

Multimedia and Internet @Schools September/October 2006

The Media Center
Visibility in the Community

by

Mary Alice Anderson
Lead Media Specialist
Winona Area Public Schools
Winona, Minnesota

Media specialists have numerous and varied opportunities to work with staff and students in our schools and districts. We can also have opportunities to interact with community members and groups if we proactively seek them out and take advantage of the community connections presented to us. Community involvement can increase media program visibility and help develop support that can be very beneficial to our programs. Small districts may have a built in community and schools are often the focal point of community activity. But, even larger districts have communities within the district. No matter how large or how small, there are possibilities; the community may be an entire city, it may be a neighborhood, but involvement can bring positive results.

Community support and recognition of a need were contributing factors in the district's commitment to build a new media center for the high school and to provide funding for extensive collection improvement in our district. Parents and community members eagerly participated in planning the new media center and went on site visits to other schools. A core group of dedicated parents and one school board member formed a "Friends of the Senior High Media Center" group that helped weed the old collection. They sponsored an "Adopt a Book" program, which raised money for new resources and increased visibility through an ongoing display, a school board presentation, articles in local news media, and sharing information about district media programs on the district produced monthly television program. The "Friends" group may not have even been organized without previous and conscious efforts to increase media program visibility.

Do the parents of your students know about the technology resources available to students in the school media centers? Are they aware of the subscription databases they can access at home via the web? Do your students have remote access to their school server space? Do the parents know about it? Proactive, visible media specialists seek out avenues for involving families in student learning. A junior high media specialist worked with her principal to build a media center resources session into the back to school orientation schedule. Hundreds of parents attended the half-hour sessions and left saying it was the most valuable part of the evening. Many media specialists invite parents to attend awareness building sessions during parent-teacher conferences or provide programs at PTA meetings. Other classes can be offered through adult education programs. School and district newsletters and press releases in the local news media are other tools to help you build awareness and increase visibility.

One energetic and forward thinking school media specialist and web site manager wrote that she has media center news in the school's newsletter twice a month. Because of her regular contributions the media center is more widely known and considered in many more areas of the school. She includes information on reading incentives, general news, and volunteer recognition – always keeping the news positive. The media program web site is an ideal tool for publishing news and increasing visibility throughout the community and beyond. The media center at one school in our district recently received a generous donation from an alumna who learned of program events and needs on the media center's web site.

Visibility beyond the school, the immediate school community and the professional library/media community is part of leadership. The requirements for National Board Certification for Library Media include community connections as part of the job. (National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, Standard X, Leadership, Advocacy and Community Partnerships) Pages 43-44. You don't always have to do all the work yourself.

Possibly your school district has a communications or public relations director. Stay in touch with this person and become a regular contributor to the publications news releases. Quite likely that person needs your contributions just as much as the media program will benefit from them. Use your technology skills to submit high quality digital photos and succinctly written news stories. Even consider writing a column or feature for the local paper; possibly they have a school section or guest columnists.

Many cities have government cable channels or local news stations that feature educational events. Our district produces a monthly news show; district media/technology programs were featured twice in the past year. A New York media specialist described how the local television station did a live broadcast of a successful battle of the books as well as a feature broadcast later in the day. Village dignitaries and school administrators served as officials for the final battle—an excellent example of visibility.

Get your name on a speaker's bureau; speak at community, education and service groups. Organizations such as Delta Kappa Gamma or Phi Delta Kappa with an interest in education may be interested in what's going on with technology, literacy, standards or a variety of educational topics. Offer to be a guest speaker at college and university classes' and not just in the library science department. Professors of classes for future teachers and administrators may welcome your expertise.

Developing connections goes beyond "telling" others what we can offer and what we can do; it means and working with and supporting them. It's a mutually beneficial relationship. One way is to willingly support continuing education classes or community organizations that may use the media center and its equipment or classrooms. Throughout the years our middle school media school media center support diverse groups such as the county Master Gardeners, a beauty Pageant, and countless adult education classes who use the computer labs or media center classroom. It can be a lot of and it may mean wear and tear on media center equipment, but it's positive PR. Does the school district charge a facilities or equipment rental fee? Perhaps you can negotiate for part of it to be returned to the media center. These folks are local taxpayers who see what the media center has to offer and what it needs; they may become your best allies in the future.

Sara Kelly Johns, AASL President-Elect believes a school media center should be a community center. She explained that her school's media center is often "set up to host meetings, teas, breakfasts, receptions, Read Alouds, baby and wedding showers, retirement parties, whatever. It is the preferred location in the school. We have one set of cupboards filled with tablecloths, sugar and creamer sets, cake servers, bowls, platters and anything needed for a party. It's all part of showcasing the library and its program. I think there must be a bit of the risk-taker in good advocates. If you open your library and someone spills something, it might be worth it if that person is so excited by what he or she sees that the next time your program needs support, you have an advocate who will be heard more readily than your own voice. "

Active participation in political bodies is another avenue for increasing visibility. A St. Paul area media director has served several terms on the city council in her community; many media specialists are members of cable television or public library boards. A Georgia media specialist is even on the school board in her home county. Another media director hosted a fund raiser for a gubernatorial candidate who is supportive of school media

centers and libraries. Attend public forums when state and national politicians are visiting the area as well as state legislative lobby days and local visits. As Johns noted, “You know you're having an impact when the pols start talking about libraries to you when they shake your hand or see you in the audience. It makes a statement to the other people who are there, too.”

Media specialists have a strong technology skill set and can offer assistance to community groups, cultural and non-profit organizations that may need help in areas such as maintaining a membership database or maintaining web site. A Wisconsin media specialist created a web site for her county historical society. Media specialists who are web masters can provide a service to groups to linking to community groups that partner with the schools. A Connecticut media specialist established a partnership with an area humane society. Many community organizations often work with teachers and their students; how often do they work with media specialists? It isn't always about giving of your unique talents and time; attending community events or belonging to community organization increases visibility and helps make connections for you and your program.

Increasing our visibility takes time, but it benefits learners, increases program visibility and enhances the media program. The people you meet and work with are the voters and taxpayers. Visibility is part of the job; it's advocacy and leadership in action.

Mary Alice Anderson is a contributor to professional journals and available as a conference and workshop presenter. She is the Lead Media Specialist for Winona Area Public Schools in Minnesota and is an online adjunct instructor with the Online Professional Development for Educators Program in the School of Education at University of Wisconsin—Stout. She recently received Top Online Educator – 2006 recognition from SurfAcquarium. Her personal Web site can be found at <http://www.homepage.mac.com/Maryalicea/Sites/Anderson/Anderson.html>. Communications to the author may be sent to maryalicea@mac.com.