

Canadian School Library Market Analysis

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The school library market has shrunk. There is no other way to put it. Over the past 10 years average order size has decreased on a school by school basis by 30%. The number of locations actively buying books through an organized buying system has decreased also by 30%. Promises of technology purchasing, including eBooks, to make up the difference have not materialized as budgets have not kept pace with needs. The result of this contraction is less choice both in the vendors schools deal with and the publishers directly serving school libraries especially with great Canadian books.

The contraction of the Canadian school library market is not unique. In fact there has been a contraction of the school library market in other countries such as Australia, the UK and the United States. Publisher print runs have fallen in response to a decrease in overall spending. It is evident that the market is not shifting to digital resources as many in the public might believe. As a company that represents digital products in Canada as well as in the United States, we have seen growth in this area. However, this growth is very small in comparison to the market size for print product. In fact the market for eBooks in Canada is estimated by library vendors to be around 2% of overall school library purchasing. In the United States the estimate is 10% and growing, albeit slowly, according to US based publishers and vendors. The U.S. school library market for print has stabilized and rebounded slightly in terms of purchasing resources primarily due to the introduction of the Common Core Curriculum and its associated funding. We have not experienced a similar injection into our system since the end of the Ontario Library Investment Project in 2010. More spending is leaving the system and not coming back.

While none of these facts are shocking or startling it is important to examine why this is happening. Only after we see the why can we determine the way forward to create effective and well resourced school libraries and learning commons to benefit future generations of students

Central Staff

After 20 years personally in this industry and 51 years as a company serving school and public libraries, we have seen many changes in personnel and customers who have often become like family to us. However, no trend is more worrisome than the current decline in central school library supervisory staff. From the perspective of a vendor this person is essential not only on the basic level of organizing buying opportunities and securing library funding, but also as a "champion" of the entire program. The central library support staff and/or library coordinator, instructional resource teacher, innovative learning consultant etc. basically whoever is tasked with the role, is a champion of library throughout the school board or division. They serve a function they don't often realize and that is to be the visible face of school libraries to fellow staff, teacher-librarians, parents, technicians, superintendents and trustees. They give the function of a school library a voice and legitimacy as an essential element of a modern day school. For those of us serving the purchasing needs of the school library community I challenge that there is no more important function than this role. While purchasing is definitely done right across the country by jurisdictions that lack this professional, we see more direction on resource purchases when a champion exists. It is also more than just finding a person who supports library. The library coordinator is most effective as champion when they have the experience and training in the field especially as they make the vital transition to a proper learning commons. As this role disappears it becomes more difficult and costly from both the vendor perspective as well as that of the school.

Time

Without a centralized champion of library, existing school library staff must fight for time. As we all know this is a constant battle at every elementary and high school but fought at different levels with varying degrees of success. It is about the time taken to properly instruct students and lead them to thinking critically by using the learning commons effectively. It is about the time needed to accurately setup and maintain a school library with all of its moving parts, books, databases, tablets, computers, ILS, etc. It is also about the time needed to attend a library resource display, sit down with a catalogue, read reviews, attend a professional conference, or visit a website to make accurate informed purchases of resources the students will use, love and enjoy. The key to making this time available is not rocket science. It is once again convincing all involved, fellow staff, parents and administration of the importance of the role of the learning commons and how important it is to a student's learning.

Budget

While budget for school library has declined in many schools across the country, it may not be as bad as you think. For many years budget has varied based on board/district support and individual schools needs and wants. Dedicated budgets do exist and schools do receive new resources. The difficulty with budgets is making sure that school library staffs not only have the authority to spend it, but also know how to spend it. New teacher-librarians and technicians often enter a purchasing event with a “deer caught in the headlights” look. It is overwhelming to say the least but often with a short training session most of the fear is overcome. Again a champion in the form of a library coordinator becomes very important in making sure dollars are spent wisely and effectively.

Conclusion

After many years in the business and after visits with school librarians across the country, three tenants of an effective and healthy school library market have become evident to me. The importance of central staff, time and budgets are definitely not revolutionary. They are not new concepts and neither is the idea of a champion for the learning commons. However, it is the interaction of three elements taken together that makes for a great school library program system wide. Combine a centralized champion that makes the case for time for library staff to do all elements of their job including but not limited to purchasing with effective spending of budget money, then you have a winning combination. Having been in hundreds of school libraries across Canada there are many fantastic examples of this combination at work today. As schools make the transition to learning commons with a properly resourced space, the role of library personnel takes on even more importance to nurture the concept into an effective environment for students and teachers. As a dedicated exclusive distributor to the school library community in Canada, we look forward to working with you in strengthening the role of the library/learning commons throughout the country. Working together we can reverse the current downturn in the Canadian school library market and pave the way for the future. We must build and protect the fantastic and effective learning commons and school library programs in existence today. Please feel free to contact me with comments, suggestions or just a great chat on the market we have dedicated our time and efforts to for many years.