

Virtual Schools and the School Library

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Abstract: School libraries are an integral part of student achievement in the brick and mortar school and should play an equally important role in the online school. The school library should provide to students and faculty a collection of instructional, informational, and recreational resources for the school. For school accreditation, school libraries need to employ qualified personnel and have a collection that supports the school's curriculum. Among the practices associated with quality distance education programs that support library services in virtual schools are: Student services; Appropriate learning materials; Student access to learning resources; Focus on content and students; and Program accreditation. Some school accrediting agencies have begun to accredit diploma-granting online high schools. For this study, librarians, teachers, administrators from online schools were surveyed and interviewed to gather information about their student library services and teacher/library collaboration.

Introduction

One important goal in education is to provide students instruction and opportunities to read independently, accurately, and with enjoyment. If students achieve this goal they will experience typical rates of growth in reading fluency (Torgesen 2004). School libraries are an integral part of achieving this goal in the brick and mortar school and should play an equally important role in the online school. The library has an impact on the school, beyond physical space. The February/March 2004 issue of *Reading Today* reports that "research findings from more than 4,000 schools in more than a dozen U.S. states indicate links between academic achievement and strong school libraries, as measured by library staffing levels, librarian activities, collection size, technology integration, and library usage" (Libraries Called Key). Additionally findings indicate that strong libraries correlate to higher standardized test scores; 10-20% overall, and 3-8% when accounting for school and community differences.

A budget and access to a collection are only part of an effective library media program. A qualified librarian is a key factor in contributing to student achievement. For students to achieve the essential literacies for 21st century education, professional librarians are needed to guide them and their teachers in becoming proficient at accessing, evaluating, and using information. The majority of today's millennial generation students use tools such as Google when starting to research a topic (Kaminski, Seel, & Cullen 2003). While they are using such search tools, the students recognize that they are wasting time in their research process and desire assistance (McEuen 2001).

The Role of Library Resources and Services for Learning

According to the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) in *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning*, the mission of school libraries is "to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information" (1998, p. 6). This mission is accomplished through the two primary purposes of school libraries: supporting the curriculum and promoting reading for enjoyment. To be effective users of ideas and information, students need access to reference and reading materials and the ability to use them to meet their personal and academic goals. Librarians must ensure that students are provided with opportunities that will engage them in reading, and create an environment where reading is valued and encouraged (AASL 1999). Therefore the role of the library is to support student learning of content and the development of interest in lifelong reading.

An effective school library should provide all students and teachers access to quality, age-appropriate materials, reflecting the needs of its population and be integrated in the school's educational program. The library, including the collection and the staff, should be easily accessible to all users. The school library should provide to students and faculty a collection of instructional, informational, and recreational resources for the school. This collection should

reflect the cultural, developmental, learning, personal, and recreational needs of the students, be the school brick or virtual.

As distance education programs, virtual schools succeed when they apply effective practices based on experience and research. Many effective practices for online learning programs have been encapsulated in the Resources--Processes--Results cycle (Cavanaugh, 2005). Among the practices associated with quality distance education programs that support library services in virtual schools are:

- Student services (Resources)
- Qualified, experienced staff (Resources)
- Appropriate learning materials (Resources)
- Student access to learning resources (Resources)
- Focus on content and students (Practices)
- Development of information literacy (Practices)
- Program accreditation (Results)

Expectations of School Libraries for Accreditation

The U.S. Department of Education recognizes a group of regional accrediting bodies at the elementary and secondary levels (USDOE, 2006). Each of these accrediting organizations publishes standards and expectations for on-ground schools regarding libraries. In general these accreditation agencies require that schools have libraries and that these libraries meet certain standards regarding the collection, staff, and practices.

Standards related to library materials, including the collection, require that the materials be integrated into the curriculum in ways that meet the institution's goals. The collection should include a wide range of materials, exclusive of the textbook, and should represent an appropriate quality and quantity to support the programs. School libraries should be equipped with up-to-date materials and technology to support student learning and may include electronic books and references. Some accrediting bodies specify a ratio of books to students, for example SACS states that new schools must have at least four volumes per student in the school library upon opening

School libraries need to employ qualified personnel. Some of the accreditation standards qualify that the library staff must be state certified or have a minimum of 18 credit hours in library/media sciences. In some accrediting regions, such as SACS and NCA, specific student:librarian ratios are stated, for example schools up to 1,500 students must have least one full time equivalent staff member with an additional staff member added for each additional 250 students. Librarians are expected to collaborate with faculty to obtain maximum benefit of the resources in support of the curriculum.

The regional accrediting bodies require school libraries to develop and use policies concerning services that the libraries provide, and for the currency, selection, and removal of materials from the collection. Libraries are also required to develop and manage budgets and long range plans for services. These plans must address methods of evaluating the library's effectiveness.

Regional accrediting bodies are recognizing that virtual schools will require different accrediting requirements, and are creating guidelines and assessment tools to evaluate virtual schools. For example the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools has developed their draft tool for accrediting virtual schools, and now has guidelines for a virtual school's library. Table 1 shows the differences in the requirements between a physical or brick and mortar school as compared to a virtual school. The only listed differences between the two systems are for the staffing and the access. A physical school's library is staffed according to enrolment, with larger schools requiring additional staff, while a virtual school has no population adjustment, only requiring a single certified librarian for the school. A physical school library must also provide a specific level and type of access and be integrated into the educational experience, while virtual schools do not have a similar requirement.

	Brick and Mortar School	Virtual School
Staffing	The library media program is directed by a certified library media specialist a) <250 students – not certified but under direction b) 250→500 – 1 full-time qualified c) >500 – full time specialist and additional personnel d) Personnel are under the direction of a qualified library media specialist.	The library media program is directed by a certified library media specialist
Collection	A wide range of materials, technologies, or other library/information services that are responsive to the school’s student population are available to students and faculty and utilized to improve teaching and learning	A wide range of materials, technologies, or other library/information services that are responsive to the school’s student population are available to students and faculty and utilized to improve teaching and learning
Access	Students, faculty, and support staff have regular and frequent access to library/information services, facilities, and programs as an integral part of their educational experience before, during, and after the school day.	
Independent inquiry	The library/information services program fosters independent inquiry by enabling students and faculty to use various school and community information resources and technologies	The library/information services program fosters independent inquiry by enabling students and faculty to use various school and community information resources and technologies
Policies	Policies are in place for the selection and removal of information resources and the use of technologies and the Internet.	Policies are in place for the selection and removal of information resources and the use of technologies and the Internet.

Table 1 School library accreditation requirements from NAAS

Virtual Schools Accreditation

While not every online program and school is accredited, increasing numbers have achieved regional accreditation or state approval to deliver K-12 courses. Some of the school accrediting agencies have begun to accredit diploma-granting online high schools (see Table 2). Data is currently being collected from those agencies about the application of library standards to online schools. Of the eight regionally accredited U.S. online diploma-granting high schools, two make library materials available to students online, and none employ certified librarians as school librarians (Personal communication, 2006).

Regional Accrediting Agencies	Accredited Online High School Diploma Programs
Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSA) http://www.msche.org/	Penn Foster High School
North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) http://www.ncacasi.org/	University of Missouri--Columbia High School
Northwest Association of Colleges and Schools (NAAS) http://www.boisestate.edu/naas/	Christa McAuliffe Academy
	Keystone National High School
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) http://www.sacscasi.org/region/	CompuHigh
	James Madison High School
	University of Miami Online High School
Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) http://www.acswasc.org/index.htm	Orange Lutheran High School Online

Table 2: Accredited online high schools and their accrediting agencies.

How Virtual Schools are Meeting These Expectations

In order to identify the current state of library access for k-12 distance learning students, an online survey was constructed. Librarians, teachers (primary language instructors), administrators from online schools were invited to participate in the survey to gather information about their student library services (see appendix A and B). These services might be provided by schools, by subscription, or available in the student's local community. The survey topics were: Personnel, Access, Funding/budget, Accreditation, and the Students. The surveys asked questions about:

- The priority given to library services
- How students access library resources (local school, public library, online, etc.)
- Whether the school has a budget for library materials
- Whether the school employs certified librarians
- Demographics of the students served
- School's current accreditation status
- The collaboration between distance learning teachers and school librarians.

In addition to the surveys phone and in-person interviews are being conducted with teachers of courses such as reading, literature, and language arts to get more detailed information about the contacts and interactions that these teachers have with the students' school libraries.

Initial Results

Preliminary results from the surveys questions of the schools indicate a wide range of library offerings, policies, and priorities among responding virtual schools. Of the eight schools responding five expected students to use a library. When asked how the schools rated their priority toward libraries, the schools were evenly distributed among high, moderate, low, and no priority. Twelve schools indicated how they provided library services, with some schools providing more than one form of library access. From the respondents, three schools had physical libraries, three created school online libraries, three schools had subscribed to a service for library access, and eight schools responded that they had no library access. One of the responding schools employs a full time librarian, one employs a part time librarian, and the other responding schools indicated having no librarians.

Schools were asked how students were expected to access library materials. Three schools indicated that they expected their students to access resources in local school libraries, five schools expected the students to use public libraries, and three schools had no library use expectations. Three schools provide materials to students for enjoyment reading, while five schools did not. Similarly three schools provide materials to students for research, while five schools did not. Preliminary results from the interview indicate that the teachers have had no interactions with librarians in their own distance learning school, or librarians from schools where their students attend.

Implications and Recommendations

Trends in virtual schooling show growth in enrolments at the k-12 level and students taking more of their secondary programs online. To accommodate these growth trends, increasing numbers of virtual schools are being established, many with the new goal of not just providing one or a few courses, but providing full diploma programs. As more students do more of their programs online, they will have fewer opportunities to interact face-to-face with school librarians. To fill this gap, online schools will need to develop their own library services, partner with area school libraries, or provide third party library access so that students get the guidance that they need to develop 21st century skills and collaborate with course instructors. These school library services for online students will also need to go beyond the reference component in order to provide to students a varied and interesting collection along with services to encourage reading for enjoyment.

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Appendix A: *Survey questions for virtual school administrators:*

- 1) What is the name of your school?
- 2) What is your official title/role at the school?
- 3) How do you rate the level of priority your school places on providing library services/support in comparison to other academic services for your virtual school?
- 4) Personnel: Do you have a person on staff who is a designated librarian or media specialist?
- 5) Personnel: If you have a person designated as a school librarian, is this person a state certified media specialist/librarian?
- 6) Access: Does your school provide its own library for student use?
- 7) Access: If your school does provide its own library for student use, is this an online library developed by/for the school?
- 8) Does your school subscribe to a virtual library? (if yes which one(s)?)
- 9) Access: Are your students expected to use local area school libraries as part of their program?
- 10) Access: Are your students expected to use local public libraries as part of their program?
- 11) Access: How else is library access provided to your school and/or students?
- 12) Access: Does your school provide library reading materials to students?
- 13) Funding/budget: What, if any, is the annual budget available for the library?
- 14) Funding/budget: Does the school library have a library collection currency plan?
- 15) Accreditation: Is your school accredited? (If so please add the name of your accrediting organization)
- 16) Students: How many students are currently enrolled in your school?
- 17) Students: How many full time students are currently enrolled in your school? (attend your virtual school for their entire school "day")
- 18) Students: How many homeschooled students are currently enrolled in your school? (for at least one class)
- 19) Students: Do you offer a high school diploma for your students?

Appendix B: *Survey questions for virtual school primary language instructors.*

- 1) What is the name of your school?
- 2) What is your official title/role at the school?
- 3) How do you rate the level of priority your school places on providing library services/support in comparison to other academic services for your virtual school?
- 4) What are the reading requirements for your class beyond the textbook?
- 5) Is your textbook available to your students in a digital form?
- 6) Are you as a distance education teacher working with a remote school's librarian concerning your course content?
- 7) If you are working with a remote school's librarian, in what way are you working? Please describe:
- 8) What expectations do you as a distance learning teacher have for remote school libraries?
- 9) How are students expected to obtain materials on reading lists (other than textbooks)? Please rank, with format most used being first.
- 10) Do you, as the course teacher, provide reading materials to students? (select all that apply)