

Who Will Replace the Super Heroes? School Librarians and the Retirement Crisis

By Jody K. Howard

Recently, the DVD version of Disney's *The Incredibles*¹ was made available for purchase. In one of the advertisements for this DVD, the announcer said something along the lines of, what would the world be like without all of the super heroes? He then proceeded to encourage everyone to purchase a personal copy of *The Incredibles*. Without giving away the plot, the basic storyline is that all of the super heroes have been forced to go into the super hero witness protection program and then are systematically being eliminated—permanently. The world becomes very vulnerable to an attack from any evil enemy and, of course, that enemy does eventually surface to wreak havoc on the world. This commercial and the plot from *The Incredibles* reminded me of the current situation we have with librarians in general and school librarians in particular. No, they are not all in a super hero witness protection program. However, they are disappearing from our profession, and the school environment is exposed to an “attack” which will affect the achievement level of our students. Many of these super heroes are retiring from our profession..

RETIREMENT

Much has been written recently about the graying of the library profession. James M. Matarazzo, Dean Emeritus of Simmons College's Graduate School of Library and Information Science in Boston, provides the sobering fact that between 1990 and 2010, 83,000 librarians are projected to retire² with half of the library workforce retiring every twenty years. Library programs are providing approximately 5,000 graduates per year, which barely covers the anticipated vacancies.

In the study, *Retirement, Retention, and Recruitment: The Future of Librarianship in Colorado*,³ the responses concerning retirement from the school librarians was alarming. Of the 110 school librarians participating in the study, 47 percent plan to retire from the library profession within the next five years. Although this figure cannot be considered a general percentage for the entire state, it does show that there is a critical need for school librarians here in Colorado.

The challenge we have in the school library field is: How do we attract candidates to the field of school librarianship to fill these anticipated vacancies? Young, Heron, and Powell⁴ state that attracting candidates to the library profession is hampered by the low salaries and the perception that the library field in general is not as prestigious as other fields. Another hindrance in the school setting is that the librarian is responsible for every aspect of the total library program. Many times this is a one-person operation without additional staffing. Conducting an entire program without any assistance is a daunting task. *Information Power*⁵ describes the role of the school librarian as encompassing three areas: learning and teaching, information access, and program administration. The expectation for the school librarian is to be a teacher collaborating with as many classroom teachers as possible, providing access for all students and staff to the information and skills they need to become lifelong learners. A school librarian must also develop a well functioning program that provides resources supporting the other two facets of

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the position. In discussing the state required competencies for school librarians, one principal told me that school librarians must also be able to walk on water—true Super Heroes! With these expectations, attracting candidates to these positions can be difficult.

In order to attract interested persons to the school library profession, some school districts and the universities in the state with school library programs have held various meetings to explain the role of the school librarian. In January of 2005, the Colorado School Library Leaders (CoSLL) sponsored two informational meetings in the Denver Metro area. The university representatives who were present explained their programs, distributed program brochures, and answered questions concerning their courses of study. Nance Nassar, the School Library Senior Consultant at the Colorado State Library (CSL), explained the new rules for state endorsement in school libraries.⁶ Approximately one hundred interested persons attended these meetings. In addition to these types of meetings, school library directors in specific school districts have organized mini-recruitment fairs where school librarians and classroom teachers in their buildings who have expressed an interest in becoming a school librarian have spent an evening in dialogue discussing the role of a school librarian.

NEW ENDORSEMENT RULES

Another factor that is helping attract people to the school librarian way of life is through the recent changes to the School Library Endorsement Rules. Prior to September 2003, candidates wanting to obtain endorsement in the school library field were required to have a valid teacher's license and one year of classroom experience. The only avenue for becoming a school librarian was through the K-12 classroom. CoSLL members were aware of many librarians with master's degrees in library science and paraprofessionals working in the libraries who wanted to achieve state endorsement. Under the previous endorsement rules, this was not possible. A CoSLL subcommittee, working with CSL, produced a tiered system with two different levels of endorsement.

Teacher Librarian. This level is the highest level of endorsement and requires a valid teacher's license, one year of classroom experience, and a master's degree in the library science content area.

School Librarian. This level of endorsement requires a valid teaching license, and the minimum of 24 hours of specific library science courses. This level does not require the candidate to have the one year of classroom experience.

The significant change in the endorsement rules is that persons wanting to gain school library endorsement who do not have a teaching license may now do so through the alternative teaching licensure program. Candidates would complete the required library science courses initially and then work with their school districts to gain their teaching licenses through the Teacher in Residency Program or the Alternative Teacher Preparation Program.

Even though at first glance the new endorsement rules may look confusing, they provide additional paths to achieving state endorsement in the school library area. People who have a desire to become

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endorsed can do so through a variety of methods, making more people eligible to obtain endorsement. Having additional people eligible for this endorsement will help mitigate the shortage of the school librarians we are currently experiencing.

WHO ARE THE NEXT SUPER HEROES?

The facts are evident. We are going to lose a significant number of school librarians in the next five to ten years. In replacing the super heroes who are leaving the profession with ones who will continue in the school library legacy, we need people with specific qualifications. Although many qualities are necessary for persons assuming these positions, one area that is receiving emphasis in the education field today is the role of leadership. The ultimate purpose of librarians being in the schools, as with teachers, is to promote, develop, enhance, and increase the achievement level of the students. Several recent articles have discussed the relationship of leadership to student achievement. Lance, Rodney, and Hamilton-Pennell's research⁷ indicates that school librarians who exercise leadership and collaborate with classroom teachers tend to be instrumental in the academic achievement of students. Waters, Marzano, and McNulty in their working paper, *Balanced Leadership*,⁸ have found a correlation between the leadership qualities of principals and other school leaders and the increase of student achievement. In this working paper, they identified twenty-one leadership traits that have a direct correlation with student achievement. Many of these traits are appropriate for the school librarian. The new state endorsement rules for both the Teacher Librarian and the School Librarian require the candidates to demonstrate leadership ability. Young, Heron, and Powell⁹ also indicate that one reason candidates are not entering the field of librarianship is because of the reluctance on the part of some to assume the leadership responsibilities associated with these library positions.

We need leaders. There are many different definitions of leadership, and sometimes leadership is confused with management. What the school library needs is someone who truly exhibits specific leadership qualities. Kouzes and Posner in *The Leadership Challenge*¹⁰ have conducted extensive research over the last twenty years to determine the qualities that effective leaders exhibit. They have found that effective leaders model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. These are the types of people we need. They should be able to work with the teachers and model best practices in the instructional arena through collaboration. School librarians should have a vision for the library that aligns with the school's vision for improvement. They should be willing to analyze the improvement processes already in place in the schools, and through valid and reliable action research and reflective problem solving, help the staff determine if the current practices are appropriate for the academic achievement of students. As professionals they should foster collaboration in every aspect of the school community, building trust and supporting the efforts of others.

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Finally, school librarians should recognize the efforts of others and appreciate their accomplishments. If the school librarians can develop these skills and bring them to the school setting, then the students and other members of the school community will grow and develop in their pursuit of lifelong learning.

THE FUTURE

At the conclusion of *The Incredibles*, the super heroes are victorious and are allowed to leave the super hero witness protection program. (Of course, it is a Disney movie!) Our situation with the number of school librarians retiring in the next few years will not be as easily solved. As members of the library profession, we must continue our efforts to recruit school librarians who will be leaders in our schools; we must make academic programs available to all interested persons wanting to receive this training; and we must promote the value of our school library positions, illustrating the link between our roles and the academic achievement of students. We may be losing many incredible, super school librarians, but we must make the commitment to replace them with equally incredible super heroes.

NOTES:

¹*The Incredibles*, DVD. 115 minutes. Walt Disney Home Entertainment, Burbank, CA 2005.

²Young, Arthur, Peter Heron, and Ronald Powell. "What will GEN NEXT need to Lead?" *American Libraries*, May 2004. 33-35.

³Steffen, Nicole, Keith Curry Lance, Becky Russell, and Zeth Lietzau, *Retirement, Retention, and Recruitment: The Future of Librarianship in Colorado, A Closer Look*. Denver, CO: Library Research Service, September, 2004.

⁴Young, Heron, and Powell. Ibid.

⁵American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communications and Technology. *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1998.

⁶Colorado State Library. *School Library Media Development Program*. <<http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdelib/LibDev/SchoolLib/slschool.htm>>.

⁷Lance, Keith Curry, Marcia J. Rodney, and Christine Hamilton-Pennell. *How School Librarians Help Kids Achieve Standards: The Second Colorado Study*. Denver, CO: Colorado Department of Education, April, 2000.

⁸Waters, Tim, Robert J. Marzano, and Brian McNulty. *Balanced Leadership: What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement, A Working Paper*. McRel, 2003

⁹Young, Heron, and Powell. Ibid.

¹⁰Kouzes, James M. and Barry Z. Posner. *The Leadership Challenge*. 3rd ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002: 10.

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