
The Media Specialist in the Millennium: Accepting the Challenge

by Diane Kessler

The following article is a response to the preceding one entitled "The Media Specialist in the Millennium: The Challenge" by Dr. Marilyn Miller. Both articles grew out of a growing concern across the profession for the role of the media specialist in the twenty-first century.

In the past few years it has become increasingly difficult to open any library/media journal and not find an article or two warning of the dire straits in which school library media personnel find themselves and how library media specialists are going to have to change their ways of thinking and methods of doing business in order to survive. All across the country, media centers are being closed, or at best kept open on a part-time basis, or run by clerks instead of media professionals. Faced with budget cuts, school boards and school administrators quite often are deciding that the obvious place to make savings is through cutting library/media programs.

Why are these catastrophic events happening, particularly at a time when technology is becoming more and more important throughout the education process and especially in media centers? And why should these occurrences be important to media personnel in the public schools of North Carolina? After all, we are still employed; in fact, almost every public school in North Carolina has a media professional on staff. And, as almost any administrator who deals with media programs in North Carolina will tell you, currently there are simply not

enough applicants for all the media center jobs that are open across the state. In short, school library media personnel in North Carolina are sitting in the catbird seat and have nothing to worry about, right? Wrong!

Even though the cutbacks to and elimination of school media programs and/or staff have not affected us to any great degree as yet, it is time for media professionals in the Tar Heel State to become aware of what is happening to media programs elsewhere across the country. History shows us that educational trends, once they have taken hold, tend to spread from state to state and from district to district. We can already see an alarming tendency in North Carolina to separate media and

technology from one another and place them in totally unrelated departments within school districts. In fact, the most popular trend is to put *all* technology within a school district into the Information Management Systems (IMS) area, not withstanding the fact that the usual IMS staff has little, if any, actual knowledge of instructional technology. In these cases, media programs and their directors are left with no input into the development of technology plans or programs.

So what should media professionals in North Carolina be doing? There are a number of actions that we must take as we approach the millennium. These can be lumped together into one observation: we must be prepared — for anything and everything that may occur in the future. And how do we get to this state of preparedness? We must become involved, informed, and proactive.

Be Involved

First, we must be professionally involved: we must join our professional organizations and regularly attend conferences and workshops, at the district, regional, state, and national levels. We also should be willing to make presentations at these conferences ourselves; after all, many of us are doing interesting and worthwhile things in our media centers that need to be shared with our colleagues.

In addition, we need to look at what, if anything, we are doing at the

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local level to involve media professionals. We could form our own interest groups for such topics as automation, *HyperStudio*, multi-cultural literature, and collection development. We could develop a listserv for our district. Newly hired media personnel (as well as some of us who have been around a while) could certainly benefit from support groups where all would feel free to ask questions, complain about problems, and look for solutions. We need to keep in mind that in most schools there is only one media professional, and it is vital that we have the time and the opportunity to meet with colleagues and develop networks of support.

Another area where we all must be vitally involved is at the individual school building level. We must be an integral part of the educational process in our schools and the best way to ensure that we are is through use of the *Teacher Handbook: Information Skills/Computer Skills K-12* developed by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) in Raleigh. This crucial document illustrates exactly how the teaching of information skills should be integrated into the curriculum as a whole and not taught in isolation. It is a clear, sequential road map of what students should learn from kindergarten through high school in the media center, and we all need to be sure that we are thoroughly familiar with it and have made it the cornerstone of our media programs. If, indeed, the curriculum is the basis for our media programs, then we will find ourselves and our programs totally involved in the whole curriculum.

It is imperative that good media coordinators be involved in all areas of the curriculum and that they wear as many hats as the job requires. How many hats do you wear on a normal day in your media center? There are, of course, the three hats and/or roles discussed in *Information Power* which we all wear/perform everyday: information specialist, teacher, and instructional consultant. As pointed out in *Information Power*, these roles are "separate but overlapping" and serve "to link the information resources and services of the library media program to the information needs and interests of the school's students and staff."¹

But there are many other

hats we should be wearing. Are you, for example, a member of your school's Site-Based Management Committee or School Improvement Committee? Do you have input into budget decisions? How active and involved is your own Media Advisory Committee (MAC)? Do the MAC members know of current trends in media and technology and are they aware of what may happen in the future? Their involvement depends on how much you have shared with them.

Be Informed

Secondly, we must be informed; that is, we must read widely and continuously in the professional literature in order to keep up to date on new developments and trends in our profession. We must be knowledgeable and prepared for the future and whatever it brings. There are numerous periodicals available in the field of librarianship in general and school librarianship in particular. Two that I particularly recommend are *School Library Journal (SLJ)* and *School Library Media Activities Monthly (SLMAM)*. If nothing else, we should all be sure that each month we have read Dan Barron's column, "Keeping Current," in *SLMAM*; this column stays abreast of new develop-

ments and trends and also cites other articles, books, and ideas that deal with media and educational issues confronting all of us.

Additionally, we can stay informed electronically. As more and more of us get access to e-mail, we should investigate listservs and subscribe to the ones that are of most interest to us. Of those that are now available, perhaps the most useful to school media personnel is LM_NET, a listserv designed for media personnel and subscribed to by thousands of librarians across the country. You can subscribe to this listserv by sending an e-mail request to: listserv@suvvm.syr.edu. In the body of the message simply state: **subscribe LM_NET firstname lastname**. One warning about this service: it is comprised of an extremely active and vocal group of media professionals, and there are numerous messages every day. If the message volume turns out to be too heavy for you, one possibility is to subscribe to the daily digest instead; it is much less time-consuming and yet you can still follow the virtual discussion. Other listservs, including one for Unison users and one for NCLA, are also available.

Knowledge about legislation affecting education and technology, especially at the state level, is an additional arena with which we need to be familiar. Public Schools of North Carolina (formerly the Department of Public Instruction) and NCASL publications and presentations help to keep all of us up to date on legislative activities. But once we have this information, what do we do with it? When was the last time any of us wrote or called our General Assembly representatives? When participants at the 1994 NCASL conference were given the opportunity to write to their North Carolina legislators, a large number did just that. The surprising number of letters concerning media and technology did make a difference in how legislators viewed bills that involved issues in which we are all interested.

Be Proactive

Thirdly, and by far most importantly, we must take a good, hard, individual look at ourselves, our profession, our attitudes, and our actions. We must decide how to become proactive, participating



Integrating the arts into the information skills curriculum helps students see the correlation between media centers and their classroom activities.

in the decision-making process, rather than simply reacting to decisions that already have been made.

Make no mistake: it is essential that we become more involved and proactive. As Daniel Barron points out in the December 1995 issue of *School Library Media Activities Monthly*, "... we don't need people who have no commitment or sense of purpose. This is not to say that we are not willing to coach, facilitate, nurture, or encourage others, but if individuals do not take responsibility for themselves and work toward what they believe in — especially in this profession — they are taking up valuable space and breathing valuable air."²

But how, exactly, do we become proactive? We begin by looking for methods to bring our program and its goals and objectives to the attention of the administrators. I once told a group of media specialists with whom I was working that I believe every school library media person needs to have the following as a goal: every building level media person should become so indispensable to the learning process in that particular school that if cuts have to be made, the principal will not even consider eliminating the media position. And if the principal did consider it, the faculty would be up in arms because how could they ever teach without that particular person!

Don't ever sell yourself and your abilities short. You may be only one person, but you can make a tremendous difference in a media center or in a school. Frances Jacobson found this to be true in her travels to media centers across America:

More than any other factor I was exposed to during these travels, I was continually struck by the power of the individual — whether media specialist or teacher or administrator — to either foster boundless opportunity or logjam all progress. The fragility of this power is revealed when the pivotal person is absent. A thriving program is likely to collapse; the very climate of the school can be transformed. To create lasting and meaningful growth, school culture must support a community of change — making individuals who, in working together, have to the power to establish a stable infrastructure. It is imperative for the school library media specialist to be a member of that community when so much is at stake.³

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We should, for example, anticipate that we are going to be held accountable for our media centers, their programs, and our efforts to affect how children learn. We are, after all, in charge of one of the most expensive, if not *the* most expensive, programs in the whole school, and we are highly visible. So we need to decide how to present library media services so that others will understand that we are a viable, vital part of the educational process. Good, positive public relations are imperative. Newsletters, memos, brochures highlighting the media center are always welcome, as are celebrations of National Library Week, Children's Book Week, and School Library Media Day. And, to paraphrase, "If you feed them, they will come": invite your teachers in for bagels, doughnuts, and/or cookies; and, while they are there, show them new materials, equipment, programs, and other possibilities.

Most importantly, we need to make our administrators aware of what we do every day and how vital a role we play in their school. A quarterly report of programming activities is always a good idea. With the advent of automation, we have numerous statistics about collection use at our fingertips. We also need to communicate just how wide-ranging our programs and our duties are; here is Martha Morrill's partial list from a recent article in *School Library Journal*:

... rattle off names of Newbery and Caldecott winners, whip up a book talk, set up for all-school activities, figure out the closed circuit equipment, operate 16mm and video cameras, and even set a timer on a VCR

... Monitoring an after-school video club ... Floppy disks, hard drives, eight megabytes of RAM, multimedia, Hypercard, CD-ROMs, and laserdiscs are a few of the terms and applications that we've learned.⁴

We deal with these and many more responsibilities every day. We must ensure that others are aware of our involvement.

We should always remember that we are making a case for our profession and our programs by what we do and say. We can best accomplish this by being prepared for what the next bend in the road will

bring, ready to change and respond to new demands and ideas. Through our professional organizations, through networking among ourselves, and through a thorough knowledge of trends and innovations, we can help determine our own futures and not be subject to the whims of administrators and school boards who have no idea of what we do. As Lesley S.J. Farmer noted in *The Book Report*, "In this sea of library and educational change, school librarians should look around to see how others are changing, and work with them to stay afloat and paddle ahead. What skills does each one have? How can each person and each function be matched to further change effectively? Working together for change, we can make a positive difference — in ourselves and for those we serve."⁵

References

¹ American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communications and Technology, *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs*. (Chicago: American Library Association 1988), 26.

² Daniel D. Barron, "Keeping Current: Beyond *Information Power*: Changing Our Guidelines in Changing Times (Part II)," *School Library Media Activities Monthly* 12 (December 1995): 49.

³ Frances F. Jacobson, "Road Scholar: A School Librarian Sets Out in Search of High-Tech Success," *School Library Journal* 41 (November 1995): 23.

⁴ Martha Morrill, "Roles 2000," *School Library Journal* 41 (January 1995): 32.

⁵ Lesley S.J. Farmer, "Changing Our Own & Others' Mindsets," *The Book Report* 13 (September/October 1994): 22.