The Top Ten Reasons a Library Media Specialist Is a Teacher's Best Friend

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The Top Ten Reasons a Library Media Specialist Is a Teacher’s Best Friend

JAN HYLEN

Many teachers think too little about the role of the library media specialist in their professional lives, and because of this oversight they underutilize this great resource. Here are the top ten reasons why teachers should work with their library media specialists:

1. A good school library program improves test scores.

In 1993 and again in 1999, the Colorado State Library and the University of Denver Library and Information Services Department studied the impact of school libraries and school library media specialists on student achievement. They found that “a school library media program with a full-time library media specialist, support staff, and a strong computer network (one that connects the library’s resources to classrooms and labs) leads to higher student achievement, regardless of social and economic factors in a community” (Hamilton-Pennell 2000, 46). Studies in nine other states have produced similar results.

Collaboration between a teacher and a library media specialist makes a difference in student learning and progress. The following types of collaboration are directly linked with higher test scores (in particular, higher reading scores): “identifying useful materials and information for teachers, planning instruction cooperatively with teachers, providing in-service training to teachers, and teaching students both with classroom teachers and independently” (Lance 2002, para. 21). A library media specialist arms both teachers and students with additional information, enriching both the teaching and learning processes.

Student achievement is the bottom line. And a library media specialist can provide resources that make a teacher a more effective educator, ensuring the success of the students.

2. A library media specialist helps a teacher become a better teacher.

Collaboration with a library media specialist helps ease a teacher’s workload. Having such a specialist in the classroom reduces the teacher/student ratio, a critical factor for student learning. Together, teacher and specialist can divide tasks so that each works in his or her area of expertise. Such collaboration also brings different teaching styles into the classroom, which can be redirected at the different learning styles of the students. Following the old adage, two heads are better than one, a teacher and library media specialist can create a more engaging classroom experience. This type of planned collaboration improves teaching and learning, as well as models the cooperation a teacher wants students to use. However, collaboration does not mean teaching library skills in a vacuum. When a library media specialist teaches library skills without an assignment linked to them, the students do not learn effectively. A teacher needs to remember to integrate library skills into the lesson plans.

3. Sometimes a teacher needs a friend.

One of the advantages of working with a library media specialist is companionship. The isolation of the classroom can, at times, wear on a teacher. Having another adult to bounce ideas off of can be reassuring and provide an invaluable kind of emotional support.

A library media specialist can also help a teacher develop professionally. He or she may have a professional collection that will help a teacher with advanced graduate classes. Or, he or she may know the best Web

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sites to use for information that would be useful for a research paper or grant writing. Students are not the only ones who can benefit from a library media specialist’s knowledge of information resources.

4. Sometimes a teacher needs a lawyer.

Although a library media specialist is not actually a lawyer, he or she may be the person who can keep a teacher out of legal trouble. A library media specialist is a good information source on copyright and fair use and can advise a teacher on which procedures to follow when classroom materials are challenged. Copyright laws continually change, and a library media specialist is aware of the most recent changes. He or she can inform a teacher of any changes, helping the teacher avoid any legal problems.

With today’s technology, plagiarism is easy to do—and not so easy to detect. Students could be copying from a variety of sources available on the Web; therefore, the quality of the writing is no longer a good indication of plagiarism. A library media specialist can help a teacher track down cases of plagiarism. More important, he or she can help a teacher construct assignments that require a different kind of critical thinking and cannot be copied from anyone else.

5. There is just too much information out there.

The Internet has caused an information explosion. A teacher does not have the time to keep up with it all. A library media specialist’s job is to explore the Internet looking for tie-ins with the curriculum. He or she can help a teacher create WebQuests for students or develop a list of useful Web sites that can be used for particular assignments. Moreover, a teacher may find some great Internet sites to use with students, but the school’s Internet filter may not allow students to access those sites. The library media specialist can help a teacher handle this problem by finding alternative ways to get the information to the students.

Studies of student use of the Internet show that students prefer browsing to systematic search strategies. They only perform two or three queries per search and abort searches quickly. Students often are unable to judge the quality of the information they find, and they have a tendency to plagiarize (Todd 2001). They believe the information they find on the Internet is correct simply because it exists. A library media specialist can teach students how to construct successful search strategies, skim the information they see on the screen, evaluate it, and incorporate it into their assignments.

6. A library media specialist has special training.

A library media specialist is trained to select materials to fit the curriculum. This applies not only to the books in the library but also to software and Internet sites. He or she is trained to evaluate information based on authority and accuracy, which is especially important when it comes to the Internet because anyone is able to post any kind of information or propaganda there. A library media specialist knows the best ways to teach students how to evaluate the Web sites they find. Furthermore, a library media specialist can also help students publish their research on the Web, providing real motivation to do a good job since millions of people could potentially see their work.

A library media specialist also has an expertise in computer ethics. Experts in computer piracy say that piracy is beginning at a younger and younger age. They stress that from the beginning, students need to be taught ethical behavior. A library media specialist is prepared to teach students about respect for intellectual property, privacy, and copyright laws. He or she is also aware of the best ways to keep students safe when they are online.

7. A library media specialist knows the library collection.

A library media specialist knows what information can be found in the library media center and can help a teacher create assignments that the center can support. He or she may know of books or portions of books that have pertinent information. Students often underuse some of these books, especially those in the reference section, because they have trouble finding them. For example, they may have general subject headings in the library catalog, so a search of the catalog will not reveal them.

Equally important, when the library media specialist knows of an assignment that the library cannot currently support, he or she can use portions of the library’s budget to buy other appropriate materials. Such a specialist can also find sites on the Internet or make arrangements with the public library to reserve books on that topic, allowing all the students to access the information.

Whether a teacher needs help finding resources to support an assignment or tailoring the assignment to fit the library collection, a library media specialist can save a teacher time. He or she can bring together the available resources or locate substitutes for resources the library media center does not have.

8. A library media specialist knows the curriculum.

Because a library media specialist knows what is taught in the different grades and classrooms, he or she can make valuable connections between teachers, resulting in an excellent interdisciplinary unit. The specialist’s knowledge of the curriculum helps him or her stay on the lookout for new materials that will support

Just like a reading specialist, a library media specialist is also reading the current books that students will enjoy. He or she can give book talks to students, do some storytelling, arrange author visits, run reading incentive programs, prepare reading lists, and match literature to classroom assignments. A library media specialist is an expert at promoting reading for enjoyment and literacy.

10. The library media center provides equal access.

Students with access to the Internet have a distinct advantage over students without access. The library media center is a place where all students are treated equally and have equal access to the materials they need to do their schoolwork. Students also receive individual attention from the library media specialist when needed.

If a library media specialist knows about an assignment in advance, he or she can put materials on reserve so that over-eager students do not check out all the relevant materials. In addition, he or she can look for those Internet sites that are most appropriate to the assignment so that all students have access to the materials they need and can complete the assignment in a timely manner.

Conclusion

These are just a few of the ways a library media specialist can help teachers save time, create engaging assignments, and ensure students have access to the best information. Teachers should not hesitate to march into the library media center; they will probably meet their new best friend there. They will not regret it.

Key words: collaboration, information resources, library media specialist

REFERENCES

