Take Me to Your Leader: The (Invisible) School District Library Supervisor

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"**LET ME SPEAK** to your supervisor." Whether you're on the phone with your bank, visiting your grocery store, or complimenting great service at a hotel, the person to whom you are talking immediately knows how to direct you to the boss. Knowing who runs things and who can get things done most efficiently is critical in nearly every business or organization. Customers can identify an authority figure who can solve problems, and employees all know who is "in charge" and who can provide feedback and guidance on their work.

WHO IS IN CHARGE?

So what if you needed to call your school district to ask a question about libraries? You could be a parent, vendor, job applicant, researcher, or community business partner. Unfortunately, the following conversation is far too likely to occur:

School district operator: Hello, Smithsville School District.
You: Yes, I would like to speak with the person in charge of libraries for the school district.
Operator: Please tell me the name of the school and I will transfer you and you can ask for their librarian.
You: That's not what I mean. Is there a person in the district office that helps out with libraries and technology?
Operator: You mean like the IT department?
You: Not really, no. I mean the person who runs the school libraries for the district and picks out books for schools and things like that.
Operator: I'll transfer you to the textbooks department.

Employees and patrons understand that a supervisor is a person with responsibilities and probably a manager of other people in the organization. The role conveys authority and expertise. Yet in many school districts, supervisors of library programs are often invisible—not just to the public, but to the people working inside their own school district. This invis-

ibility and inaccessibility belies the essential role of the school library in student achievement and could leave programs defenseless when budget and staffing cuts are threatened. If no one knows who coordinates or supervises the library program, decisions could be made that are detrimental to the important contributions that school library programs make to student achievement.

THE SUPERVISOR'S SITUATION

Over the last fifty years, the role and importance of the district supervisor has become much less visible at the national level. School library standards from 1960, 1975, 1988, and 1998 all commit some text to defining the role of the district library supervisor and how that role functions within the district and with building-level libraries (AASL 1960, 1998; ALA & AECT 1975, 1988). However, the most recent AASL *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* (AASL 2007) makes no mention of district supervisors and their role in library programs. Numerous studies indicate that district administrators, principals, teachers, and even school librarians have varying perceptions about what the district library supervisor actually does and the contributions they make to students and schools (Andwood 1984; Held 1986; Krentz 1986; Macon 1977; Nelson 1987; Sullivan 1977). Even supervisors themselves often disagree on what they should be doing (Ahlers and Wieman 1974; Bundy, Wasserman, and O'Connell 1970; Coulter 1990; McCulley 1989).

CONDUCTING THE SEARCH

Knowing that such mixed perceptions exist and with so little real knowledge about what school district library supervisors do, it seems critical to better understand the work of supervisors and how they impact library programs and student achievement. The Lilead Project (rhymes with Iliad) began as a study of

the roles, responsibilities, and major challenges of school district library supervisors, an undertaking last conducted on a national scale in the 1960s. Carried out by University of Maryland researchers and funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the study sought to establish baseline data on the work of library supervisors. The participants for the survey included supervisors in school districts with 25,000 students or more, as well as the largest district in each state—nearly 300 school districts in total. Before conducting the survey, however, supervisors had to be identified, and that proved to be no easy task. It wasn't that they didn't exist; from outside and inside many districts, the supervisor was simply invisible.

SEARCHING ONLINE

Those who supervise or coordinate library services at the district level go by many different titles and are situated in numerous different departments. The methodology for collecting names, titles, and contact information was a simple (though not always easy) process:

▶ Begin by looking for contact information for supervisors on school district websites.

▶ If ten minutes is spent searching the website with no results, shift to telephone inquiries at the district level.

▶ If there is no response at the district level, try to reach someone at the building level.

Researchers kept a log indicating how much time it took to locate information online. It immediately became clear that even in this digital age, district websites are incredibly difficult to navigate and information on the district's libraries is often hidden behind multiple page clicks—if the information is there at all. Too often, after several minutes of searching, the library page would be located—hurray!—but with just a link to the online catalog used by the district and no other information.

This search began casually at first in September 2011, and by June 2012, 184 (63%) of the contacts had been found, strictly by searching school district websites. But 24% of those contacts (44 total) were only found after five to ten minutes of searching. Those longer searches involved multiple page clicks well beyond what an average searcher would conduct, with searches of different department pages, site maps, school sites, organizational charts, board meeting minutes, and even press releases and invoices for clues to the person in charge of libraries. One supervisor was only visible on a document disclosing the salaries of district administrators. Another was listed only on a press release for a special event involving the district libraries.

This left 37% of the supervisor pool not visible even in the darkest recesses of their district's websites. Part of this invisibility was due to uncertainty about the department in which library services were located. Department names varied so much that when library or media were not choices, the search was conducted under curriculum, technology, information management, language arts, and even professional development departments. Organizational charts often did not help because library services were not elevated enough in the hierarchy to be visible. One deep search led to the Data Administration department, which housed Media and Technology Integration. Bingo: the name of the library supervisor. However, most people—again, parents, job applicants, vendors—would have given up searching long before that point.

WORKING THE PHONES

Following the slow process of searching online, phone calls were made to those districts with no apparent online information for their library supervisor. Calls were redirected to textbook departments and IT personnel, and contacting the public library was suggested. One woman answering the phone in a large school district responded incredulously, "You mean, the supervisor? For libraries? In our schools?"

Phoning districts for the missing information amplified concern over visibility. After searching online, there were still nearly 100 districts to call, and rarely were callers directed to the right department on the first transfer; often suggestions had to be offered to the person answering the phone: "Try the technology department. No? How about curriculum?" Once, the caller was transferred to the transportation department. Less than half —39—of those remaining supervisors were found by phone. Again, a lack of uniformity about department names and supervisor titles contributed to this lack of success. It was much harder to get the right information when the right question was not known.

ASKING FOR HELP

Just a few weeks before the survey was launched, nearly 50 districts—16% of the total—could not provide supervisor information. The next step was to turn to national library organizations and vendors, including the Council of State School Library Consultants (CoSSLC), with the hope that their contacts would help identify those last few supervisors. Other 11th-hour tactics included calling individual schools to ask if the school librarians knew the name of their supervisor. By the time the survey was conducted in October 2012, it was discovered that only 12 of the 291 districts lacked a supervisor at all, cementing the fear that supervisors had become wallflowers in their districts.

DISCUSSION

The AASL position statement on the school library supervisor states that "the leadership of a qualified school library supervisor is an essential component in the delivery of a quality school library program in collaboration with qualified school librarians and competent library support personnel." Further, it says that "a key role of the supervisor is to serve as a partner with the entire educational community to support student achievement goals and objectives." In many school districts, the only voice at the administrative level to question budget and

staffing cuts to library programs is the district library supervisor. It is the district supervisor who can advocate for the value and importance of library programs that enable students to gain critical 21st-century skills. These supervisors also are crucial in professional development that addresses the unique needs of school librarians. Additionally, they provide critical support to those paraprofessionals who are placed in library positions with no knowledge of library procedures for circulating materials, building collections, or providing instruction and readers' advisory services to students and support for teachers. Without visibility, it stands to reason that the supervisor's voice won't be heard.

Solving this visibility problem won't be easy. The results of the 2012 Lilead Survey indicate that supervisors are juggling disparate roles, from acting as head of IT departments to being in charge of language programs. They also reveal a real problem of time: With all the duties supervisors are assigned to manage in their districts, libraries aren't always getting the focus they deserve. At the same time, if these same supervisors don't become a visible presence for library programs in their districts, school libraries will continue to suffer from lack of attention. One never has to look far to find a district with a dormant school library program.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The 2012 Lilead Survey was designed to tell us more about the state of the profession. But the project doesn't stop there. Another survey will go out again this fall, and in August, the process of verifying the supervisors, who were part of the first survey, as well as some new ones, began. An effort has been made to keep up with the survey pool over the last two years, but in the last few weeks, 27 email addresses have bounced—putting the process back at the beginning of trying to excavate the information in these districts. Some survey participants were only in the post of supervisor as a Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA) and so their role moves on to someone else. Emails sent have also gotten numerous automatic replies from individuals who have retired and give no indication of a replacement, if there is one. Conducting this second survey could tell more about turnover and continue to reveal issues with supervisor visibility.

THE LILEAD FELLOWS PROGRAM

Meanwhile, The Lilead Project also is starting the Lilead Fellows Program, which goes to the heart of being a visible advocate for school library programs. Through additional funding from IMLS, provision will be made for 25 district supervisors—from large and small districts across the country—with an intensive 18-month professional development program to strengthen their leadership skills and provide them with the chance to work with others to solve current problems in their school districts. By bringing supervisors together and providing them the opportunity to speak with a collective voice, it is hoped that they can emerge from under structural hierarchies and district bureaucracy and become a visible force for the positive impact of libraries on students.

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