School Libraries and 21st-Century Skills

BY ANDREA ANGE

When you think of 21st-century skills, what comes to mind? Do you think of the International Society for Technology in Education's NETS (National Educational Technology Standards for teaching and learning), the American Association of School Librarians' Learning4Life standards, the Common Core State Standards, or the Partnership for 21st Century Skills Framework? No one argues about the importance of 21st-century skills for students. Students need these skills to be fully equipped for work and learning once they leave our public school system. But where exactly do these standards fit into our curriculum? What comes to mind when you think of a school library? Do you think of 21st-century skills, like collaborative learning, digital tools, and literacy?

On any given morning in Campbell High School's library in Litchfield, NH, you can find 12 to 24 or more students. On this particular day, I have 14 students who are talking, laughing, and listening to music, but they are all doing homework using the digital tools they need to get it done. One student borrowed a graphing calculator, three borrowed computers, and several of them are using tools they brought from home. Two of them are talking in Spanish, practicing for their oral exam later today. Two of them are speaking Greek (literally) as they

are in AP calculus and working on their homework. One is writing in a notebook, and two are using ChemThink on their computers. All of this cacophony of sound and productivity is before 8 a.m., which is surprising when you think of the average teen and teenagers' need for sleep. Libraries today are places where students learn communication and collaboration, digital citizenship (including citations, plagiarism, ethical use of resources, and Internet safety), digital tool integration, research, information analysis, and critical thinking.

Twenty-first-century skills need to be emphasized outside of a standard classroom in social settings, like libraries. In fact, the Common Core State Standards have 21st-century skills beginning in kindergarten and woven through all content areas until graduation. The most important part of this concept for school libraries is the expectation that students will begin conducting research, albeit guided research, in kindergarten. Schools that have strong library programs staffed by certified school librarians directly impact student learning and literacy. In libraries where these concepts are taught and encouraged by school administrators, schools regularly perform better on state and national assessments in core content areas, including reading, writing, and math. Science education depends on students' abilities to think critically about the world we live in (Library Research Service, 2012). Literacy is not only reading; a literate person must also be able to gauge information for accuracy, relevance, and timeliness (information literacy) and then have a way to convey this learning using digital tools (media literacy). Students who are regularly exposed to libraries and have lessons from a licensed library media specialist perform better on reading assessments (Library Research Service, 2012). Every administrator and school district wants students to achieve the highest possible results, and the research shows that you get those results by providing a flexible and fully staffed library program.

Not all library programs are created equal. Some programs are better than others. One way that libraries are changing is by moving to a learning commons format. In this format, students have access to all the information resources of their library while also having access to digital tools and technology support. As libraries change and adapt to new formats for resources, bookcases move and areas are created for collaborative learning. We have seen librarians being replaced too (Palermo, 2012). That is a mistake! When you replace your librarian with either a paraprofessional or a teacher who does not have a library background, you are doing a disservice to your students. Librarians are aware of curricular content in all school programs; they have to be in order to purchase resources for the library collection. This knowledge allows a librarian to see and recognize areas where there are opportuni-

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ties for cross-curricular instruction. Improving collaboration and creating a culture of academic excellence in your school is the heart of a strong library program.

Robust libraries also provide consistent information about plagiarism, ethical use of sources, the importance of reading for pleasure, and integrating new technology platforms into teaching and learning. I believe that everyone who reads this will do a Google search for something. That is okay; there is nothing wrong with a Google search, but you put in a few words and get hundreds—okay, millions—of answers. Can you tell which answer is the right one? All websites are not created by experts. Do you know how to evaluate a website for value and accuracy? If you do, you probably were taught how to do this assessment—by a librarian. Plagiarism is on the rise; with a plethora of electronic resources available, overwhelmed by the information available to them and the expectation for lengthy essays, students have resorted to cutting and pasting without thinking about intellectual property or the fact that this is not their own original work. Our digital world makes us more connected, but at the same time it is blurring the lines between original thought and what is the work of other authors. As students learn to read for information, they must be reminded to take notes, question what they are reading, and write down pertinent information about their resources, not just print out a copy or make a photocopy of the information. Teachers know that when you are gathering information, you are learning deeply about your subject; that is why research is such an important aspect of learning. Research promotes inquiry and that, in turn, supports curiosity. Curiosity is where the love of learning is born. Why does it surprise people that a student will soak up information and, like a sponge, retain it, thinking that the information belongs to them? Funny, when an artist turns out a cover of a song that we heard years ago, he or she rarely mentions the original artist. Students think that this is the cover artist's original work, but if you just change a few riffs, is it really

new? This example offers a similar concept and another blurring of the intellectual property lines that confuse our students; they need their teachers and librarians to help them sort it out.

When your students need help integrating technology into their projects, whom do they turn to besides their teachers? Do you have a full-time technology integration person in your school? Or is that person your librarian? A required part of the coursework for certification as a school librarian is Technology in the Library Media Center (Plymouth State University College of Graduate Studies, 2012). In this course, prospective librarians learn how to integrate technology into teaching and learning. Technology integration is an area that many schools have addressed by hiring people to fulfill the role, often at the cost of a school librarian's position. Though the two have some overlap, they do not have all of the same skill sets. The technology integrationist rarely has training in information assessment, collection management, or preventing plagiarism but may have more training on what digital tool can support the learning needs of a class.

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Equity of access is another area of consideration regarding resources and equipment for your school community. All your students do not all have computers at home. Especially these days when times are economically difficult, many homes conserve funds by cutting back on extras, like cable and Internet access, or putting off purchases for other items, like computers and televisions. Many families need to have both parents work, and not all of these hardworking parents are able to make time to help their children find information for a school research project. Equity also includes the people who work with students. All teachers cannot afford to bring or even purchase their own devices for work. Having a library media specialist in your school ensures that your school community has equitable access to the resources and equipment that are often housed in the library.

Librarians and school libraries are essential to the development of 21st-century skills. If you have not taken the time to talk to a school librarian about what he or she does to support student learning, visit your library. Spend some time observing what librarians do, even if they are not teaching a class. I bet you will find them working with a student on a project, fixing a recalcitrant computer, ordering materials to support curriculum in your school, or finding the most current research on best practices to share with other faculty members. School librarians teach classes, manage library programs, and work to provide the best resources for their schools. Not sure how your school library measures up? The American Association of School Librarians has developed a new tool to help administrators and librarians assess their programs. It is an approach that considers 21st-century skills and what a successful school library program provides for the entire community it serves. Our professional organizations offer regular learning opportunities for library professionals and paraprofessionals that address local, regional, and national concerns around school libraries. Your libraries are an important part of a healthy school ecosystem. No, this is not your mother's school library; in today's library, your children are being taught by licensed educators. Librarians who teach 21st-century skills know the value of being able to integrate technology into student work and recognize that all people need to be able to conduct both professional and personal research beyond the library walls.

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