

Re-Designing a School Library Media Center for the 21st Century

How does a school library media center become a library for the twenty-first century? According to Myerberg, “the twenty-first century library will be a flexible work and social setting for multiple activities: simultaneously a classroom, computer lab, reading room, study hall, conference center, theater, lecture hall, teacher’s lounge, community center, and a place for parents to meet” (12). The School Library Media Center at Delsea Regional High School was an attractively designed room that had been converted in 1996 from a gymnasium into a media center. It was a much larger facility than the previous library; it had more room for books, computers, and students. However, the room was not meeting the current needs of the students, staff, and community. The school library media specialists knew that a re-design of the library space was needed. However, just talking about the need for the library re-design was not very effective. They needed to stop, reconsider their needs, and come up with a plan for the re-design. This new thinking launched the plan that led to the re-design of their school library media center. The new design provides space for class instruction and large group presentations. It also allows greater visibility of the room while retaining its attractive, inviting atmosphere.

Off on the Right Foot

The first step in the project was to decide on the objectives for the re-design. The first objective was to consider the traffic patterns and



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how specifically the room was used. One problem was that the seating area for students was split into three sections, and this was not conducive to instruction. The layout meant that some students always had their backs to the teacher. The library media specialists wanted all of the students facing in the same direction without having to move their chairs. In addition, when students worked in groups there was no easy way for the teacher to move from group to group to check their progress on projects. The library media center was often host to guest speakers, and the tables and chairs always had to be moved so that more than one class could participate in the event. Again, having the students all facing the same direction to hear the guest speakers was important. Other large group meetings that were held in the media center included faculty meetings where the staff was spread throughout the room without any feeling of cohesiveness during the meeting. Additionally, the media center was used for community meetings in the evenings and on weekends. Local sports organizations, the local business alliance, parents’ groups, and the athletic director often held meetings in the media center during after-school hours. The library media specialists’ objective was to improve the setting for instruction and large group presentations. This gave them the concrete reasons for why it was necessary to rearrange the tables and move the bookshelves.

The second objective for the re-design project was to provide greater visibility in the room. With the split seating area and the reference shelves blocking the view, it was difficult to view the entire room. This was a problem because of study hall students and classes using the room at the same time; it was essential to be able to track the movements of all the students. The library media specialists decided to use visibility as a safety issue for their second objective.

An In-House Architect

Once the objectives were clarified, it was time for a new layout design. The library media specialists enlisted the help of the CAD teacher who assigned a student to provide a scale drawing of the proposed changes. The library media specialists explained their needs to the student and exactly where they thought the furniture and bookshelves should be moved. The student measured the shelving, the tables, and the space between the shelving and tables to ensure that what was proposed would fit in the new set-up. The student used a CAD program to provide two versions of the proposed changes in a scaled drawing. The professionally prepared design provided a detailed sketch of the entire room with all the tables, chairs, shelving, computer area, and circulation area clearly labeled.

Armed with specific objectives, the rationale for their suggested changes, and a detailed drawing of the new design, the library media specialists were prepared to meet with their principal and supervisor to discuss the proposed changes. During the meeting with the principal and the supervisor, the instructional advantages to the changes were stressed as well as how having an open space for large group meetings would benefit the school community. The principal immediately saw the advantages. He wanted to create staff togetherness during faculty meetings and he also liked the fact that he would easily be able to see his staff during a faculty meeting with the proposed arrangement. The principal gave the go-ahead to approach the superintendent with the plan.

The Big Pitch

With the principal’s support, a meeting was arranged with the superintendent. However, the library media specialists knew they needed to include another key player in the meeting: the maintenance supervisor. This was

very important because the maintenance department would be needed to help move the shelving, and the library media specialists wanted to ensure their support. They had the scale drawings to show the superintendent, the proposed changes, and a time frame for how the work could be accomplished during the school year without interrupting library services. The maintenance supervisor was supportive of the idea and thought the shelving and furniture could be moved before the end of the school year. The meeting was a success and after the superintendent reviewed the plan with the school board, the library media specialists were given the “green light” to begin reconfiguring the media center.

Students volunteered to help move the books, clean the shelves, and scan the books for inventory. (The library media specialists decided to begin inventory at this time. Since the books were already going to be moved once, the logical step was to begin inventory to save having to move the books a second time for inventory.) Students were very happy to be included in part of the project and often gave up study hall periods to help.

The process involved moving books from one section and placing them on book carts or on the tops of other bookshelves in the correct order so that they could easily be moved to their new location. Next, the maintenance staff was called to move the shelving to the appropriate area. Then, the books were moved back onto the relocated shelves. The process took approximately four weeks to complete. In addition, during this time the bookshelves were cleaned, and books were repaired, weeded, and inventoried. The reconfiguration involved moving the Reference, Fiction, and 000 - 398 sections. The project was all done without closing the media center or inconveniencing the maintenance staff. Since the maintenance staff only needed fifteen or twenty minutes at a time to move each section, it was easy for them to fit the work into their schedules. During this project, the library media specialists had to divide their time between



After



Before

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maintaining library media services and supervising student helpers and the maintenance staff with the re-design process. It was extra work during this time, but the results were well worth the effort.

The Payoff

The new library media center is now a place where large group meetings can occur, classes can receive library skills instruction, teachers can monitor their students more easily, and all students can be seen (there are no more “blind spots”). The new set-up of the room allows the classroom teachers to easily find their students when other students are using the room. Also, the library media specialists can see all of the students from any point in the room. In fact, students have commented on how well they can see one another, and the new configuration has eliminated the small areas where groups of students would congregate to chat. There is still a small group seating area as well as a leisure reading area. The students and staff are happy with the results. The library media specialists have received many positive comments including one from the athletic director. He was very pleased to see the new layout of the media center because it meant that when he needed to use the media center for meetings, he would no longer need to move the furniture. In addition, even though the move was completed late in the school year (early May), there were still opportunities to use the

room for large group programs. Two math classes utilized the new seating area to host guest speakers from a local bank, and the guidance department was able to make presentations to several classes regarding guidance services. Also, groups used the room to host special luncheons to honor returning alumni, members of an advisory committee, and a ninth grade English class held a medieval feast.

The re-design of the library media center was a three-year-project from the beginning of the idea that the library media center was not designed for effective use to the very last book being moved and placed in its new shelving location. However, during this process the library media specialists learned to plan objectives, provide a scale drawing, and to involve key players as stakeholders in the re-design project. They also learned to be patient and flexible. What was once a viable learning center has increased its usage and flexibility to benefit the school and the community. “Although, the media center at Delsea Regional High school only consumes five percent of the school’s real estate, it truly does serve 100% of the school’s teachers and students (Myerberg, 12).” ■

Myerberg, Harry. “School libraries: a design recipe for the future.” *Knowledge Quest*. September/October 2002, Vol. 31, No. 1:11-13.

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