

What's In Your Classroom Library?

By Julie Christman, Ed.M., Senior Program Advisor, Schoolwide, Inc.

Kids not only need to read a lot but they also need lots of books they can read right at their fingertips. They also need access to books that entice them, attract them to reading. Schools can foster wider reading by creating school and classroom collections that provide a rich and wide array of appropriate books and magazines and by providing time every day for children to actually sit and read.

Richard L. Allington

What Really Matters for Struggling Readers: Designing Research-Based Programs

Getting Libraries Started

Florida's Pinellas County School leaders recognized the importance of classroom libraries for years, yet they lacked the funds to implement a countywide initiative to put libraries in each elementary classroom. When funding for a Reading First grant arrived, Pinellas County was at last able to begin their library project. Pinellas's top reading specialists, charged with planning and managing the project, called on Schoolwide, Inc. to get things started.

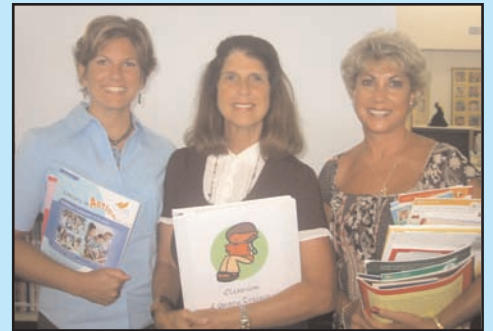
Eyvonne Ryan, Pinellas's *Reading First* Reading Coach Coordinator, chose Schoolwide, Inc. because it offered "a variety of quality literature from different publishers, leveled bundles, bins, labels, independent book bags, and the *Literacy in Action* teacher guide to help us build a community of readers. I had a very long, in-depth conversation with Educational Director and Senior Content Advisor for Schoolwide, Rory Cohen. They had everything we needed," she said.

Cohen traveled to Pinellas to train and motivate reading coaches in their implementation of the classroom library initiative at the participating schools in the county. She posed this all-important question to the coaches: "How does your classroom support your readers?" The room was very quiet. Money had been spent on manipulatives for centers and differentiated instruction, and the library had evolved to a center, but all agreed that the students were not actively engaged in text on a regular basis. Observing and conferring with students affirmed that they were quietly playing, flipping through books without having the tools to choose just-right books, and in general, wasting precious time. Students needed to learn how to book shop, and they needed a purpose for visiting the library. Teachers needed to learn how to get more teaching power from their libraries.

Hours of discovery and discussion ensued, and coaches became committed to and invested in their new mission. Schoolwide was instrumental in helping these teachers implement classroom libraries and in moving away from the idea that a library is just a center. Schoolwide's belief, based on research and best teaching practice—where books are a teacher's passion—is that the right classroom environment makes teaching reading, and writing not only easier but more productive. The goals for each classroom library created by Schoolwide are to ensure each library includes several hundred books divided between narratives and informational texts. Each library also contains a variety of levels to meet the needs of developing and more advanced students.

Top Priority: Training

"Just as important [as the funds and the books] is the training," said Deanna Texel, Pinellas Elementary Reading and Language Arts supervisor. "On our walk-throughs at schools, we had the opportunity to observe classroom teachers who had experienced solid training and follow-up training. They were effectively using



From left to right: Schoolwide Senior Program Advisor Julie Christman, Pinellas County Reading Coach Jane Dukes, and Pinellas County Staff Developer Darla Ristoff at Walsingham Elementary's Back-to-School Classroom Library Training.

their classroom libraries and helping their students find "just-right" books. We made it a requirement that, to receive a library, teachers had to commit to a six-hour training."

Two reading staff developers (former coaches with outstanding libraries) were selected to design and deliver training to schools receiving new libraries. "We told teachers not to open the boxes until they've had their library training," Texel explained, "because the wonderful collections and leveled sets often get mixed up before the teacher realizes how systematic and organized these collections need to be in order to meet the needs of their students."

Motivating Teachers

Cohen's question, "How does your classroom support your readers?" echoed around the county helping teachers to rethink their classroom space, shelves, and book collections. Coaches led teachers to their own discoveries about what their classrooms needed: an inviting, organized, leveled, labeled library to support their readers. Teachers did away with the spines-out displays and emptied every local store of its plastic bins. They inventoried their collections for quality, appropriate levels, and range of interests and genres, and they listed where they needed to fill the gaps to support all their readers. Once the teachers looked at their library as a *resource* for teaching, they realized the value of their collections; they began to see gaps in their materials for topics such as teaching story structure, writer's craft, poetry, or social studies.

Motivated by the promise of beautiful new books, teachers worked (with the support of their coach) to designate prime real estate in their rooms for a library. Teachers who sacrificed a corner for their library watched as children gravitated to the cozy space with chairs, rugs, and more book displays. Teachers who routinely used books to support their instruction soon realized that a little corner nook was not enough. They began lining the gathering area with their shelves, literally surrounding their students with books. This larger space, now devoted to the library *and* gathering area, became multi-use, maximizing valuable square footage.



A second-grade classroom library at Cross Bayou Elementary School.

Staff Developer Darla Ristoff has trained over 500 teachers and 50 Title I facilitators on effective classroom libraries. "Every time I train, I learn something new. Even teachers who have started their libraries, and think they're done, inevitably leave with fresh ideas: new ways to classify books, management methods, teaching just-right book choice, or getting more teaching power from their libraries," she said. She shows photos of model libraries and deficient libraries while asking, "Does this library say, 'Come look at me! Look in *this* bin for awesome books!' and 'How does this library *support* your readers?'"



Another view of a second-grade classroom library at Cross Bayou Elementary School.

Inspiring Changes

The results (more reading, higher scores, better conversations, bigger smiles) were so immediate, especially in schools where coaches trained with ongoing follow-up, that referendum and Title I funds were allocated to develop classroom libraries at *all* schools. As teachers received books and unveiled the shiny new additions to their libraries, they saw a higher level of engagement. They observed that the organized, inviting displays surrounding their gathering area and connecting books to their instruction yielded longer periods of sustained reading. Teaching mini-lessons on book shopping and clear expectations about carefully choosing the books students would keep all week in their independent book baggies virtually eliminated wasted time.

Room for Improvement

Teachers were progressing at their own pace and comfort level, and staff developers and coaches began to see common roadblocks to library development. When skeptical teachers said, “The kids won’t put the books back where they go,” or “My room is too small for a library/gathering area,” coaches addressed concerns with examples of successful implementation. As one coach pointed out, most kindergarteners easily classified books from messy piles into baskets for Dr. Seuss, math, insects, family, and so on. Kindergartners also loved making their own labels. They enjoyed talking and thinking about other labels they could make for the rest of the books. They discussed book-basket topics they *wished* they’d had. When the students had ownership of the library, they policed it quite well on their own and got upset when someone returned a book to the wrong place. Teachers got the idea that if five-year-olds could do it, students in any grade could, too.

Addressing the space issue, Ristoff asked teachers to envision their actual rooms. “Is the very best, quietest corner of your room full of *your* teacher desk and filing cabinets? Are all your best low shelves, that would be perfect for holding library books at eye level, full of *your* teacher editions/materials you hardly use?” Then she asked them to even consider removing their teacher desk. She shared testimonials of teachers who thought they’d never consider it and now wish they had done it long ago to make room for their students’ needs.

Walsingham’s Kick-off

At a recent training at Walsingham Elementary, Reading Coach Jane Dukes, Darla Ristoff, and I collaborated in a back-to-school staff training aimed at reconceptualizing the classroom library: from *having* a library to *using* a library to teach reading and writing.

Because teachers are accustomed to stocking their shelves themselves (out of their own pockets), they have kept practically any book that has come their way. During the training, we asked teachers to envision their home library and its contents. Were they willing to give up space at home for books that are in poor condition or on topics in which they have no interest? Certainly not. Home libraries are developed based on readability and interest level. This kind of thinking needed to be emulated in the classrooms: eliminate books that do not support the readers, make room for new attractive, attention-grabbing books and, foster a life-long love of reading.

Among the favorite parts of the training were the fish-bowl exercises in which groups prepared and delivered mini-lessons from the *Literacy in Action* book. One group watched another group teach a lesson and then they switched. Teachers were empowered by the experience of using the actual script they would later teach to students. This fun and creative activity devised by Staff Developer Julie Jones also had the side benefits of helping teachers bond and keeping teachers enthused in a late-afternoon training.

Other illuminating parts of the training were the quiet-write at the beginning, and the book sorting activity. In the quiet-write, teachers discovered what they believe about classroom libraries—it seldom included instruction. In the book sorting, a hands-on cooperative activity, everyone learned that there are endless ways to sort books. “Fiction” and “Nonfiction” labels are just not enough. For instance, teachers were glad to be reminded that “Science” is a broad topic that can be further broken down into space, weather, dinosaurs, oceans, and so on. Ristoff noted, “We always have ‘ah-ha’s’ that lead to creative planning for their libraries.”

Teachers also completed a survey about the use of their library and prioritized goals for the year. They were excited to look at their collections through a new lens with their instructional goals in mind.

Ristoff’s enthusiasm for libraries is so contagious that her audience was motivated, even well into the last hour. Many of the teachers decided to start taking action in their classroom immediately. “The lively conversations around environment, decluttering, and sacrificing teacher space for the library are invigorating for any staff,”

Ristoff observed: “Just before I send them off to work I ask the toughest question again: ‘Is the best, biggest space in your room full of your teacher desk and shelves of materials you hardly use?’ The room gets very quiet. Then, full of ideas, they hit the halls.”

In Your Classroom

Teachers know that access to, and time spent reading, quality literature across genres, and by many authors, increases students’ reading skills and allows maximum flexibility for instruction. Libraries are not small projects. They are not conceptualized, completed, nor organized in one weekend by one teacher; useful and vital classroom libraries are an ongoing, living, working reflection of your students' interests and abilities and potential. It may take some time to build the classroom library that is just right for your students and your instructional goals, adding and rearranging each year, but the effort is worth it. Schoolwide's leveled libraries and well-planned book sets will help you establish a solid foundation for a great classroom library.

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About the author: Julie Christman, now a Senior Program Advisor at Schoolwide, Inc., was formerly with Pinellas County Schools as a reading coach and staff developer and was a Reading First Professional Development regional coordinator for the State of Florida.