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Making the Impossible Dream Come True: The Ohio Quest to Serve Students

DEBRA KAY LOGAN ON BEHALF OF OELMA

Unbelievable! On July 17, 2009, Ohio Educational Library Media Association’s (OELMA) leaders shared the same reaction. “I cannot believe it.... It is impossible.”

For nearly ten years, the OELMA has consistently and persistently worked toward the impossible. When the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) significantly reduced requirements for teacher-librarians with the implementation of new Operating Standards in 2002, the possibility of remedying the situation seemed truly unachievable. Today it is almost impossible to believe that we had overcome.

IT WILL NEVER HAPPEN...

During the 1990’s, the Ohio DeRolph Supreme Court case resulted in Ohio’s educational funding system being declared unconstitutional. OELMA knew the state could not reinstate a mandate for teacher-librarians without the state funding the positions. Ohio has struggled with educational funding since long before the national recession. The 1996 PBS Bill Moyers documentary, “Children of America’s Schools,” based on Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* (1992), used the state of Ohio to demonstrate the inequities in educational funding.

OELMA’s leaders knew Ohio’s school children needed strong school libraries. Faced with accomplishing the unachievable but necessary task, OELMA’s board voted on a motion to work toward professionally-staffed school libraries and has not stopped working toward that goal.

DREAM WEAVERS

Leadership for School Libraries (L4SL) was formed in response to the announcement of Ohio’s new Operating Standards in 2000. L4SL included school library leaders from OELMA, the State Library of Ohio, INFO-hio, and the Ohio Department of Education.



Starting in fiscal year 2010, under Governor Ted Strickland’s Evidence-based Education Reform and Funding Plan, over the next ten years, Ohio will phase in funding for licensed librarians and media specialists in Ohio’s schools. For each “organizational unit” as defined in Section 3306.04 of HB 1, \$60,000 will be phased in for “the licensed librarian and media specialist factor.” The organizational units will be determined by dividing the number of students in the district by grade levels (418 students in grades K-5, 557 in grades 6-8, and 733 in grades 9-12). In smaller school districts the number of organizational units is one unit; each district will have at least one organizational unit regardless of the formula ADM, http://www.oelma.org/Leg_update_7_15.htm.

When faced with an impossible situation and the certain knowledge that the change in the Operating Standards would result in thousands of students losing essential services, this group stepped up and began taking action. L4SL's thinking and initiatives guided OELMA's advocacy efforts and provided advocacy strategies that OELMA has built upon and still utilizes.

OELMA was caught by surprise in 2000 when the 2002 operating standards were announced. Despite arranging testimony to the State Board of Education, OELMA was unable to provide input into the already completed process. One of L4SL's first efforts was to work toward the inclusion of OELMA in future discussions. The goal was that teacher-librarians would have a place at the table along with other educational groups on ODE's committees and groups. This strategy has led to OELMA's involvement in many projects and initiatives including school library representation on standards writing teams. OELMA now has a presence in Ohio's educational community.

The involvement in the standards writing teams was used to embed information literacy indicators throughout Ohio's content standards. The members of L4SL reasoned that while math, science, and other core content teachers are not mandated by the Operating Standards, the content standards are required by law and have to be taught by qualified teachers. The inclusion of these standards would necessitate the participation of professional teacher-librarians in the educational process. This strategy then led to the writing of Ohio's "K-12 School Library Guidelines." These standards define a high quality library program and the unique, essential content teacher-librarians contribute to what students should know and be able to do. The creation and publication of these standards were significant accomplishments in light of the fact that the Guidelines are the only set of non-legally mandated standards in the state. This was achieved by clearly showing how strong school library programs align with and support the objectives of the education community.

L4SL was more than a think tank; L4SL was the force behind the Ohio Study. By

working with the Library Services and Technology Act to get funding, OELMA commissioned The Ohio Study. The study provides Ohio-specific data about the educational role of Ohio's school libraries. Since it is about state constituents, this evidence is relevant to local, state, and national decision makers.

Data often has the reputation of being the stuff of daydreams. When favorable data is quoted, a frequent response is, "You can make data say anything you want." It is not enough to have a snapshot of school libraries in the state. L4SL helped OELMA implement a practice that empowers teacher-librarians across the state with tangible data specific to their buildings and districts. It is one thing to say, "The Ohio Study shows..." and another to add, "These statistics are reflected by the findings with my work with Mrs. X's class." Evidence Based Practice (EBP), also known as Data-Driven Decision Making, is about improving practice through research and data. School library practitioners across Ohio gather and analyze information in order to improve their school library programs. EBP's benefits are multi-fold. Strengthening school library programs is the obvious benefit of EBP and the collected data is an invaluable resource when advocating for school libraries. EBP-trained teacher-librarians have evidence of student learning in their school libraries. OELMA trained EBP instructors and created and offers EBP training modules to facilitate the use of EBP in as many libraries as possible.

L4SL positioned OELMA to advocate for the school children of Ohio by increasing their visibility in the state's educational community and by envisioning and guiding The Ohio Study and OELMA's Evidence Based Practice project. These initial efforts laid the groundwork that led to the inclusion of teacher-librarians in HB1.

IN THE FACE OF A NIGHTMARE, KEEPING THE DREAM ALIVE

Beginning in 2002, springtime became a nightmare; each spring brought announcements of more and more Ohio students losing professional library services and

the learning opportunities they provide. In some cases, students lost all library services. OELMA worked to assist and support teacher-librarians as they dealt with cuts. Under these unfortunate circumstances, OELMA provided letters of support, information, and strategic advice. However, by the time school districts made the decision to reduce or eliminate a program, there was a limit to how much could be done. That was why OELMA focused the majority of advocacy efforts on prevention and continued working toward the dream of legislative intervention. With that in mind, the Advocacy Committee offered grassroots and general advocacy training, while stressing the importance of positive student-centered messages.

OELMA wants a state full of strong student advocates whenever grassroots messages are needed at the local, state, or national levels.

With the help of OELMA's legislative advisor and the American Library Association's Washington Office, the advocacy committee worked to continuously monitor state and national legislative projects, trends, and initiatives. They also watched educational programs, trends, and research at the national, regional, and state levels. OELMA searches for ways to accurately connect and align with stakeholder priorities. OELMA also looks for and utilizes opportunities to inform and educate decision-makers and stakeholders about how strong professionally staffed school libraries prepare students for 21st Century life, learning, and work. The best time for advocacy is before there is a crisis and like a baby, advocacy needs constant care and attention to grow and thrive.

BUILD AND BRING ON THE DREAM TEAM

When OELMA developed a strategic plan in 2008, the association officially made advocacy a top priority. The advocacy co-chairs were invited to participate in the process and the co-chairs stressed the need to strengthen both the advocacy committee and communication between the committee and OELMA's leadership. With the

support of Past President Kathy Halsey, and President, Marie Sabol, OELMA expanded the team to three members to infuse new life and continuity as longest serving members are rotated off every three years.

Under this new plan, there are now three volunteers to call upon when advocacy matters need urgent attention. Frequently, advocacy matters require immediate attention and action. OELMA's leaders and committee members are volunteers with work and personal lives. Sometimes family, work, health, or other issues have to take priority in volunteer's lives. With the team concept, there is always someone to keep efforts moving when needed. Advocacy projects are placed in Google docs or on wikis and can be worked on as time permits. Even when one person is dealing with a health issue or another person is out of town, the work gets done in a timely fashion.

Halsey and Sabol also support the idea of having the Advocacy Committee work closely with the board. That means involving the Advocacy Committee as soon as information is available rather than waiting until board meetings to share and ask for involvement. This further expanded the advocacy work force. Leadership and advocacy now work hand-in-hand. Halsey and Sabol see the value of building a true team-approach to advocacy. When the opportunity arose to advocate for the impossible school library dream for Ohio's students, OELMA had the preparation, information, and coordination in place. The dream team was ready.

DREAM QUEST: THE DREAM COMES TRUE

When Governor Ted Strickland began to research and build his "Evidence-Based Model" education reform plan, OELMA's president was invited to represent school libraries at the meetings. OELMA had a place at the table and was now prepared. The association had established a relationship with the governor's office and had been monitoring the educational environment. During meetings, the president was able to talk about the Ohio Study, the state standards, AASL's Standards, and OELMA's Evidence-Based Practice project.

The governor used education to position Ohio to compete in the evolving 21st Century economy. One of OELMA's value statements is to, "Serve the needs of 21st Century learners and workers in a global society." OELMA's leaders can articulate and provide evidence of how school libraries prepare students with 21st Century skills.

The same types of information that served OELMA's president during the meetings were explained and made available to teacher-librarians who represented OELMA and school libraries at the governor's regional meetings. When Governor Strickland developed his educational reform plan, he was armed with information about how Ohio's school libraries play a unique, essential role in preparing students for future success.

As soon as Strickland's completed education reform plan was turned over to Ohio's House of Representatives, OELMA was ready. The governor's version did not specify "licensed" librarian and media specialist; the wording was too vague and needed to be made specific. OELMA's board members worked with the advocacy team to develop testimony for the House Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education. The team focused on the addition of language specifying "licensed" librarian and media specialist.

After OELMA's past president testified, the team developed talking points for the school library community in support of HB1 and the new language. The team used a wiki to write the talking points. Grass-roots advocacy tips were added to the talking points page and then a call to action was sent out on Ohio's library listserv, <http://oelmataalkpts.wikispaces.com>. HB1 passed and OELMA's language was added.

When HB1 went to the Senate, the testimony was revised, the talking points were adjusted and the necessary calls to action were sent out. Initially, Ohio's senate did not adopt HB1, but HB1 went into Conference Committee with Ohio's budget. Again, OELMA sent out a call to action to teacher-librarians across the state and information was prepared for the State Library Board. Ohio's State Library Board passed a resolu-

tion in favor of Library Media Specialists/Teacher-Librarians (<http://www.library.ohio.gov/StateLibrarian/aboutus/board/resolutions/2009/schoollibrarians>.) When the Conference Committee was adjourned, HB1 passed with the wording intact: "The licensed librarian and media specialist factor."

"IMPOSSIBLE THINGS ARE HAPPENING EVERY DAY"

The fairy godmother in Rodgers and Hammerstein's story of Cinderella sings, "Impossible things are happening every day." OELMA's impossible dream of strong library services for our students aligned with Governor Strickland's dreams of educational reform. Years of work, persistence, and preparation came together with opportunity; OELMA efforts have helped to make the dream come true for Ohio's students. OELMA's impossible dream came true with the passage of HB1.

While Cinderella's story ends with the line, "And they lived happily ever after," OELMA is already starting the next chapter. Saying "thank you" to the governor, members of the legislature, the State Library, and other supporters is OELMA's first priority. Information about "what this is going to look like in my school" is another main concern. The association will continue to build relationships with stakeholders like ODE and the legislature. Plans are being made for legislative visits to Ohio's school libraries. The "dream team" is just getting started.

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