"Exemplary Elementary Schools" and Their Library Media Centers: A Research Report

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*An Examination of Library Media Services in Public Schools
Appearing on the U.S. Department of Education's 1986 List
of Exemplary Public and Private Elementary Schools*

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

During the summer of 1986 the U.S. Department of Education published a list of 270 exemplary public and private elementary schools in 49 states.[1] The selection process began the previous year when the department invited all elementary schools in the country to take part in the "Elementary Recognition Program." The competition required schools to nominate themselves by completing a lengthy application form. The competing schools were then visited and screened by state and national teams of educators.

This report examines the status of library media services in the 209 public schools that appeared on the final list. In looking at them, the researchers had a number of questions to pose. Are library media centers in "exemplary" elementary schools exemplary? What "cutting-edge" services and programs do these library media centers provide? What is exemplary about the library media programs in these schools? What services would the library media specialists in these schools like to add or improve? Answers to these questions could suggest workable guidelines for those elementary schools that did not make the 1986 list.

ANTECEDENTS OF THE STUDY

The current study has been preceded by a number of research projects spanning thirteen years. The first, conducted by David Loertscher in 1973, examined the services of high school library media programs in Indiana senior high schools. He found that most school media specialists had yet to assume a partnership with teachers in improving their schools' instructional programs.[2]

A second related study, conducted by Loertscher and P. Land in Indiana elementary schools in 1976, found that full-time media specialists provided significantly more services than did either part-time professionals or full-time clericals.[3] In addition, the researchers learned that traditional rather than innovative services were being offered in the schools examined.

J. Stroud replicated the Loertscher/Land research and found that in middle schools only one-third of the media specialists took an active role in instructional planning.[4] In a 1985 published review of research, Gerald C. Hodges concluded that "the frequency with which the school library media specialist assumes an active role in curriculum and instruction is directly related to the size of the media staff."[5]

S. Aaron's annual reviews of research have pointed out the importance of media services and professional staff to the overall quality of school programs.[6] Further efforts by one of the authors of this report have also shown that both size and quality of library media staff have been major factors in the variety and frequency of library media center services.

METHODOLOGY

This study's population comprised the 209 public schools of the 270 elementary schools recognized as exemplary by the U.S. Department of Education in 1986. Forty-nine of the fifty states were represented (Arkansas was not). The researchers designed nineteen statements on library media services using

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PSES, Loertscher's LMC Taxonomy,[8] the current literature, and the researchers' own knowledge and experiences in the field.[7] The items on the questionnaire covered four categories of services: (a) instructional development services to teachers, (b) other important services to teachers, (c) services to students, and (d) collections. Three open-ended questions were also asked:

1. What do you think is the best part of your LMC program?
2. If you had your wish, what would you add or emphasize in your program?
3. What do you need most to implement your wish?

The questionnaire was pretested by school library media specialists and a panel of experts in the field. The questionnaire was then revised, printed, and mailed to the schools the last week of August 1986.

Of the 209 questionnaires mailed, 147 were returned. Of those returned, only one was rated unusable for a net response rate of 70%. Two more questionnaires were returned after the response deadline and were not included in the analysis.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Table 1 summarizes the important demographic data on the participating schools.

Student Enrollment

The smallest school had only 173 students, while the largest school had 1,300 students. About half (48%) of the schools had student bodies of less than 500. Almost one-third (29%) of the schools reported minority enrollments of less than 5%, and only 11% of the respondents said that minorities comprised more than 50% of their student bodies. Almost half (46%) of the respondents reported that most of the students in their schools came from affluent or above-average-income homes. Only 4% of them considered that most of their students were from poor homes. These data strongly suggest that the enrollment of the schools in the study could be primarily classified as mostly white students from middle- to upper-middle-class homes.

Spending

According to table 1, money spent on library media materials in almost half (43%) of the schools has remained steady over the past five years. However, 44% of the schools experienced spending increases during that same period, and 13%

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TABLE 1
Profile of Exemplary Schools

Category	Average	Std. Dev.
Students and Faculty		
Number of students	549	225
Number of faculty	29	12
Percent of minority students	22	27
Staff of the Library Media Center		
FTE library media professionals	.78	.39
Average number of years experience (professional)	7	5
FTE clerical staff	.59	.61
FTE adult volunteers	.33	.45
Total FTE staff	1.71	.80

Spending
Spending for library media materials over the past five years:
13%—major increase (more than 10% per year)
31%—moderate increase (5-10% per year)
43%—steady
8%—moderate decrease (5-10% per year)
5%—major decrease (more than 10% per year)

Affluence
The school could be considered:
7%—affluent
40%—above average
40%—average
12%—below average
1%—poor

Family Income
Family income for these schools:
14%—affluent
32%—above average
36%—average
14%—below average
4%—poor

reported moderate to major decreases. It appears that the exemplary schools, to a large extent, have been faring somewhat better than most other schools with regard to maintaining and improving expenditures for library media programs. This conclusion is also supported by the fact that 47% of the respondents reported that their schools could be considered above average in "affluence" or money available for school programs.

Staffing

Table 2 shows that of the 146 schools in the present study, less than half (43%) had a full-time professional and at least one clerk. It was disappointing to see that a fifth of the schools had only part-time professional help and another 12% were totally without the services of a professional staff. One school in the study had no library media center and reported that it relied on classroom collections supplemented by materials from the local public library.

The overall staffing patterns in the exemplary schools are somewhat disappointing. Because research has shown that professional staffing is critical to the overall excellence of library media programs, one would have expected that in

TABLE 2
Personnel Distribution

Category	Number	Percentage
Schools with full-time professionals and clerks	63	43
Schools with full-time professionals and no clerks	38	26
Schools with part-time professionals and clerks	23	16
Schools with part-time professionals and no clerks	4	3
Schools with no professionals	17	12
Schools with no library media center	1	
Total	146	100

It appears that the exemplary schools . . . have been faring somewhat better than most other schools with regard to maintaining and improving expenditures for library media programs.

schools designated as excellent there would have been more with full-time library media professionals.

Services

A school library media center exists to support and carry out the school's curriculum. In order to accomplish this, a number of important services must be rendered. These include more than just the traditional "warehousing" activities. A library media specialist must be a visible and forceful agent to meet the demands of a particular curriculum, a teaching staff, and a unique group of students. How often, then, are the exemplary schools providing those services deemed critical to an effective school program?

The major part of the questionnaire dealt with nineteen "cutting-edge" or critical services. The frequency with which each service is currently offered was rated by the library media specialist as either regularly, occasionally, or rarely or never performed. Table 3 provides the percentages of schools offering each of these nineteen services.

Instructional Development. The analysis of the data concerning instructional development is good news indeed. According to the current data, the ten-year effort to encourage library media specialists to become more heavily involved in curricular matters is now beginning to pay off. Although most

studies have shown little interest on the part of library media specialists in engaging in instructional development, and many have been quite negative about the role, these data suggest that, while much progress is still needed, inroads are being made toward changing the role of the library media specialist in the schools.

Forty-seven percent of the respondents in this study indicated that they regularly consult with teachers in advance of unit presentations, and 10% conduct exit evaluations with the teachers. These two factors are keys to progress in enlarging the instructional role of media specialists in the schools. Library educators in schools of library science and colleges of education need to concentrate on teaching practical methods for instructional involvement until these skills become second nature to prospective school library media specialists.

Other Services to Teachers. Classroom collections have been praised on a number of occasions. However, these have been replaced in the U.S. largely by centralized collections. The question then arose, "Do teachers still have access to classroom collections?" Happily, the data show that all of the library media specialists, to some extent, still provide temporary classroom collections in addition to maintaining centralized collections. Ninety percent of the respondents reported that they do this on a regular basis. Indications are that many teachers in the exemplary schools enjoy flexibility in using media center materials for instruction. Perhaps materials exist in these schools in sufficient number and variety to satisfy changing curricular needs.

The data also indicate that elementary school library media specialists are very much aware of the need for in-service training for teachers in effective use of the materials and services that are being offered. More than a third of the respondents regularly provide in-service training in the use of materials and equipment (including computers) for teachers. Another 43% do so occasionally.

TABLE 3
Services Provided by the Library Media Specialists

Item	Regularly	Occasionally	Rarely or Never
A. Instructional Development			
The library media staff assists teachers in unit planning by:			
1. gathering materials	90%	7%	3%
2. helping formulate lesson objectives	61%	27%	12%
3. consulting in advance of unit presentation	47%	43%	10%
4. teaching a library/information or production skill connected with the unit	46%	38%	16%
5. carrying out an instructional activity connected with the unit	31%	49%	20%
6. consulting with curriculum/textbook selection committees	29%	25%	46%
7. helping evaluate the success of the unit	10%	32%	58%
B. Other Services to Teachers			
8. Teachers check out materials for temporary classroom collections	90%	9%	1%
9. In-service training is given to teachers in materials, equipment, computers or other methods of using the LMC	37%	43%	21%
C. Services to Students			
10. Reading and telling stories to students are provided	89%	6%	5%
11. Literature promotion activities (book tales, reading contests, special reading activities, reading guidance) are offered	85%	14%	1%
12. Special programming events take place (book fairs, celebration of National Library Week, author visits, local celebrations, etc.)	73%	25%	1%
13. Students pursue individualized activities in addition to classroom group activities in the LMC	62%	28%	10%
14. Information or materials are provided to students from sources outside the LMC	36%	41%	23%
15. Students produce audiovisual media in the LMC	10%	29%	61%
E. Collections			
The library media collection provides:			
16. a variety of print and AV media for instruction	94%	3%	3%
17. quality materials	92%	7%	1%
18. up-to-date materials	88%	12%	0%
19. enough materials for the number of users	77%	22%	1%

Services to Students. Interaction with literature appears to be a popular service to children in the exemplary schools, and rightly so. Storytelling, reading activities, and special programming were reported to be regular service features by 89% of the respondents. The researchers also wondered to what extent library media centers provided opportunities for students to interact individually with materials other than those needed for class assignments. Only 62% claim this as a regular feature of programming, which seems low. The researchers suspect that the dogmatic emphasis on teaching library skills has had an undesirable effect on this critical service, although evidence for this was not specifically examined. If such is the case, then library media specialists in exemplary schools, along with their counterparts in other schools, must be convinced of the value of individualized student use of media centers and libraries so that we may produce lifelong learners. More research in this critical area of library media services in "good" schools is suggested.

It was a surprising disappointment that only 10% of the media specialists allow students to produce audiovisual media in the library media center on a regular basis. Progress toward the multimedia concept has certainly been made, but direct student involvement in the process still has a long way to go before it reaches the desired level. Perhaps the often-cited use of student-produced media to motivate students to participate in their own learning is still one of the best-kept secrets of the library media program. Again, there appears to be a critical need in the field to convince library media specialists of the long-term benefits of this vital service.

Collection as a Service. The questionnaire contained four items concerning the library media specialists' overall perceptions of the quality of their collections. The ratings for variety, general quality, currency, and quantity of materials showed a progressive decline, from 94% to 77%, among respondents who could regularly boast about the materials being offered to clients. However, on examining the data from the three open-ended questions (table 4), there appeared to be some discrepancy between the ratings on service items and the open-ended comments. In case after case, library media specialists would mark 3 (regular) for each of the four collection items but complain that their collections were out-of-date and lacking in quantity. In this case, the researchers decided that the open-ended comments more nearly reflected the truth of the matter and not the data from the four questions concerning collections. This view has some support, however weak, from the

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data on the collection items. The researchers are now collecting more extensive data concerning collections from these and other schools, and this data should provide a basis for more extensive analysis.

Predicting Service in Library Media Centers

A total score for the frequency of services was computed for each school (respondents indicated frequency on a scale from 3 to 1 (regularly to rarely or never). This score (a minimum of 19 and a maximum of 57) was entered into a regression model to be compared to
- Size of faculty
- Size of library media staff (FTE professionals, FTE clerical, and FTE adult volunteers)
- Number of students in the school
- Spending for library media materials
- Affluence of the school
- Family income
- Experience of the library media specialist

The following were significant at the .05 level:
- Affluence of the school
- Family income
- Number of professional library media specialists
- Total size of the library media staff

This means that a greater variety of library media services can be predicted in the more affluent communities and in schools with larger library media staffs. Such a finding replicates earlier studies in the field. It is simply a matter of parents in more affluent communities demanding and paying for more educational services for their children.

Open-Ended Questions

The library media specialists were asked to respond to three questions:
1. What do you think is the best part of your LMC program?
2. If you have your wish, what would you add or emphasize in your program?
3. What do you need to implement your wish?

A content analysis of the comments was made utilizing the Appleworks spreadsheet. As the researchers read each comment, categories of responses were set up as a row on the spreadsheet, and the number of times those comments were made was recorded in columns corresponding to the type of staffing pattern of the library media center. Table 4 shows the spreadsheet, which includes the researchers' comments for each category.

Possibly the responses made by library media specialists in the open-ended section were influenced by the nineteen items they had just answered. This point of view can be interpreted both positively and negatively—either the previous answers reminded the respondents of their best and their worst program features or the items unduly influenced their responses. Nevertheless, there were sufficient independent answers to convince the researchers of the value of these data.

The open-ended comments revealed that there was a significant difference between the comments of full-time library media specialists who had full-time clericals and those who worked part-time and/or had no clerical help. This led the researchers to conclude that there is a threshold in library media staffing below which the effectiveness of programs cannot be maintained. It was reasoned that because all library media centers have a very heavy burden of warehousing functions, the

TABLE 4
Open-Ended Questions

	(N=32) Full-time Prof. + Full-time Clerk	(N=31) Full-time Prof. + Part-time Clerk	(N=38) Full-time Prof. + No Clerk	(N=27) Part-time Prof. with/without Clerk	(N=18) No. Prof.: Full/Part-time Clerk	Comments on the Data by the Researchers
Library Media Specialists Are Most Proud Of:						
Support						
1. Support of administration and teachers	41%	10%	13%	12%	17%	Notice the difference when the LMC has a full staff
2. Support of parents	2%	3%	11%	15%		Support of parents is irratic across schools
Services to Students						
1. Literature-based activities	38%	42%	50%	27%	33%	Important component for all schools
2. Individualized help given students	22%	6%	5%	8%		Note the rapid decline as staff decreases
3. A conducive atmosphere for students	16%	13%	18%	23%	22%	Consistent efforts are made
4. Library skills (isolated)	16%	32%	21%	19%	11%	Much too high in all schools
5. Library skills (integrated)	6%	16%	5%	8%	6%	Too low, considering the encouragement in the literature
Services to Teachers						
1. Instructional development	31%	16%	13%			Note how this vital service fades as staff does
2. Support of curriculum	25%	16%	11%	8%		Fades out of existence as staff does
3. Flexible scheduling	12%	29%	21%	12%		Those who have it, like it
4. Regularly scheduled classes	6%	6%	11%	8%	17%	These persons feel that they reach all students
Other Services						
1. A carefully selected collection	19%	10%	16%	8%	17%	The materials they do have are quality items
2. A multimedia catalog	6%		3%			Shows the effort toward a multimedia center
3. The amount of items circulated	3%		5%	8%		Circ. is not a revealing eval. measure
4. Educational television service	3%				6%	Several noted their great service in this area
5. AV production services			3%	4%		Not nearly as high as one would suppose
6. Computers for students		3%	3%			A number had become centers for inst. computing
7. Learning centers			11%			The service is popular with some LMS
8. Networking with other libraries				4%	6%	Not nearly as high as it should be
9. Special events			24%			Those pressed for time tend to try this approach
Administrative Components						
1. The contribution of automation	6%	3%	3%			Those who have automated laud its contribution
2. The difference clerical help makes	6%					Grateful people
3. Enough staff to differentiate tasks	6%	6%	6%	6%		Understand that full staffing gives possibilities
4. An adequate facility			3%			A surprise even with declining enrollments
Library Media Specialists Feel That the Following Would Be the Most Important Additions to Their Program:						
Services to Students						
1. More literature activities	12%	13%	11%	4%	11%	Much more could be done
2. Add student AV production	3%	16%	3%	4%		This highly motivating learning strategy would help
3. More independent help for students		10%	3%			LMS give up as staff declines
Services to Teachers						
1. More instructional development	9%	6%	18%	8%	11%	LMS realize that this is a primary goal
2. Implement a flexible schedule	9%	10%	16%	12%	17%	Those who don't have it dream of having it
3. Provide more inservice	6%	3%				Teachers need more training to use media
Other Services						
1. Provide computer services	6%	3%	3%	4%		Some would like to be leaders in this technology
2. Increase AV services	3%	3%	3%	4%		Some haven't made it into the multimedia center
3. Collection renewal	3%	26%	23%	15%	22%	An important factor for national attention
4. Provide summer hours	3%	3%				These people hate to see gains lost
5. Teach more library skills		3%	6%	8%	11%	Some realize they don't have time to teach skills
6. Set up learning centers			3%			
Administrative Components						
1. More time to act as a professional			26%	77%	56%	A dramatic plea for help to become excellent
2. Money	19%	35%	21%	62%	28%	They know what they would spend it on
3. A larger staff (usually clerical)	12%	32%	21%	27%	17%	Clericals are in short supply
4. More space	6%	19%	16%	23%	6%	Program suffers when space is limited
5. More equipment	3%		11%	12%		Requests came from poorer schools
6. Just more time!	3%	23%	3%	4%		A never-ending battle
7. Need a district LMC coord.				4%		Frustration with the administration
8. Automate to provide more professional time	9%	19%	16%			The hope of those lacking help
9. Add more volunteers	6%	3%			6%	Even fully staffed LMCs wanted more
10. Move AV materials to library			5%			

full-service program cannot emerge until the staffing threshold of a full-time professional and a full-time clerical is met or exceeded.

This conclusion was influenced by both the tone and the substance of comments. A careful reading of the open-ended comments reveals that library media specialists with a full-time clerical were more enthusiastic, more positive, and more confident than their counterparts with less staff. This was further supported when the researchers did a content analysis of the open-ended comments. The topics discussed as strengths and weaknesses by those with full staffs and those without differed significantly.

Full-time library media specialists with full-time clericals

reported the following as their best program features:
1. Support of administration and teachers—42%
2. Literature-based activities—38%
3. Instructional development—31%
4. Individualized help for students—22%
5. Support of the curriculum—25%

In contrast, library media specialists without full staffs rated the same five services as follows:
1. Support of administration and teachers—13%
2. Literature-based activities—38%
3. Instructional development—7%
4. Individualized help for students—5%
5. Support of the curriculum—9%

. . . there is a threshhold in library media staffing below which the effectiveness of programs cannot be maintained.

Note that literature activities are equal in the two groups but that instructional involvement and help for individual students drop off significantly when staff is reduced.

The second and third questions in the open-ended section of the questionnaire asked what improvements the library media specialists wanted to make. Full-time library media specialists spread their comments across many concerns, the highest being simply more money (19%). Those without full staffs wanted collection renewal, more time to act as a professional, money, larger clerical staffs, more time, more space, and more automation. Such a pattern of responses shows one group almost searching for things to want and the other seeking to keep their heads above water. They realize that most of their problems stem from too many things to do and not enough people to do them.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Staffing

There seems to be a threshold at which the library media program begins to pay the kinds of dividends expected from the investment made in it. This threshold is a staff consisting of a *full-time professional and a full-time clerical person*. This finding was not only statistically significant but was the single most important variable in an excellent library media program. Having a fine facility stocked with ample materials and equipment is essential, but without the critical staffing component, services suffer and the impact on education is drastically lowered. A library media center has such a heavy warehousing function that a professional without full-time assistance gets bogged down in the clerical burdens of the center. A sound analogy seems to be that a library media center without a full staff component suffers the same way a school would without a full-time principal who has full-time clerical assistance.

Evidence is as follows:
* The FTE number of professional library media specialists predicts the frequency of "cutting-edge" services. (Multiple regression comparison P <0.0001)
* The FTE number of total staff (professional, clerical, plus adult volunteers) predicts the frequency of library media services. (Multiple regression comparison P <0.0002)

Services to Students

1. Activities designed to increase enjoyment of literature and to promote reading are the bedrock of the elementary school library media program. These activities range from storytelling and reading guidance to major special events involving the entire school and community. This function is consistent across all schools with all types of staffing patterns.
2. Library media specialists make a great effort to provide a conducive atmosphere for children to interact with literature and a wide range of reference and audiovisual materials.

3. In the best library media programs, children receive individualized attention as they interact with literature and find and use materials to help them in their studies.
4. Library skills are taught regularly but are not always integrated into the curriculum of the school.

Services to Teachers

1. Working with teachers to deliver more effective instruction using the resources of the media center is a strong component of fully staffed centers. This component, known as instructional development, declines as personnel are reduced. Library media specialists in understaffed programs recognize that they should be offering this service regularly.
2. Integrating the materials of the media center into the curriculum is a strong feature of fully staffed programs, but this service fades as staffing is reduced.
3. The meshing of instruction with library media materials occurs where flexible schedules allow for daylong access by individuals, small groups, and large groups to the center. In schools where library media specialists are locked into heavily scheduled days or do not have adequate staff, flexibility and more staffing to make it work are major dreams.

Resources and Operations

1. While many library media specialists are proud of their collections of materials, the majority realize that it is time for a massive effort to *renew the collections* of the school libraries of the nation. The major spending of the 1960s, coupled with the inflation and declining budgets of the 1970s, has created a problem in supplying materials for budding readers and researchers.
2. Support of administrators, teachers, and parents is recognized as an outstanding requisite of excellence in fully staffed library media programs.
3. Full-time library media specialists who lack sufficient clerical assistance hope that automation will provide them with more professional time to interact with students and teachers.
4. Most library media specialists agree that money is desperately needed to improve their programs, and they have very specific plans for those funds, should they be forthcoming.
5. Many library media specialists recognize that their programs suffer because of a lack of space. Crowding is the damper on simultaneous literary activities, student research, and private individual reading or enjoyment. This is true particularly in centers where the bulk of the library day is scheduled with class groups.

Excellent Schools, Excellent Library Media Programs

The study shows that while not all the "excellent" schools had excellent library media programs, there was a definite overlap of the two concepts.

In schools with mediocre to poor library media programs, the question must be asked: How could a school having inadequate library media service pass through the process of self-nomination and screening at state and national levels and still be considered excellent? Informal feedback from a number of sources indicates that the process may have been somewhat flawed. Nevertheless, the schools in this group have provided a fascinating look into the programs of library media centers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to administrators, boards of education, parents, and governments seeking to have library media center programs make a significant impact on education.

Inputs

1. While a spacious and attractive center stocked with well-chosen materials is essential, a full-time library media specialist with full-time clerical assistance is necessary if the investment is to pay maximum dividends.
2. It is possible to blunt the impact of the library media center if massive rigid scheduling and time-consuming "courses of library skills" are taught. As one person recently noted, "The children in my school are forced to spend more time learning library skills than I spent getting a master's degree in library science!"
3. Since the U.S. school library media collections are in desperate need of a massive collection-renewal effort, a good rule for spending would be
   a. Budget an amount equivalent to *two* books per student. This amount, if spent on all materials, should be sufficient to keep collections current.
   b. Require that the materials purchased be focused on supporting specific curricular goals and on providing a flood of good literature of interest to the students in the schools.

Expectations for Impact

To maximize the impact on elementary education, the best advice is to hire a full-time library media staff, provide a flexi-ble schedule, and install a program emphasizing the following prioritized program services:

1. A rich, literature-related program that promotes the enjoyment of reading.
2. A partnership with teachers in a program of instructional development.
3. An emphasis on individual assistance to learners who are using materials.
4. A creative use of new materials, technology, and methods for making the resources of the library media center the core of instruction—not an appendage to it.
5. Library skills programs as a supporting corollary to the above program features rather than the main focus of activity.

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