaged in their own learning.
2. New organizational structures are appearing in schools. We can use a planning model to develop budgets that show the impact of short-changing the media program over the years; we can lobby; we can prepare documentation to justify centralized resources.
3. There is less money to spend on books. The *School Library Journal* report in the October 1995 issue shows that we are now spending as much on non-book materials as we are on book materials. Data indicates that non-book expenditures

will continue to outstrip print resources. Are there organizational changes, resource use patterns, marketing strategies to be developed that will bring in more money or help stretch the money available for media programs?

Failure for media programs resides in the failure of media specialists to become involved in the curriculum, in their failure to master the basic techniques of public relations and marketing, and in their failure to become knowledgeable of how children learn. Unless we can offer options, strategies, and techniques that will help

all teachers and students, we have lost part of the battle for funds and attention before we even begin.

The successful media program will be one in which the media specialist collaborates with teachers, both reluctant and eager, and where the media specialist is involved in the many networking options that occur in the schools. The successful media specialist connects with appropriate professional groups and builds a program on flexibility, approachability, knowledge, and abilities that grow year by year.

Media specialists in each district are only as strong as the weakest specialist. If directing a media program is just a job, we are all in trouble. If the physical media center facility, rather than the entire school building, is the focus of the program, we are in trouble. Unless we are seen as essential to the use of information, the learning of students, and the instructional skills of teachers, we are

dispensable. Let us look in the mirror and talk turkey about our performance and how we can improve ourselves for the challenges of restructured schools and demanding communities of the twenty-first century.

Note

1. American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communications and Technology, *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs*, (Chicago: ALA, 1988).



Automated circulation frees media specialists to spend more time with students.