

California Dreamin'

Interview with an American Teacher-Librarian

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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Chris Arnstead
Teacher-Librarian
Regina Public Schools
Editor SSLA The Medium

Sheila Bennett-Newton
Teacher Librarian
Sir Francis Drake High School
San Anselmo, California



SASKATCHEWAN SCHOOL LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

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In March, while on a site visitation to Sir Francis Drake High School in San Anselmo, California, I had the pleasure of meeting teacher librarian Sheila Bennett-Newton. She welcomed me with a guided tour of the library and we enjoyed chatting about our respective jobs. It was fun to discuss common problems, collection development, and technology integration. We compared research assignments, budgets, and advocacy issues. And of course the topic of favourite books came up too! Sheila graciously agreed to an interview via email so that readers of The Medium could learn about a school library and a teacher librarian’s perspective from our southern neighbour.

What qualifications are teacher librarians in your district required to have?

In California, the title “Teacher Librarian” (recently changed from “Library Media Teacher”) refers to a person with both a classroom teaching credential and a library teaching credential. This is what my district requires. There are only three of us, (one for each of our comprehensive high schools) and we each have an MLS/MLIS as well, although it is not required.

Do you have paid support staff or use volunteers in your library?

The three comprehensive high schools in this district each have a full time TL and a full-time classified assistant, called a Library Specialist. I do not use parent volunteers because I have a very efficient assistant, and also because I have students workers. Since the students need the units I prefer to give them the work.

Do you have district meetings and support from a consultant or supervisor having both library and teacher qualifications?

We do not have a consultant or supervisor, but the three Teacher Librarians in the district do meet and look forward to this time to discuss library issues. We have only four regularly scheduled meetings throughout the school year (three hours each) but we often extend these into lunch or dinner, and sometimes just get together on our own time. We always have so much to discuss and share, and we also email and phone on a regular basis.

Are school libraries adequately funded in your district?

We are incredibly fortunate in this district. When I started here fifteen years ago, my budget was about \$16,000. Several years later, the state started giving school districts money to improve their libraries. Some districts were very creative with how this money was actually used but my district gave it all to the librarians. When this state funding ended our Board of Trustees was concerned and gave us the equivalent each year to make up for it. This year my budget was \$30,815. Because of the budget crisis in California, I anticipate that it will be reduced for next school year.

Do you have a professional association or a networking group of teacher librarians you meet with regularly?

We have an organized group of school librarians from around the county who usually meet once a month. They are from both public and private schools, and serve kindergarten through high school. The California School Library

Association (CSLA) is our state group, of which most of us are members. One of the librarians in my district is president of the Northern Section of this association, so I get up-to-date information about issues and activities. CSLA sponsors a statewide conference each year, which has valuable speakers, workshops, and opportunities to see new products. Every other year it is held in northern California and my district pays for me to attend.

Are you involved in any organized advocacy to promote libraries or the teacher librarian's role?

Just informally through the Marin County School Librarians' group mentioned earlier, but that is not the focus of the group. A recent front-page article in the local county newspaper about Teacher Librarians came out of discussions we had had at some of these meetings, but I was not directly involved with the advocacy.

What is your approach to collection development given the variety of topics assigned to students for research?

I'm fortunate to have been here for fifteen years and to have a sense of what will continue to be taught again and again. I know the teachers who use the library, and know what types of topics they will be assigning, even if the details of those assignments may change. Because the social studies teachers use the library, I buy heavily in the areas they study. Most of my science teachers do not use the library, and therefore I buy much less in that area. In some areas, such as poetry, I ask the English teachers for purchase suggestions, as my knowledge of modern poetry is weak. I try to have a somewhat well rounded collection, although I do tie the majority of purchases to curriculum support. I also spend some funds on "just-for-fun" types of books, such as Guinness World Records.

What do you consider for fiction and periodical purchases?

All freshman and take Social Issues and World Cultures, and several of the teachers require students to read a book relating to these topics. The books can be either fiction or nonfiction, but I do buy some of my fiction with these assignments in mind. Other teachers also have themes they tend to repeat, such as "coming of age", so I look for fiction that fits their criteria too. I get appropriate adult fiction ideas from the New York Times Best Seller List, and keep up with the various young adult award winners from the American Library Association. I read two professional review journals, Booklist and School Library Journal, to keep up with new titles. I also take recommendations and requests from students and staff.

Print magazines are rarely used for research; the online periodical database covers that need. The magazines are not circulated, but are read by students who are relaxing in the library. For this reason, I buy mostly popular titles such as People, Seventeen, Sports Illustrated, etc. Each year I make a few changes based on how much use a title gets (my assistant knows which ones are moved around and left on tables) and on suggestions, I solicit from students. Teachers occasionally ask me to subscribe to a title they want to use in class.

What electronic subscriptions do you purchase?

EBSCOhost, Gale Student Resource Center (silver level), Gale Opposing Viewpoints, Rosen Teen Health & Wellness, World Book Web, CultureGrams, Sirs Researcher, and Curriculum Video on Demand. I am considering dropping SIRS, and possibly replacing Opposing Viewpoints with an EBSCO product called Points of View Reference Center. EBSCO and World Book Web are a consortium purchase through our county office of education. The others are individual subscriptions, but with diminishing budgets, the three librarians in my district are planning to request a discounted district purchase price from vendors on several of the databases we have in common.

What technology is available for student use in your library?

The library has 29-networked computers for student use and one printer. I am currently looking into adding a color printer, a scanner, and flip-cameras that I will check out to students and staff. I also buy the core books read in English and Social Studies in audio format. Most are on CD, but as more titles become available in Playaway format, I buy those, as the students prefer them.

Could you give us a couple of examples of the kind of assignments for which teachers and students at your school use the library?

Three sections of an 11th grade U.S. History class were in last week studying the 1950s. The teacher had borrowed the library's copies of Life Magazine from the 50s and the students had looked at those in the classroom. They continued this in the library, plus I showed them our yearbooks and school newspapers from the 50s. They also looked at books I had set aside, all to get a feel for what the decade was like. Today they will come back to research people associated with the decade. I have set aside books on these people, and will be showing students the Current Biography books in the reference section, and how to use the index to this set. Their culminating activity will be a 1950s "dinner party" in which they will be encouraged to dress up as their character, eat 1950s-style food they have brought, and mingle and discuss issues of the time. They must be prepared to answer certain questions that their character would be knowledgeable about. I will be invited to the classroom for this party.

This same group of students recently wrote a 3-4 page World War II research paper. Students chose from among a variety of topics, and I pre-selected books for them to use. This teacher is a wonderful library user and promoter. For this assignment (and a few others in the past) the students were required to get my signature proving that I had helped them with some aspect of the research process, whether locating information in a book or online, or helping with the Works Cited page. If they used a website (as opposed to my databases), they needed to show it to me so that I could work with them on evaluating online sources. This real hands-on involvement with an assignment is wonderful, and I love that it gets the students who might not ordinarily ask for my help doing just that, but it is not the norm. A few teachers use the library solely as a computer lab, but most like bringing their classes in because the students have access to both computers and books, and also to my services.

Could you give us a couple of examples of popular books that students at each grade level are reading at your school?

I cannot really break it down by grade level, as we have freshman who read only adult books, seniors who read only YA books, and everything in between. It is easier to break it down along gender lines. Some of the prolific authors that are popular with the girls are Sarah Dessen, Jodi Picoult, Ellen Hopkins, and Louise Rennison. Boys tend to like Stephen King and Walter Dean Myers, and nonfiction books about World War II. Some popular single titles are The Hunger Games, The Secret Life of Bees, Winter Girls, Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, The Lovely Bones, Memoirs of a Geisha, Ender's Game, Dune, White Oleander, and The Glass Castle.

Are teachers willing to plan, collaborate, and team-teach with teacher librarians?

This has not been the culture in the district, although there is more acceptance than when I began. A few teachers will ask my advice when designing a completely new unit or assignment, and I've collaborated on several library research lessons with teachers, but this is not the norm. Often I don't even know about an assignment until a flock of students come in asking for help finding information. At the beginning of each semester, I send out an email reminding teachers that the more I know ahead of time about their plans the more help I can give the students, but it is the same teachers who respond each time. Most teachers appreciate my knowledge of the book collection and are glad to have me assist students in finding print sources, or to pre-select books for a reserve section. Most also like when I

demonstrate use of the databases relevant to an assignment, but with others I feel I am lucky to get a few minutes to talk to the class.

Are teacher librarians involved in any initiatives to increase literacy or teach reading strategies in your school?

Not in any real organized way, but over the years I have been on several committees that dealt with this issue. At one point I worked with a group of teachers planning a reading and writing lab staffed by a trained reading specialist, but it went nowhere at the district level. The subject still crops up from time to time as a need, but it's no closer to happening, especially with the budget cuts the district is experiencing.

What challenges are you currently facing in your role of teacher librarian?

Simply keeping my job is a huge challenge right now. California has the lowest number of school librarians per pupil in the nation. With the state budget crisis, even districts that have previously hired qualified teacher librarians are deciding that they can manage with paraprofessionals instead. Administrators and board of trustee members try to keep cuts "away from the classroom", not acknowledging that the library is an important extension of the classroom. I belong to a California School Librarian list-serve and it has been disheartening to read the posts these past months telling of whole districts possibly doing away with librarians and even closing libraries.

What successes do you feel proud about in your role as teacher librarian?

I've worked to create a safe, welcoming, and intellectually stimulating space where students can feel comfortable asking for help, and can view me and the variety of materials available in the library as useful resources throughout their time at Drake. Because our student body is relatively small and there are two of us here all day we can provide the personal touches that mean so much to many students. We know all of our regulars by name, and try to learn a bit about their extra-curricular interests and activities. During my freshman orientations at the beginning of each school year I stress that although I always look busy, I am NEVER too busy for them to ask me for help. I also stress that I am interested in what they are reading and encourage them to make suggestions for new purchases. I really enjoy the opportunity to bring this personalization to my students and am proud of the atmosphere that leads so many students to visit the library on a daily basis.



