After 26 years as an educator at Eanes Independent School District in Texas, Carolyn Foote has seen changes come and go in the school library. Transitions and trends have helped shape the librarian she is today, and she readily admits that being respected in her field didn’t come quickly or easily. Here, Foote shares her insights on the journey she’s traveled, and what it takes to become a leader.

Q: As 21st-century library programs go, yours is considered a leader. How did you get there, and how did you become a leader?

A: Growing into leadership isn’t something that happens overnight. Sometimes being a leader involves having a mindset that allows you to take risks over time. I began in our district as a part-time librarian, working with two excellent mentors, and eventually took on the district lead librarian position. Having such great mentors made a huge difference in the trajectory of my career. From them, I learned what it looked like to put students first and how to construct a meaningful research curriculum, think collaboratively, support my own learning with professional development, blaze new trails with technology, advocate and be a personal cheerleader for students and teachers. I added my own passion for exploring new technologies and for advocacy as I transitioned into the district librarian position. Though it can be very challenging to be both a district leader and work on a campus, it also comes with some advantages. Being a campus librarian has allowed me to keep close touch with students, curriculum and teachers. As a district leader, I’ve had opportunities to help support the professional growth of our librarians in library design and building a research curriculum.

Q: In your opinion, what sets a librarian apart from a 21st-century leader?

A: Being a Future Ready Librarian begins with a growth mindset – you have to learn to be willing to experiment, take risks and embrace the idea of yourself an instructional leader. And you have to really be thoughtful about building your own network of mentors and building your own skills in areas where you know you need growth. It also means learning, learning, learning all the time. I’ve learned to not divide resources into print vs. electronic, but use whatever tool is the best for the job. As librarians, we have to rise above stereotypes by being willing to question everything and making sure we question our own stereotypes. Curiosity is key.

A Community of Peers Makes All the Difference

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White House Champion of Change

A published author and columnist, Foote has served on various library and education boards and committees, and has presented at state, regional and local education and library conferences. She was named a White House Champion of Change in 2013. You can read more on her blog at futuro.edublogs.org.
Q: Is there a moment when you knew you became a leader? What was the aha moment?
A: Social media really set me forth on this leadership journey. I suppose I had always had the mindset of experimenting, even in the classroom. But when I discovered Twitter and started blogging, I realized that I had information to share, and I was willing to risk speaking up and sharing my stories. I discovered my own voice, but most importantly, through social media, I discovered a network of like-minded librarians and educators. Finding that tribe of colleagues who shared my crazy passions urged me to challenge myself and to think more deeply, and it allowed me to share in professional development that I personalized for myself. I still remember seeing the first time someone retweeted me, or shared something I wrote on my blog. The power of knowing there were like-minded colleagues that I could work with across the country was very powerful in my leadership growth. We all need a tribe.

Q: What factors enabled your library program to transform into what it is today?
A: I think my interest in staying on the cutting edge of new library and education trends has had an impact on our library program. Being aware of those larger trends gives you credibility when you work across the district with other administrators and demonstrates your abilities as a leader. But there’s no one silver bullet – it’s just hard work, it’s building connections with other people in the district, building outside connections so you are exposed to new ideas and striving for clarity about what your library is about and then pursuing steps to move it in that direction. Honestly, one of the best keys for me has been the strong support our district has had for professional development for all staff. Because of their support, I’ve had so many learning opportunities that have helped me with content, research, advocacy, strategies, technology trends and more. It’s important to seek as many opportunities as you can to give you a broad set of skills as a leader.

Q: What lessons did you learn from the journey?
A: Keep your eye on what’s really important (hint – the students). Realize that sometimes things are going to fail and it’s hard not to take it personally. But there’s growth in learning to pick up the pieces and begin again or start a new direction. Be mindful of how you portray your library in the world – that influences people. Value and respect your coworkers – that respect becomes mutual. Be kind. Don’t be afraid to speak up and advocate for what you believe in. Sometimes speaking up for what you believe in may not be popular and it may feel stressful, but as long as it is about kids, it’s the right thing to do. I believe more than ever our children deserve all the opportunities that having a well-staffed library has to offer. What student doesn’t deserve that?

Just be sure you also do things to restore yourself, because sometimes the journey may be more like a marathon than a sprint. (That’s a lesson I’m always trying to learn.) Don’t compare yourself to the work of others – we all have our individual strengths and gifts – just make the most of your own.

Q: Words of encouragement for a struggling librarian who wants to transform his or her program? What ideas can you share?
A: It’s easy to get overwhelmed trying to rethink everything at once. Use a tool like the Future Ready framework and select one or two areas to focus on initially. Make a list of goals at the beginning of the year. If you find you are lacking in some area, seek resources for your own professional growth, like webinars, blog posts, the Project Connect Microcredentials program or library chats online like #tltchat. Transforming space is probably the most visible change. Space communicates the purpose and tone of a space. There’s so much help available through social media and so many colleagues willing to help you – reach out and build a network to get the help you need to bring your ideas to fruition.