

Reflections of an Empowered Library

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Lakeside Academy of Math, Science, and Technology is a Magnet School in Chattanooga, TN serving mostly an inner city population. At the present time, we have a diverse student body with about 70% minority and 53% on free/reduced meals. However, that has not always been the case.

In 1991 when I became the principal of Lakeside Elementary, 95% of our students were minority and 78% receiving free or reduced meals. The school ranked last in the System on the standardized test. Morale was at an all time low. No funds were available for staff development of any type and teachers were not implementing best practices. A paradigm shift was very necessary. In 1994, we had the opportunity to apply for a Readers' Digest DeWitt Wallace Grant which was for the purpose of school reform via the library. The funds were awarded to Lakeside and change was on the way.

The goal of the Library Power initiative was to enhance student learning by improving library services. The administration and librarian at Lakeside held to the following beliefs:

- Library Power was a school reform initiative and not limited to just library reform.
- Through Library Power the role of the media specialist changes to that of teacher, information specialist, as well as instructional consultant.
- Students are natural researchers and the library resources, opportunities, and training to enhance this natural inquisitiveness should be made available to them.
- Students must be given opportunities to explore, share, and appreciate reading, writing, and literature of many types.
- It is the role of the principal to facilitate full integration of the library program into the total curriculum.
- Library Power begins a developmental process which results in a child learning to read.
- All students and teachers deserve a library that is integral to student learning and has a collection correlated to the curriculum.
- All students and teachers deserve a library that is available to students when needed – not just one time a week for 30 minutes.

The library at Lakeside became the most vital part of the teaching and learning process. Teachers no longer view it as a “glorified babysitter” with the primary purpose of providing classroom teachers with a 30-45 minute break. It is the focal point in

holistic teaching and in bridging all aspects of art, science, mathematics, language arts and technology into the curriculum. The library changed from a resource center to a center of instruction, exploration and learning. No longer did the teachers plan and teach in isolation. The key to change was the collaborative planning between the library media specialist and the classroom teachers. The role of the librarian changed to that of an information specialist, a teacher and an instructional consultant.

According to Ken Haycock, collaboration means: “Professionals working together to design a program that works for kids.” That certainly is a far cry from what librarians historically have done. Lakeside’s librarian used to:

- schedule classes 30-45 minutes once a week
- presented authors and read stories once a week
- checked out books to students once a week
- taught library skills in January and February
- gathered materials for teacher – when they asked
- had some knowledge of the curriculum, but not in detail

She was “excellent” doing her own thing. The teachers were “excellent” doing their own thing. We were wasting precious instruction time until we implemented collaboration. Today the librarian:

- plans units of study with grade level teams and with individual teachers
- is involved with the total instructional program
- now teaches information/library skills as the need arises – usually in small groups
- reads stories if they directly relate to the curriculum
- leads kindergarten students through the research process
- assists students working on computer projects, working in small groups or working independently

The library changed in another way. Flexible scheduling was implemented to allow students open access to the library. The library is open and available when the learning opportunities arise. Students may check out books every day if they wish. We must remember, in order to learn to read, students must have a variety of genre of books accessible to them. Students come and go all day using the library for extended learning. Truly, the library is the “hub” of learning at Lakeside Academy.

Another very important change occurred. Our library collection was totally revamped. At least seventy-five percent of the collection was purged. Some items had been on the shelf and not been checked out in fifteen years. The collection was enhanced to support the curriculum which was evolving. Keep in mind, when the curriculum is enriched the collection must be also. It is very important to have unit resources, videos and many, many books for every unit of study. Don’t forget the assessment products

which must accompany the unit. Because of the DeWitt Wallace Grant, this refurbishment was possible.

We, at Lakeside, have celebrated many successes since the implementation of Library Power. After the first year of flexible scheduling, with all library projects based on teacher/librarian collaboration, we found there was a direct correlation between library usage and improved test scores. After running the end-of-the year circulation report, it became obvious that the teachers who had the highest library usage also had the highest test scores. A detailed analysis revealed there was a direct link between library usage and test scores in the reference study and reading comprehension. For example, the classroom with the highest library usage had a mastery percentage of 86% in reference study and 81% in comprehension. The teacher who offered the most resistance to collaborative planning and library usage also had the lowest in mastery scores---19% in reference study and 52% in comprehension.

Not every teacher endorsed flexible scheduling and collaboration. Some paid lip service only to the concept and then retreated to the sanctity of their classroom to do their own thing. Various methods were used to monitor the progress of implementation. Remember, only what is monitored gets done. Teachers were expected to include into their lesson plans collaboration sessions with the librarian. Each nine weeks brief reports were to be given on projects the students were doing in the library. One first grade teacher invented the Triple R Club....Research, Report, Review. Students were sent to the library in small groups with a topic to research with the librarian. After learning the information, the students would then go back to their classrooms and report their findings to the entire class or small groups. The teacher and students would review the information together. The students would take notes in their journals on the material. Another group would go to the library to research another topic and the process would start over again. One can see how this integration of subject matter aided the teacher in teaching many skills and concepts.

Because of the perseverance of the administration and the librarian, the media center is still a very lively place at Lakeside. The reports are showing that the circulation of non-fiction books have doubled in the last two years. This year twenty five thousand books were circulated in our library. That is an average of forty five books per child. As a result of more books being read, students are improving in their reading. Children are encouraged to have a book with them wherever they go, thus eliminating down time. The library is opened an hour before school each day and students may visit the library any time during the day.

Because of the school reform, which began in the library, Lakeside has been awarded four monetary incentives from the State of Tennessee. This money could be spent with no strings attached. I chose to spend it on further staff development. An empowered teacher is a teacher who can turn an average student into an excellent student.

At Lakeside Academy, the teachers and administration believe the students are the most important persons in the school and they deserve our very best each day. Parents should expect dramatic improvements in learning and teachers should rise to the occasion. The Library Power enabled Lakeside to move further and faster than it could on its own. The commitment to reform involved the school in implementing a package of innovations that were mutually reinforcing. Flexible scheduling provided the opportunity for teachers to use the library in a more integrated way. Professional development in collaborative planning allowed the librarian and teachers to plan the integrated units of study. Collection development ensured that the resources necessary for the curriculum were available.

Today, Lakeside Academy is still a forward moving place of learning where students look forward to coming each day. It is a haven of protection for some, and a place where the mind can be challenged and enriched for others. What ever the case may be, the reform can be credited to school reform via the library.