

Consider the Coalition (Part I)

President's Message by Gerri Fegan

I am a very fortunate individual to be able to represent the finest school librarians in Massachusetts. In all my travels across America and abroad, representing school librarians has never been as fulfilling as when I know that my colleagues here in the Commonwealth are working to build library programs that are recognized as a gold standard everywhere else. I believe this is because we all share the leadership responsibilities: everyone who is a member of MSLA has been actively contributing to his or her own legacy and adding to the honor of the profession. From the top down, we have proudly worn the badge of school librarian in good times and bad. This past year, we have shared the frustrations of the shrinking economy and have watched our numbers diminish, but I do not believe we have seen anyone give up. There is indeed strength in numbers.

At our first board meeting of the new leadership, I looked around that table at the departing members who have given so much. Thanks to their combined efforts for so many years, we have been able to financially plan conferences and events effectively, to record all the moments of decision-making and policy changes, and to plan innovative, professional development in the regions. I also viewed the new members who are so vibrant and energetic; we'll have many exciting new ideas to pursue in the year ahead.



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*All of these meetings
have served as the
prelude to a
statewide coalition
to
protect and preserve
school libraries.*

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this as a "wheel of influence" with children at the hub, the center that drives our instruction. Organizations that are the stakeholders of our children's future will serve as the rim that keeps this advocacy wheel in motion. The longer this wheel keeps meeting the road, the more school libraries are recognized as the thrust behind student success.

And finally, I was caught by this moment when I saw the past presidents of MSLA, sitting side by side with such pride at how well we have been able to collaborate with each other and achieve so much. One would think that, after all these years of service, they would want to just get on with family and teaching, but each one of them has gone on to national notice and commendation, and all of them are planning to continue to represent MSLA with vigor and determination. The moment was not lost on me.

This past year, you have read about the efforts of the MSLA board to collaborate with other Massachusetts organizations to help us sustain our school library programs: Massachusetts PTA, MassCUE, MTA, MLA, and even the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. Sandy Kelly and I met with the Commissioner, Mitchell Chester, and the Interim Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Julia Phelps to plan new strategies for statistical data collection and curriculum. **We are hoping to develop a stakeholder plan that focuses on children's needs and how school libraries and other organizations can address them. I envision**

Panel Discussion at ALA Chicago 2009

The plan originates with ALA Past President Jim Rettig's articles about the ecosystem of libraries and I had the honor of serving on his panel at ALA in Chicago this summer:
<http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/advocacy/libecosystem/index.cfm>

The emphasis is not only about public relations, but on the collective esteem, how we can improve our profession *with other stakeholders* who serve our children. We have all heard stories this year from those members who have felt disempowered, who have felt a lack of self-confidence, been "helpless" because they feared of losing their jobs. According to Wangari Maathai (founder of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya where I have helped to build a school library), "to the disempowered, it seems much easier or even more acceptable to leave one's life in the hands of third parties (governments, aid agencies, and even God) than to try to alleviate one's circumstances through one's own effort." It's quite true that the larger powers have had an impact on our careers, dreams and goals, our efforts can only be enhanced by allying ourselves with those whose influential circles are closer to our students. Maathai is speaking to effective advocacy through targeted collaboration with the third parties who can directly affect the cause. She's talking empowerment through local coalitions.

Rettig has asked all of us to brainstorm ways to form alliances with all the stakeholders who have an impact on the lifelong learning that occurs in all libraries. Starting local coalitions means planning, organizing, documenting and publicizing your success with your allies, and it begins at the school level. Ask yourself if you have discussed goals with the stakeholders at your school: the students, parents, teachers, community members and administrators? If you have, have you formalized this by having meetings, communicating with newsletters, media articles, photos and promotions? Have you accomplished goals and achieved success in any way? I would like to offer perspectives on school library coalitions in a series of Forum articles this year that can guide school librarians along the stakeholder path. If you decide to try any of these ideas, please comment and offer suggestions to all members to strengthen our advocacy efforts.

Discover the Identities of Your Stakeholders

Start right away. Don't wait. Make a list of all the stakeholders at your school who can attend meetings and carry out simple advocacy efforts. Get contact information of your teacher leader(s), the head of your student council or advisory, a representative of the parent association, anyone who will serve as a representative from your local Rotary or civic and business group, a member of the school committee, a school administrator, a local public librarian, and (highly recommended) an administrator who specializes in curriculum.

Limit Your Limitations

Make a list of what you are willing to do for your program. Are you able to commit prep time for meetings? Before and after school time? Food contributions? Newsletters? Making contacts? No one can put an estimate on the value of your commitment except you. Only you can determine how much you want to give to make your program important to your stakeholders, especially your students. However, you are the driving force behind your program's success; your administrators will only look with favor on your accomplishments.

Plan a Meeting or Event to Kick Off the Coalition

Make this a simple breakfast or lunch. Communication for this event should be in person, in writing, or by telephone. The most successful strategy for getting positive feedback to invitations is face-to-face or at least voice-to-voice contact. You can always follow this with confirmations by email, but initial contact has the greatest success rate if you have *actual contact* with your stakeholder. More plans have been thwarted by dead emails and lack of follow-up. Your meeting should be no more than 45-minutes in length and should first and foremost be used to set up a set of regularly scheduled meetings – perhaps, monthly or quarterly.

Agendas, Goals and Actions

Each meeting should have formal documentation even if the atmosphere is casual. Plan a standard agenda that allows everyone to discuss old and new business, concerns, and plans. Because these stakeholders are attending at your request for the sake of children, each meeting should have a program-centered goal or event at the heart of the discussion. All stakeholders can then collaborate to accomplish whatever is set forth. Be prepared with ideas that can make your program shine throughout your community and serve as annual events. (I'm not necessarily talking about fundraisers, but advocacy events for your program.)

Give Your Coalition an Identity

One of the best ways to collaborate with your stakeholders is to give them the recognition they deserve for their school library advocacy. Reward them with business cards, tee-shirts and media coverage. If your community knows about your coalition, more attention will be drawn to the school library program in ways that could assist with funding and support.

Coalitions are more than just collaborative efforts and members are considered to be very valuable in their work. Coalitions succeed because they not only work together, they plan together. Local school library coalitions will form the spokes of that "wheel" I mentioned, and the MSLA board will bring your efforts to the statewide stakeholders. I will discuss the second phase of coalition-building in the next issue of the Forum and would love to include your comments and ideas.

The plan to be positive is the greatest strength we have.

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