

# Reinvent Your School's Library and Watch Student Academic Achievement Increase

The books are still there, but nearly everything else in the library has changed. Is it worth it?

BY CONNIE CHAMPLIN AND DAVID LOERTSCHER

*I'm very pleased to yield this month's space to my colleague, Connie Champlin who gently but diligently reminds me that library media centers and the professionals who run them can be powerful forces in integrating technology into teaching and learning. Here, Connie and her colleague, David Loertscher, outline some "first steps" in ensuring that your library media center achieves its potential for improving student learning and developing 21st century skills.*

Perhaps you remember when you visited the school library once a week to hear a story, check out a book, or copy 20 citations from *Readers' Guide* in the hopes of finding a single magazine article back in the musty magazine room. In your lifetime, school libraries have evolved from book collections to multimedia repositories to high-tech information centers operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with tentacles reaching out to every classroom, into students' homes, and now onto students' hand-held computers.

Research about school libraries in 10 states and 33,000 schools leads us to conclude that quality school library media programs make a difference in academic achievement (Library Research Service, 2000). That is, the evidence suggests that in any balanced diet for a learner, the library media center is a staple, not a frill. But libraries don't make a difference if they are merely warehouses of outdated stuff, places to drop students while teachers have a planning period, or where students complete worksheets by copying facts from books or downloading data from the Internet. Neither do libraries make a difference when staffed only by paraprofessional or clerical staff members. In a study of library media programs in Alaska, 41% of elementary students and 49% of secondary students scored below average when only a clerical staff member was present in the library. With a full-time library media specialist, only 17% of elementary students and 8% of secondary students scored below average (Lance & Loertscher, 2002).

A 21st century library media center can be the heart of the school

because it is a high-tech learning laboratory staffed by a high-powered learning and technology consultant (the school library media specialist). It is expensive. So with today's emphasis on results, the library media center must pull its weight, and it *can* when administrators have a clear vision of its function and hold its program accountable.

This article recommends four reasonably simple ways to monitor the investment of transforming an outdated library program into a modern one versus its effect.

*Technique #1: Measure the amount of collaboration among library media specialists and teachers to plan, execute, and evaluate joint learning experiences.* When a teacher is willing to move a learning experience from the classroom to the library media center, good things happen: There are now two teachers instead of one, an information-rich and technology-rich environment is available, and each learner can expect twice as much professional support.

Exciting learning experiences in the library media center require advance planning; creative transformation of a low-level learning experience to an improved one; innovative use of technology; and sound assessment of content knowledge, information literacy skills, and technology use.

One simple measure is to request that library media specialists keep a collaboration log—a notebook with the planning sheets used by library media specialists and teachers as they collaborate to build learning experiences. A lesson belongs in the log only if the teacher and the library media specialist agree that the experience was superior to one that would have been conducted in the classroom. The number of entries in the log constitute the "gold star" learning experiences at your school.

If a principal notices a low frequency of collaboration across disciplines or grade levels, he or she

Figure 1

**What's Your LMC Accessibility Score?**

**Is Your Library Media Center Ready for Collaboration?**

Access to information, information technologies, and library media facilities must not be a barrier to teachers and students lest the collaborative process be squelched. Use the following checklist to measure whether the library media program is providing the flexible access students and teachers need to foster collaboration.

**Library facilities:**

- The library media center is not scheduled for weekly visits from any class, but all classes have multiple opportunities each week to send individuals, small groups, or large groups.
- Teachers might bring the class to the library media center every day during a project and at other times the entire class does not come for a few weeks.
- Library media center facilities are arranged in such a way that multiple groups and individuals may be working simultaneously without undue disturbance.

**Classrooms:**

- Classroom book collections are being rotated in and out of the central library media center collection to provide attractive and interesting titles.
- Classroom computers are connected to information data sources in the library media center.
- Video and electronic materials are available from the library media center for classroom use for short- or long-term use.
- The classroom is connected to the Internet.

**Access to the library media center as an extension of the classroom (library media specialist attention not required):**

- Individual students can be sent to the library media center at any time of the day for independent use and to obtain materials, equipment, or to use production facilities.
- Small groups can be sent to the library media center to use information and information technology.
- The teacher can take a large group to the library media center for independent use as facilities permit. Adjoining classroom space to the library media center enables free-flow communication.

**Access to the library media center as an extension of the classroom (library media specialist attention required):**

- The teacher assists students in getting on the library media center calendar so that the library media specialist can give the individual student undivided attention.
- Small groups are scheduled so that the library media specialist has time to work with the group.
- Large groups are scheduled so that both the classroom teacher and the library media specialist can work together as a team.

**Accessibility Score:**

\_\_\_\_\_ of items above, or \_\_\_\_\_% Accessibility  
(divide number checked by 13 and then multiply by 100)

can partner with the library media specialists to build this exciting intervention. As a collaboration increases, a pattern emerges in the library media center. Figure 1 provides a checklist to be used during an observation (Loertscher, 2001, p. 29).

*Technique #2: Ascertain the effect of information literacy taught by the library media specialist during a collaboratively taught unit of instruction.* Library media specialists are charged by their professional associations with teaching information literacy, which is defined as the effective use of ideas and information. To do this, they equip learners with a research model whereby novices learn to build a question, find high-quality information, internalize the information, synthesize and draw conclusions, communicate findings, and reflect on the process and the learning.

How do teachers and library media specialists know whether a learner has made progress? One most promising assessment is fairly simple. Include content-related items and process-related items (information literacy) on the rubric for any library-based project. Learners understand that they must master knowledge about their topic, and they also will have to show competence in the research process. For a specific project, the teacher would rate the content and the library media specialist would rate the process.

*Technique #3: Ascertain the effect of technology on collaboratively taught units of instruction.* When a teacher is overwhelmed by technology or there isn't enough equipment in the classroom for each student, moving a unit to the library media center learning laboratory makes sense. The library media center not only has more equipment but also more adults to assist. The computer space in the library media center becomes a learning laboratory. Creative ideas for the effective use of technology build over

time because of the “parade” of units passing through the center. The assessment of whether technology has contributed to students’ knowledge and the learning process can be assessed at the learner level if the rubric contains items related to the effective use of technology. For example, see the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory’s Scoring Guide for Student Products ([www.ncrtec.org/tl/sgsp/how.htm](http://www.ncrtec.org/tl/sgsp/how.htm)), and checklists from the International Society for Technology Education ([www.iste.org/standards](http://www.iste.org/standards)).

*Technique #4: Ascertain the amount of reading being stimulated through the library media program.* The research is quite clear: The more students read, the higher they will score on almost any measure in almost any discipline (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Krashen, 1993; McQuillan, 1998; National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). The following questions can help determine how much the library is doing to promote reading:

- What percent of students would say they are reading a “library book or two” right now?
- Can students check out unlimited quantities of library books?
- Are the abuses of electronic reading programs under control?
- Are there mountains of fascinating, exciting, and interesting books stocked in the library media center, in rotating classroom collections, and at other appropriate places in the school?

Money spent to purchase the books kids *want* to read affects reading scores because students will read more (Plucker, Humphrey, Kearns, & Walter, 2002).

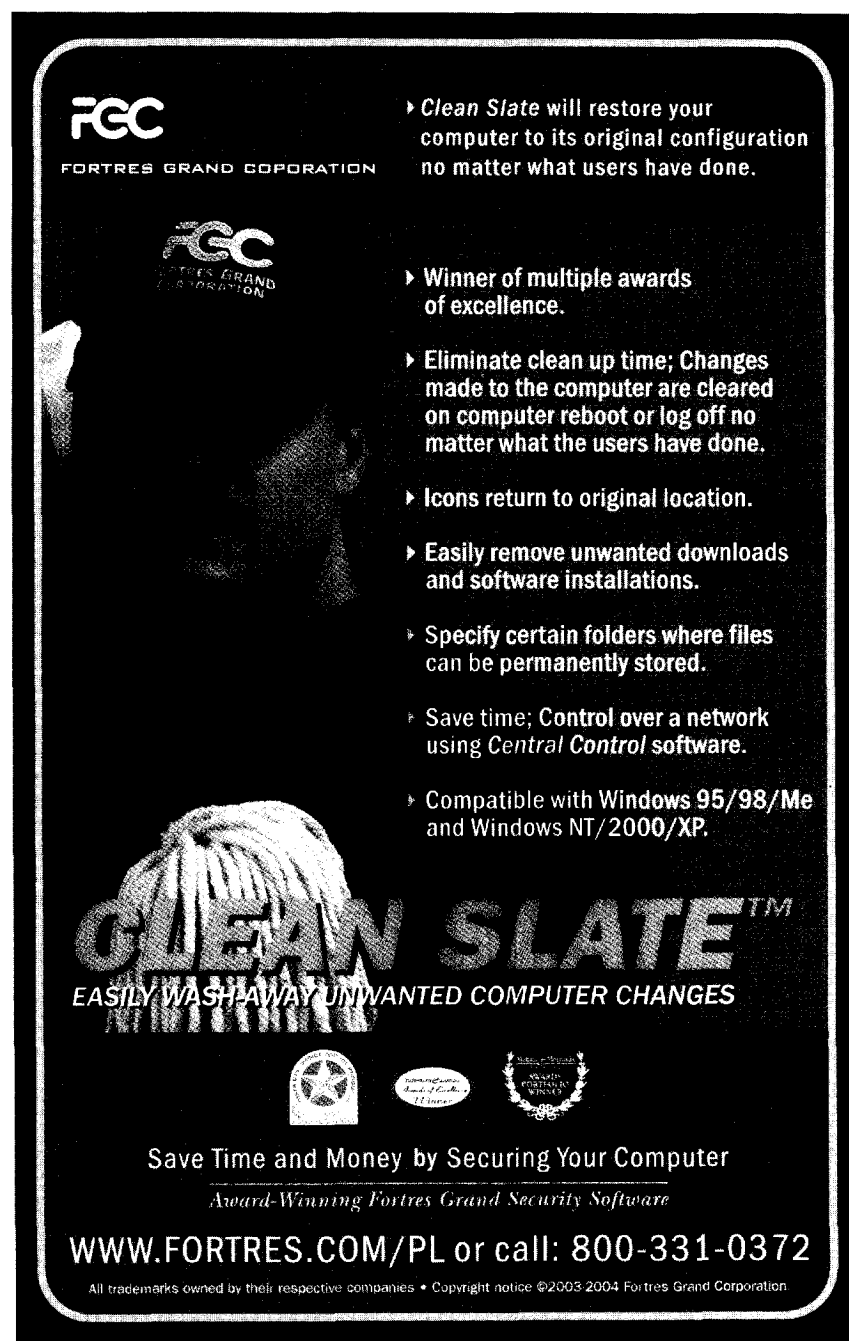
### Conclusions

Recently, one of us conducted a graduate class in two spectacular school library media centers. In both schools, no expense had been spared to build

a 21st century facility with state-of-the-art technology and lavish furnishings. In the first school, the principal and the library media specialist made a pact that no teacher would schedule a visit to the library media center without first completing advance planning with the library media specialist. Because all the teachers were new at the school’s opening, they

thought collaboration was “just how it works around here.” The library media center in this school is filled with exciting learning experiences. In the second school, the principal opted to staff the center with a clerical staff member. This library media center is a lavish babysitting facility.

Across the United States, thousands of school library media



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specialists who were educated in the 1970s are retiring. These people were educated at a time when audiovisual materials were new to library collections. New library media specialists need to be technology gurus, learning consultants, and collaborative partners focused on making a difference in learning. The challenge, of course, is to find such people and to release staff members who have not kept up with the vision of what a school library media program can do to increase achievement. Wise administrators seek out an exemplary teacher and commit them to get their library media and technology credentials. The school may lose a good teacher, but that person will have a great influence on all teachers and students.

If your library media center is the hub of the school and if it is contributing to achievement, it will be to your credit! **PL**

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