Library Advisory Councils

By Natalie Teske

Library Advisory Councils (LACs) go by many names—Media Technology Committees, Reader Advisory Boards, and Faculty Feedback Forums, among others. They may target different segments of the patron base, or be established for a specified amount of time. Most of us are aware of Teen Advisory Councils, but there are Senior Advisory Councils as well as committees that serve the needs of homeschoolers. This article draws on my own experiences with starting a Library Advisory Council at my K-12 private school library media center.

WHY HAVE AN LAC?

An LAC is beneficial to every library, of every size. It increases buy-in from stakeholders, distributes responsibility for decisions, increases library usage, and assists the library governing body (even if it’s only one person, like me) in crafting a strategic plan understood by stakeholders and the community the library serves. Without an LAC, the librarian/media specialist does the best she can by using informal survey techniques to determine the needs of her educational community. In this case, the most vocal of users will get more materials and more support for their curriculum, while the low-users or non-users will continue to believe the library has “nothing they want.” In my school, these users are typically the faculty of math/higher science-oriented subjects: just the areas where America’s students lag behind. When we follow this course to its logical conclusion, our high school libraries will have a variety of history, humanities, and language arts materials, but less than robust collections in math and higher sciences. I frequently hear from these same teachers that “they don’t have time” to bring their classes to the library. Presented with the argument that research skills cross all boundaries and disciplines, they agree, but the school year passes without a class visit to the library, or a research project.

If each high school department was required to nominate an LAC member, their department would become more informed about tools the library offers. When their department realizes that the library is asking for input on how its budget is spent to better support them, more requests would flood in. As these non-users realize that the library now has the materials they requested, they would increase their usage. At first, LAC members may resist or resent being required to take on another duty, but as they begin to realize that it will eventually make their load easier, as they get technology, web 2.0, and research skills support from the media specialist, they will become enthusiastic LAC members.

An LAC also builds relationships and assists in beneficial conflict resolution between faculty/library, parents/library, and student/library users. In cases where a teacher may not feel comfortable speaking directly with the librarian, they can go to their faculty representative, who will present their request at the next LAC meeting.

STEPS TO STARTING AN LAC

The supervisory librarian first needs to establish several policies and procedures that answer some critical questions.

1. Establishing procedures: How often/how long will the LAC meet? Does everyone get an equal voice? How will you handle challenges to budgetary decisions? How will you handle disputes between members? You must emphasize that this is an advisory council: you will note, and consider everyone’s comments and opinions, but you will, in the end, make the best decision for the library. Members may feel that their time was “wasted” if their advice was not followed—continuously reiterate how much you value their time and contribution to the library. They are helping make your job easier, even if it doesn’t feel like it at the time!

2. Designating an LAC leader: This should not be the librarian. You need an independent person to call “time.” You don’t want a teacher to think you’re biased just because time for their topic was up. You also want someone to consult with when making the agenda for the meetings. This should be someone who the other faculty members feel free to come and talk to if there is an issue they want addressed. Teachers don’t always feel comfortable coming to the librarian and telling them that they feel the computer lab schedule is unfairly biased towards a certain teacher. The LAC leader is your liaison to the faculty body.

3. Creating an LAC mission statement: The librarian should work with the LAC leader to create a rough draft, and ask for input from the committee for the final draft.

4. Nominating members: In middle and high schools, members should be nominated by department. What a 6th grade science teacher needs is much different from what a 6th grade English teacher needs. In elementary school, divisions by grade level make more sense. A parent and student representative will give your committee more depth, and help all involved remember the end-user they all serve. The parent/student need not be invited to every meeting, or stay the whole time. An Administrative representative is also necessary. When you create your LAC, you must decide if this representative gets a “voice” or if they are only there to support.
OBSTACLES YOU MAY ENCOUNTER

If you create an LAC, leadership will no longer be solely in your hands, or the hands of the administration. If your administration believes that they “know best” what teachers, parents or students want, you will face opposition. Your principal/supervisor may fear loss of control, fear of transparency, and fear of new ideas. All of these fears have a common root—a lack of trust in other educational professionals in our schools. This subject has been extensively explored in the business world by Margaret Wheatly in her 1997 article “Goodbye Command and Control” in Leader to Leader. That institutions still struggle with this concept 12 years later illustrates how deeply ingrained the top-down management model is in our culture. A carefully reasoned proposal may be sufficient to calm your principal’s fears and convince him to trust you and your fellow teachers. It also may not. If you manage to implement a Library Advisory Council at your school, you will have done your part in furthering collaboration and improving the state of education and school libraries in America. I wish you luck!

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