

THE INTEGRAL ROLE OF THE LIBRARIAN NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED SCHOOL DISTRICT REIMAGINES THE WAYS INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS SUPPORT STUDENT LEARNING, THE DIGITAL SHIFT AND 1:1 INITIATIVES

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STEVE JOEL
Superintendent,
Lincoln Public Schools



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As the educational landscape continues to change and digital products and services become everyday tools in America’s classrooms, it’s not surprising the role of the school librarian is changing, too. While librarians will always promote literacy and a love of reading and learning, information literacy in the 21st century is more all encompassing than ever, and is now part of the fabric of learning. Forward-thinking school districts around the country see librarians and media specialists as linchpins in supporting student learning in a digital world.



Project Connect’s roots began as a library advocacy effort to improve student outcomes by ensuring the role of the librarian remains relevant; empowering librarians to have a more influential voice; and enhancing the role of the librarian to impact curriculum decisions and develop digital content.

That’s certainly the case in Lincoln Public Schools (LPS), the second-largest public school district in Nebraska. Located in the heart of the plains, LPS is renowned for its long-standing legacy of educational excellence as well as its tradition of rigorous academic achievement. With superintendent Steve Joel at the helm and hundreds of dedicated teachers and staff—including librarians—the school district is growing and thriving, serving more than 39,000 students in more than 60 schools and programs.

ENTER PROJECT CONNECT:

However, the district didn’t always fully understand the capabilities of its librarians, nor did they fully utilize what those professionals had to offer beyond traditional

roles. When Superintendent Joel became part of Project Connect—a national initiative and a panel of industry thought leaders from the PreK-12, professional association, and higher education space working to link school libraries to 21st-century student learning—he began to comprehend how important school librarians are to student learning.

“Being invited to be a part of Project Connect provided me the opportunity to explore and question how LPS views libraries and the role of the librarian,” said Joel. “I discovered an excellent reputation within the district and a commitment to excellence by media leadership. There was inconsistency, however, in how librarians were being utilized in our

schools. My interest in deepening their roles as instructional leaders has resulted in our principals viewing and utilizing their expertise much more strategically.”

Sponsored by Follett, and the brainchild of Todd Litzsinger, chairman of Follett Corporation, Project Connect’s roots began as a library advocacy effort to improve student outcomes by ensuring the role of the librarian remains relevant; empowering librarians to have a more influential voice; and enhancing the role of the librarian to impact curriculum decisions and develop digital content.

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LIBRARIANS AT THE CENTER OF THE SCHOOL:

"The media center is the nucleus of what we are doing in Lincoln as we move forward with digital services, and our librarians are at the nucleus of the media centers," says Joel. "Today's librarians must be knowledgeable about a vast array of digital resources. They teach learners how to conduct research online, collaborate with teachers and reach out to parents and the community. They're the go-to professionals for a range of teaching and learning needs, as well as information about databases and technology."

As a district, Lincoln always had a certain commitment to librarians. In 1999, LPS won the *National School Library Media Program of the Year* from the American Association of School Librarians. The award was based on the district's mission and vision for student achievement, information literacy instruction, library media specialists and teachers working collaboratively, integration of library resources and services within the curriculum, excellent library media center facilities in all schools, and more.

LPS's Library Media Services Department offers a professional and multicultural library, audio and video services, technical and curriculum assistance, and professional development opportunities for all staff. It also provides online digital content resources to LPS students and staff, accessed from the Library Media Services website and from each school's library website.

Students at all grade levels receive guidance and instruction and access to a trove of resources when they visit their school libraries. Standard content ranges from books, eBooks, online and print periodicals, vast databases of vetted content, curated digital content aligned to the curriculum, and much more.

Now, administrators in LPS fully recognize the far-reaching expertise possessed by their librarians, and knew it would be in the district's (and students') best interest to tap into that wisdom. Encouraging librarians to become involved in decision making and instruction beyond the walls of the library, Joel and his colleagues were able to vastly expand



learning programs and improve the learning experience for all kids. For instance, LPS's librarians work with Family Literacy programs that provide language assistance to parents and their children; a middle school librarian sponsors a *Lunch in the Library* program; one month's topic was "BYOD" (Bring Your Own Device), at which students learned how to use their devices to explore learning resources. Librarians also offer professional development opportunities, working with teachers (some of whom are intimidated by technology) on locating the most appropriate technology tools to assist in easily finding digital resources for their lessons.





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When ninth graders at one LPS high school begin their research, they learn how to use the digital resources their teachers and librarian have integrated to supplement their textbooks and class work. At one of the district's elementary schools, second graders choose an animal to research and create a slide show presentation. At another, the librarian tailors her library literacy lesson to what the teacher is presenting that day, demonstrating the value of the library in helping students build critical thinking skills.



At Park Middle School, former librarian Chris Haeffner (currently Library Media Services Coordinator) regularly worked with sixth grade teachers in creating lessons utilizing library resources, with the focus on reading, research and technology skills. “When the sixth graders are assigned a research project we teach them how to access digital research and properly cite sources. The teachers trust us, and know when they work with us it won’t be painful. That encourages them to think about what else they can do to bring students to the library—and us into the classroom.”

LPS’s librarians also engage in outreach to promote more interaction with teachers; for instance, being part of a city-wide signing of ALA’s Declaration of the Right to Libraries, visiting classrooms to renew books using mobile checkout devices, and sending emails/texts/tweets with

links to websites that relate to library lessons.

Library advocacy is part of the culture here—it’s what unifies this large district and makes integrated 21st-century learning possible. At Pound Middle School, Principal Chris Deibler said, “The Media Center is a hub of activity. Our media specialist has breathed new life into the center, and our kids are better prepared for the real world as a result.”

As the Lincoln Public School district considers and adopts some of the many new online programs designed to help school districts and their teachers build core skills in reading, science, and mathematics among all levels of learners, the role of librarians promises to become even more essential to preparing students for college and careers.

In Lincoln Public Schools, they’re ready, and eager, to do their part.