## Feature

# Transition Mentoring
## in School Library Media Programs

by Bea Baaden

Mentoring is an important practice in schools today. At its simplest, mentoring is defined as a professional relationship between an experienced person and an inexperienced person. The key to the mentoring process is person-to-person communication.

When newly hired library media specialists enter their schools, they often become part of the district's mentoring program. Yet, mentoring these new professionals can be problematic for school districts. Is a library media specialist from another school in the district an appropriate mentor? Even though they are knowledgeable of the profession, they are not of the particular school's culture. What about a classroom teacher from the same building who is knowledgeable of the school culture, but not familiar with the professional tasks of that library media center?

## Appropriate Mentors

An appropriate mentor is one who is intimate with classroom routines and teaching strategies that have proven successful, the expectations of administrators and classroom teachers, the formal and informal relationships, the curriculum in action of classroom teachers, and the values and traditions of a particular site, all of which form school culture. The one person who has this knowledge for an incoming library media specialist is the exiting library media specialist. The transmission of the culture and practices of a library media center by an exiting library media specialist to the incoming professional is "transition mentoring" (Baaden and Uhl 2006).

Newly hired library media specialists enter the library media centers with the knowledge and skills engendered from their academic programs and internship experiences. In their pre-service preparation through observations or field activities, library media specialists visit a few library media centers usually, for a limited amount of time. They experience the cultures of these school sites in a fragmented way. Internships provide practical learning experiences from the perspective of respective sites and the cooperating teacher and academic supervisor. Learning how to read the culture of a school, however, may or may not have been a part of university preparation.

## Important Insights

School culture plays an important role in student achievement and student learning. Successful schools have "leaders who can read, assess, and reinforce core rituals, traditions, and values," which are indicative of school culture (Deal and Petersen 1999). Library media programs are particularly reflective of the culture of the particular school building.

Traditionally, a single library media specialist is the only professional tending the library media center. He or she is knowledgeable not only about the library media center but also about the culture of the school. When the library media specialist leaves, it is both an opportunity and a challenge for the school. A great deal of working knowledge and insight leaves with the departing library media specialist, and a new professional

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then attempts to implement his/her vision with little practical experience. Often, critical knowledge and information to ease this transition is lost.

## Communication

An exploratory study to examine the communication of past practices between the exiting library media specialist and the incoming professional was completed in 2006 (Baaden and Uhl). The study analyzed the nature of the mentoring that the exiting or retiring professional provided for the new library media specialist and how it impacted the ease of transition into the new school facility and the school culture. This transmission of the culture and practices of the exiting professional to the new professional is transition mentoring.
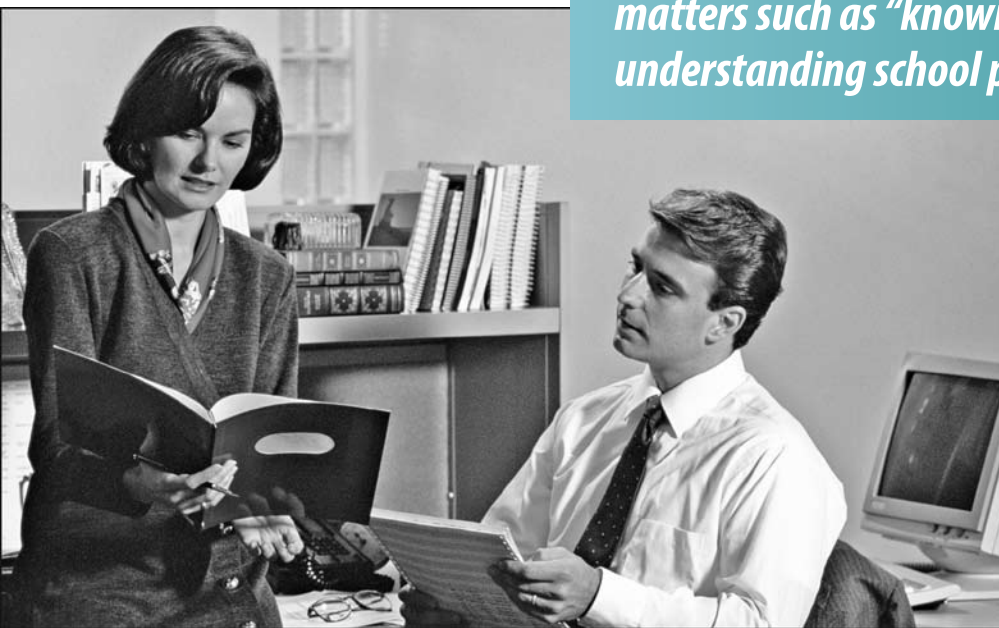
The study analyzed communication patterns between exiting and incoming



library media specialists, materials that were left by the exiting professional, and people considered helpful by the incoming library media specialist in the transition to their new sites. Ninety library media specialists from Long Island, New York, were surveyed. Of the ninety respondents, sixty-one had some form of communication with the exiting library media specialist. Most respondents said the communication took the form of a

phone call, while others cited brief meetings and specific conversations about the administration of the library media center or about instruction.

The incoming person considered communication with the exiting library media specialist very helpful in the transition. When there was lack of communication, the incoming library media specialist felt at a loss or floundering. New library media specialists reported that they felt overwhelmed and did not feel understood by other professionals in the building. One new library media specialist noted: "I know it is the nature of the job to be on your own and create your own programming and relationships, but I feel that I was left with

very little information about policies, procedures, collaborations, barcodes, etc. from previous years. I had the phone number of the prior library media specialist, but very often felt uncomfortable contacting her because I felt it was my responsibility to figure things out on my own."

Another respondent stated that the transition was "difficult since no information was left about lessons and

no information about curriculum. I had no idea about which information skills had been taught" and thus didn't have a good foundation on which to proceed. For others, the entire transitional experience was difficult. One library media specialist stated, "My first year I felt like I was drowning. Nearly every free moment during my week was spent researching ideas and planning lessons. The library itself was a mess. It's difficult when you're the only librarian in a school district." Such comments suggest that it is critical for exiting library media specialists to make an effort to meet formally with incoming colleagues to share information about instruction and managerial, administrative matters.

*These library media specialist mentors were particularly helpful in advising about specific library matters such as "knowing proper procedures and understanding school policies."*

## Procedures

There were also a number of materials left by exiting professionals that respondents noted were helpful. Exiting library media specialists generally left more procedural information, such as prior purchase orders, budget, and circulation procedures, rather than instructional information. Yet when procedural information was not left, the new library media specialist felt at a loss.

One respondent noted, "It would have been wonderful if the exiting librarian could have given me some information on procedures already in place. I was very overwhelmed in the beginning." Respondents noted that very few collaborative planning forms considered helpful were left. One respondent commented, "I had to create my own curriculum and fly by the seat of my pants." Sometimes the information left behind was out of date with current best practices. When relevant information was left, one new library media specialist

felt empowered and stated, "The retired librarian left good files with records of all transactions as well as notes about different programs she chaired. These, along with several lessons, helped me to evaluate the success of the library program and I could make changes to continue the success of the library media program."

## People as Resources

People were considered critical in the transition to the new library media center. Library support staff/paraprofessionals and their knowledge were deemed most important. Some respondents noted that they were "fortunate" to have "a terrific library clerk who was both willing to share the 'old ways,' but equally supportive when it came to trying out 'new ways.'" However, in some cases, library support staff was considered the biggest transition problem. One

needs to be greater consideration for some type of transition mentoring. Library media centers are often spoken about as the heart, the hub, or network central of the school and as such reflect the culture of the school. This kind of transitional communication between the outgoing and incoming library media specialists is essential yet not often done in a way that is helpful to the new professional.

More formal meetings need to be deliberately planned. Preferably, the exiting library media specialist should hold one or more face-to-face meetings in the library media center with the new professional and should introduce the new professional to important staff, show the location of important documents, and delineate important procedures. Discussion should take place about instructional materials, curriculum, and the position of the library me-

ogy support information, and lists/ranges of barcodes for the new person. Instructional information can be left in the form of prior plan books, schedules and calendars, lesson plans, collaborative planning forms, curriculum maps, bibliographies, and information about any instructional improvements under consideration. All should be left where the incoming library media specialist can have easy access.

In addition to materials and resources is the knowledge that the library support staff imparts to the new library media specialist. Library support staff know about procedures and routines and should be prepared for their important role in transition mentoring.

A new library media specialist enters a school with some knowledge of the myriad tasks she or he needs to perform. This new person usually enters the school workplace with a vision of how to incorporate skills and knowledge into the school culture but only a vague sense of what that might entail. The exiting library media specialist is a key source who has this knowledge. Communication between the outgoing professional and the new one is critical for the transition process. Engaging in transition mentoring, where specific meetings occur and specific documents are left, is one way to ensure that a carefully nurtured professional culture is being successfully transferred.

> *Not only did she become familiar with procedures of the library media center, but "made some new friends. It was nice seeing some friendly faces in September."*

new library media specialist reported that "the biggest obstacle to a successful transition was the assistant in the library. She was extremely difficult to work with and resistant to change of any kind."

Respondents also reported that other district library media specialists were very helpful, often taking the form of mentors. These library media specialist mentors were particularly helpful in advising about specific library matters such as "knowing proper procedures and understanding school policies." For a complete mentoring experience, the new library media specialist needed both a building mentor and a library media colleague, even from another building.

## Importance of Transition Mentoring

This study clearly shows that there

dia center in the culture of the school. For example, one new library media specialist took a day off from work and spent it with the exiting library media specialist. Not only did she become familiar with procedures of the library media center, but "made some new friends. It was nice seeing some friendly faces in September."

Communication of a professional culture also can be imparted through objects, forms, and information left by the exiting library media specialist. He/she can leave carefully labeled and accessible procedural information, such as circulation, budget, and beginning of year procedures, prior purchase orders, selection and acceptable use policies, important phone numbers, and keys. The library media specialist can also leave automation procedures, words and protocols for technology, technol-

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# Leadership: Beyond the Memes

**Susan D. Ballard and Kristin Fontichiaro**

Almost 160 years ago, the French journalist Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr observed, "The more things change, the more they stay the same." This epigram is an apt description of what school librarian leaders need to bear in mind in navigating the ever-changing educational and information landscape. For while our profession pushes school librarians to be aware of pedagogical, technological, and societal shifts, it is in mastery of the underlying dynamics of power, authority, and school culture that a librarian moves from innovation instigator to someone who is trusted to champion high-impact growth.

Few guideposts exist for navigating those complex networks, and even the most strategic and prepared among us will experience a situation that is the result of dealing with the age-old stumbling blocks of individual personalities and group dynamics. We have all witnessed libraryland impresarios who talk a good game but do not produce real results or impact on student learning. Leading from the library, without endowed authority, is complex and glamour-free. Real leadership involves a persistence of vision and an indefatigable belief in the work you do. It is about framing that vision in a way that truly connects with others' wants, needs, and aspirations. Leadership is not a drive-through or drive-by approach: it develops from sweat equity. We know firsthand how one change in personnel, curriculum, administration, legislation, or budget can—despite our best intents—set into motion a cascading domino effect that requires all of our energy, savvy, and finesse to resolve.

As we reflect on our leadership journeys, we remember our own missteps and ensuing labors to correct course. And as our careers have taken us outside of daily work in a library and into various external roles, we have been fortunate to see school libraries through others' eyes and gained insight that we wish we had known earlier in our careers. If we had to narrow down what differentiates those who successfully lead from the library and those who do not, it's knowing what makes people tick and figuring out how to optimize existing culture for growth. As Dale Carnegie says in *How to Win Friends and Influence People,* "People do things for their reasons, not ours. Find their reasons."

## Stakeholders

First, speak the language of stakeholders. So many of us leave library school fired up to talk about information literacy and flexible schedules, having implicitly or explicitly been told that it was our job to turn the school's schedule around. Kristin tried that. It fell flat and felt downright demoralizing; worse, it did not increase library usage, much less student learning. Instead of fighting an uphill battle to instill those concepts, Kristin

turned elsewhere. She subscribed to *Educational Leadership,* which she saw on her principal's desk, so she could connect to her principal's knowledge base. She became familiar with the district's strategic plan and technology documentation to see the goals the administration had set for itself, then adopted their language to show how library-based efforts could enhance progress toward those goals. In short, make it a priority to create a positive working relationship with your administrator. Find something that fires them up and build on it. Every administrator is proud of *something*—find their "love language" and then figure out how to connect your goals to their aspirations.

In Kristin's case, knowing that administrators were required to share points of pride at their weekly meetings gave her the idea to do a weekly share to her principal of what she saw happening in the building (sometimes about the library, sometimes not). That added value to the overall relationship she worked diligently to build with her principal. After all, aren't libraries information gatherers and disseminators? This also "bought some insurance" with her administrator, setting up a relationship in which Kristin was a problem-solving asset for the principal. (This lessened the blow when she screwed up—and she did.)

With another principal, the need could be for *less* information rather than fancy annual reports or constant emails; or for tracking down articles for graduate coursework; or taking over website management (annoying until you realize you now control the school's messaging). Kristin spoke recently with one librarian who after a meeting with administrators was panicked that makerspaces were going to annihilate her library program. Upon reflection, she realized that all the principal had asked for was a bunch of STEM toys set out on library tables. She realized she could easily achieve his maker goals and, by satisfying him, build goodwill as she continued to develop her more-nuanced maker priorities for students.

Leadership doesn't mean working in a vacuum. Susan, as a district director who met regularly with administrators, had regular opportunity to convey program needs and share what the school librarians could do to help the district achieve its goals. She needed her team of librarians to keep her in the loop so she could be an effective leader in helping them help their learning communities. Too often, librarians would "sit on things" because they didn't want to complain or admit that they needed assistance. As an adherent to the old adage that a "stitch in time, saves nine," Susan instituted a monthly form—first paper-based, and eventually electronic—that at first, was perceived as onerous by the librarians, but which they became accustomed to over time. The form prompted each school librarian to reflect on these questions:

1. What went right this month?
2. What went wrong?
3. What would fix what went wrong?
4. Instructional strategies I am excited about
5. What do you need from administration?

The responses provided critical information and gave Susan a "heads up" to any problem that might be brewing, as well as alerted her to wonderful things that the school librarians were doing. She could further her relationship with their principals by sharing positive stories with them to facilitate their own "boasting" as well.

The librarians' individual personalities took form in their answers and gave Susan new ideas for customizing her supervision, focusing professional development, and addressing issues before they became points of contention or frustration. Additionally, the required reflection helped the librarians prioritize and put things in perspective, essential skills for their own leadership development.

Keep asking yourself, "How can the library help solve problems?" not, "How can my administrator solve my problem?" and you'll find that your helpful approach will not only gain you more administrative respect, but likely more *face time* as well. Once the rapport is established, it becomes easier to make an ask of an administrator, because there is a sense of mutuality established. (A deep dive into curriculum documents yields similar results with teachers: you will have more empathy for where there are instructional strains, and, hopefully, find a way to meet your library's goals while lessening their burdens.)

**Work Culture**

Be mindful of the *work culture* of your building. Too often, we impose conditions on educators' library interactions. Consider, for example, our profession's insistence upon collaborative teaching. Most of us were taught that co-teaching and flexible scheduling are the ideal. But, as one of Kristin's former colleagues once posed, "I wonder why your profession thinks I can't teach by myself?" What a powerful question! (Consider this from an administrator's position, too: "Why do I need a certified librarian if there's got to be a teacher there already? A para could do that stuff under a teacher's supervision and that would free up the funds I need for summer school.")

Our classroom colleagues must balance everything from students' mental health to standardized tests. Librarians justifiably see collaborative teaching as maximizing pedagogical expertise and halving the student-teacher ratio. Classroom teachers may feel differently, seeing collaborative planning and team-teaching as luxuries their time-strapped schedules cannot accommodate. Kristin shifted her focus to out-of-school and lunchtime tech experiences and fixed schedule classes, where she could systematically build skills instead of insisting on a work style her educators didn't want. Over time, her colleagues saw her impact on kids and asked if she could integrate more of "their" curriculum into those fixed classes.

The result on student learning was as high as that of flexible scheduling; it just came in a different format. The trick was to realize that collaboration is a *means to an end,* not an end in and of itself. The correct end goal is student growth, and there are many paths to get there. Over time, Kristin admitted that she worked better this way, because it

required less fruitless effort. Instead of constantly calibrating to match the teaching style of each colleague, she could fully embrace her own pedagogical approach, which made her more confident and satisfied. This made it easier to recover when she flubbed things, as all aspiring leaders do.

If you're tired of, "The more things change, the more they stay the same," perhaps it's time to begin making some changes so that you can gain more support for the library priorities you have. Always remember that while you may not perceive yourself as a "rock star" compared to colleagues who have more of a presence in professional circles, nobody knows your learning community better than you do, and the only group you need to impress is them. So rock on!

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# Permission Granted:

## Energizing Your Professional Journey

*By Val Edwards*

**A** fundamental aspect of embracing your career joyfully is understanding that you have the ability to control your experience. Give yourself permission to pursue those activities that most delight you, that you find highly motivating, and which you believe will further your delivery of high-quality service. I once told my school board, "Happily, I don't need your funding to undertake this project, I will move forward with my own resources because I believe it will be valuable for my practice and the students I serve." Perhaps you do not need to (and probably shouldn't) celebrate your independent spirit with such a sassy delivery, but you can find occasions to make the choices that best suit you despite others' input.

I came to understand my ability to exercise self-determination while at an SLJ Summit more years ago than I care to share. It was my good fortune to sit at breakout table with Dr. Ross Todd of Rutgers University. We were discussing my frustration at the slow pace of implementing evidence-based practices into my district's library curriculum. The rush of emotion and flood of relief I experienced when Dr. Todd said, "You don't need to wait for everyone to be ready. Go ahead and when the others are ready you can collaborate with them." I was stunned! I didn't have to wait politely (or not so politely) for everyone to be in a place to get on board. I could move ahead at my own pace and make myself available when the time came to join forces. I was thrilled!! Since this conversation, I have had a heightened sense of our human need for permission and our capacity to give permission to ourselves.

So let me give you permission, right now, to make decisions that feed your professional enthusiasm. This does not mean neglecting responsibilities but allows for prioritizing and carving out time to alleviate some of the challenges that must be faced.

Both the misery of burnout and the euphoria of a brilliant idea are passing. Misery seems to have a longer shelf life and a greater impact on workplace morale. Give yourself permission to lighten the load in whatever way serves you best. This is generally not the time to restructure your entire self-care routine and implement a new wellness regime. Falling back to a temporary comfort position provides immediate, possibly brief, respite. Building your professional awareness and planning for times when you will need more space develops long-range systems for well-being and professional satisfaction.

## Let's take an internal survey.

**1. How are you connecting with your colleagues? Which ones frustrate you? Which ones do you look forward to seeing every day? Which ones do you socialize with? Which ones do you avoid?** You spend A LOT of time in your school.

Your peers are as important to your well-being as your students' friends are to theirs. Pay attention to who gives you energy, who shares your professional values, and who appreciates your work and who you are. Make a point of spending time with them. Join the committees they are on. Invite them to join the committees you are on. Support their instruction with invitations to work in the library. Invite them to spend their prep time in the library, which can provide a quiet work space with fewer interruptions. Seeing friendly faces will ease a tough day, and like-minded colleagues will remind you of what you value about your work.

**2. Who else is struggling? Can you find ways to support each other? Do you have ideas you can present to administration together to advocate for impactful improvements?** Look for opportunities to provide moral support, boost morale, and share the burden of often overwhelming demands. Taking an active role here is very reinforcing. Building others up and helping them perform well will boost your sense of the value of your work. Collegiality is highly energizing. Even the smallest of gestures can have a significant impact; peanut butter M&Ms can make a colleague's day. Knowing that they will find empathy and a quick sugar fix in the library builds connections. Often, hearing of someone else's struggle makes you feel less alone, helps you realize your struggle is not as tough as you thought, and reinforces your feelings of self-worth because you were able to provide some relief to a colleague.

**3. What do you look forward to each day?** I'm not sure how UPS figured out my state of mind but my book order deliveries almost always arrived on a Friday. HEAVEN!! I chatted

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*Even the smallest of gestures can have a significant impact.*

with our facilities team so they would not worry when I retrieved the boxes from the office without their assistance. Opening those treasures on a Friday served two purposes. It energized and connected the library assistant and I as we exclaimed and celebrated new additions to our collection. Together, we took center stage in the library, sharing with our students our joy and excitement around books in general and our new books in particular. We drew them in, had fun conversations, build a rapport, and promoted reading and libraries while giving ourselves a must needed end-of-the-week boost. Had I needed to wait for a facilities delivery, the timing would have been unpredictable and the arrival essentially a non-event. Find what can be transformed into a celebration and recharge!

**4. What would you like to learn more about?** I have never and will never want to learn more about statistics, however, I came to realize that statistics as a standalone and statistics as a means of demonstrating return on investment (ROI) in libraries are two different topics. While ROI is a concept most applied in the corporate world, for educators it feeds directly into student achievement. Therefore, into the data we must dive. This may test your enthusiasm, but once you discover statistics as a means to share the success story of your high-quality library service, the evidence will resonate with your administrators, school board, and community. One of the most effective reinforcements for the long hours and demanding schedule of a school librarian is the acknowledgement in hard numbers of the positive and lifelong impact your work has on your students. Every educator I ever met strives to advance their students toward achievement and rewarding life experiences. Rejoice in your wins and know that your hard work and grappling with whatever is most difficult for you (data) is worthwhile and impactful.

**5. How are you involved in librarianship beyond your library?** Within your building, district, and professional associations lie opportunities waiting for you to take advantage. Attending a conference or workshop is a fantastic way to breathe new life into your work. A fresh take on a routine task can change your outlook and make the tired fun again. A change of scenery is one aspect of this. Simply being able to get out of your library or building can make all the difference. This doesn't require a big expense like attending a national conference (although that is quite lovely). You can provide yourself with this energizing experience by visiting a fellow librarian in a different school in your district or at the same grade level in a nearby district. The high schools in my district's athletic conference would meet monthly for admin and once each year representatives from specific departments would gather as well. While we always had a specific topic or resource to learn about and explore, it was the connection with professionals at our same level, in essentially our same type of district/school, that made those meetings a joy. Where are your opportunities to connect? (P.S. becoming involved beyond your library also reinforces your professional authority.) Nothing boosts your professional enthusiasm like an admiring, appreciative acknowledgment of your additional contributions from colleagues.

Gather your insights from your internal survey and use them to control your experience going forward.

## Yes, No, and Planned Abandonment

One of the benefits of being a solo practitioner in your school is that much of the time, you alone decide where you spend your time. There are always responsibilities that are embraced and those that are nagging worries. How you allocate your time is your decision. No matter what you choose, you will be impacting student learning so you can make this choice with a clear conscious. In fact, if you are doing work that does not impact student learning, you

should stop it. That is work that does not need doing and is not valuable. This is where planned abandonment can come into play. You have four tasks waiting and only time for three. Prioritize based on student impact even if that means something that is high profile goes by the wayside. Unless it is required, let it go. Shift the spotlight to a service that is more impactful and use your time and effort there.

An abundance of opportunities will pass your way over the course of your career. Consider them with care. Will they help you stay current regarding new trends and practices in the field? Will they connect you to colleagues who will foster your professional growth, sharing and exploring in a manner that bolsters and energizes? Consider the long-term implications of the more challenging opportunities. The ones that may feel so daunting you are inclined to refuse despite an excitement and desire to participate. There are opportunities outside of your workday that will position you to strengthen your influence in your department, building, district, and perhaps state. What do you hope your career will look like in the future both near and distant? Placing yourself where you can be and feel more heard will do wonders for your enthusiasm and investment in your work. It is validating!

No is not forever; neither is yes. The decision cuts both ways—both when someone tells you yes or no and also when you reply with a yes or a no. Be prudent in accepting opportunities but not overly cautious. Saying yes to a committee appointment is generally something that can be reviewed annually. If other opportunities come your way that are a more effective or interesting use of your time, you can notify leaders you will need to resign at the end of the term. Similarly, saying no does not have to mean never. I have turned down enticing projects while expressing my regret, explaining the circumstances, and requesting that I be considered for participation in the future. Optimizing your energy, time, and

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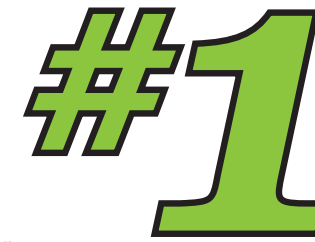
*Prioritize based on student impact.*

effort to achieve professional goals and attain professional fulfillment requires planning, reflection, and advocacy by you, for you.

Every day you have the option to take control of your work experience. There will always be difficult days. It is perhaps those difficult times when it is most critical to exercise your capacity to make choices. First, take a moment to consider the challenges of the day and find even the smallest opportunity to exercise control. Give yourself permission to review, reflect, and evaluate the flood of demands and identify those over which you have sole decision-making power. Take ownership of those responsibilities and address them in whatever way provides you with relief whether that means postponing a task or immersing yourself in a favorite or calming project.

There is no better, more rewarding occupation than to be completely immersed in learning and supporting the learning of others in a school library. Embrace the challenges. It is with clarity and understanding that they are best controlled. Celebrate your professional strength and authority. It is on that foundation you grant yourself permission to control your work and deliver high-quality service to your students, colleagues, and community.

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