

# School Library Media Centers: The Revolutionary Past

by *David Loertscher*

For all the criticism heaped upon American education for adopting this trend or that and seeming to fail in the attempt, one program advance has been notable for its educational riches—the school library media center.

The school library media center, or LMC, is a new concept. If you were alive during World War II, you have lived almost all of the history of the school library media center. True, classroom book collections existed in most schools, and a few book-oriented school libraries did exist in high schools at the turn of the century, but most of these were very limited in their development. Only since 1960 has a new interest in libraries and their role in modern education fostered the concept of the school library media center.

What is this new concept? Even a simple definition needs to be understood in a historical context to be appreciated fully. Two revolutions in thought should be reviewed. This article and the one that follows on pages 417 through 421 examine the school library media center's revolutionary past and future.

## *The first revolution*

The idea of a school library as a repository for books serving as a supplement to children's education was challenged in the years that followed the Second World War. This challenge came from some great revolutionaries in the library and audiovisual fields, who had a vision of what audiovisual materials, equipment, and printed media could do for American education. They saw that all these media could have a center stage in the educational process rather than a supplementary role, and they agreed that the child would be richer educationally for this new experience.

It is interesting to trace the actions of these revolutionaries as they schemed, individually

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and in groups, to convince educators, parents, the government, and students that the potential of educational media in all its forms was too great to neglect. These great individuals came to their battle stations armed to the hilt with dreams, theories, research findings, persuasive arguments, and a little political know-how.

There was Bob Brown, who worked for Encyclopaedia Britannica and who gave hundreds of demonstrations with groups of school children to show how audiovisual media could be utilized to teach concepts that would never be forgotten. There was Frances Henne of Columbia University and Mary Gaver of Rutgers University, who plotted the 1960 *Standards for School Libraries*. There was Margaret Rufsvold at Indiana University, who argued that audiovisual media had a place in school libraries (a concept that was heretical in 1949). There was Carolyn Whitenack of Purdue University, who bridged the gap between librarians and audiovisualists to forge cooperative standards in 1969 and again in 1975. There was James Finn from UCLA, who preached about the impact that instructional technology could have on education. There was Harvey Frye at Indiana University, who taught us that simple and inexpensive local production of audiovisual materials could have a great effect on teaching. All these and more fought, convinced, trained disciples, and forged the concept of the modern school library media center. Most are still living and have seen many of their dreams come to fruition in thousands of schools all over the world.

Like many revolutions, this battle did not produce victories everywhere at once. In the thirty-year war, some schools developed the multimedia philosophy rapidly, others started late and developed over time, and some pockets of resistance still remain today. Recessions have also had an impact on the development of school library media centers, as the intense fight for funds sometimes crushed both plans and LMCs already in existence.

What did these fighters succeed in doing? The list is long. Classroom collections were merged to form centralized collections, and audiovisual media and equipment were purchased. Print collections were improved and made more appealing. Facilities were constructed and remodeled, and professional and clerical staff were employed. New ways of improving the use of these wide-ranging collections were developed. Public relations programs were fostered.

At first, in many schools, efforts to improve the library of books was paralleled with the development of a separate audiovisual center. Some of the most influential revolutionaries, however, saw this split between media as a disaster and advocated that all media should be merged into a single collection administered by a professional who would be known as the library media specialist. Local economics (when a school could only afford to hire a single specialist) and the multimedia concept teamed to make the merged library and audiovisual departments a single entity as a common organizational pattern.

Today there is still a long way to go to establish the library media center idea—a place with a rich collection of media and a full staff of professional, technical, and clerical personnel in every school. The first revolution is not over. It will not be over until the target is reached. Revolutionaries of the first order will be needed for some time to come.

### *Role problems*

Where do we stand after thirty years of experimentation in school library media centers? While there isn't a single answer to this question, one principle has emerged. We have discovered (as have principals, parents, and students) that collections, staff, and facilities by themselves contribute very little to the educational process. They are resources, not products. An under-utilized library media center is worth very little to anyone and can be a drain on precious tax revenues.

Like all tools, the school library media center can be properly used or it can be misused; it can add or detract from the educational process in a school. As we look into the 1980s, we need to scrutinize our roles carefully—

learning from our mistakes and capitalizing on our strengths. What problems need our critical attention?

We have often promoted materials and equipment for their flashiness rather than as the real workhorses of education. We have remained silent while teachers and students have used educational technology only as an entertainment medium rather than as an instructional medium. We have considered ourselves as "enrichment" for the basics rather than as the fodder on which learning can thrive; enrichment, like butter on bread, can be scraped off or done without when times get tough. We have developed curricula of library skills that children neither enjoy nor need when taught in isolation from classroom curricular units; parading children through the library once or twice a week for forty minutes and teaching them a curriculum of our own design that has little relationship to classroom activities is of doubtful worth. We have encouraged the term paper syndrome—an assumption that the library media center exists primarily for research to support only one expression of literary development.

We have developed organizational and clerical chores that take a great deal of time to accomplish; being busy all day can substitute very easily for challenging activities that could contribute to instruction. We have organized rigid schedules, created restrictive rules, and clamped tight disciplinary rules on patrons to the point that our library media centers are empty and we complain about unwilling teachers, disinterested students, and non-supportive administrators. Finally, we have created national standards that are so poorly understood by our colleagues that they are dismissed and ridiculed: for example, what school could even spend the full ten percent of the per-pupil operating cost on media each year?

Perhaps this picture is painted so dismally that the wonderful things we have accomplished are lost in criticism. We have done great things, and a visit to almost any center convinces us of worth. But we also seem to be on a plateau. We should pause to assess our past and paint a new picture so intertwined in the vision of sound educational principles that we become the essential piece of the puzzle we have convinced ourselves we ought to be. □