Servant Leadership in the Library

Dr. Kristen Mattson is an award-winning writer, library advocate, digital-citizenship expert and presenter. With experience as a classroom teacher and a librarian, Mattson learned early on to balance every learning experience with the most current and relevant research, personal experiences from the field and opportunities for participants. She transformed a 40-year-old school library into a 21st-century learning center, where she partners with teachers in all content areas to integrate digital literacy, research and innovation into the classroom. Her library epitomizes every aspect of the Future Ready Framework, and she supports fellow librarians by hosting site visits, facilitating professional development, blogging and moderating the Future Ready Librarians Facebook group.

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

A: I have had the pleasure of working in two different high school libraries in my career. Each one had very different strengths and its own unique sets of challenges. It was because of these challenges that I got out of the comfort of the library and actively sought out ways to serve, which allowed me to discover my gifts for instructional partnering and professional development. In my early years I developed *The Toilet Paper*, a weekly newsletter I posted in staff bathrooms with the latest tips and tricks for student-centered teaching, an interesting blog post I had read or a spotlight story. The teachers in my school were grateful for this as well as *The Teaching Tip of the Day* I sent via Remind101 every morning. As I learned more by working with various teachers, continuing my own graduate studies and connecting with other educators on social media, I gained confidence in my abilities to offer guidance to teachers who wanted to try something new. I began blogging, presenting at local conferences and leading PD in my building and for the district.

KRISTEN MATTSON, EdD
High School Library Media Director, Indian Prairie School District 204, Illinois

These newly developed educational philosophies and goals became my guiding light and led me to my second high school library, which presented different challenges, but ones I was up for. After weeding nearly 10,000 items from the library collection and genre-sorting what remained, I added a student library committee. They met with me once a month to confer on everything from new library paint colors to programs and furniture arrangements. Many of these students became so invested in the renovation, they volunteered during their lunch hours and after school to help box up weeded books and relabel the keepers with genre stickers. One of the best things my committee did was help design a student interest survey for the library. They advertised the link and encouraged their classmates to complete the survey. Nearly two-thirds of the student body gave their opinion about what the ideal space would look like and what services it would offer. The student library committee helped comb through that data and used it to drive decisions about how we could spend our money and other resources wisely.

In those rocky years where I couldn’t quite make my vision for the ideal library a reality, I was forced to think outside the box, and as a result, I came into my own and developed a professional part of myself that I had never anticipated. Now I have students accessing our library during their 43-minute lunch hour. During four periods out of the day, anywhere from 100 to 150 students fill the space to study, explore our maker materials, use our digital resources or attend a program. Because of this guaranteed audience each day, I have been able to successfully bring in authors to visit, run Breakout EDU challenges and host a myriad of events in partnership with other teachers.

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

A: This is something I have struggled with over the last few years. I always saw myself as a leader, and as I started working more with teachers and feeling passionate about providing professional development and guidance, and not just student learning, the desire to lead grew, too. I started my doctoral program in 2012, and the more I learned, the more I felt the pull toward leadership. Foolishly, I spent several years interviewing for positions that held leadership titles, thinking that the job I had would deem me a leader. Surely if teachers had to report to me, or if I could dictate learning for teachers, I would be a leader, right?

I spent one year in a role in my district office as a Professional Development Specialist. I was organizing PD opportunities for teachers, coordinating with building admin over agendas for school-improvement days, and reaching out to speakers and consultants to come work with our staff. Guess what? I hated every minute of it! I did not feel that I was personally making a difference at all – I was simply making sure that the people who were making a difference had everything they needed to run a successful PD session.

When I went back into the school library and came to the end of my doctoral work, I had this slow realization that leadership has absolutely nothing to do with a title. I had been leading all along – influencing students, teachers and administrators to make slow and steady changes that would benefit our learning communities. At some point in the last year, really, I stopped looking for the next step up the ladder and started noticing the moments when my presence, my words, my assistance helped make a difference. Isn’t that the real mark of a leader?
Q: What factors enabled your library program to transform into what it is today?

A: First and foremost, I had a clear vision I was able to bring to my administration. The vision was backed by student survey data, examples from other school libraries and input from teachers. I think too often, librarians wait to be told what to do or are too afraid to ask for support. When my administration saw I was taking initiative and how my vision fit with the overall mission and goals of the school, they gave me their blessing to move forward. Second, I was never afraid to roll up my sleeves and dig in. Again, I could have waited for my very busy school maintenance staff to remove bookshelves for me, but because I was capable, I grabbed a screwdriver after school one day and got to work. When I did need maintenance to help me with projects I couldn’t do on my own, they were so much more willing to prioritize my needs because they saw how invested I was in the work.

Student voice was probably the biggest factor in helping me make a change. It was hard for administration to refute the student survey data. The kids were also instrumental in making presentations to the PTA for monetary support. Because so many students were involved with the physical makeover, the senior class of 2016 also felt compelled to leave their class gift to our space, allowing us to create two small group collaborative rooms in the back of our library.

Q: What lessons did you learn from the journey?

A: I have learned so many things in my role as a school librarian. I've learned what leadership looks like in action, and I've learned that change cannot happen through one person acting alone. I used to think leadership was about showing people a better way to do things, but now I know that leadership is about coming alongside others to build something better, together. I’ve learned that leadership is about sharing my experiences, so that others can learn and grow from them. Leadership is also about listening, learning and continuously striving to be better – not just professionally, but personally too.

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

A: The best advice I have is to start small. Find something that matters most to your students or your teachers and dedicate yourself to making that happen for them. Even if you find ideas online or want to replicate something you learned at a conference, remember that you know your students and staff better than anyone else. Don’t be afraid to put your own spin on someone else’s ideas so whatever you do fits the needs of your learning community.

It’s also helpful to connect with a group of other innovative librarians. There are lots of us on Twitter. Try searching #futurereadylibs or #tlchat. There are also Facebook groups where you can connect. Some of my favorites are the Future Ready Librarians and the School Librarians Workshop. These communities are safe spaces to ask for advice, share ideas and gain support.