

## Forging Partnerships: Schools, School Libraries, and Communities

By D. Jackson Maxwell

Public schools and public school libraries in particular have for far too long ignored the communities in which they exist. As Brophy (1992) asserts, for educational systems to succeed schools need to have strong parental and community involvement programs. While recently many school administrators realized the mistake of losing touch with their communities, most school libraries have yet to come to this realization. Studies have repeatedly shown the benefit of creating linkages between schools and their communities (Castaneda, 1997; Timpane &

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Reich, 1997). As schools attempt to bridge the gap between themselves and their communities, more often than not librarians simply turn a blind eye to the gap's existence. The preponderance of the practice of this form of naiveté by school librarians may literally drive the profession out of business. When whole staffs are being disbanded or reconstituted (restaffing a school from scratch) to bring in fresh reform minded and committed professionals, teachers and school librarians need to take notice (Hendrie, 1998; Sack, 1997).

The community, county, or state that no longer views the role of the professional school librarian as

an essential one, will be more inclined to vote that position out of existence to save a few tax dollars. This has already occurred in California and Massachusetts (McCarthy, 1996). To prevent the continued devolution of the profession, the majority of school librarians need to take notice of the American Library Association's (1988) warning that "neither schools nor library media centers operate in a vacuum" (p. 43). The public demand for accountability is growing. Libraries' missions must grow to include serving the whole school community. Partnerships between students, parents, faculties, and communities must be initiated. School librarians across the country must step up and create these partnerships with the groups and powers that exist within their communities.

Further, school library media specialists must learn to be better self-promoters. Stewart (1997) insists that to get the administrations and other's attentions focused on the library's successes, librarians' must learn how to become self-promoting. Librarians must promote not only the importance of their role in educating students but also the role that the school library media center can play in the community. This article will examine a school library whose librarian is positively promoting the profession by aggressively building partnerships with the community.

### **Introduction**

Hamilton Elementary School is an urban community-based public school located in Memphis, Tennessee. The school was built in 1964 and serves 770 students. The student population is 100 percent African-American and, according to Title I statistics, 80 percent of the families live below the national poverty line. The school library media specialist (or school librarian), beginning his sixth year of service at Hamilton, has a Bachelor of Science in Education and a Master of Library and Information Science. Within the last five years, the Hamilton Elementary School Library has become known throughout the city and state for its innovative programs and creative partnering. The library media specialist has established contacts, recruited volunteers, and gained supporters throughout the area who regularly offer the school and the library their assistance. Once formed, these partnerships have continued to grow over the years due largely to the professional respect and credit each side has given to the other.

The partners have provided the school and the library with both tangible and intangible services and products. Volunteers, student and parent educational opportunities, financial and material donations, community good will, positive press, and numerous other direct interventions by the partners have had a tremendous beneficial impact upon the school and its library services. In return, the librarian has given acknowledgment to these benefactors in school-related announcements, the community press and television, educational publications, speeches, presentations, and through personal thank-you notes. All of these actions have helped turned these partnerships into mutually beneficial friendships. If other

schools wish to partake of these benefits, someone must step forward and take the initiative. School librarians, with their knowledge of how to access information and resources, are the natural fit. Unfortunately, too many librarians for one reason or another seem reluctant to leave their media centers and seek out these community partnerships.

The following sections will outline how Hamilton Elementary School and its librarian have tapped into many community resources. A brief description and discussion of the linkage is provided. An effort will also be made to distinguish how all sides benefit from these partnerships. While it is realized that not all communities have the same resources as Memphis, most communities have similar support structures.

### **Public Library Partnerships**

The public library is a natural ally and an excellent place to start building contacts. Many public libraries have summer reading programs that can be promoted in the school. Reading lists, posters, and contest rules for these programs can often be presented in an assembly accompanied by storytelling or reading. Public library representatives can often be recruited to make these presentations to promote their programs. Many public libraries have children's librarians whose job it is to give book talks and shows to the community. Arranging for these individuals to visit the school provides the students with a different type of exposure to literature. Another means to build contact between your school and the public library is to organize a field trip. Students can tour the process a book undergoes before it becomes available for checkout. Finally, students can use this opportunity to get a library card if they do not have one.

All of the above associations are mutually beneficial. Through these initiatives the public library gains positive community exposure, heightened awareness of its programs, increased circulation, and the registration of new patrons. The students also gain a greater knowledge of what the public library offers. The school librarian benefits from the additional knowledge children acquire from their visits to the public library. Community colleges and local universities can also provide school librarians with many similar resources.

In some cities, public libraries have a bookmobile. Memphis has been lucky enough to be served by two of these mobile libraries. Hamilton Elementary created a partnership with the bookmobile whereby it makes regularly scheduled stops in front of the school once every two weeks. While Hamilton's library is open to community members, it is an elementary library and many older students and adults often find its materials too juvenile. The bookmobile provides an outlet for these patrons. Additionally, the bookmobile offers a wealth of other materials (such as CDs, videotapes, games, etc.) for checkout that the school library cannot provide.

The bookmobile's two-hour stops have been further coordinated so that they

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are at school an hour before dismissal and an hour after dismissal. In this way, teachers can take their class to the bookmobile as an organized group to checkout materials. After dismissal, individual children can visit this moving library on their way home. Students, teachers, and community members can make material requests of the bookmobile. The bookmobile staff will deliver the requested materials on their next visit. As bookmobile services expand to include on-line card catalogs, fax machines, Internet access, and other electronic mediums, the partnership will continue to grow to better accommodate these underserved library patrons (Lockwood, 1996). As a benefit, the bookmobile and public library profit by increased registrations and circulation, safe parking zones, and free advertising of the bookmobile visits and services in the school's announcements and publications. The school librarian benefits from increased access to materials, children's increased exposure to the library environment, and the increased association with fellow professionals. The students and community benefit from greater access to resources and information.

### **University Partnerships**

Local colleges and universities are good places for all K-12 educators to become involved. Many of these institutions are beginning to realize the need of hiring experienced classroom teachers to teach many of their practical applications courses. Teachers need to share the skills, knowledge, and insight they have gained with the educators of tomorrow. Charles Hathaway (1996), Chancellor of the University of Arkansas, goes even further by stating that university "faculty seldom consider investing their sabbatical leave in direct involvement in the public schools. I would like to see those who educate teachers and administrators more frequently involve themselves directly in the practice of teaching" (p. 345). He goes on to suggest that university faculty should be required to periodically teach in the K-12 classroom to keep their practical knowledge current.

On the other hand, most colleges and universities are looking for qualified educators to serve as part-time adjunct faculty. This enables them to offer students more course selections and saves the institution the high cost of employing full-time professors. Teachers gain from the experience by both the academic challenges it presents and the monetary compensation it provides. The university/college students gain from their academic association with an "in-the-field" educator. Lastly, as noted above, institutions of higher education are facing increasingly tight budgets. Many K-12 educators are knowledgeable, competent professionals who can provide the skills needed to fill these part-time assignments. The school-university partnership strengthens the future of the education profession.

### **News/Electronic Media Partnerships**

Building ties to the local and regional media is essential. Local and city

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newspapers are constantly searching for good stories, and positive situations where schools and children are working together make good stories. Once a month for the past several years, Hamilton Elementary School has been featured in Memphis' *Commercial Appeal* newspaper. These articles have been consistently positive, relaying to the city uplifting news about the school. Over half of these articles have concerned the library and have praised the programs it offers students and the surrounding community. This press coverage has come about through the school librarian mailing, telephoning, faxing, and e-mailing story ideas to the newspaper. This partnership has evolved to the point where newspaper writers now initiate the contact by checking with the librarian to see if there are any stories to be told.

Other print media utilized to spread the word about programs have been: (1) School newspapers and flyers; (2) Local, regional, and national library newsletters, magazines, and journals; (3) Local and state school board publications; (4) Local, state, and national associations' newsletters and publications; and (5) Education magazines and journals. Local television has also been interested in stories concerning events at Hamilton Elementary School. At least three or four times a year, the television cameras and reporters converge on Hamilton to film a story. A recently televised event included a school library-sponsored puppet show. Coordinated by the librarian, two television stations filmed and conducted interviews for the story that was subsequently featured on the noon and evening news program. Once these contacts have been established with the media and they have seen the quality of the project, it should be easy to make them repeat customers. Further, by showing these groups professional courtesy and sending them thank you notes from the students, a long-term positive relationship can be created.

Electronic media is another excellent means by which to get the school library's message out to the community. A regional bank sponsors a voice mail system that students, parents, and community members can call to find out homework, teacher messages, and school news. In Tennessee this program is called Lesson Line. This line of communication is heavily used. In fact, by placing questions and assignments on Lesson Line or by offering small incentives for those who call it, a teacher may easily get over 300 calls per month.

Another way for the school librarian to get in contact with the community is through creating a school Web site. If the school already has a Web site, add a page to the site that promotes the school library. With the advent of PageMill and Netscape Gold, Web page construction has been made simple. Telephone or telecommunications companies have readily provided schools and teachers with free or discounted Internet access and Web site space. Also, the American Schools Directory (ASD) has free Web space and assistance for every school in the United States. Those interested in getting their school a homepage on the Web can contact them at <[www.asd.com](http://www.asd.com)>. Hamilton Elementary was one of the first schools in the city to have a Memphis City School Board-approved site loaded onto the World Wide Web. The Web site has spurred interest and contacts from community

members, teachers, college students, principals, and professors. These electronic carriers put the school library and its activities in plain view for both Memphians and the world.

### **Professional Partnerships**

Building ties professionally within the library and education fields is critically important. Conducting workshops that include library use, professional/job-related materials available, reference skills, and training courses for teachers, school staff, and community are a necessity for the school media specialist. This type of activity raises the collective consciousness to the specialized skills possessed by school library professionals. Some examples of these types of activities are discussed in the following section.

During the 1996-97 school year, the school library media specialist conducted a one-on-one, one-hour introductory, hands-on training workshop on the use of the Internet. All full time faculty and staff were afforded the opportunity to attend. This course was created and taught by the librarian to provide all of Hamilton Elementary's educators with at least a cursory knowledge of Internet and e-mail use. Research was conducted on this staff development project and a paper resulted. This paper was presented at the 1997 Mid-South Educational Research Association's (MSERA) Annual Conference. It informed other educators of what was learned concerning staff development training for teachers. The research article is pending publication.

Offering workshops for teachers is another excellent opportunity for librarians to share their skills. In the Bean, Fulmer, Zigmond, and Grumet Teacher Reflective Study (1997), the researchers found that teachers are likely to incorporate ideas from workshops into their classroom. Thus, a workshop on how to integrate different types of media into the curriculum could provide the impetus for a revolution in teaching methods used in the classroom. Beyond workshops, librarians can conduct classes for teachers and the community to inform them of the availability of different types of library resources, their location, and their usage.

The school librarian can further spread ideas by submitting articles for publication in education and library magazines and journals that concern research as well as practical applications. Not only do these contributions help other practitioners, but they also introduce the authors to others in the wider realm of academia. Through these initial contacts, stronger ties can be forged by networking at seminars, conferences, etc. with those who have come to recognize the author through his/her articles. All of these activities help keep librarians in the forefront, showing others the worth of employing professionals.

Further, librarians must actively involve themselves in a variety of school activities, groups, and management committees in order to make their voices heard. Interschool cooperation and resource sharing is one way to create mutually beneficial linkages. Interlibrary material loans, shared assistants, and staff develop-

ment training are just a few ways that schools within the same system can work cooperatively. In 1998, due to the Hamilton librarian's specialized expertise in a particular area, ten other librarians could be provided professional training at no direct cost to their schools. Beyond the sharing of resources, librarians and other educators could benefit by taking a bigger role in local school governance by actively attending school board of education meetings and perhaps even running for office. If your school is site-based managed, attend the council meetings and/or become a council representative.

The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) is another group with which to form close ties. For the past five years, the Hamilton Elementary School librarian has presented the PTA with formal proposals that targeted specific library needs. Financial support of \$500 - \$1200 has been awarded to the library annually by the PTA. Lastly, membership in professional organizations makes associating with other librarians and educators easy. National and local organizations offer their members a number of services. Regular meetings and conferences afford one the opportunity to make and maintain valuable contacts within the professional community. By becoming involved in the various political structures within the school system, the school librarian can build powerful allies. These networking activities benefit the school, educators, and the entire profession.

### **Business Partnerships**

Public-private partnerships have begun to become common place. Bookstores, media groups, foundations, technology corporations, and other businesses have begun partnering with libraries and schools on many different levels (Trotter, 1998; Glick, 1997; Olson, 1996). Good relationships with the business community can provide many advantages for a school library. Hamilton Elementary School library has received free donations of books and software from communication corporations. These donations have created a paperback section that the library had previously been unable to afford. Participation in Blockbuster's Co-stars program by teachers has provided the school with additional financial resources. Restaurants have donated food to the Library Club members and Library Helpers for special events. The local distributor for National Geographic has made numerous gifts of magazines and books to our students.

Hamilton Elementary has also sought out sponsors such as the Ben Jones Chapter of the National Bar Association, The Bulk Mail Center, and Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad which have provided volunteers who donated their time and money to help students improve their reading skills and academic performance. These are just a few of the many advantages that can be gained by developing ties to the business community. In return for their generous acts, the librarian and students send thank-you letters to those involved in these efforts. These letters hopefully express our gratitude not only to those who have made these opportunities

possible but also to those at higher corporate levels. Finally, notify businesses that any gift to the school or school library is tax deductible. The tax-deductible receipt you provide these entrepreneurs gives them an additional incentive to donate to the school.

### **Educational Partnerships**

State and national community education initiatives can provide strategic support for the school community. One such program is Tennessee's Voices for Children. They conduct Parent Universities in primarily low-income, urban school communities. The primary focus of this program is to provide, in a single location, as many forms of educational opportunities as possible for parents. Public, private, and charitable organizations send representatives to provide workshops, information, assistance, and educational opportunities for parents whose children are growing up in at risk neighborhoods. In 1997, Hamilton Elementary School held one of these events. The school librarian solicited for and received permission to sponsor a reading booth for students and parents. The booth provided information for parents on literacy, reading level targeted booklists, school and public library information, and low cost books for sale. This event offered the perfect setting for the librarian to meet parents, community leaders, and to build contacts with many of the public and private organizations in the region.

President Clinton's AmeriCorp Program offers diverse educational opportunities that teachers and school library media specialists can take advantage of. In 1996, Hamilton Elementary and AmeriCorp coordinated the AmeriKids Summer Computer Camp. The school made its facilities available and educators applied to teach computer skills to disadvantaged center city youth. The school library media specialist and the library assistant were both selected to provide instruction and guidance for the program. The unique combination of technology and library skills possessed by school media specialists make their participation in these types of joint national and local initiatives a logical choice. Further, AmeriCorp, in a reciprocal agreement for using Hamilton's facilities, donated the software used during their program to the school. Many grant, university, and research project organizers will agree to donate the materials and/or equipment used in their program to the school in return for being allowed to use the school as a study site. Under the right guidelines, this is a win-win proposition.

### **School Partnerships**

Hamilton Elementary School has recently started partnering with other schools in the city. Beginning in 1996, Hamilton Elementary's librarian began cultivating a relationship with the suburban Bartlett High School. Today, Bartlett's Student Government Association annually provides food, clothing, and other resources for the needy students and families within the Hamilton community. Hamilton Elemen-



tary donates its out-of-date magazines to Northside High School teachers for use in their classrooms particularly with those students needing remedial help in reading. Hamilton High School has begun sending student speakers, role models, and tutors to help guide the elementary students to academic success.

Finally, the cooperative sharing of salaries and time of support teachers between several schools has enabled both schools to employ the services of a parent advocate, music teacher, and other special needs teachers. Hamilton Elementary library has also engaged in resource sharing projects with other area elementary and middle schools. While these inter-school partnerships are still in their infancy the benefits, as shown above, have been outstanding.

### **Nonprofit Organization Partnerships**

Partnerships developed with other local nonprofit organizations have proven to be very successful. The Metropolitan Interfaith Association (MIFA) and Hamilton Elementary School have developed a strong working relationship. MIFA, through the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), has supplied the library with a host of extremely capable volunteers who have provided needed support services. These volunteers have processed, laminated, and covered books as well as performing a host of other services. This relationship has branched out to include, in conjunction with the school's guidance department, the "Grandma/Grandpa Please" program. In this program senior volunteers will both read and listen to Hamilton Elementary students. These seniors will be available on-site or via the telephone after school to talk and listen to students. For MIFA, Hamilton provides favorable recognition in newspapers and in published articles which helps them with funding and volunteer recruitment.

Les Passees is another local nonprofit agency. Their primary focus is on mental health services for children. Through grants, they have been able to establish a traveling puppeteer troupe. Les Passees' award winning troupe visits the school five to six times a year. They provide stories and guidance for students while exposing them to new and unusual forms of media presentation. In return for their enrichment services, the school library media specialist has secured local television coverage for their presentations. Les Passees puppeteers depend entirely on outside funding and this media coverage greatly aids in future fund raising endeavors.

Currently, the library is establishing contact with members of the Memphis Storytellers League. This talented group has a rich 75-year heritage. The storytellers are constantly searching for new venues and groups for which to perform. The school library provides a natural outlet for this form of education. Students gain insight into the art of the oral tradition of storytelling while the Memphis Storytellers League gains access to the potential storytellers of the future. This partnership will help pass down the storytelling tradition to the next generation.

### **In-House Partnerships**

Library media specialists need to tap into in-house resources to strengthen the library's position within the school and community. Adelman, Eagle, and Hargreaves (1997) argue that paraprofessionals, if given meaningful support roles, can be a key to creating successful programs and providing additional education services. If the library has only one librarian, one source of possible help could be a teacher's assistant. The person who was to become the assistant librarian at Hamilton had worked previously as a full-time teaching assistant. By presenting a plan of programs that could be implemented to benefit the students if the school librarian had the services of an assistant, the administration was persuaded to accept the proposal. Today, Hamilton Elementary's assistant teaches three to five one-hour library whole language and specialty reading classes per week. The assistant also provides all of the training and support for the student library helpers.

Student library helpers are chosen primarily from the 4th and 5th grade. While these students provide the library with a wide variety of help, their main job is to shelve books. This program has been extremely successful. These students are rewarded for a job well done by being given the opportunity to checkout extra books. Further, several times a year they are given a small party in which pizza donated by a local restaurant is served. Both of these projects provide the students with additional library exposure while freeing up the professional librarian's time to further enhance and plan the library's overall program.

### **Stakeholders Partnerships**

Parents, grandparents, and legal guardians can be integrated into successful library-community efforts. These type volunteers are being used around the world as classroom assistants to provide extra hands to assist with nonteaching duties (McGarvey, Marriott, Morgan, & Abbott, 1996). The parent volunteers were recruited at registration where they were asked to sign up to help with a variety of school needs, including those within the library. Parents have been trained to help with shelving, card catalog work, inventories, etc. As McCarthy (1996) points out, as funding for school libraries declines, volunteers become the new reality of library staffing and service.

The library also reaches out to different groups by lending its support to them. Hobby groups and clubs are two such groups. When a parent who wished to form a school chess club needed chess sets, the library media specialist interceded on his behalf with the local newspaper. As a result of the article, the club received enough in donations to buy the needed equipment. Two other organizations, the Parent Institute and the Parent Reading Club (community empowerment groups) have coordinated some of their endeavors with the library. The school library and the bookmobile have readily made their resources available to these groups for their

monthly meetings. The library willingly offers support to various organizations and groups by providing them with meeting rooms, equipment, and library services. This small service has benefited the school library in many ways. By building friendly relations with these parents, groups, and organizations they become the library's community liaisons and good will ambassadors.

### **Conclusion**

While not all of these specific groups and organizations are found in every community, most have a local equivalent. To discover what is available, educators must initiate contact with their communities. Teachers must step out of their traditional roles. As Henderson and Barron (1995) conclude, for schools to bring about effective change teachers must take on many new roles—serving as instructional leaders, reform advocates, and community leaders. Additionally, librarians need to take on the further roles of facilitator, mentor, curriculum consultant, technology expert, and lobbyist for progressive change (Dowling, 1997). School librarians in particular must heed this advice because the future of their profession depends upon it. They must seek out partnerships that can help them to better serve their students, parents, teachers, and communities. Only through taking these proactive steps will today's school libraries become the viable educational and community service centers the future will require.

Powerful change forces are coursing through all of education. Educators must develop progressive mindsets that will quickly allow them to re-acculturate themselves to the new and ever changing demands of the profession (Fullan, 1993). With school systems being called on to continually re-invent themselves to meet the constantly changing needs of their students (Johnson et al., 1997), school librarians need to take notice. Rather than ignoring the erosion of their professional status, now more than ever school librarians/media specialists must take an active role in promoting themselves, their profession, their school, and their school library if they wish to continue as viable professionals in the decades to come. The end game will be lost if the majority of librarians continue to only respond reactively to the attacks on their profession. Only through actively pursuing community support and forging partnerships will school librarians once again attain recognition by the public as essential members of the educational process. Through building these strong interpersonal and interagency linkages, the school librarian will become and remain a valuable asset in the educational community.

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