Jennifer Boudrye is the Director of Library Programs at the District of Columbia Public Schools. Prior to joining DCPS, Boudrye was a school library media specialist in Montgomery County, MD, public schools and worked with PreK-12 students. Before earning her MLS from the University of Maryland, she worked as a web publisher and radio talk show producer and host. She is committed to ensuring all students have access to the best information resources and opportunities to develop expert information literacy skills for school and life.

Q: As 21st-century library programs go, yours is considered a leader. How did you develop this leadership?

A: I believe in the possible, and don’t ask permission or get tripped up by obstacles to make it reality. As a school librarian, I often stepped out of the library to coach and support teachers struggling with classroom management. I took on leadership roles for technology integration and implementation, participated in curriculum development and earned school administration credentials. When I stepped into the role of Director of Library Programs in DCPS, I was provided the incredible opportunity to guide and support librarians to do what is possible – to be leaders and instructional partners as well as passionate advocates for reading. I worked to clarify a vision of what is possible in DCPS libraries, including ensuring that every school is staffed with a certified librarian, that equitable and excellent collections exist in every school and that all stakeholders hold clarity on exactly what librarians can and should be doing every day. Every step of the way, every decision and every action has been based on the belief that school librarians are essential to students’ path to be life-ready.
Q: In your opinion, what sets a traditional librarian apart from a 21st-century leader?

A: To accurately answer this question, I am going replace “traditional” with “stereotypical.” I believe in many people’s minds, a stereotypical librarian has a fixed mindset, hordes resources, despises the chaos and noise essential to learning and maintains a preference for print. I believe stereotypical librarians are the minority, and most of today’s school librarians are by nature leaders in using the most efficient tools and processes to effectively find, analyze, organize, use and promote quality information resources. Leader librarians are problem solvers and connectors. They stay abreast of developments in technology and are ready to explore, experiment and implement what works.

Q: Is there a moment when you knew you became a leader? What was the “aha” moment?

A: I view my role as a leader to be one of providing opportunity and support for others to excel. Two experiences convinced me we were on the right track: we made significant changes to the model of professional development for school librarians and clearly communicated that we were working to raise the ceiling and the floor at the same time by setting high expectations and providing resources and tools to meet them. For some it was very uncomfortable. During the second year of this work we began to receive feedback that demonstrated the impact – librarians were writing things such as, “Thank you for helping me feel like a real professional,” and, “I feel truly supported to do what I am trained to do.” The second was from an interaction with a principal. She had been resistant to hire a certified librarian as she didn’t see the value. I leveraged my supports and convinced her to hire someone I knew was a strong librarian. After a year of major changes and improvements, the principal, with her entire administrative team, came to acknowledge the dramatic and positive impact the librarian had brought to the school, and she asserted she didn’t know what they would have done without her.

Q: What factors enabled your library program to transform into what it is today?

A: Right time, right place, right team! I started in this role at a time that DCPS had committed to re-building the library programs in every school. Community enthusiasm resulted in a work group that made specific recommendations aligned to Information Power and AASL standards for effective library programs. DCPS committed not only to fund librarian positions, but the central office team also needed to build and support the programs and the funding to invest in library collections. I had the great fortune of working with a dynamic team who excelled in very complementry skill sets. Together we simply proved what is possible. We hired excellent school librarians, we leveraged community support for funding, we held librarians and principals accountable for creating and supporting effective library programs, and we kept focus on the goal of doing what is right for students. I had great support from my supervisor and up the chain to the Chancellor, which allowed me to push back in some instances when we met resistance.

Q: What lessons did you learn from the journey?

A: One of the greatest, and most challenging lessons, has been patience. My philosophy is that everything happens when and as it should. But I’m often frustrated when I have little or no control over the timeline. To quell my frustration, I often counsel my team – and therefore myself – to count the wins, and we have had many over what is, in reality, a very short time.

Q: Words of encouragement for a struggling librarian who wants to transform his/her program? What ideas can you share?

A: This may sound harsh, but stop expecting anyone to understand what you can and should be doing and simply do it, because it is the right thing to do for kids. Forced to do lunch/recess duty? Bring books to share with students and check them out on the go, or use the time to get to know students’ interests and make book recommendations to them. Asked to cover a class for a teacher yet again? Use that opportunity to share technology tools, information resources and inquiry skills directly with students. Communicate openly and frequently with teachers and administrators to understand their needs and expectations and provide solutions that will make an impact. Share the great work you are doing and celebrate every success. Don’t wait for others to notice!