

Essential Documents for School Libraries:

Do You Have Them?

By Colleen MacDonell



Essential documents answer questions and comments that continually arise in school libraries. Ask yourself if you've ever heard the following:

- ☐ "This book is filth!"
- ☐ "Doesn't a librarian just check out books?"
- ☐ "Why are you throwing away these good books?"
- ☐ "Tell me, how many books [videos, visits per day] do you have in your library?"
- ☐ "I've downloaded five articles. I've finished my research!"
- ☐ "I have a paper due tomorrow. Can you help me do a bibliography?"
- ☐ "If I think a student plagiarized, what do I do?"
- ☐ "Can I check my e-mail?"
- ☐ "Shouldn't we have an Internet filter on these computers?"
- ☐ "What does the library do for my child?"
- ☐ "How did we do that last year?"

Library policies, guides, brochures, procedure sheets, and handouts can come to your aid when administrators want an answer, when students need help, when teachers look to you for advice, and when parents come to visit. If you recognize which documents you need, write them clearly, and promote them well, many potential problems, misunderstandings, and stereotypes can be vitiated before they get out of hand.

If you are lucky, you have a district supervisor who has already done most of this work for you. All you need to do as a teacher-librarian is to have this information ready-to-hand when crucial questions arise and to promote the content of the documents as widely and effectively as possible. More on that in a minute! For those of you who do not have officially approved library documents, you'll need to play a bit of catch-up. Here's how.

Planning and Writing Essential Documents

As a library administrator in an international school, I have had to plan and write all of our essential documents. This is my "can't live without" list:

Library Programming documents justify your very existence in the school. It is the answer to the question of what you do as a teacher-librarian to facilitate inquiry-based learning and promotion of reading.

- a. Mission Statement
- b. Cooperative Planning Policy
- c. Internet Acceptable Use Policy
- d. Statement on Plagiarism
- e. Library Skills Continuum

Collection Development documents justify the way you spend your money. They give clear guidelines as to what resources are considered necessary to answer the information and pleasure-reading needs of your students and teachers.

- a. Collection Development Policy
- b. Book Challenge Policy & Procedure
- c. Donations Policy & Procedure
- d. Weeding Policy & Procedure
- e. Budget Formula Guidelines

Library Rules and Regulations are clear statements of the responsibilities of anyone who uses the library. Although rules can always be broken or bent when situations warrant, we can't function without them.

- a. Library Borrowing Rules
- b. Library Fines
- c. Hours of Operation
- d. Guidelines for Student Behavior

Procedures should be clearly and concisely written on single sheets, for easy use when doing non-routine technical tasks. At our main library, we write up step-by-step instructions for tasks that are not detailed in current user manuals—the sorts of things that involve

minute details that are easy to forget if you don't do them often. If you have a high turn over of staff—often the case with volunteers—this can be another reason for writing up some procedures in an easy-to-follow format.

- a. Inventory
- b. Acquisitions
- c. Book Processing

Planning documents help remind you of your short-term goals so that they are accomplished in a timely fashion and allow you to sit back to assess your overall progress from time to time. A good strategic plan can be updated periodically for brief presentations to administration and staff.

- a. Strategic Plan (2-year)
- b. Operational Plan (annual)

Reporting and Publicity is where you get to accentuate the positive. Any documents that promote what the library does for administrators, teachers, parents, and even students, should be upbeat, focusing on how the library contributes to the school as a whole.

- a. Annual Reports
- b. Brochures for Parents
- c. Flyers for New Teachers
- d. "Quick Picture" Statistics

Teaching documents answer questions that come up in almost every teaching situation in the library. We place our essential teaching handouts in plastic display cases in our libraries. Teachers and students have come to depend on them. As with other documents, they are available through the library Web site in pdf format, for printing at home.

- a. Research Process Handout
- b. Fill-In Bibliography Forms
- c. In-Text Citation How-To
- d. Online Searching How-To

Even if you are part of a large school district, it doesn't hurt to ask yourself the same questions that someone

without that support must ask:

1. What documents do you have now?
2. How old are these documents?
3. Have they received official approval?
4. Are they widely circulated?
5. Is the content of these documents already a part of the school culture?

If you are starting from "scratch," seek help. There are many excellent examples of these policies and forms available through school district websites, school library associations, teacher-librarian homepages, and library management handbooks. Read as many examples of what others have done and apply these ideas to your particular needs.

Once you have written your own documents, make sure they receive the imprimatur of an official Library Committee, which should include representatives from every group you serve: teachers, students, administrators, library staff, and parents. In fact, all documents should be presented as drafts to your committee so they can help you tailor these policies and guidelines to your school community.

Promoting and Applying Essential Documents

Many library management handbooks suggest that you collect your policies and procedures in a Library Management Manual (Markuson) or Handbook (*Where Do I Start?*). While this is excellent advice, you can't stop there. I have a lovely Library Management Manual. It has every essential document in a neatly classified arrangement. *No one has ever asked to see this document.* And they never will.

If you believe in the content of your essential documents, you will make sure that they don't just gather dust on a shelf, but become living documents which affect real change in the culture and behavior of your school's learners and teachers. For example, you have an approved Statement on Plagiarism and an Internet Use Policy. Have you asked your principal to include it in the student handbook? Do students sign a form saying they have read and understood these documents? Do you refer to them during cooperative lessons? Do you tell new teachers

about them? Are they made accessible through your school's Web site?

On the Web, through your Library Committee, in your Student Handbook, in school-wide published policies, in speeches to teachers, in reports to administrators, and in everyday conversations with colleagues and students, you can make this important information a part of your school culture. As the content of these documents becomes common knowledge, you are sure to see a real effect on learning. And

you'll notice you haven't heard some of those old questions and comments for a long time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Markuson, Carolyn. *Effective Libraries in International Schools*. London: John Catt, 1999.

Where Do I Start? A School Library Handbook. Worthington, OH: Linworth, 2001. □

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