# Transforming Canadian School Libraries to Meet the Needs of 21st Century Learners:

# Alberta Education School Library Services Initiative - Research Review and Principal Survey Themes

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**Transforming Canadian School Libraries to Meet the Needs of 21st Century Learners: Alberta Education School Library Services Initiative - Research Review and Principal Survey Themes**

> The hallmark of a school library in the 21st century is not its collections, its systems, its technology, its staffing, its buildings, BUT its actions and evidences that show that it makes a real difference to student learning, that it contributes in tangible and significant ways to the development of … meaning making and constructing knowledge. (Todd 2001, p. 4)

In improving education, reform expert Richard DuFour states, "All policies, programs, and practices are considered through the lens of 'How does this impact student learning?' Those that encourage learning are embraced. Those that interfere with learning are discarded" (DuFour et al. 2004, p. 174). In its review of equitable student access to library services, Alberta Education's School Library Services Initiative examined research and conducted a survey with school principals. School library transformation to a learning commons perspective emerges as pivotal in the role school libraries can fulfill in 21st century educational reform.

Ideally, a school library learning commons provides seamless access to library services for all students, acting as a "learning central" or the "heart" of a school's reading and inquiry activities that are intentionally connected with curriculum. These school library learning commons are interactive, lively learning environments in which professional learning teams collaborate. As a result, students achieve learning outcomes as they interact with knowledge in its variant forms—fiction or nonfiction, print or digital—to access, evaluate, dialogue about and construct new knowledge, and reflect on what they have learned. For many students experiencing physical, emotional or cognitive learning challenges, the learning commons can personalize independent learning success. Alberta, however, not unlike many other provinces, states and countries, has experienced a decline in student access to quality school library services.

Extensive research supports the correlation of advanced student achievement and literacy development with quality school library services (Krashen 2004, Lance and Loertscher 2005). Many school libraries strive to meet the Canadian national standards developed in 2003 by the Canadian Association for School Libraries (CASL). Research conducted in 2002 within a large metropolitan public school system in Alberta (Sykes 2002) is consistent with today's literature in revealing essential themes for equity of student access to quality school libraries. One such theme from the research literature involves inquiry-based (constructivist) school library learning experiences— collaboratively planned and taught—that enable student access beyond "walls" by extending the classroom across the curriculum to other libraries and the world and allowing the world to come in to the classroom.

Impediments to student access to quality school libraries are identified in this study and are consistent with those found in current research.  These impediments include:

- gaps between resources and technology/technology support
- not understanding the effects of school libraries on student learning and achievement
- nonflexible scheduling of student library learning time
- need for active administrator support, i.e., principal, district

To overcome impediments, the 2002 study within a large metropolitan public school system, in conjunction with the University of Portland, recommended addressing issues around training and hiring accredited school library personnel, with the understanding that roles and responsibilities have evolved; e.g., unlearning old understandings or perceptions and broadening stakeholder in-servicing, based on current best practice in the field. Accountability measures are essential to ensure seamless student access to library services in support of learning outcomes with a need to understand and develop program-based budgets and partnerships for seamless student access to quality school library services.

Rapid developments in emerging technology continue to highly impact schools, learning and libraries.  "Research that once required days in the stacks or periodical rooms of libraries can now be done in minutes … that boon comes at a price" (Carr 2008, p. 1).  Students, relying heavily on search engines such as Google, are becoming adept at skimming and scanning the Internet for articles and information, but are lacking in-depth reading, critical thinking and analysis skills that result in deep and intensive learning and understanding.  In Alberta, student access to an Internet connection at home continues to grow; as of this writing, 89 percent of Alberta students have this access.

According to a 2008 report by the British Library and Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), "The information literacy of young people has not improved with the widening access to technology.  … Young people have a poorer understanding of their information needs and thus find it difficult to develop effective search strategies" (p. 12).  In addition, "the lack of strategic [United Kingdom] government support for information literacy programs" (p. 23) has impacted students entering higher education.

Although the United Kingdom is just starting to collect data in this area, "the USA has much research available showing a large minority of freshmen entering college and university with low levels of information literacy and high levels of library anxiety" (p. 23).  Intervention at the university level was proven to be too late; information skills need development in the formative years.  The report hypothesizes a future "information environment 2017" with the following "powerful trends" (p. 26):

- a worldwide unified Web culture
- the inexorable rise of the e-book
- the continued content explosion

- emerging forms of scholarship and publication, including prepublication release and online peer review
- virtual forms of publication in various formats
- the semantic Web, in which computers become capable of analyzing all the data on the Web, especially in areas like e-science.

The main message the authors of the report wish to impress upon information experts is that "they have no option but to understand and design systems around the actual behaviour of today's virtual scholar. … This should start with effecting that shift from a content-orientation to a user-facing perspective and then on to an outcome focus. … This will require concerted action between libraries, schools and parents" (pp. 31–32).

According to authors Loertscher, Koechlin and Zwaan (2008) in describing the learning commons perspective, the shift from a content-orientation to a user-facing perspective is central to the school library learning commons.  The authors describe activities and spaces in the physical and virtual learning commons as flexible in design to accommodate a variety of learning activities; e.g. collaborative community spaces, a "coffee house" concept. This environment supports students in critical thinking, inquiry, action research and interdisciplinary learning, and supports what brain research evidences. Students access active learning, in real time and online, with project-based, problem-based, experiential and cooperative learning, ideally coordinated by a teacher-librarian. The learning commons becomes a gateway to the virtual landscape, incorporating "knowledge building centres" and 21st century resources; i.e., Web 2.0, social networking, gaming, podcasts, animation, film, remix, online databases, other libraries.

According to Loertscher, Koechlin and Zwaan (2008), the learning commons is a collaborative space, created by users, that turns the library into the "center, the network, of social, cultural and learning in the school … the place, either physical or virtual, that is the hub of the school, where exemplary learning and teaching are showcased, where professional development, teaching and learning experimentation and action research happen, and where the various specialists of the school [have their] office[s] (whether virtually or physically)" (p. 123). They indicate that shifting to the perspective "does not require years of planning and astronomical budgets …" (p. 3), but the authors indicate a shift  that encompasses the following three points (pp. 122, 125):

- Open Commons:  The place, both physical and virtual, where classes, individuals, small groups, and events are scheduled to benefit from the support and expertise of specialists, resources, and a comfortable learning environment.  The Open Commons is not regularly scheduled by any group but is available using its own calendar booking system.
- Expert Bar:  A service, either physical or virtual, in the Open Commons where students and adults provide individual or small-group advice and information tutorials on software and hardware.
- Experimental Learning Centre:  The place, both physical and virtual, where professional development, action research, and experimental programs are being

tested, exhibited, and analyzed before going out for widespread adoption in the rest of the school."

Research identifies one of the most important factors for seamless student access to school library services: the active support of the school principal (Henri, Hay and Oberg 2002; Asselin, Branch and Oberg 2004; Haycock 2006). Commonly, in schools, the complex work of the principal involves balancing many agendas, policies and roles to meet the learning needs of all students in an increasingly complex society. Principals advocate for students on many levels with available resources as they want their students to achieve learning outcomes. Many principals have forged forward to make the school library the heart of student learning in the school (Sykes 2002); yet, there is an increasingly vast disconnect between educational leadership, administrator and teacher literature with school library learning impact literature (Krashen 2004, Lance and Loertscher 2005). Researchers such as Zmuda and Harada note that principals may be unaware that a great amount of school library literature actually focuses on teacher-librarians as learning leaders. The principal's duty "is to construct a meaningful role for this position in the architecture of the school leadership team …" (Zmuda and Harada 2008, p. 24).

> The goal is not to increase collaboration but to improve student performance. The goal is not to force staff to attend professional development; the goal is for them to improve their practice in order to improve student performance. The goal is not to garner more respect for the learning specialists; the goal is for the interactions between learning specialists and staff to help the system improve its overall performance. (p. 31)

Zmuda and Harada expand on this when discussing:

> personalizing the learning experience and depersonalizing the profession … Library media specialists can be valuable partners in several critical dimensions of differentiation in the personalization of learning: providing resources (for diverse learners), assisting in the construction of products (that encourage students in their preferred modes of learning), and teaching critical thinking processes (balancing products with processes of learning). (pp. 58, 62)

In Alberta and beyond, principals are faced with multiple needs and limited resources. They are accountable for ensuring all students have certificated instruction that supports a program of studies. Most programs of study, including Alberta's, mandate information literacy skills and processes in most curricular subjects. Principals are finding that they must explore as many options as possible to support students in achieving these learning outcomes. According to the *Guide to Education: ECS to Grade 12, 2009–2010*:

> Students in Alberta schools should have access to an effective school library program that is integrated with instructional programs. Such library programs improve student opportunities for achieving a basic education.

Student learning experiences should integrate information retrieval and research skills. These skills are learned best within the curricula. To promote integration, opportunities for cooperative planning between teachers and teacher-librarians should be provided.

In an integrated school library program, the services and activities are not peripheral or supplementary to the school's instructional program; they are an essential and dynamic part of it. The integrated library program widens, deepens and personalizes learning by involving students in the planned and purposeful use of resources. Library resources are designed to help students expand their abilities to find, generate, evaluate and apply information. Developing these information skills will, in turn, prepare students to function effectively as individuals and as full participants in society.

An integrated school library program attends not only to its formal instructional role, but also to its function as a centre for informal learning. As a resource centre, the school library should be a place where students can pursue their individual educational interests.

For more information, see *Focus on Inquiry: A Teacher's Guide to Implementing Inquiry-based Learning* (2004). (p. 69)

So what is a principal to do? Collaborative teams in professional learning communities have stood out as one of the most successful sustainable improvement initiatives used to advance student learning in the reform of schools in the past few decades (Eaker, DuFour and DuFour 2002; DuFour et al. 2004). This model, familiar to many schools, could be extended to develop school library learning commons teams.

DuFour recommends developing "high performing … collaborative teams that work interdependently to achieve common goals," (pp. 3, 5) taking an effective solution to a better one by drawing on collective opinion and research into the most effective practice to cocreating data-driven action plans: list of steps, focus of steps, and funding for steps. A solid foundation is first established for the school with which the learning commons is in direct alignment, including collaboratively developing and widely sharing mission, vision, values and short- and long-term SMART goals (strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, time-bound). The school develops a results-oriented culture that is focused on learning (students, pre- and post-graduates, adults), with a commitment to continuous improvement based on measurable performance standards. Library teams explore accountability measures at the school site using regular reporting practices already in place to reflect upon, evaluate or measure their services in alignment with their particular school, district, provincial or state learning goals and policies. School library services measurement, linked with innovative research studies, could focus on such key questions as "How can we ensure that students leave school having learned how to learn? Having learned how to know when they need information? Where to find it and how to know if it's any good or not" (Lance quoted in Achterma 2007, p. 1)?

In June 2009, Alberta Education's School Library Services Commission administered a school library services survey to all school principals in Alberta. The purpose of the survey was to determine baseline data to develop strategies for levels of access to school library services and chart gaps and growth around inputs that affect student learning access outcomes. The survey return rate was 629 out of 1778 schools for a 37 percent response rate, indicating that this is an important issue for Alberta schools. In surveys, larger response rates narrow the confidence interval and reduce the margin of error, which increases the ability to generalize the survey results and apply them to the overall population. The survey results confirmed the need to review Alberta Education's *Policy, Guidelines, Procedures and Standards for School Libraries in Alberta*, 1984 and have helped inform the development of a 2010 draft policy and guidelines document which will undergo further consultation. A detailed summary of the survey results is available on the Government of Alberta Web site (see References).

Alberta Education's School Library Services Initiative (SLSI) has worked with the Alberta Education (AE) Policy Development and Research Branch, the School Library Stakeholder Advisory and AE Inter-branch Committees to revise the 1984 school library policy and prepare the 2010 draft *Library Access Policy*. Consultation on the draft policy with stakeholder associations was held January 21st, 2010 - April 6th, 2010. A summary report reflective of the responses with draft policy edits will be shared with these committees prior to re-submitting to Alberta Education. The survey data will also inform the development of innovative models that enable schools to take incremental steps toward implementing seamless student access to school library services. Survey data documenting the qualifications and full-time equivalencies of school library staff will provide insight into audience and content development for innovative in-service models.

A gap analysis of the survey results prepared for the draft policy consultation process revealed three key themes. The first related to *planning for student learning* for library services. Principal responses indicated that:

- 58 percent did not have a current School Library Services Plan
- 80 percent did not link student learning outcomes to school library plans in their annual education plan
- 66 percent did not have a collection development plan
- 64 percent did not have a budget plan.

Key strategies to explore planning for student learning include:

- implementing the school library learning commons perspective
- providing exemplars that:
  – model effective learning commons access outcomes strategies, library resources collections and budgeting tools
  – address how to link student learning outcomes to school library access outcomes, and develop student learning rubrics and/or continuums to facilitate the linkage

- studying how school-based assessment data correlates with school library learning commons development
- examining and encouraging additional research that focuses on the impact of student learning on the school library learning commons; e.g., university or district research.

The survey's second theme related to *pedagogical support for student learning*. Principal responses indicated that:

- 57 percent do not have school library related coplanning and teaching
- 90 percent do not have a teacher-librarian
- 74 percent have less than 0.5 FTE assigned to a teacher to coordinate library services
- 35 percent use a library technician or clerk to attend the library
- 35 percent use a library assistant/clerk to attend the library
- 30 percent have no staff with any form of library training attending the library.

Key strategies to explore pedagogical support include:

- building capacity around understanding the roles and responsibilities of all staff on a school library learning commons team in supporting student learning
- developing innovative in-service models that address the interdependence of a school library learning commons team in the provision of a student's co-planning and teaching, recreational reading and reference needs.

The third theme related to *student seamless access to physical or virtual school library services*. Principal responses indicated that:

- 21 percent only open the school library at selective times throughout the week
- 70 percent do not have their catalogue on the Internet
- 71 percent do not have a school library Web page that students could access from the Internet.

Key strategies to explore student seamless access to physical or virtual school library services include:

- clearly defining "seamless access" with the inclusion of physical and intellectual access for all students in both time and place, ensuring each school library learning commons becomes a portal to the world and allows any time, any place, any pace learning
- developing and/or highlighting innovative student learning models in the physical and virtual learning commons.

A variety of innovative models and templates are being explored to be adapted or developed to provide students with seamless access to library services within the

contextual uniqueness inherent in every school. School library services teams can take incremental steps to envision and create school library learning commons strategies for all students, without incurring additional financial pressure to create enhanced learning commons services and support.

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