



Transform Your Library Now, Ask Permission Later

Almost two years ago, Suzanna Panter was selected to drive Tacoma Public Schools' two-year pilot program called Libraries of the Future, an initiative put forth by the district to determine exactly what a library of the future looks like and to bring that vision to fruition.

Suzanna Panter's experience with technology integration, open-access libraries, vibrant Makerspaces, and her habit of co-teaching are just some of the reasons she landed the job in Tacoma. Panter previously served as an Educational Specialist for Library Services in Henrico County Virginia Public Schools, where the program was named AASL's 2011 National School Library Program of the Year. She was named an ALA Emerging Leader in 2009 and was chosen to attend the first ALA Leading to the Future Institute in 2013. In 2012, her school library won the Virginia Association of School Libraries: Library Program of the Year Award, becoming the first elementary school to do so.

Q: As 21st-century library programs go, yours is considered a leader. How did you get there and become a leader?

A: I attribute my success to mentors along the way, from my undergrad Children's Literature Professor, Dr. Susan Cooper, to Dr. Gail Dickinson – my esteemed professor at Old Dominion University who taught me everything I know about school librarianship. I learned how to be a leader from the exceptional Ann Martin and how to navigate our changing educational landscapes from my Lilead Fellows. I sometimes stop and think, "How did I get here?" but I know I stood on the shoulders of giants, and I hope one day I will hold others up as they did me.



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Suzanna Panter is a very active in AASL; has published articles in Knowledge Quest, SLC, and SLJ; and is a Lilead Fellow. She has presented at numerous state and national conferences and has been featured in Publishers Weekly as an expert in school librarianship. Follow her on Twitter at @slpanter.



Q: In your opinion, what sets a traditional librarian apart from a 21st-century leader?

A: School librarianship is not about reading – it’s about learning! The teacher-librarian must be a master teacher. They need to deeply understand the curriculum and standards, and be able to teach them while integrating technology, the research process, and having fun. Yes, we need to know literature still, but the best librarians are those who love teaching, not just reading. Here in Tacoma, we are growing as a team to fit this definition by co-teaching more and expanding our use of the blended learning environment.

Q: Is there a moment when you knew you became a leader? What was the “aha” moment?

A: When I was accepted into the Lilead Fellows program! That felt amazing. Brilliant supervisors I admired from around the country let me be a part of their group. I realized then I was an equal, and it took me by surprise. It was a magical experience to grow and learn how to be better leaders from each other. It’s not position, it’s influence.

Q: What factors enabled your library program to transform into what it is today?

A: You need to know your stuff. Read articles, attend webinars and conferences, and join AASL, ISTE, and ASCD. You must be able to speak the language of your administrators. It is hard work advocating for our programs, but I am blessed to be in an amazing district with superior leadership. Our library programs have a long way to go, but Tacoma’s administrators care about kids. We need, and are working toward, full-time librarians in all our schools and equitable materials budgets. We will continue to educate our principals and directors on the true job responsibilities of the school librarian. Some principals are starting to get it, and we hope to leverage their understanding with other school leadership.

Q: What lessons did you learn from the journey? What’s been the most difficult part?

A: For me, the most difficult part is advocacy. In my position, I need to continuously fight to make our program relevant in the eyes of our administration and community. I’ve learned that you must stand up for your students and your program, in part by saying “no” to all those little jobs given to you. If you want to be treated as a professional, you need to be clear about what your job is and what it is not. You are not a fundraiser, you are not an interventionist, you are not a reading specialist, you are not a cafeteria monitor. You are a school librarian, and if you’re doing your job right, you have the hardest but most rewarding job in the building.

Q: Words of encouragement for a struggling librarian who wants to transform his/her program? What ideas can you share?

A: Transform now, ask permission later. You know more about your job than anyone else in your building. You know what needs to be done for your program to fully impact your students and staff. Just do it. Others will see what you are doing and will begin to understand more than any change proposal could teach.

