

# STRATEGIC LONG-RANGE PLANNING



## **WHY USE STRATEGIC LONG-RANGE PLANNING?**

Any solid, well run school library media center will have a strategic long-range planning document. According to Michael Eisenberg, a strategic plan is an analysis of the library and a plan or vision for guiding and developing the library to maximize student growth and learning. He suggests using documentation beyond circulation statistics to illustrate how the library media center provides for students and staff. This is feasible with a strategic long-range plan.

The rationale for a strategic long-range plan is twofold. First, AASL recommends developing a strategic plan to continually improve the library program (AASL 30). As school leaders, librarians must take initiative and have a documented, analytical vision, or a strategic plan of where the media center is headed in order to get there. This is usually based on the mission, goals, and objectives of the library.

Secondly, a strategic long-range plan will help maintain current levels of library service, obtain funding for additional resources and

secure support from library stakeholders. The demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century technology and information influx require that school librarians assist, lead, and collaborate with teachers, as well as create an effective, productive learning community for students. A strategic plan guides multiple disciplinary connections, creating more meaningful learning within the school. As a professional and an educator, a school librarian should consistently analyze the library from a critical perspective in order to ascertain that the library program is staying current to foster and maximize student learning. Having a concrete, written plan reinforces goals and objectives.

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## **ASSESSMENT OF THE LIBRARY PROGRAM**

School librarians should continually evaluate and assess school library programs. Assessing the program helps ensure that the media center is a positive learning community that continually grows to meet the needs of the community (AASL 15). This will also support the librarian's efforts to constantly evolve professionally, through collaboration, curriculum mapping, and offering professional development to colleagues.

Ideally a school librarian should utilize evidence-based practices to make informed decisions. A data-informed approach examines input measures in relation to output measures, providing a better understanding of the cost effectiveness of current programs in direct relation to instruction, learning, and achievement. A strategic plan can support curbing some expenses and justify the addition of programs, special requests, resources, and expenditures. This data illustrates strengths and weaknesses and assists in monitoring the progress of the strategic plan to ensure that the mission, goals, and objectives are being met.

By Tracey Wong



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## Why spend all this time and energy writing a plan that only a few people will see? A strategic long-range plan has several other uses.

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Expanding on that concept, there are various means to gather data and determine whether progress is being made toward specific goals and objectives. It is important to have a thorough understanding of how library stakeholders perceive the media center and how they feel they benefit from its programs and services.

### **FORMAT FOR STRATEGIC LONG-RANGE PLANNING**

Strategic plans include several components. Before anything else, a library committee must be established to represent stakeholders and their interests. This committee usually consists of people such as an administrator, teaching staff, library staff, PTA members and/or parents from the community, and possibly the superintendent, students, and an IT person. The library committee should begin the process with a planning template, establish a timeframe of tasks to be completed in priority order, and assign tasks to committee members.

### **COMMUNITY PROFILE**

An environmental scan shows the demographics and composition of the school community; this should include ethnic, racial, community educational, and income levels. The profile provides a descriptive overview of the background of the student population. Be sure to include any special needs, as library media centers frequently provide services that utilize assistive technology.

### **MISSION STATEMENT OF THE SCHOOL AND THE LIBRARY PROGRAM**

The library committee can identify and determine vital points that should be

incorporated into the mission statement (MA 20). The mission assists in focusing the curriculum development. The mission statement is a guiding principle that should ultimately lead curriculum and instruction.

### **CURRENT STATUS OF THE LMC**

All programs, resources, services, and instruction performed by the media specialist should be detailed. The objective is to provide an image of how the media center is established and the functions it performs (MA 25). Strengths and weaknesses of the media center can be identified and evaluated at this point.

### **NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

At this juncture, the library media center is assessed by both the committee members and the media specialist. The needs assessment can vary greatly as it takes into account multiple perspectives (MA 25). A rubric is developed based on aspects of the library program, such as curriculum, collaboration, technological access, information literacy skills, etc. The rubric is usually rated on a one to four scale. The result of this analysis is the needs assessment, or what changes need to be made to achieve the mission.

### **ACTION PLANS**

An action plan is a one-year plan that describes the immediate steps that will be taken to lead the LMC toward the five-year plan (MA 48). It includes specific timeframes and activities to produce desired results. Measurable outcomes ascertain if progress is being made.

### **FIVE-YEAR PLAN GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

A five-year plan defines goals and objectives that will drive the course of action for the library media center's programs, services, and resources. These can be established in two separate areas: program-oriented goals and organizational or management goals.

### **TIMELINE**

At the start of the school year, action plans from the previous school year must be updated. Library staff and the committee should review and revise the action plan in order to make needed changes. Activities, programs, and instruction should reflect how the strategic long-range plan will meet goals and objectives. This needs to be completed prior to the budget being released.

Shortly after, the media specialist should have a budget spreadsheet finalized listing all expenditures for collections, subscriptions, electronic resources, supplies, technology, professional development, author visits, and miscellaneous expenses. This timeline is crucial as requests for additional funds are often aligned to the strategic long-range plan.

At the end of each school year an annual report should be prepared by the school librarian. This document illustrates the progress made toward specific goals and objectives. All stakeholders should have access to or a copy of this document.

Maintain and update a checklist as each step is completed. Use of a checklist ensures that the long-range plan is on schedule and on time.

### **SAMPLE PROCEDURES**

Have the library committee look at other strategic plans. Rather than starting from scratch, use what pertains to your library media center and pinpoint and evaluate differences (Watkins). It is feasible to adapt

what has been successful for other school library programs. Further, have various committee members working on different tasks and projects in order to prioritize and cover more ground. Ideally, committee members' efforts should be overlapping but not duplicating each other.

A school library media specialist should create a strategic long-range plan that is simple and straight forward. It should very concisely describe goals, objectives, and a five-year plan. Alternating text with visuals will not overwhelm the reader or stakeholders. The beginning pages should efficiently list the vision and mission statement as well as background and survey results. The layout should be a quick and visually appealing read through use of color, graphs, visuals, and bulleted text. Pictures put faces to the constituents and make the plan come alive.

#### USE OF STRATEGIC PLANS

Why spend all this time and energy writing a plan that only a few people will see? A strategic long-range plan has several other uses.

First, having a strategic long-range plan in place allows a school library media specialist to be a strong advocate for the library. Data, documentation, and outcomes-based assessment provide an excellent springboard for grants (PA Guidelines 28). Local businesses, political representatives, foundations and other nonprofit

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organizations are more likely to partner with a library advocate who has plans and research to support funding requests. The school librarian is seen as an advocate and a professional, and as the embodiment of the characteristics the librarian is attempting to instill in others: an analytical, dedicated, and intelligent lifelong learner.

Using direct quotes from a media center's strategic plan to support budget requests will improve the likelihood of funding and approval. When budget requests align with the strategic plan, administrators can see the correlation between funding and student achievement more easily (Baule 9).

In addition, long-range plans can be used to generate positive public relations and further support of school library media specialists. Too often, administrators and teaching staff do not realize or value the expertise, skills, and wealth of knowledge librarians possess. School librarians must be dedicated and persistent in their public relations efforts (Hartzell 25). Being the force behind a strategic long-range plan creates more visibility and credibility for any school librarian. A strategic long-range plan demonstrates that the librarian is an educator, a visionary, and a team player.

#### SUMMARY

In conclusion, Carmen Del Valle, a fifteen-year school library media specialist in New York City schools, fully supports strategic long-range planning. She strongly believes it is an essential tool for all librarians and can provide guidance and direction for the library media center. Similarly, in the LM\_NET archives various school librarians support strategic long-range planning. They believe that "background work" must be done to understand the current status of a library and gear toward where the library, its programs, services, and resources are heading.

Long-range strategic planning is an essential tool that provides guidance and direction. A strategic plan prompts questioning of challenges facing library media centers so librarians can determine how opportunities

can be created out of those challenges (Beck 209). Strategic plans not only provide data but also inform library staff and stakeholders as to what additional resources, program, services, or instruction are required or needed. By assessing, analyzing, and evaluating a school library program, ultimately librarians can identify new strategies, trends, and technologies that will enable resources and services to be delivered more effectively.

Now more than ever, the value of a school librarian must be emphasized. Strategic plans ensure that libraries continue to be integral centers for learning, education, and ethical use and evaluation of information for the next generation and for years to come.

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