

What Does the Next-Generation School Library Look Like?

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3D printers like this one can be found at Monticello High School's new library/WikiCommons

At a time when public libraries are starting to offer everything from [community gardening plots](#) to opportunities to [check out humans](#) for conversations, some school libraries are similarly re-evaluating their roles and expanding their offerings.

Case in point: Monticello High School in Charlottesville, Virginia. When librarian Joan Ackroyd arrived there four years ago, she found an environment very different from the “engaging, creative, fun” elementary and middle school libraries to which she was accustomed. “Its library was none of those things,” she recalls. “It was a traditional, quiet research space.”

Ackroyd decided this wasn't optimal. “People no longer have to come to a library to get information,” she says, “so the library has to get people coming in for different reasons. Students need somewhere to socialize, create things and collaborate.”

As her first step, she and her co-librarian at the time (music teacher Dave Glover), converted a storeroom into a technology lab. They salvaged computers destined for the landfill and installed music-authoring software on them.

Teachers balked because the library was no longer quiet, but students liked it, and many at-risk students became frequent visitors. Some even admitted to Ackroyd that the only reason they still came to school was to go to the lab.

When the principal witnessed this new level of engagement, she decided to support a full library renovation, funded

by rent collected from a company that used the space every summer. They hired an experienced library consultant and took inspiration from libraries designed for younger patrons. “We have open, flexible scheduling, and let students in even when other classes are there,” Ackroyd explains. “We also have banked computers that students can use independently, and a circulation desk in a more central area. It’s a matter of attitude, to make students feel welcome any time.”

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The book collection was weeded, and shelves were moved to one wall, freeing up space for collaboration and instruction (with glass walls that serve as sound buffers but enable participants to see what’s happening in the rest of the library). Rooms that had been used for offices or storage were turned into student areas. The library now also has reading lounge areas with comfortable modular seating, as well as tables with chairs and stools that students are free to move around; two music studios; a HackerSpace (with high-tech equipment such as a microscope, 3D printer, gaming hardware and software, and a green screen for filming) and a Maker Space that also houses a 3D printer and serves as a “hands-on” craft room where old technology can be disassembled and re-configured with other materials. In short, the Monticello Library Media Center has become a “Learning Commons.”

“Students work more productively in that kind of environment,” Ackroyd says. “It’s not an adversarial relationship, with teachers at the front of the room and students at their desks. It makes the teacher’s job easier and more pleasant.”

“Our library is now more like the workspace of the future,” adds Ackroyd’s fellow librarian, Ida Mae Craddock, who previously taught English at the school. “Kids who graduate from here will be more productive in those environments.”

A New Culture Develops

The new surroundings were also accompanied by a new attitude. “We went from managing students’ time to giving them ownership,” Ackroyd explains. “They’re almost out the door, and they have to be able to manage their time. We are more like an academic library now.”

“They need natural consequences,” Craddock adds. “What happens when adults don’t turn in our work on time? Controlling children that much and then telling them ‘goodbye’ when they turn 18 doesn’t work well.”

But it didn’t happen overnight — the shift entailed a transition period. “At first they came to the library to experience freedom, but they weren’t using it wisely,” Ackroyd recalls. “The first year, and even a little bit into the second year, students saw it as a place where they didn’t have to be quiet anymore, where they could come and laugh. They weren’t studying.”

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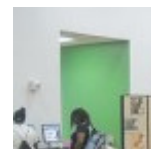
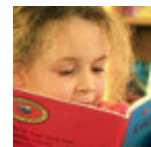
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But now, accepting the responsibility that comes with freedom has become ingrained in the school culture, and new students adjust quickly. “You learn behaviors from the people around you,” Craddock notes. “They train each other, through social learning.”

As a result, parents’ worst fears (of “atrophy, a fate worse than death,” as Craddock puts it) haven’t materialized. “Atrophy is fairly hard to achieve here, because everything is moving,” she says, and students are either busy on their own or engaging each other.

Students are free to use phones and other devices. But no first-person shooter games are allowed, and the library uses county Internet filters. Students police each other if they become disruptive to others.



“They know we trust them, and they trust us,” Ackroyd says. “We form relationships. We circulate all the time, and try to be welcoming.”



A Resource for Teachers

Teachers have come around to embrace the “Learning Commons,” holding classes there when they want to conduct lessons that require research, equipment, additional space, personnel or expertise, or that may get messy. “All that has migrated down here,” Craddock says. “Teachers want to be creative, do interesting things, and engage students. We provide that environment.”

Students are free to use the library during study hall, remediation period, or during internship hours (available to juniors and seniors). They can also use the library during lunch (food and drink are allowed). Some students do their internships in the library, for example by staffing the help desk or maintaining the equipment.

The Virginia School Boards Association recognized the library in its “Showcases for Success,” and other librarians have visited Monticello High School to inform their own practices. Many are stunned by the statistics: the “Learning Commons” logs more than 33,000 student visits per year outside class time (the school’s enrollment is 1,104).

Visitors also ask if it’s loud and messy. “Yes, it is,” Craddock tells them, “because people are loud and messy. It’s not a problem.” To accommodate those students who still want quiet, some areas are designated as quiet spaces during certain periods. Students can also use the office for quiet study. Meanwhile, the rest of the “Learning Commons” is buzzing, which suits this new breed of librarians just fine. “It creeps me out when it’s quiet in here,” Craddock says.

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