

Library Advisory Committees

• Keep 'em Reading •

Grades
K-5

by | Toni Buzzeo



Dear Mrs. Skorupski:

An Occasional Advice Column with
Mrs. Skorupski, LMS @Your Service

It's great to be heading back to school following the long summer break, and I find myself with renewed energy—perhaps even enough energy to launch a

library advisory committee, something I've wanted to do for a very long time. As I think about this project, though, I realize that I don't know where to begin. I worry that if I do not formulate a plan now, the academic year with all of its teaching and learning demands will descend and my advisory committee will still be a long-range plan when June rolls around.

*Signed,
Energetic in Enfield*

Dear Energetic,
Isn't the beginning of the new school year an exciting time? I look forward to it each year, as eager as a first grader with new shoes and a new backpack!

I salute you for your desire to actually launch the library advisory committee (LAC) you've long dreamed of during this academic year. But you are correct to create a plan before you begin. The best way to proceed is to ask yourself the following series of questions, and answer them as completely as possible. You will find that your answers give your plan direction.

- What is the purpose of your committee?
- When, where, and how often will meetings be held?
- Who will serve on the committee?

Okily dokily, let's get started!

The Purpose of the LAC

There are many possible roles for a Library Advisory Committee to fill, but no matter what the role of your LAC, it is essential for you to define it clearly before you solicit members. You will then be assured that those who are serving on the committee are interested in and dedicated to the objectives of the group. Furthermore, you will be clear about what you expect from the committee and can evaluate tasks that are put forth against the mission of the group in order to ensure that all activities are within the scope of the LAC's commission.

Collection Guidance

One of the most common purposes for an LAC is to guide materials acquisitions for the library. Jane Smith, library media specialist at Brookwood (Alabama) Elementary School says that all schools in her Tuscaloosa County School System are required to have an LAC. "The principal or assistant principal, LMS, teacher representative from each grade level, and parents serve on this committee. Each member signs a form at the meeting. Mainly, it serves as documentation for State Department audits to show that state funds are spent wisely and have been presented to a library committee prior to being presented to the School Budget Committee, which then submits the library budget to the whole faculty for a vote."

Jane notes that the LAC also offers suggestions to the LMS and discusses how the LMS has decided to spend state funds. While the form Jane referred to was created by a previous district library supervisor, she has continued its use. "I feel that it is important that LMSs have input and discourse

with teachers and parents. It was most helpful this year when the auditors came from the Alabama State Department to check our school system. It was proof that spending was shared, but LMS-centered.”

In the state of Arkansas, the section on Media Services in the Rules Governing Standards for Accreditation of Arkansas Public Schools and School Districts (http://arkansased.org/rules/pdf/current/ade_282_standards_1107_current.pdf), mandates that schools have “[A] process for input from teachers, parents and students in the acquisition of instructional materials” (page 21 16.02.2). Some administrators and librarians interpret this to mean that a formal committee must be formed to provide this broad-based input.

One Arkansas elementary and middle school librarian who currently manages three libraries hasn't yet found time to convene a committee this year, but hopes to next year. He plans to include upper-grade elementary aged students on his LAC because, as he explains, “In our school improvement committees, also required by the state, we must include students at each building. They meet a couple of times a year, and the principal and/or faculty chairperson explains to the kids what the committee is about, and what is expected of them. So far we've gotten positive responses from both students and parents.” If student presence is a positive addition on other committees, it's likely to be on your LAC, too.

Other Arkansas librarians feel that a more informal process meets the state requirement. Media specialist Jan Owens at Greenwood (Arkansas) High School notes that the word “committee” is not mentioned in the Rules. “I do not have a committee,” Jan says, “but I do have an open relationship with the faculty and students and receive several book requests a week that I review and usually purchase.” In fact, Jan would prefer not to have a committee. “I think that basically is asking someone else to do my job. I understand many librarians may feel they are in a position where they need back up, though. I think that is why the standard is worded as it is.”

Judi Chelekis, library media specialist at Vassar (Michigan) Junior/Senior High School, is one such librarian. “We do not have an LAC, although I have been looking into the possibility of starting one. With input from students, a parent or two, and a teacher (if they have time and are

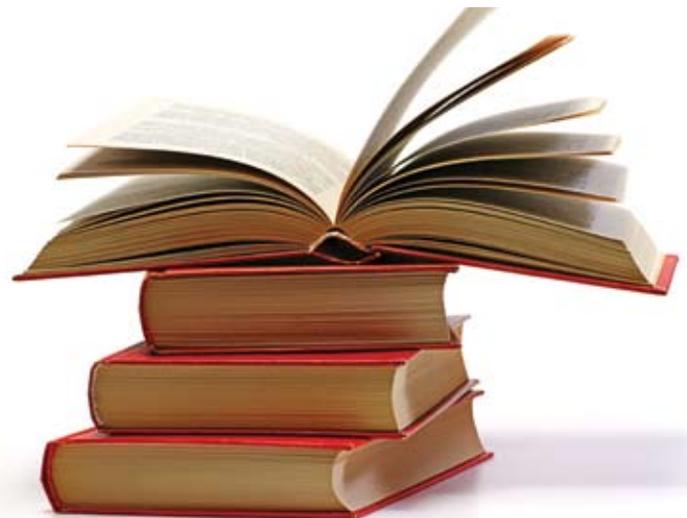
willing to serve), I would have another ‘back up’ for selection and support in the face of challenges. Our school is very conservative, but I know that intellectual freedom is our goal. So I'd like to have input from a diverse group.”

Reflecting further on the role of such a committee, Judi notes, “I don't see that the committee is doing my job. I think that the committee would help (e.g., read more reviews, find more books appropriate for the collection and curriculum). By having more eyes and ears, you can get more done and have a better collection for your school.”

Book Challenge Committee

Some librarians only convene an LAC when there is a book or instructional materials challenge in the school. In every school district, there should be a policy guiding the response to a challenge, and the policy will include the make-up of this committee. Most commonly, the committee will include designated administrators, teachers, or other professional staff members such as guidance counselors or social workers, library media specialists, school board members, parents, and, depending on the level of the school, students. Typically, the book challenge advisory committee meets only if there is a book or materials challenge.

Jan Owens notes that the Greenwood District Challenged Book Policy requires that they convene a committee if a book is challenged. “That is not state mandated, but self imposed by the district librarians.”



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Combined Purpose Committees

As you think about forming your own LAC, consider your school culture. If you hope to create a committee of adults, ask yourself whether the members of your school community have the room and flexibility in their school commitments to take on another committee membership. If you feel cautious about faculty time constraints, consider, as one possibility, a joint committee.

If your school is like Pinewood Elementary School in Rotterdam, New York, you may want to follow the path that librarian Mindy Holland chose when creating an LAC. "Like most schools, our building has so many committees that people are stretched to the limit. I chair the building's Shared Decision Making Committee, a New York State mandated committee. I asked this group if they would also function as the library advisory committee. The group enthusiastically agreed. The committee consists of the principal, teachers from all the grade levels, a teacher who is working on her administration degree, and two parents. We have a library-update at most meetings and have reviewed library policies. We have also discussed what would happen if a book challenge occurred. Combining committees allows me to have an active, vital library committee."

Similarly, Donna Reble, media coordinator at West Buncombe Elementary in Asheville, North Carolina, has a combined focus advisory committee. "Our K-5 school has a Media/Technology Advisory Committee. One teacher from every grade level, a parent, an administrator, the media coordinator and the technology assistant are on it. We meet to discuss technology goals for our school and come up with a three-year plan for how to spend our tech funds. (We update it yearly.) This year, I've also asked for input on our media collection for a grant I wrote. I have shared the collection analysis with them and showed them my areas of concern, and they brought up curriculum areas that they'd like to see improved as well."

As in other districts, this LAC also serves when there is a book or instructional materials challenge. Fortunately, Donna hasn't had a challenge in the four years she has been in the position, and so the LAC has not served in this role.



Program Guidance

Beyond collection guidance and challenged materials response, LACs can profitably support and guide library programs. Judi Chelekis suggests that an LAC might "easily help plan programming, find funding for said programming, and even help with events we have in the library (such as the annual DDR and Guitar Hero tournaments coming up next week)." She adds, "The promotion of reading (with activities and field trips) should also be a high priority for the group and also might lead to needing more funds."

Librarian Vicki Krebsbach has had plenty of experience with LACs. She has had advisory committees at Stone Oak Elementary, Hardy Oak Elementary, Wilderness Oak Elementary, and now at Lopez Middle School in San Antonio, Texas. Membership at the elementary level included a mix of teachers representing grades K-1, 2-3, and 4-5, plus the gifted and talented teacher, a parent volunteer, and sometimes the assistant principal. At the middle school, the members are an English and reading teacher from each grade level as well as the gifted and talented teacher. Vicki says, "The purpose has been to help make decisions about library related activities that have included author visits, choosing a title for an all-school book project, reviewing any challenged books and coming to consensus, and choosing a library theme for the year." Vicki has opened several elementary school libraries and she says her committees have also been beneficial in the creation and review of policies and procedures.

She explains, "I think that the most important function is school community 'buy-in' and a philosophy of staff/student/parent input. The library

does not BELONG to the librarian, but to the entire school, and activities, lessons, etc. are driven by the campus needs.”

Frequency Of Meetings

There is no rule of thumb for the frequency of LAC meetings. Most meet in the library media center, of course, some on a regular schedule—once a month, once a quarter, once a semester, or even once a year, as is the case with one part-time Ohio librarian. “I have a committee which meets once yearly. I tried twice yearly and it was too much. There are at least two teachers, two parents, the principal, and me on the committee. I use the committee as a way to present the work that I’ve been doing all year. Essentially, I get my accolades from the committee. I present issues that I’m having difficulty with and I present a budget. Since I don’t work much, I think it’s good for me to review things myself at least ONCE a year!”

Vicki Krebsbach considers her LAC more ad hoc in nature. “Sometimes we have not had formal meetings but communicated through email. The issues at hand dictated the type of meeting needed.”

In my elementary school, my LAC met once every month throughout the year and as often as weekly during preparation for a major event, such as an author visit or the annual student book award celebration. You may not want to decide on the frequency of your meetings at the outset. Rather, you may want to establish the LAC and meet a few times to establish rapport and shared goals and then allow the committee to determine frequency of meetings.

Membership

Many of the committees I’ve discussed so far have been adult-only committees. Others have been combined adult and student committees. You might also want to consider establishing an exclusively student committee. While many secondary librarians have student LACs, there is no reason not to try student membership at the elementary level. If you do, there are many possibilities for purpose and goals.

Student Committees

Rose Bright, teacher-librarian at Pinole (California) Middle School sees her LAC as more of an after school club that meets for an hour two Mondays a month. Rose reports, “So far, they have helped me to identify series that are incomplete, to develop bulletin board ideas, to create lists of books and games to purchase for the library, and to assist with fundraising activities. Each month we get more kids so we should be able to get more done in the future. I’m hoping they will help me reorganize the library and decorate it so it is more kid friendly.”

Likewise, Vicki Krebsbach, now in a middle school, has an LAC called the CREW club. “It’s made up of students who promote the library, help with the Book Fair, offer ideas on how to keep the library viable and fun. We had a *Twilight* Book Bash last fall; right now we are selling TAKS GRAMS with fun pencils that wish the students well on the state TAKS exams. We have had one Board Game Frenzy before school on a Friday morning. I want to evolve into short podcasts on new books.”

Both Rose’s and Vicki’s LACs would work equally well at the elementary level, especially with intermediate grade student members. Librarian Lisa Nagel at St. Francis Xavier School in Wilmette, Illinois agrees. “Our Teen Advisory Board (TAB) has been a great success. At first the kids did not know what to expect, but I knew it was going well when other students, including the ‘cool’ kids, came in and wondered if it was too late to join. I absolutely think that it could work for fourth and fifth graders.”

Lisa sees so many benefits to having her students more personally involved in the library by belonging to TAB. “We went first to the middle school, as we were looking for a way to get these kids more involved with and into the library space. The circulation of middle school books has increased dramatically since we started the TAB, and for me that was one of the main goals. I want to keep that hard-to-reach group reading, which they say is a leading indicator of success in school as they move forward. I also think they take better care of their library resources when they take ownership in selecting and purchasing them. We even have had a field trip to Borders and Barnes and Noble to buy books which the kids loved. Also, our fifth graders are all talking about being able to

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join the TAB next year, so I am looking forward to the growing enthusiasm.”

Faculty Committees

Of course, your purpose may require exclusively adult membership in your LAC. This is true for Denise Glenn, media specialist at Northside School in Opelika, Alabama. Her LAC includes one teacher from each grade, the principal, the reading coach, and one special education teacher in addition to herself. “We meet to discuss purchases for the library and rewards for students who participate in the Accelerated Reader program. We have not had to meet to discuss a challenged book but the committee understands that they may be called to do so. The main purpose of our committee is purchases, rewards, and challenges, but many other issues related to the library have been discussed in our meetings.” For instance, she explains, “Silent reading time at our school takes place while the students are in their respective places waiting for school to begin, as well as certain times in the classroom, depending on the teacher. So this makes book checkout a major issue at our school!”

Denise’s LAC discussed solutions to this challenge. At another time, the discussion revolved around the library being closed during the week of the book fair. “We have discussed what to do about book checkout (e.g., get a sub or have an aide or the reading coach learn how to use the circulation program).” Obviously, it is most appropriate for teaching faculty on an LAC to discuss these issues, rather than students.

Similarly, a Virginia LMS says, “Having the committee was especially handy when I had small conflicts—some teachers signed up for a large block and others complained. It was the committee—a group of peers—that worked to decide if there should be limits on how much a teacher could monopolize the library. In the end, the teachers who complained realized that they sometimes needed large blocks, so we worked to creatively schedule the time.” Again, a faculty LAC was the appropriate vehicle for resolving the problem.

Okily dokily, Energized, there you have it—a roundup of ideas to help you create a plan for your new library advisory committee. And while I know you are not new in your school, I do have

one last bit of advice for your library teaching colleagues who are new to their libraries this year. It may be best to wait for at least a year before establishing your LAC. As one new Colorado librarian remarked, “I will wait to establish an advisory committee until I hit a few milestones and can really articulate what role my LAC will play.”

Best of luck to you, Energized, as you get back to school and get to work on accomplishing this worthwhile goal. Let me know how it all works out!

*Signed,
Mrs. Skorupski, LMS @ Your Service*



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