the time is now: transform your school library into a learning commons

T IS TIME TO CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE DO IN SCHOOLS. WE KNOW READING CAPACITY IMPROVES STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN ALL FACETS OF LEARNING. WE KNOW THAT TECHNOLOGIES CAN BE EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT TOOLS FOR MAKING WORK EASIER, MORE ACCURATE, AND MORE FUN. WE KNOW THAT THERE IS A REAL DISCONNECT BETWEEN WHAT OUR STUDENTS DO WITH TECHNOLOGIES OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL AND WHAT THEY ARE ALLOWED TO DO WITH THEM IN SCHOOL.

We know what the needs of 21st-century learners are, and we are already behind on that schedule. We know that teacher-librarians make a significant contribution to student achievement, and at the same time, we see very little evidence of recognition through programs or staffing. We know that schools that employ collaborative teams for the task of school improvement make a difference, and yet isolation of specialists continues.

A MOMENT IN TIME

A quick tour of Higher High Secondary School finds the teacher-librarian frustrated because yet again another teacher has booked the library only to have access to the Internet:

• The teacher-librarian has read the research and has lots of ideas for facilitating interventions during projects, to really help students build deeper understanding, but the teachers are always too busy. "Just show them where to find the stuff!" they exclaim.

• Down the hall, the teacher technologist sits, head in hand, weary from her daily run of emergency calls from staff and students who get tripped up with techno glitches, lost equipment, and firewalls that deny them access to the data they need. A student who hacked his way onto a social networking site sits outside her door awaiting a reprimand.

• Secluded in the east wing is the student success teacher, recently hired, following a mandate from the district to reach at-risk kids. The dropout rates are too high, but the new hire is running into roadblocks at every turn in her attempts to get needy students released from class.

• The guidance counselor is compiling yet another memo to the Literacy Committee requesting time on the agenda to discuss recent demographic statistics, but the committee has a packed agenda of mandates from administration.

• The arts coordinator sits outside the vice principal's door in panic because she needs an administrator's signature on her grant proposal, and it is due in one hour.

Across the street at Paradise Primary School, the principal is trying to track down the literacy coach because he has money to spend on classroom books, and it must be spent within the next 24 hours:

• The teacher-librarian here is herding one class out and another in for a scheduled book exchange while trying to help a teacher find recent books on energy sources for their next class, but the library budget has been cut, and there are no up-to-date books on energy.

• The vice principal is dealing with a student who brought his iPod to class for the third time this week, and personal portable technology is not allowed at Paradise Primary School.
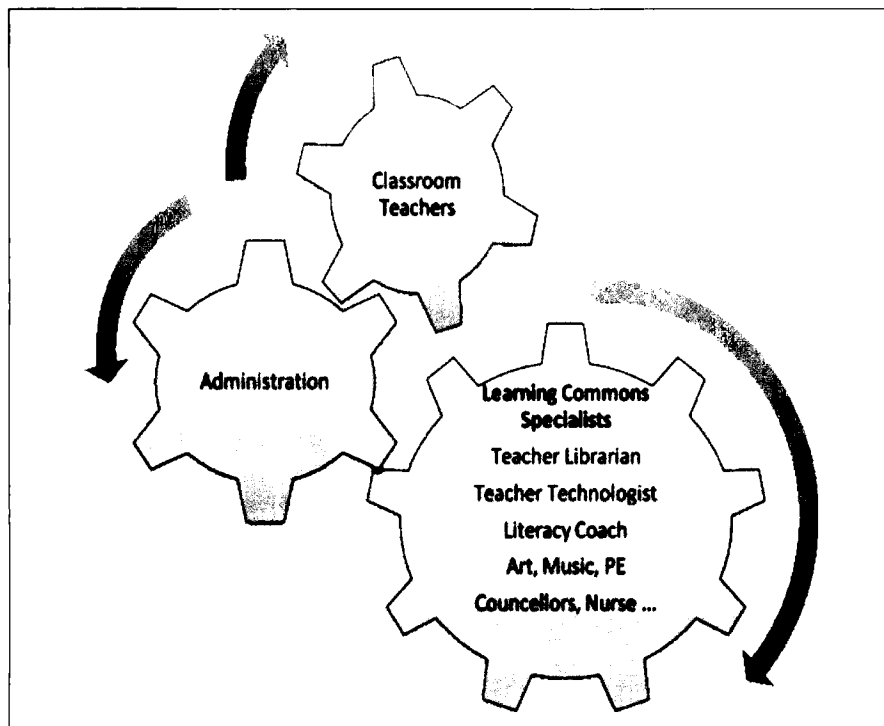
Do we need to go on?

The images are well focused but wanting. Highly trained specialists are all working at cross purposes, all fighting to get the attention of the classroom teacher and administration, all very dedicated professionals who really desire the best for students. Their earnest efforts result in little or no progress, lots of frustration, inefficient use of time, and students still in need of resources and programs to improve their achievement.

IS THERE A BETTER WAY?

Teaching professionals can paint a better picture, compose a more dynamic

by carol koechlin, sandi zwaan, and david v. loertscher

FIGURE 1

[Figure 1: Interlocking gears diagram]
- Classroom Teachers
- Administration
- Learning Commons Specialists
  - Teacher Librarian
  - Teacher Technologist
  - Literacy Coach
  - Art, Music, PE
  - Councellors, Nurse ...

symphony, dance a more relevant step, and write a more powerful story. In the new moment, the cast of players remains the same; the vision is still to advance school improvement; only, the dynamics change to create a synergy and efficacy that is more collaborative, more current, and more successful. Currently, few schools really take advantage of the expertise they have in their teacher-librarian and teacher technologist. These folks hold the key to real-world teaching and learning in this knowledge age. They are highly trained teacher specialists who know how to work with information and technologies to help students learn how to learn in our evolving information places and spaces. They know how to harness collegiality and bring together classroom teachers and the other specialists in a constructive process to design schools to meet the growing complexities of working, playing, and growing in today's world. Similarly we find that other specialists in the school battle at cross purposes for time, budget, and the authority to do what they know needs to be done, and they ask themselves why things aren't working. It's time to stop asking why things aren't working and start asking what we need to do to make it work.

First, we must recognize that we are not doing the best possible job connecting to learners today and get with the program now because we are already a decade behind. Second, schools need to take an honest look at how effectively we are utilizing the school library, computer lab facilities and staff, and the other school specialists. The new question is: How can we utilize our current assets to reorganize, refocus, and reconnect in order to create a learning environment that meets the needs of 21st-century teaching and learning?

Our answer to the current dilemma is to ask teacher-librarians to lead the journey in creating a schoolwide learning commons and challenge administration and staff to invest in this philosophy and build the collaborative learning community necessary to design and sustain the best possible teaching and learning environments. The dynamics of the school learning commons must revolve around learning partnerships that share the vision of creating powerful learning environments combined with the best learning science and a common goal of improving learning and achievement for each and every student.

BOOKMARKIT

YA FICTION

WHAT IS NORMAL?

Big fat manifesto. Susan Vaught. Bloomsbury, 2008. $16.95. 978-1-59990-206-7. Grades 9–12. Jamie writes forceful, unapologetic columns for her school newspaper on being overweight, how she's treated, and how she feels. When her boyfriend gets his stomach stapled to lose weight, emotional and physical complications arise in this thought-provoking, readable novel.

Found. Margaret Peterson Haddix. Simon and Schuster, 2008. $15.99. 978-1-4169-5417-0. Grades 5–8. A gripping introduction foreshadows the adventures of two 13-year-old friends who have being adopted in common. When each receives a letter that says "You are one of the missing," they try to figure out what it means—and end up in another time. This is the first in the Missing series.

Nation. Terry Pratchett. HarperCollins, 2008. $16.99. 978-0-06-143301-6. Grades 6–9. Mau's entire nation dies in the tsunami, which also strands Ermintrude, a seemingly British upper-crust girl, on his Pacific island. Though the two adolescents don't speak the same language, they need each other as they rebuild their lives and help the stray people who slowly find refuge with them.

Waiting for normal. Leslie Connor. Harper, 2008. $16.99. 978-0-06-089088-9. Grades 5–8. Addie misses her younger half-sisters and her loving stepfather, now divorced from her irresponsible mother. The sixth-grader makes the best of a hard life, befriending her neighbors and forgiving her mother, but she longs for a stable family. Can her wish come true?

THE 21ST-CENTURY SCHOOL LEARNING COMMONS

The role and function of the 21st-century school library has evolved as the result of the exponential growth of information, rapid technology advancements, and the challenge to contribute to student achievement. Libraries of the past supplied resources and provided support. Computer labs provided scheduled access and support to technology. Today we need a learning commons, a learning laboratory that is the foundation of all learning in the school rather than a warehouse of information and technologies. The new learning commons focuses on client-centered programs pushing world-class excellence throughout the school. Teacher-librarians in partnerships with teacher technologists (the former tech directors) and other learning specialists must look for ways to capitalize on the and assess knowledge-building learning activities.

Much more than a physical space, the library is now also available 24/7/365 as a virtual learning center. Many critical learning activities are happening simultaneously in both the physical and the virtual commons, beginning before school and ending long after the traditional school day is over. One observes the constant flow of individual students, small groups, and large groups through the physical and virtual center each day as personal needs, assignments, and learning activities from regular classrooms are in progress. At the same time, other groups are part of the experimental nature of the commons, including professional development, traditional literacy program, information literacy, emerging literacies, and technology trials. Teachers are coming for individual and group professional development that

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rich resources, technologies, spaces, and expertise available in the school library to advance best-practice pedagogy and energize teaching and learning for today's students and teachers. This new mandate is centered on student performance through improved teaching and learning throughout the school.

OUR VISION

Primarily, the school learning commons is the showcase for high-quality teaching and learning—a place to develop and demonstrate exemplary educational practices. It will serve as the professional development center for the entire school—a place to learn, experiment with, assess, and then widely adopt improved instructional programs. It is the keystone of literacy and technological programs of the school and the place where classroom teachers can collaboratively design, build, implement, is planned in concert with their professional learning communities. Parents and other members of the public are serving as volunteers to help make the organization run smoothly. Support staff is maintaining the nuts and bolts of the facility so that it is actually operational. Administrators, specialists, and classroom teachers frequent the center as they plan, implement, and assess the various program components. The learning commons exudes a culture of continuous change and learning. Suddenly, this transformation is recognized in the general educational literature unlike the current practice of ignoring what we do.

For students, the new library is an essential element in their education—a gateway into the vast world of information, exploration, inquiry, learning, interactivity, creativity, and production. It is the center of a world-class education where both individual and collaborative team learning happens. It is the place to learn how to

build, manage, and effectively use the Internet and to learn how to manage one's self safely in that space. Again, instead of ignoring us, or just Googling around us, students help build the former library web site into a virtual learning commons.

For teachers, the new library embraces the building of student literacies and inquiry learning as central to their program. It provides an opportunity to share the expertise of other professionals and reignite passion for teaching. When students and teachers work, read, and play with information and ideas in the ever-changing landscape of the learning commons, they, too, experience transformations as they learn and grow. The program elements of the learning commons provide a solid foundation of keystones for 21st-century learning.

LEARNING LITERACIES KEYSTONE

In the past, librarians have promoted literacy and lifetime reading habits for all students, but today, the school's literacy team sees the library as central to planning, implementing, and assessing the literacy effort of the entire school. The literacy team includes administrators, reading coaches, language specialists, classroom teachers, teacher technologists, and the teacher-librarian. This team forms a professional learning community to plan, build, and assess the reading program using evidence-based practices to develop world-class readers who not only know how to read and read to learn, but who are avid readers as well.

The mandate of the learning commons is to prepare students with emerging literacies that will ensure learning for life. As well as reading literacies, the rich environments of the library commons ensure that other necessary student literacies are developed. Students become efficient and effective users of information and evolving technologies.

The exponential growth of information requires that every young person have the skills and abilities needed to be a creative and critical thinker in a world of a thousand voices demanding attention. In order to produce successful learners in the 21st century, schools must

FIGURE 2
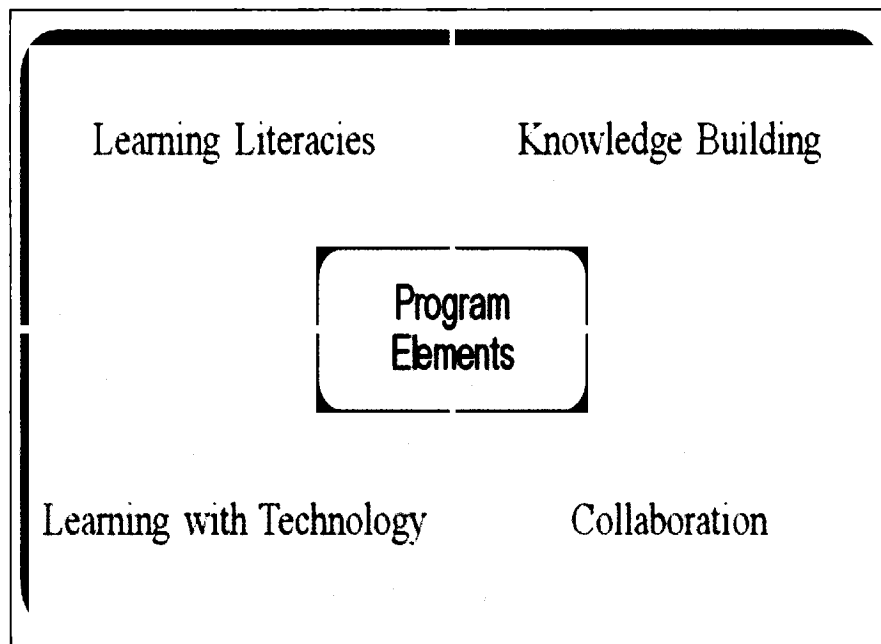
integrate information literacy throughout the whole curriculum. Information literacy has been simplistically defined as the ability to find and use information to meet a personal need. Learning standards developed by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) in 2007 point to a much more complex intellectual and attitudinal strategy that learners need to develop the information literacy needed to compete in a global society.

Through professional partnerships with teacher-librarians, needed interventions can be effectively designed to infuse information literacy instruction and assessment into all curriculum areas. Through the virtual spaces of the library learning commons, additional support for information literacy will be available to students and teachers around the clock every day.

KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING KEYSTONE

To succeed intellectually, a learner must be a capable and avid reader who is able to follow a process of inquiry. Inquiry skills include beginning with background knowledge, developing questions, finding and evaluating information, reading/viewing/listening to gain understanding, thinking critically, drawing conclusions, answering the questions posed, asking "So what?," sharing, and assessing how well the inquiry

has progressed. As learners follow such an inquiry, they develop personal qualities, such as responsibility, positive attitudes toward learning, ethical uses of information and technology, creativity, and self-assessment. Altogether, this leads not only to information-literate students but also to lifelong learners, knowledge builders, and people ready for the challenges of work and advanced education. Teacher-librarians turn the age of information into the age of understanding, critical thinking, and learning to learn:

> For any of the learning specialists and, in particular, the teacher-librarian, the curriculum of the specialist is being integrated with the learning standards required by the classroom teacher. This "just in time" and "need to know" instruction helps learners build their knowledge base and at the same time helps them learn even more efficiently. Examples might include how to judge the differences between fact and opinion as a political issue is being explored; how to think critically about conflicting media messages encountered on the topic; how to paraphrase by selecting major ideas in a variety of texts; and how to use a wiki to collaboratively build a case for a position the group is creating. As these learning journeys happen,

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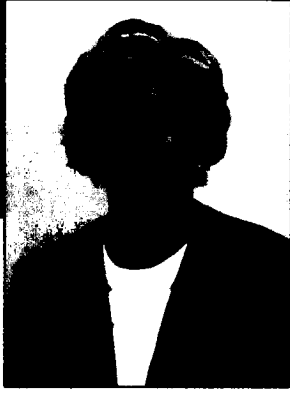
> ADULT BOOKS FOR OLDER TEENS

THE CIRCUS

The circus in winter. Cathy Day. Harcourt, 2004. $23.00. 978-0-15-101048-6. Grades 11–12. The Great Porter Circus winters in Lima, Indiana, for almost 60 years, and the circus people become indelible parts of the town. In these arresting, intertwined stories of circus animals and people, Day creates a captivating world for readers.

The contemporary circus: Art of the spectacular. Ernest Albrecht. Scarecrow Press, 2006. $60.00. 978-0-8108-5734-6. Grades 9–12. An incisive look at today's circuses, this book reveals the hard work and planning behind such shows as Cirque du Soleil. From costumers to choreographers, performers to stagehands, this book is fascinating.

Mr. Sebastian and the Negro magician. Daniel Wallace. Doubleday, 2007. $21.95. 978-0-385-52109-3. Grades 11–12. After magician Henry Walker disappears from the circus, his friends and coworkers try to discover the truth behind this unusual man. Enigmatic yet likeable, Henry will astound and please readers who enjoy a good mystery.

Rain village. Carolyn Turgeon. Unbridled Books, 2006. $24.95. 978-1-932961-24-9. Grades 11–12. Friendless Tessa Riley, impoverished and abused, is mentored by Mary Finn, town librarian and former trapeze artist. After learning Mary's craft, 16-year-old Tessa joins the circus and finds both happiness and herself.

Water for elephants. Sara Gruen. Algonquin Books, 2006. $23.95. 978-1-56512-499-8. Grades 9–12. Orphaned during the Depression while in veterinary school, destitute and without a future, Jacob Jankowski joins the circus. Jacob, now 90, narrates his life in vivid flashbacks. Entertaining and compelling, this novel is storytelling at its best.

the adults are watching, coaching, and assessing progress to insure that every learner either meets or exceeds the learning expectations. In other words, the Learning Commons supports a school-wide culture of inquiry fostering "habits of mind" and "learning dispositions" conducive to success. (Loertscher, Koechlin, & Zwaan, 2008)

COLLABORATION KEYSTONE

The establishment of the Learning Commons as a community of learners opens the door for more effective instruction and, consequently, school improvement. Here we experience many types and layers of collaboration—everyone working together to analyze and improve teaching and learning for all. Teachers and administrators work on specific facets of school improvement and safety. Students work with other students and teachers on solving problems, building knowledge, and creating together. The broader school community works within the Learning Commons to support learning and local initiatives. All work together supported by the rich resources and technologies of the Commons. (Loertscher, Koechlin, & Zwaan, 2008)

The learning commons serves as the center of a collegial schoolwide effort to improve teaching and learning. It is a learning laboratory where new teaching and learning strategies are developed and taught; where experimentation with new strategies is tested and analyzed; where action research is used to verify instructional progress; and where successful experimen-

tation then radiates out into the rest of the school and is showcased to boards, parents, and the community. The leadership team for this effort includes administrators, selected classroom teachers, specialists in the school (music, art, PE, etc.), specialty coaches, librarians, and technologists. This leadership team schedules the learning commons with the major "experiments" and experiences throughout the school year so that a constant stream of learning initiatives are beginning, being implemented, assessed, reported, and applied throughout the whole school. The result is school-wide improvement through the learning commons.
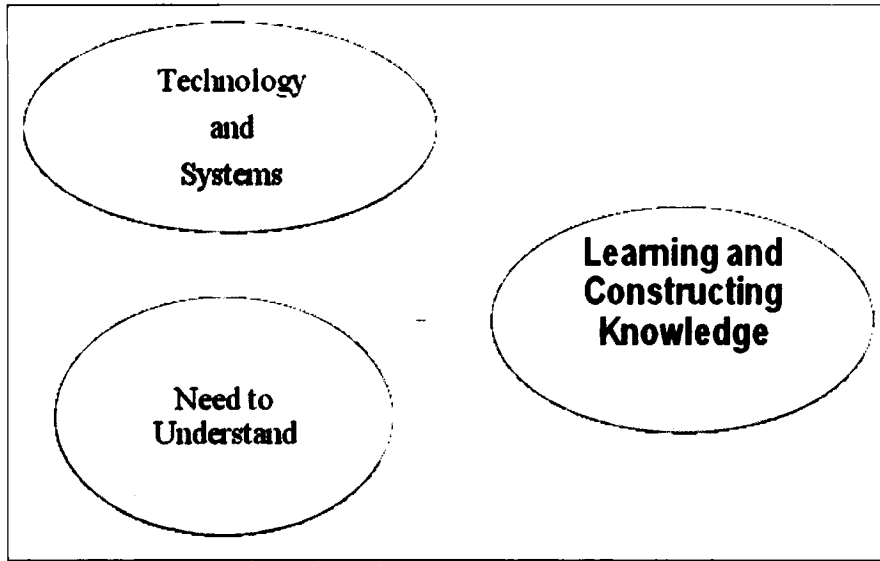
TECHNOLOGY KEYSTONE

The Learning Commons is the space where learners and technology converge. This merger creates a dynamic environment where world class learners blossom. There is general agreement that learners who are astute in the wise use of technology have a better chance of competing globally. For schools, the challenge is not only to create the networks, acquire the software, and make both operational, but to react to the transformative influences of technology on the way everyone learns. (Loertscher, Koechlin, & Zwaan, 2008)

Students know how to operate the various technologies in the learning commons to their advantage, and they also know how to maximize their own efficiency and collaborative learning using that technology. They apply their technological expertise to design innovative products and compelling presentations to communicate

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FIGURE 3

For teachers, the library as a professional development center is the keystone of learning to teach effectively with technology as the technological environment of the school develops and innovation occurs. To ensure real-world learning experiences, the learning commons prepares for change as technologies and needs shift.

their new learning. Learning is maximized and deepened as the technology becomes transparent.

In an age when young people's social networking skills often surpass those of adults, teacher-librarians utilize these known skills and transfer them to academic situations. Children and teens are introduced to the concept of building their own information, organizational, and group spaces using Web 2.0 technologies. They not only learn to build and manage these information spaces but also learn how to manage themselves in those spaces (Williams & Loertscher, 2008). This emphasis on client-centered technology allows young people to participate in building smaller, high-quality, useful, and safe information environments.

A LEARNING COMMONS MOMENT—ASK THE LEARNERS

If a visitor to the school were to randomly select a table during lunch and ask students about the role the learning commons plays in their school life, how would students respond? What sort of information would

the students share? Perhaps something along these lines:

- **Environment**—a comfortable place where they can work, relax, learn, create, or do.
- **Access**—a convenient, 24/7 source of materials, information, and advice they trust.
- **Assistance**—a place to comfortably obtain help from both adults and fellow students.
- **Personal Contributions**—a place to voice opinions and give advice to assist in decisions about construction of the learning commons; a place to make contributions and feel some sense of ownership.
- **Experimentation**—a place to try new things, test technology or software, develop special projects, and see the adults doing the same.
- **Technology**—a place to access and use hot new technologies and programs/software; a source of connection to the digital world and a center for discussion about that world and how they control it to their advantage.
- **Activities and Exhibitions**—a variety of activities they have participated in or seen happening; many student productions

that are part of the digital museum of the school.

Certainly they would convey a sense that adults coach and mentor them when they need help and that staff inquire about how they learn as well as what they know.

They would talk about a caring, supportive place to learn without angst and pressure.

In other words, the various learners recognize that the learning commons is a client-side organization where they have some say in what goes on and they are contributing as well as receiving as a user. They may not understand the impact that the learning commons is having on teaching and learning throughout the school, but they should recognize they are engaged as they inquire, use, contribute, work, and create.

A LEARNING COMMONS MOMENT—ASK THE TEACHERS

Likewise, if a visitor to the school were to enter the teachers' lounge and interview random teachers about the learning commons, what sense of its value would be expressed? Perhaps something along these lines:

- **Environment**—a part of their classroom, an extension of both work and learning activities.
- **Access**—the 24/7 source of materials, information, and advice they trust; a place to send individuals or small groups or schedule the entire class there as needed.
- **Assistance**—a place where they obtain help from both adults and students who are sharing their expertise.
- **Personal Contribution**—a place to voice opinions and give advice to assist in decisions about construction of the learning commons; a place to make contributions and feel a sense of ownership.
- **Experimentation**—a place to learn, test, and share new strategies, test technology or software, and develop special projects; the center of professional development.
- **Technology**—the recognition that the learning commons is the source of their connection to the digital world that extends into their classrooms.
- **Activities and Exhibitions**—a place for a variety of activities they have seen

happening and knowledge that their students' work and productions are a part of the digital museum of the school.

• a place where they do not feel they are alone in the challenge of elevating every learner toward excellence; a place to be part of a teaching and learning team that merges classroom teachers and specialists in a mutual quest.

In other words, teachers recognize the advantages of building and maintaining a client-side learning commons and feel at ease in the give and take of the idea of the experimental learning center.

The learning commons is long overdue. Begin the work today. Reinvent your school library and computer labs; listen to your clients; build learning partnership teams; infuse the best teaching science. Be prepared for dramatic results!

AN INVITATION

We need to hear your stories as we all join forces to reinvent school libraries and computer labs. Please participate in our wiki at schoollearningcommons.pbwiki.com.

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