

Making Connections

School librarians play key role in student learning

by Jim Rettig

The experiences I had one day in early January confirmed two things I thought I already knew. The first was how much richer my K–12 education could have been; the second, how much in common we have regardless of the type of library we work in.

I realized that although I have been talking about the importance of school libraries since my term began last July, I had not spent a day of my life in a school library. My grade school had a room with books in it and volunteer mothers who checked them out when we went as a class. I don't think my visits were consistent year after year, but I do recall writing many book reports in 5th or 6th grade. My high school had a library and a librarian. My freshman English class went there for orientation. It was memorable because, thanks to the antics of another guy at my table, the librarian gave all of us detention. My only detention wasn't worthless; I had to memorize a Wilfred Owen poem.

The next year an issue of the school paper was ready the first week of school. Its editor, Thomas Mann, now a well-known reference librarian at the Library of Congress, wrote an exposé of the school library's inadequacies, especially of its collection. The school administration destroyed all copies before the paper was distributed. His suppressed article convinced me that I was better off using my public library.

I learned firsthand how much more my schools' libraries could

have been. Ann Martin, president of ALA's American Association of School Librarians and educational specialist in library information services for the Henrico (Va.) County Public Schools, arranged a day for me to spend time observing and talking with the librarians in three schools. In every case, I witnessed committed, creative librarians collaborating with faculty to engage students in active learning experiences.

I remember writing a paper on mythology in high school. I might remember something about its content if, like the students at Deep Run High School in Glen Allen, Virginia, I had been assigned a Greek deity and a list of his or her infamous acts—murder, kidnapping, adultery, and more. Students had to research their deity, cite sources, identify their crimes in Virginia law, develop a defense or a prosecution strategy, and prepare an oral argument for a student jury. At Hungary Creek Middle School, students moved through five stations to answer questions about such topics as ancient Rome's politics, civil engineering, and military. Librarians and a teacher incorporated print and electronic resources into the project. Both assignments engaged the students and stimulated peer interaction. Librarians and teachers kept busy responding to student questions, asking them if they needed help, and of course, troubleshooting students' computers. (Every Henrico

middle and high school student is issued a laptop.)

At Colonial Trail Elementary School, a story reading incorporated a fun letter recognition exercise. A



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kindergartner's question, "Where are the fake books about dinosaurs?" prompted the librarian's insightful reader's advisory service for make-believe books (a.k.a. fiction). I have never doubted the fundamental, foundational role of school libraries and librarians and their contribution to student achievement. Now I have experienced that, albeit decades late.

Every day these dedicated, imaginative librarians do what I have observed and experienced as a patron in public libraries and have done as an academic librarian. They help their patrons discover the best resources for a particular task, teach them how to evaluate sources, help them understand the ethics and mechanics of attribution when using others' work, make appropriate technologies available, and give them tools that help them learn on their own and with others. They create connections! We all create connections! ■

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