Both authors of this article have been active in the area of school media center services evaluation for several years and have co-authored the "Purdue Self-Evaluation System for School Media Centers", an instrument for evaluating school media center services. The various results of their venture is shared with you in this article.

User Needs and School Library Service

by Janet G. Stroud and David V. Loertscher

As a library professional, haven't you often wondered how effective your school library program actually was and whether or not you were reaching as many people as you thought you were? Certainly when you find a teacher or student completely unaware of a service that has been in existence for several years, you become sharply aware of an apparent breakdown in communication.

You probably feel that you have a pretty good idea of what your patrons want and need and how they feel about the library program. And perhaps you do. But the authors recently encountered a situation that graphically portrayed how erroneous perceptions can be. The librarian, teachers, and students, in a junior high school were surveyed to see how they viewed their library program. When responses were analyzed, the librarian was stunned to find that the teachers viewed the library as being much more restrictive and offering fewer services than

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it actually did. After examining the report more closely, the librarian said, "I just don't believe it. The library program they're describing sounds like my predecessor's but that can't be because I've been here three years! I just don't believe it." Subsequent interviews with the teachers revealed that they actually were viewing the library program as it had been three years previous. Some were completely unaware of new services that had been implemented and many were unaware of policy changes that had been made. Obviously, though the librarian was working diligently to implement new policies and services each year, she was neglecting an all-important ingredient for any program's success —communication of that program and its services to potential users.

In an effort to measure the perceptions of library media staff, teachers, and students concerning the services provided by or received from the school library media center, the authors have engaged in a series of three research studies in Indiana, each on a different grade level: elementary,[1] middle and junior high,[2] and senior high.[3] The major objective of the studies was to measure the variety of library services offered as well as the frequency with which these services

were offered. Additional objectives were to identify prominent utilization patterns and staffing patterns.

The instrument developed for use in these studies, the "Purdue Self-Evaluation System (PSES) for School Media Centers,"[4] consists of a list of service items which a school media center could possibly provide. Some of the items represent those basic services which most school libraries provide, what might be called the ordinary or "garden variety" services. Others represent the "growing edge"—the services which are more unique and are only now being implemented in some school media centers.

Study Results

In all three studies, library nonusers as well as users were surveyed which elicited an interesting observation: librarians were often reluctant to include nonusers, particularly teacher nonusers, because they felt that only those who use the library are in a position to know what services it offers. However, there is growing impetus in the field to identify those who don't use the library and to find out why they don't.

The fact that there was more concern expressed over the inclusion of the teacher nonusers than over the

student nonusers perhaps indicates that librarians are very aware of specific teachers who don't use the library but not so aware of the students who don't use the library. There are probably any number of reasons for this difference in awareness but the one that comes most quickly to mind is the sheer difference in numbers. The teachers, being a smaller group, are probably individually known by the librarian, whereas the students quite frequently are not and of course, after a particularly harried and hectic school day, most librarians would be willing to swear that every student in the school had been to the library that day! However, there is the distinct possibility that the librarian is seeing the same group of students over and over, day after day.

In almost every school examined, large blocks of nonusers were apparent, a startling fact in itself. Why weren't these people using the library? Did they not know what was available to them? Or were they aware of services available and simply not taking advantage of them? Of course, there was the occasional situation where the librarian's personality was so abrasive and the policies so restrictive that no one wanted to come to the library but these situations were very definitely in the minority and simply couldn't account for the large groups of nonusers in other situations.

The responses generated by the survey revealed that students seemed to be aware of services available but were not taking advantage of them; teachers, on the other hand, were exhibiting a lack of awareness of services available to them. Both findings are disturbing but the latter probably has the most far-reaching implications. Teachers who don't use the library are not likely to encourage their students to do so. Badly needed, it would seem, is a strong, ongoing, in-service program to acquaint teachers with what the media center does have to offer. In almost every school the media staff was making an effort to keep the faculty informed of new services

being added to the media center; few were engaged in comprehensive programs designed to inform or remind teachers of existing services. Quite often a passive attitude on the part of the media staff prevailed—the staff stood ready to help anyone who asked for library services but did not take the initiative to bring teachers into the library.

Since students seemed to be aware of available services but for some reason were choosing not to take advantage of them, the assumption was immediately made that they were either rejecting the library or were indifferent to it, an assumption which turned out to be fallacious. Almost without exception, school schedules were found to be the culprit. In few schools were the students able to use the library before or after school, not because of library policy, but because of restrictive bus schedules. Many of Indiana's school systems have consolidated into larger units with the result that all or most of the students are bused; even suburban areas were busing their students.

The busing situation was compounded even further by lack of time during the school day when students could get to the library. In some cases, schools had abandoned study halls altogether; in others, many students often had all periods taken up by classes. In either case, students usually were dependent upon classroom teachers to give them passes to come to the library. Classroom teachers were often more willing to give passes for the student to go to the library for "research" purposes than they were for recreational purposes. Passes were also sometimes seen as a means of reward and punishment. A class that had been unnecessarily noisy and unruly might be denied library privileges for a week. Though it's comforting to know that students would rather be in the library than in class or study hall, withholding library privileges as punishment for classroom misbehavior is a practice that few librarians could in good conscience endorse.

Library Usage

Who uses the library most frequently? This is one of the questions most often asked of school librarians with the expected answer being English, social studies, and science; traditionally these subject areas have been considered to be the heaviest users of library services and indeed, several earlier studies substantiated this answer. However, neither of the more recent Indiana studies supported it. Although these three subject areas still did claim heavy usage of library services, they did not prove to be the three most dominant users of library services. Rather, the relatively even diffusion of services throughout most subject areas would have made it difficult to designate any specific subject area as being the heaviest user of library services. This finding could be attributable to the fact that library materials in areas other than these three are now available or it could be due to the changed format of curricular areas such as science. Whatever the reason, it is an indication that no subject area should be slighted in favor of the traditional few.

In interviews following the studies, it was interesting to note that the principal, when asked this question, almost inevitably would answer that he considered English classes to be the heaviest users of the library because of book reports. The librarian, though, quite frequently would refute this statement. Reasons were as varied as the schools examined and ranged from the fact that English teachers were no longer requiring book reports and term papers (a fact lamented by the librarians) to the observation that since the English department had gone to a team teaching situation they had not utilized the school library as frequently.

Again a more passive attitude on the part of librarians was apparent. At a time when library funding and staffing are being curtailed because of budgetary concerns, it seems even more imperative that librarians be able to justify their existence by

demonstrating through action the role of the media center in the learning process. No longer can the library afford to serve only those who request its services; initiative must be taken to provide new direction for those who are potential users of library services. Far too often, librarians would assert that they were often unaware of curriculum changes that had been made until students would start requesting materials. Given the lag time inherent in the selection and acquisition of materials, this situation creates unnecessary delay in the collection building process. Failure to adjust to curriculum changes, while affecting the teachers, has an even greater effect on the students since they often receive fewer services to begin with.

Considerable attention recently has been given to whether or not teachers and students receive equal use of and information about facilities, equipment, and materials. Traditionally, teachers have received preferential treatment or more services from the media center than students. In recent years, however, there has been strong advocacy from the profession to extend these services to students as well. To explore progress being made in this area, teacher responses to PSES items were compared to student responses which were then compared to the librarians' responses. In almost every instance teacher ratings exceeded student ratings. All schools examined were judged to be more teacher oriented than student oriented; teachers were receiving more services more frequently.

The two service areas in which the largest disparity existed were the utilization and production areas. Items in the utilization area which showed the largest discrepancies concerned the use of audiovisual materials and equipment. Students were most restricted in the use of audiovisual equipment. If they were allowed to use audiovisual equipment at all, it was generally to be used in the library under supervision. Few schools allowed students to check out audiovisual

equipment either for use in the building or at home. In contrast, all schools permitted unlimited teacher utilization of audiovisual equipment. Students were also restricted in their use of audiovisual materials, some to use in the building, some to use in the library. Evidence existed too that students had greater accessibility to audiovisual materials for instructional use than they did for recreational use.

The production of audiovisual materials, all three groups agreed, was a service that was provided only occasionally. When production services were provided, they were provided more frequently to teachers than to students. Some schools definitely were making an attempt to involve students in the production of audiovisual materials, but their attempts were negligible when examination across schools took place.

An interesting development in this particular area emerged when agreement among groups was examined. All groups were in agreement as to which production services were offered most and least frequently. Most often provided for both teachers and students were the facilities and equipment with which to produce audiovisual materials; less often provided were supplies and help from the media staff. Least often provided was the finished product; few school media staffs were able to produce a transparency or tape recording on demand, for example. Although PSES responses garnered could not give any indication as to why teachers received more services than students or why facilities and equipment were provided more often than supplies and media staff time, interviews with librarians revealed three contributing factors: lack of money, lack of facilities, and lack of support staff.

All studies found that the services most frequently provided by school library media centers were the traditional supply and distribution type services: preparing bibliographies, distributing lists of new materials and equipment, providing reserve collections, purchasing materials

and equipment, helping patrons find materials, etc. The high school study found too that these were the services considered most important by the teachers surveyed.

The services offered least often were those that centered on the media specialist's involvement in curriculum development and instructional planning—participating on the curriculum committee, helping plan units of study, evaluating with teachers the success of a particular activity, and the analysis of learning tasks. These items generated a lot of conversation not just with librarians but with teachers and administrators as well. Some were amused and surprised to find that these might be considered part of a media specialist's job. Some expressed indignation over the concept of the media specialist as an instructional developer. More resistance to this concept was perceived among the teachers than among the administrators. Most administrators were anxious for their librarians to assume responsibilities in this area and expressed regret only that some librarians did not wish to do so. Teachers seemed to perceive the media specialist's participation in this area as a threat to their own role as primary learning agent. At any rate, it was quite clear that educators—teachers, media specialists, and administrators—need to be appraised of the growing importance of this role for school library media specialists. In the most recent study, a third of the media specialists were members of their school's curriculum committee which is encouraging since it is indicative of a developing recognition of the necessity for media specialists' involvement in this area.

Library Staffing Patterns

Members of our profession should recognize that any thought or discussion of the expansion or improvement of media center services is contingent upon adequate staffing. Examination of the staffing patterns at all levels revealed that the elementary schools had by far the most diversified media center

situations. Elementary schools examined fell into the following categories: 1). classroom collections only; 2). centralized collections supervised by part-time clericals; 3). centralized collections supervised by full-time clericals; 4). centralized collections supervised by part-time professionals; 5). centralized collections supervised by full-time professionals. Since such diversity was present, it represented an excellent opportunity to explore the familiar question of whether or not a full-time professional librarian makes a difference in the number of services offered or in the communication and utilization of those services.

In this particular study, the full-time professionals and the full-time clericals were able to provide more and better services than were either the part-time professionals or clerks. Even the part-time professional felt less able to give reading, viewing, and listening guidance than did full-time clerks, and the teachers supported that claim. When agreement between the media staff and teachers across all services was examined, the picture was much the same. The highest levels of agreement were found, not between the professional staffs and the teachers, but between the full-time staffs and the teachers. Seemingly, the full-time person, whether professional or nonprofessional, is the most capable of communicating the media center's service offerings to the users which is not surprising really as it is understandably difficult to offer a full range of services in only a few hours a week.

User needs can be assessed informally, but formal feedback usually provides a much clearer picture of services users deem most valuable. Persons who are in part-time school media center positions must attempt to assign priorities to the services the users have verbalized as being especially beneficial. So much of any school librarian's time is necessarily spent simply reacting to daily demands, that the part-time staff member needs to be especially vigilant to see that long-range objectives in program planning are met.

In many elementary schools, for example, students are scheduled into the library on a regular basis. In a situation where the media specialist is in the school only a few hours a week, the students may be scheduled into the library on an every-other-week basis and the library closed the remaining hours of the week. Assuming that the librarian puts a high priority on an activity such as the teaching of library skills, it may well be that this is the only activity that is ever accomplished. As a result, other just as beneficial activities sometimes get put aside. As one youngster dejectedly remarked, "Our librarian forgets about the time during our library period and then we don't have time to check out books or anything until our next library period." Certainly no one would deny the value of library skills but when one activity crowds out other very necessary activities, a reordering of priorities is called for.

Conclusion

So what may we as practitioners conclude as a result of these findings? First, no matter how well the media specialist thinks she knows the library users, formal feedback from users can bring about an improved view of user needs. Second, almost any practicing librarian can recount an incident in which a patron has asked about a service the librarian was sure everyone knew about. One would think that bulletins would be read and demonstrations absorbed but they are not always. The answer? Communicate and communicate and communicate, at any time to anyone who will listen.

Closely examine those who are taking advantage of the services the library has to offer. Are you really reaching all of your patrons with all of the services or only a certain few of the patrons? Identify nonusers and the reasons for their lack of involvement in media center activities. Then consider the alternatives. Are you able to increase your efforts to involve these people? Will the increased effort actually demand that much more time and staff?

If you are a part-time person in a school library media center you most certainly will have to assess your priorities in order to attain long-range objectives. Failure to do so will inevitably result in ineffectiveness and lack of impact. The fact that part-time library staffing which lacks direction can be detrimental to something as basic as appreciation of the library and what it has to offer is a sobering thought.

Examine your role and the library's role in the school. Is the library an integral part of the learning process or does it exist primarily as a stand-by support function—supplying materials and services when requested? Do you actively participate on the curriculum committee, work with teachers to formulate a unit of study, evaluate with teachers the success of the unit, seek out potential users, implement new services and sell those services? Unless the library is operated in a dynamic and positive manner, stimulating the flow of educational resources, it will never be viewed as an integral part of the educational process. □

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