

Special Feature Article:

YOUR GREATEST ADVOCATE — YOU!

Many colleagues are currently feeling under increasing pressure to consolidate their positions and influence within schools. The 2010 school year could prove to be a watershed one for the profession as Principals will have increased autonomy over staffing, and will be faced with lower student intakes and inevitably will be making cuts to staffing levels. The dilemma for school leadership teams is working out where and how to make these cuts equitably. From conversations with numerous colleagues and through other electronic forums, there is increased apprehension in our profession on the direct impact these staffing reductions will have on already reduced staffing levels. This conundrum combined with perennial confusion decision makers have about our role, our lack of a 'guaranteed clientele' of classes, has led to some justifiable concern and erosion of morale within our ranks.

This begs the obvious but essential question of what should we do and how do we go about it? From my perspective and having had to overcome significant challenges already with staffing over the years, the only logical step forward starts on a personal level. Your best advocate I believe is not the next professional development opportunity, your level of experience, and training or perceived administrative brilliance. What really matters to school communities is what you do each day and how you go about it. My view is that we need to wrest the initiative from Principals and other decision makers and protect our own positions by advocating our importance from within and co-opting our students, parents and staff to assist us.

So, where does one start? This will vary greatly in school communities due to diversity in personnel and educational focus. What

works at PLC won't necessarily do so in other environments. However, I do have some generic suggestions for building advocacy which I have adapted and refined over the years from work in different schools which may provide some ideas as you build credibility and influence in your learning environments.

It's all about the learning — stupid!

Excuse the Clintonesque reference here but the safest, surest and best way to build confidence, influence and respect is to make learning a top priority. Principals see learning as the core business of schools and whether you like it or not, this is the yardstick that will be used in measuring or judging your effectiveness.

By learning I mean active engagement in the design, implementation and validation of the learning in an authentic context. Resource provision, which is seen as one of the staples of what we do, is one small aspect of what you provide. It is, in essence, what we do with the resources in terms of thinking and learning that is of far greater importance. We must supply and follow the resources attaching ourselves to ensure they reach their potential and, above all, value add to the student's learning. Authentic learning is one area if we are fully engaged in then they won't touch us. They can't afford to. If what we bring is so much better than what they have then we are integral to the core business of schools.

So, it begs these questions. What is your level of learning engagement with the school community? Where does learning sit in your list of daily priorities? What can you bring to teachers and students that they need and can't

source from elsewhere?

Lobby and lobby again.

A key part of advocacy is to ascertain who are the power players or leaders in organisations and work with them. Individual influence and capacity to engage is usually limited — trying to do it on your own is always very difficult. You need to discern who holds the ‘power’ within your schools and evaluate your relationship with them? What do they want from you in terms of support? What is their vision and how do they see you fitting in with that vision? Tap into this and build on it showing your colleague how your vision marries with theirs and can lead to bigger and better learning experiences.

The onus sits with you to initiate and cultivate the relationship. Building rapport with colleagues who hold these positions is the conduit that can then parachute you into groups, committees and conversations where the decisions are being made. If you aren’t ‘at the table’ with others then you are already marginalised. Try to ‘tantalise’ with your thoughts and ideas. Be provocative and suggest means with which you can assist in enhancing and changing direction in what they are doing. Action and engagement are the key words here. Select HODS and other key staff to help spread the word on your considerable expertise, flexibility and capacity to extend the learning on offer. Then use the positive experience to connect with the next customer. “Did you hear what ‘x’ and I came up with for.... Do you want to try something like this?” This one is very much up to you to make it happen!

What do you have to offer?

As strange as this may seem, your training, expertise and abilities may not be what is needed or required in your schools these days. This is a vitally important point to recognise and works on two simplistic premises: Where are the school priorities and where are the weak points staff are struggling to grapple with in their daily teaching?

Having a cogent view of the School priorities is essential but more importantly is how you can take these threads and weave a tapestry

that connects these ideas to what you do. The second premise requires a cold hard assessment of where the deficiencies are with staff and then dovetailing your support to these needs. In my current environment, the use of technology, the ability to differentiate and the assimilation of International Baccalaureate into learning philosophy and programmes are the areas of greatest need so they have become my focus for my engagement with staff and students. You have a realistic and cogent view on what you can offer and how it fits with the school. No one is going to tell you what it is because most don’t understand what you can do! So, you need to make it happen and show them you understand and can make connections.

The customer is nearly always right, even if he or she doesn’t know what they want!

This rather obvious contention is a cornerstone of my relationship with the school community. Even if the original idea is daft and not worthy of pursuing! The real skill here is to validate the initiation of contact with you, the chance to build rapport and to have something to offer as an alternative. If you aren’t sure the idea is worth pursuing then try and buy some time to think it over. I try to sprinkle my negotiations with staff and students with comments like “can I have time to think about this one and get back to you” or “I think I can do something to help you out on this one but have a few different options I want to explore. Will get back to you on this one.” We do need to keep in mind that we should not compromise our integrity just to be engaged. Stay true to your philosophy and only take on what you can actually make a difference within a realistic timeframe. If staff insist on immediacy then I usually resort to “given my teaching load this is what I can do for you in the short term.” In all of these meeting I try and write something concrete and send it to staff prior to the next time we have to discuss. This indicates my preparedness to work on their ideas and aspirations and perhaps gives them an opportunity to think things through before we meet again.

You can have the \$100 job or the \$1000 job!

My view is that authentic learning and

engagement is what I do best and what school community requires of me at this particular time. If staff want shallow surface learning based around *finding* information and shuffling it around using frameworks that promote lower level thinking then this quickly determines the degree of attention and effort that will be afforded to them. I am worth much more than shallow learning and so are you! So, this \$100 or \$1000 job line underpins my approach. If I can transform the idea or concept then I go for it. If not, then I quickly make a judgment about its merit and match my effort in terms of output with the task. At times I have said no to any engagement with staff and their classes if I believe the task is valueless and they aren't willing to negotiate on things. I offer the resources of the centre but usually excuse myself on other grounds such as having prior commitments. Maintain your integrity. Set your boundaries and model the high standard of teaching and learning you are there to promote.

Liberation from negativity:

Liberate yourself by refraining from whingeing about things such as changes foisted upon us, lack of appreciation for what we do and how hard you work. Put frankly, no one else really cares because they are consumed with their own struggles on the ground. In fact, try looking at it for a teacher's point of view. Staff with a full load of classes will never see you as an equal because you don't have the same preparation, marking and assessment requirements they do. Yet you still receive the same pay as they do! Our work is *different* often not understood and I think we need to be low key about how stretched we feel because constant complaining just doesn't resonate well with the rest of the community.

One current 'hot' topic seems to be the increasing want for administrators to use libraries as study centres for upper school students. The notion is deeply flawed but we should ask ourselves why school leaders would make such a decision. Is it due to a lack of space, staffing resources or a comment on how they perceive the value of the library? Perhaps a combination of all three. Only you can answer that particular question.

In my own circumstances the library has been

the Yr 12 common room and the area that is used by all senior school students for private study throughout my tenure at the school. We have also endured two years of accommodating middle school classes at the same time whereby half the teaching space available in the library was used as a classroom for English and Humanities. It was far from ideal and quite stressful but we realised we were being judged to some extent by the administration in our response of how we met these challenges. My answer was to try and structure my time for administrative duties or meeting with staff to plan curriculum work when these groups were in as they required some form of supervision. To counter the problem with loss of library teaching space due to renovations in the middle school we decided that working more in classrooms and producing digital materials would allow us to still meet the needs of the community without too much compromise with the quality to the learning programmes we offered. My point is that whatever the unfairness behind these decisions, there are alternatives. We need to think first, make our case why this is not right but to see how else it might work if the decision is irreversible. Going with a solution is far more powerful than just giving an emotional dump on a problem. Thinking divergently is the essence of good leadership and might win you some added respect from your superiors.

Teaching outside the library is a great opportunity:

Teaching outside the library should not be seen as a condemnation of you and the library but as an opportunity to infiltrate and spread your abilities to a much wider audience. Being seen 'outside' of the library demonstrates your forward thinking and willingness to meet other's needs. Nothing brings credibility and respect from colleagues quicker than you being in the trenches with them. I have been asked to 'join' several learning areas ranging from PE, Health Education, English, Humanities and Science in several schools and the experiences I have had have been largely beneficial. Your refusal by saying no to this opportunity only promotes the notion that you are 'exclusive' and don't have the same conditions as everybody else even though you receive the same pay

and conditions as a classroom teacher. Whilst I do agree that Principals insisting on teaching outside the library can cannibalise the quality of the services you can offer, I think it is prudent to say 'yes' in the interim, then to build a case of what has been the cost to on a broader level because you are no longer as available to work with staff. I have found that my teaching in other learning areas has actually increased my connections with the school community, lead to greater respect and more 'business' in terms of what they have asked me to do.

Flexibility and membership of the 'cardigan club'

Flexibility is the most significant attribute for teacher librarians if we are in schools. Sadly we are known by some as not being flexible in our approach and instead are labelled as founding members of the so called 'cardigan club.' An esteemed colleague described his experience recently after speaking to 200 school librarians internationally. He began his address by saying "this is a new idea for you all that will change the way you operate in schools." According to him, the reaction was immediate and palpable. He says that 'all of a sudden 200 cardigans clicked together in unison and heads started to move sideways. The room was awash with negative thoughts and mutterings of "this not my job, I wasn't trained for this, when am I going to get time to do this...."

Being flexible means being open minded to different ideas concerning what you do and how you do them. It does not mean we merely take on something because it is new but surely we need to take the time to evaluate things on a holistic level. Flexibility allows us to consider different things, blend them into our school cultures, priorities and ask "what's the outcome here or the benefit for the school" and "how might it work in my environment?" Flexibility requires on going changes in our mindsets, a preparedness to take calculated risks, to innovate within our own domain, inspire those around us and build sustained positive relationships. Your flexibility I believe largely determines much of your likely successes as a teacher librarian. How many

'cardigans' do you carry around with you?

The tiny things do matter!

Often the smallest and seemingly irrelevant things matter the most with people in their observations of what we do. Due to the differences in our role which is often not widely understood, leads to greater and perhaps unfair scrutiny of some of our work practices. The 'arrive late and leave early' syndrome seems to irk staff even though it is widely practiced by other members of the teaching staff. It may contribute to an irresistible inference that we work fewer hours and therefore not as hard. I can't tell you the number of teachers who make this type of comment over the years. Maybe it is something worth looking at.

Closely aligned to the hours issue is what you take home with you at the end of each day. What you leave with is important and noticed by other staff I can assure you. Taking nothing with you at the day's end translates to having nothing to do once you leave and an implication that you don't work as hard as other staff. For years I have carried a large red box home with me in the evening mainly because I am never that organised to know what I might need or will do. I had never thought much about it until one of the English staff said to me in the car park "Gosh you work so hard, always taking things home each night." An innocent observation but one I think has a telling message within. What impression do you leave with at the end of each day?

Concluding remarks:

The comments above represent a small number of suggestions that may assist in the advocacy in schools for teacher librarians. Ultimately it is you who determines your sphere of influence and contribution to your school communities. The flexibility of the role offers enormous capacity to make connections and build lasting relationships. There are always going to be plenty of road blocks along the way. So, stand up, stay positive, rejoice in the diversity of our roles and show the staff your true worth. They

simply can't do it without you!

More advocacy ideas from you:

So, here's a challenge for the next newsletter. I would love to hear from you with original and innovative ideas that you are currently using within your schools to help market, promote and build sustained and lasting relationships within school communities and libraries. Enclosed is my email for you to add your own. My aim is to collate them and publish in the next issue.

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