CELEBRATES 50 YEARS

Extreme Makeover

If school librarians plan to survive, it's time to make some tough changes

By David V. Loertscher

Now that kids are sprinting to the Internet for the answer to almost every question, it's time for school librarians to transform themselves. In fact, if media specialists

don't adapt to the new information world, they won't survive. Of course, this isn't the first time that technology has prompted librarians to reinvent their role. When multimedia resources were coming into their own in the 1960s, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) set out to create new standards for school libraries. But its efforts kept stalling. As the story goes, an exasperated editor locked AASL members Frances Henne and Mary Gaver in a New York City hotel room, warning them that they wouldn't be released until the work was completed.

Their plan was worth the wait. These visionaries recognized that it wasn't enough for school libraries to offer books; instead, they needed to embrace the latest technologies, including such newfangled items as 16mm film, filmstrips, and phonograph records. The new standards also incorporated the findings of Gaver's research, which showed that students with access to librarians and centralized libraries achieved more than their peers who lacked

these resources. Henne and Gaver's foresight resulted in the school library media programs that we know today.

Why are media specialists in similar straits almost a half century later? A lack of funding is only part of the story. Librarians have become pigeonholed as a result of managing library facilities and technology infrastructures. More often than not, they're treated as support personnel or slaves rather than as valued teaching partners. During Henne and Gaver's heyday, the introduction of audiovisual materials into schools created a struggle for survival between two educators with contiguous roles—the AV guy and the library lady. Today, education technology threatens the coexistence of the media specialist and the technology coordinator in much the same way. Which one will survive?

Rather than predict a winner, I would like to propose a different kind of library professional—one who focuses on teaching and student learning rather than on organizational tasks. According to research, this role encompasses four characteristics that maximize student achievement. An effective school librarian of the future will collaborate with teachers to build high-level learning experiences, build avid and capable readers, develop information-literate students, and use technology to enhance learning. What

might we see if we observed this new information professional in action? Here's one scenario, set in the not-too-distant future:
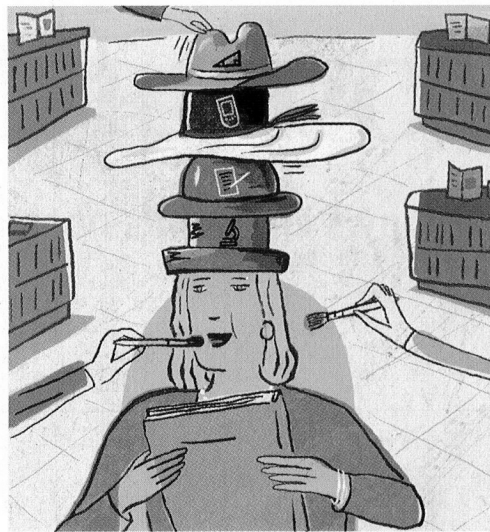
It's 2010 and a small technology start-up has unveiled an innovative screen that rivals paper in opacity, folds as easily as a napkin, and links instantly to a wireless network. Suddenly a new digital library/textbook /multimedia information system is born. To encourage kids to take advantage of it, Congress passes the Knowledge Information Act, a law that enables every student to receive a daily $5 information ticket. Kids simply redeem the coupons at their local schools, where they're used to pay for textbooks and print, digital, and multimedia library resources. Two dollars of every ticket goes toward the purchase of an innovative wireless device—a cross between a present-day personal digital assistant and a notebook computer—that connects students to the digital school library.

Later that same year, education organizations, such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and AASL, join forces with representatives from the fields of science, math, social studies, the fine arts, and reading to create a dynamic, new instructional model. This visionary approach—based on Grant P. Wiggins and Jay McTighe's book *Understanding by Design* (ASCD, 1998)—provides educators with a blueprint for creating lessons that deepen students' understanding of information.

The plan changes not only the way librarians perceive themselves, but also the way schools are set up. Under the new system, four classrooms are combined to form a single pod. One of the four teachers—the media specialist—is designated and credentialed as a knowledge team leader. He collaborates with the pod's other three teachers, planning and implementing high-level learning experiences, and is responsible for designing assessment tools and making sure that every student succeeds. The traditional library and computer lab are now handled by paraprofessionals under the direction of the school's chief information officer. Although the library still houses printed materials, it has been transformed into a flexible-learning laboratory that kids schoolwide use as the need arises.

There's also a shift in the way that students are served. Each child has access to the information system 24/7, thanks to an abundance of electronic devices that enable learners to use streaming video and other sophisticated resources. The school's online information system also has a new twist: it's a high-quality intranet that's designed to meet the curriculum needs of each learner. Students also have access to an almost inexhaustible supply of reading materials. And not to worry, there's still a human interface—the knowledge team leader.

It's easy to visualize a typical morning in the life of a knowledge team leader. During homeroom all of the leaders meet with the CIO to schedule assessments. The following period, the knowledge team leader meets with another teacher to design a unit that will help students evaluate what they read. During the next hour, students work on personal wellness projects under the direction of the knowledge team leader and the physical education department, with assistance from the pod's other three teachers. And so it goes throughout the day. In short, being a knowledge team leader is one of the toughest, most creative jobs imaginable.

I personally know hundreds of media specialists who have the skills to become excellent knowledge team leaders. These creative professionals derive great satisfaction from making a difference in students' daily lives. They don't shelve books or fix computers. They don't view the library as a warehouse for books and knowledge. They don't catalog or take inventory. They don't baby-sit classes while their teachers are taking a planning break. Rather, they are instructional leaders who are indispensable to the faculties that they serve.

The world of information and technology has changed since the days of Henne and Gaver, but the basic elements of great teaching and learning remain the same. If school librarians don't hurry up and start creating a vital role for themselves, there are others waiting in the wings, ready to take their place. Media specialists have so much to offer, it would be a shame to see them become extinct.

David V. Loertscher is a professor at the School of Library and Information Science at San Jose State University in California.