

Fighting Cuts: How To Keep Librarians in Schools

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Kara Yorio

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As teachers across the country are walking out recently in a fight for higher pay and better school funding, librarians are fighting to keep their jobs. From Oakland to Dallas to Scranton, PA, and in large and small towns across the United States, school librarian positions are being eliminated at an alarming rate. When the jobs are cut, it is difficult to know what to do. Emotions are running high and fighting seems futile. Besides, says Elissa Malespina, it's against the nature of most librarians to cause trouble.

"We're people who like to sit quietly by," says Malespina, a teacher librarian at Somerville (NJ) Middle School and president of International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) Librarians Network. "We like to push, at points, but [mostly] stay in the background and are helpful and don't like to make anyone mad at us."

But that stereotype must be shed when necessary and Malespina did just that. In February 2016, the South Orange-Maplewood, NJ, board of education proposed cutting three district librarians and all library funding. A parent and former librarian in the district, Malespina began attending board meetings to make a case against the cuts and started a Change.org petition and social media campaign to rally support.

A month later, the board eliminated the positions of two middle school librarians and a high school librarian, but Malespina did not go away. Instead, she increased her efforts. It took nearly two years, but in the end, she succeeded – all three librarian positions, as well as funding for books and supplies, were restored.



Elissa Malespina
Photo by Joy Yaid

So how did she do it? Malespina was admittedly a unique situation. A respected and award-winning school librarian, who had previously worked in the district, she knew the people involved locally and had connections to access resources. As a former administrator, she knew how budget decisions were made. As a parent, she was not only personally invested, she knew the day-to-day impact of the loss of librarians. In the end, though, even she had to figure it out along the way.

Now Malespina offers the wisdom of her experience. There is no definitive checklist to success, she says, but consider her “multi-tiered” approach to be a guidebook to fight cuts before they happen and get positions and funding reinstated if they do.

BEFORE:

Advocate for yourself

Self-promotion may not come naturally, but consider it a necessary job skill. Make yourself invaluable then make sure everyone knows it. This is especially important in middle and high school when parents aren’t as involved. Tell people what you’re doing. Tweet it. Blog about it. Post pictures on Instagram. Contact the local media for a story on something you and your students did. Invite parents and the superintendent in to see something you’re doing. You can’t keep the district from attempting cuts, but you can keep your name off the list.



“If you make yourself invaluable, when it comes time and administrator gets that mandate and has to figure out who to cut, the thought never enters their mind to cut the librarian,” says Malespina.

Pay attention

School boards go through budget workshops and there are often clues before cuts are proposed. At that point, start going to meetings to advocate for the positions, and start to rally public support.



Become a budget expert

Position cuts are almost always explained as a budget issue, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t the money available if the budget were managed differently.



“You have to understand the money, so you can question it,” says Malespina.

Ask yourself, “How do I find the funds to keep the positions?” then go tell the board the answer.

WHEN CUTS ARE PROPOSED

Contact EveryLibrary

EveryLibrary, a non-profit organization that helps school, public and college libraries with funding, legislation, referendums and fighting cuts, has become involved in 25 to 30 school librarian situations, including with Malespina in South Orange-Maplewood.



EveryLibrary is currently working with library advocates in Oakland, Chicago, and Philadelphia, among others. EveryLibrary helps structure the most effective petition then sends it out. The platform will generate customizable emails to specified people, such as members of the board

of education and school administrators, with every new signature. In South Orange-Maplewood, the petition generated so many emails, the district's email shut down. There was no ignoring the issue anymore.



Teaming with EveryLibrary was a game-changer, says Malespina, but it's impossible to measure the organization's success rate right now, according to EveryLibrary's political director Patrick Sweeney. They have only ramped up their school-related efforts over the last year and it usually takes at least 18 months for positions or funding to be restored.

They want librarians to be proactive.

"Contact us early," says Sweeney. "We'll support you as best we can."

The organization also pays for a digital ad campaign that helps get the word out locally and across the country and helps with direct mail or robocall campaigns. It's all free, in large part thanks to a grant from Follett.

Communicate effectively

How do people in your community get news to each other? Are there Facebook groups or is it text groups or mass emails? What about your local paper or hyperlocal news website? Maybe there's a diner, coffee shop or community center where people still gather to chat.



Figure out how to best reach all of the groups within the community and put your story out there.

Find a spokesperson or two

The person who knows the issues best may not be the best public speaker. You will need people who can stand up at meetings and speak clearly, calmly and with conviction. Tone matters. At times, Malespina stepped aside and had someone else make a point, "Because they could do it in a way that I couldn't."



Start with the facts

Have the statistics and research. It won't be the silver bullet, but it is necessary for building a solid case. The American Library Association has research and resources available to pass along to board and community members. Be specific with a list of the cuts specific impact on students and staff, as well.



Find your allies

Administrators, parents, educators and students can all be allies, but so can some members of the board of education. Talk to them individually, outside of a meeting, and identify the member or members who are most sympathetic to your cause.



Apply the pressure

Board of education members are politicians and members of the community. They need to face friends and neighbors each day and they want to get re-elected. Make them answer questions about cutting positions, the impact of it how they could be saved as often as possible from as many different people as possible.



WHEN CUTS HAPPEN

Understand the situation and be honest

Sometimes a cut is made to rid a school of an underperforming employee. Know the details and fight the correct fight. If you go in praising someone who wasn't particularly good at the job, you have lost credibility. Make it clear to the board of ed members that people can be replaced but positions are hard to get back once they are cut, Malespina says. They should never resort to cutting a position because of a person.



Continue to monitor the budget closely

Every line can be important. Don't accept anything additional without inquiry.

"I became very good at questioning consultants that came in," Malespina says. "I was seeing them come in for \$100,000 and \$75000 and I was like, 'If you have \$100,000, why don't you have a librarian?'"



Focus on long-term solution

Individual communities or parent teacher organizations often step up when a librarian is cut. They raise funds to save the position. But for how long? And at what cost to equity in a district? Certainly not all schools have those financial resources. But even if they did, it is never the answer. Districts cannot rely on these contributions and one-off rescue efforts no matter how well-meaning, says Malespina.



Instead ask those people to pressure the board, at meetings or via email or letters, and talk to people in the community about speaking out as well.

Develop a thick skin

Things can get ugly.

“People will start saying things to try to discredit you,” says Malespina.



You will alienate people whether you want to or not. For Malespina, it was dancers. While the library positions were gone, she saw a job posting for two new positions for middle school dance teachers.

“I hated to have to alienate the dance people, but I couldn’t justify it – to add a new position, no matter what it was,” she said.

Stay vigilant

School board meetings can be boring. Feeling like you are getting nowhere can make it difficult to keep up the fight, but you need to continue to put pressure on the board and administrators and point out every issue that arises. It can help to have a core of people who can share the duties. Life is going to get in the way but the only way to get things done is to prove to them that you’re not going anywhere.



Use your resources

You are not alone. Here are some places that can help:

- “[From Advocacy to Activism](#),” a four-part free webinar series from ISTE Librarians and Every Library. January 29: [Help them fund you](#); April 29, [Fighting back when cuts are threatened](#); August 6, [Power map your district for advocacy success](#); October 23, [Using social media and email to maximize visibility](#)
- [EveryLibrary](#)
- [Save School Librarians](#)
- [American Association of School Librarians](#)
- [State AASL Affiliate](#)
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