Building a Successful Library Program without Space or a Budget

Laura Fleming is an educational consultant, thought leader and speaker on education, librarianship and technology. She has been both a classroom teacher and media specialist for more than 20 years in New Jersey in grades K-8 and currently serves as a Library Media Specialist at New Milford Public Schools for grades 9-12. Her library Makerspace has garnered national attention and has served as an inspiration for schools across the country. She has been recognized as a National School Board Association’s 20 to Watch in Educational Technology Leadership for 2014, a 2015 Bammy Award Recipient for National School Librarian of the Year and a White House Champion of Change for Making nominee. She is also a Future Ready Schools Thought Partner.

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

A: Well, first, thank you. My efforts were never been about developing a leading program – it has all been much more organic than that. At this point in my career, I have worked in libraries spanning K-12, and my approach to all those library programs has been the same – to make our school library a meaningful and relevant part of our school community. I strived to complement and expand upon the instruction happening in the classrooms and make what the students were learning in my space relevant to the world they live in. This is the key to giving them real 21st-century skills. I never try to prepare students for success just within the four walls of my library. I want to help them gain skills they can use in my library, in the classroom, in the school community, at home and beyond. Ultimately, I hope they gain skills, practices and perspective, that will stay with them and carry with them throughout their entire lives. This approach has worked across all grade levels and, I believe, is the reason my library programs have been successful.
Q: In your opinion, what sets a traditional librarian apart from a 21st-century leader?
A: I have mad respect for what is viewed as a traditional librarian and don’t think it should be an either/or. Librarians today need to be flexible and understand that their role is always shape-shifting, sometimes daily. This is the key, though, to our job security, but more importantly, to the sustainability of school libraries. Your ability, capability and willingness to adapt to different circumstances is critical in ensuring your library stays fresh, current, meaningful and relevant to your school community.

Q: Is there a moment when you knew you became a leader? What was the “aha” moment?
A: Honestly, I’ve never had that moment. I have a lot of self-doubt and insecurities, but I think that is what keeps me totally humble and drives me to always do better and want more.

Q: What factors enabled your library program to transform into what it is today?
A: The number one factor that has enabled my library program to transform into what it is today has been my students. Yes, administrative support is a blessing, community support certainly is appreciated, but honestly, if the students didn’t choose to use our space and to see it as the hub of our school community, we would be nowhere. I give them full credit for what we have accomplished, for where we are and for where we are going still.

Q: What lessons have you learned from the journey? What’s been the most difficult part?
A: I think it is incredibly important for school librarians to tell their story. To find ways, whether through blogging, social media, conferences, etc. – to share what is happening in their spaces – their successes, their failures, their challenges, their questions. In many instances, there is only one librarian in a school, but librarians do not have to be on an island.

For me personally, the most difficult part has been being viewed as a leader in this space, wanting to help everyone I can, but simply never having enough time to do what I want, nor being able to get out on the speaking/presenting circuit as much as I am able to. I do feel these things have hindered my ability to really and truly make a bigger impact. All I can hope is that my work stands for itself and withstands the test of time.

Q: Words of encouragement for a struggling librarian who wants to transform his/her program? What ideas can you share?
A: It really is all about the culture. I recently wrote a piece for my blog called, “Thinking of Renovating Your Library, Think Again.” The idea behind that piece was based on inquiries that I get from schools all the time about their struggling libraries and how they thought renovating the space would get students in and help their spaces become relevant to their school communities. In many cases, the schools that have contacted me with this issue have been surprised to learn that despite a renovation to their space – new furniture, new paint, whatever it might have been – that students still are not interested in their space. It always comes down to culture. In my most recent position at New Milford High School, I walked into a very old, outdated space that could have benefited from a renovation. We did not have the money for that at first, and really, this was a blessing in disguise. When it came to turning our library around, I focused solely on renovating the culture to create real, sustainable transformation. It was only recently our library did undergo a renovation, and as a result, we were able to make choices that reflected the culture we already had in our space.