

# One Common Challenge— Two Different Solutions

Stories from Two  
School Libraries

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and Colleen Graves**

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*"No subject of study is more  
important than reading...  
All other intellectual powers  
depend on it."*

*—attributed to Jacques  
Barzun*

Reading is a foundational tool for successful learning in and outside of school. At the middle and high school levels, educators are keenly aware of the consequences to the lifelong learning prospects of students who are not proficient readers or who simply choose not to read and develop their comprehension skills. The *Condition of College and Career Readiness 2012* report by ACT found that only 52 percent of high school graduates met the reading benchmark. While this percentage has remained steady from 2010 to 2012 and is down from 53 percent in 2008 and 2009, students, educators, parents, and decision makers should not be satisfied with this level of proficiency. Even if students are not pursuing post-secondary education, they must be proficient readers to contribute to the workforce and to civic and political life.

What does this circumstance mean for school librarians? School librarians are concerned about students' physical and intellectual access to ideas and information. We know that the school library with its wide range of print and online resources can be a treasure trove of opportunity for youth. By providing access to reading materials in a variety of formats and genres, school librarians hope to entice reluctant readers to take full advantage of the library's treasures. Through coteaching reading comprehension strategies with classroom teachers, we hope to improve the reading proficiency of striving readers who can also benefit from increasing their use of library materials during curriculum-based and personal interest inquiry projects. Reading is central to the school library's mission.

For the past sixteen years, the International Reading Association has been conducting an annual

survey of literacy leaders. In the "What's Hot, What's Not" literacy survey for 2013, 75 percent of respondents said adolescent literacy and comprehension were "very hot." One hundred percent were in agreement that both topics should be hot issues in teaching and learning (Cassidy and Grote-Garcia 2012, 10). The sociocultural context of reading at the secondary level requires students to be proficient independent readers. For example, students are often assigned reading as homework. This can involve their reading difficult texts while isolated from the support of their peers and teachers.

Traditionally, school librarians have had two main strategies for impacting the literacy development of students in their schools. One way is through reading promotion efforts: book talks, book displays, or online book trailers, and literacy events such as book fairs, contests, and reading incentive programs. The other way has been through teaching or coteaching reading comprehension and information literacy skills through standalone or collaborative lessons and units of study.

Today, school librarians are considering other strategies to address the challenges associated with adolescent literacy. One of those strategies is to genre-fy the fiction section of the school library. Rather than shelving all fiction by the author's last name, this organization scheme—with the goal of increasing students' easy access to books—involves reorganizing the library based on the book's genre. Another strategy is re-visioning the library as an "Information Commons" (Harland 2011).

In the stories that follow, two Texas middle school librarians Jana Hunt and Colleen Graves





When the school year began, **everyone** began flocking to the school library to check out the changes—and the books!

Showcasing a popular genre at Lamar Middle School.

share their solutions for rising to meet this challenge. I interviewed each librarian and developed the following vignettes for this article. Jana and Colleen provided the illustrations and approved this article.

### Wedgwood Middle School Story

Jana Hunt, veteran librarian at Wedgwood Middle School in Fort Worth Independent School District (ISD), was worried. She was very familiar with the reading scores for her school that showed students were not achieving grade-level benchmarks in reading. With more than eight hundred students, three-quarters of whom were receiving free or reduced lunch, Jana's principal and faculty were focused on improving students' proficiency in reading. During her annual library orientation sessions, Jana noted 75 percent of students struggled to conduct author searches, even after instruction. She often heard students ask as they came through the library door, "Where are the scary books?"

In spring 2011, after hearing a genre-fiction presentation by Texas librarian colleague Tammi

Burns, Jana decided to genre-fy the fiction section of the Wedgwood Library using the NoveList genre classification scheme. Her goal was for the library program to be an integral part of improving reading proficiency by stimulating more reluctant and striving readers to read more and use the resources of the school library more effectively.

With the help of fifteen student aides and fifteen to twenty student book club members, Jana and her crew completed the entire process in three weeks. The school library was closed only when all the books were taken off the shelves, just three days. A science teacher volunteered to bring students to the library to help. The principal and the English language arts teachers were thrilled that the library would be fully operational for most of the process.

The crew placed genre labels on the spines of all of the fiction books. When books could be categorized in more than one genre, students read reviews, book jackets, and entire books to make the genre determination. In the catalog, team members edited the call numbers for each book to include the genre designation. All former "story

collection" books were moved into appropriate genres. Then the labeled books were placed in genre sections on the library shelves. The crew made student-friendly signage for each genre and celebrated their achievement.

Since genre-fying the fiction section of her school library, Jana reports that students are lined up outside the library doors every morning. She has noticed how excited the new seventh-grade students are at orientation. They find the genre organization "sticky" and decidedly different from their elementary school library experiences. Jana continues to provide book talks but makes a special effort to base each talk on a specific genre. After her talks, students rush to the shelves and put pressure on their teachers to decide who will be the first to check out these titles. Jana also notes that, after these class and book club book talks, students are using the online catalog to look for other books in that genre or written by the authors she spotlights. In addition, Jana continues to create and link book trailers that further promote these books.

Here are some quotes from Wedgwood faculty:

"Having the fiction books divided by genre helps students to easily locate books that

interest them. The system is very user friendly!”—Donna Harrison, seventh- and eighth-grade English language arts and reading teacher

“It is so much easier to assist students in locating books using the genre-based organized library vs. the old setup.”—Allison Hamrick, seventh-grade English language arts and reading teacher

“Since genre-fying the library we have seen a dramatic increase in students wanting to check out books. I believe organizing by genres gives students some focus in the library in terms of how to find the genre they are interested in. Providing this focus has increased the number of students with books in their hands reading outside of school. There is nothing like seeing a line of over fifty students every morning beating down the doors to get into the library!!!!”  
T. J. Jarchow, principal

Clearly, Jana Hunt has the support of her principal and staff for genre-fying the fiction section of the library. Students are engaged; colleagues are supportive. Jana believes genre-fying helped her reach out to students and made the resources of the library accessible and attractive, particularly for reluctant readers. In fact, Jana reported Wedgwood’s library circulation soared from 7,569 items in 2011–2012 to 16,024 items in 2012–2013. Still, I wondered why she doesn’t genre-fy the informational books in her collection so I asked, and Jana confided, “The librarian in me still loves Dewey.”

Note: Wedgwood is a feeder school for high schools with libraries

that continue to use the Dewey classification system exclusively.

### Lamar Middle School Story

In fall 2012 Colleen Graves was the new librarian at Lamar Middle School Library in Lewisville ISD. Hired just before she completed her library degree, Colleen was anxious to get her career off to a successful start. When Colleen toured the school library during her job interview, Leigh Ann Lewis, her soon-to-be principal, noted that the library resources were underutilized. Colleen shared her vision for the library and expressed her commitment to putting into action what she had learned from reading *The Learning Commons: Seven Simple Steps to Transform Your Library* (Harland 2011). Colleen was hired on the spot.

That summer Colleen prepared to serve the needs of eight hundred ethnically diverse middle-income students. She noted that, upon entering the school library, the Lamar learning community’s first impression was of musty reference

materials, including out-of-date sets of encyclopedias. In fact, many books on the library shelves had outlived their usefulness. In addition, the library space did not flow. Committed to her vision and her promise to her principal, Colleen personally moved every book and deselected many titles as she reorganized the school library collection and reconfigured the library space.

Colleen moved the fiction books to greater prominence in the library. Like Jana, Colleen understands students’ need to quickly and effectively browse. She developed a “showcase” bookshelf where new books are displayed, covers facing out. Colleen’s goal for the showcase was to help reluctant readers quickly locate the newest books in the collection from a small selection of titles. She has achieved her goal. This collection within the collection also allows student aides to easily keep these shelves replenished. While she did not genre-fy the entire library, she did decide to showcase books in popular genres by displaying the books together, many with the front covers visible. (Spine





# As word spread throughout the learning community, library usage soared.

labeling on Lamar library materials conforms to the district's Dewey standard.)

She also moved shelves and furniture to create reading nooks and relocated computers that had been spread throughout the library. Colleen set up a lab at the back of the school library space where a screen and digital projector could also be located. Moving shelves and furniture opened up a new study space at the front of the library; Colleen installed café seating there to attract students. She topped off the library re-visioning with fresh paint and decals in geometric shapes to add color and pizzazz to the room.

When the school year began, everyone began flocking to the school library to check out the changes—and the books! As word spread throughout the learning community, library usage soared.

As many as eighty students now come to the library every morning before school to read, study, use the computers, chat with friends, and check out books. Colleen noticed a student who came every day but never touched a book. Her theory is, "If they sit in the Learning Commons long enough, they are bound to pick up a book!" And by the end of the year, that student did. In fact, at the end of her first year, Colleen reports that the Lamar circulation increased by 34 percent compared with the previous year's stats.

Students are not the only stakeholders who have responded positively to the changes in the library. Teachers are also using the resources of the library and collaborating more, and the principal is pleased with the results:

"My ESL students have really enjoyed coming to the library this year. Even my reluctant readers have shown an enthusiasm for checking out

books and actually reading them! I definitely attribute this to the inviting, relaxed atmosphere that you [Colleen] have created in the library this year. Thanks so much for all of your effort in this great transformation!"—Kelly Baxter, teacher

"The library gives them [GATE students] a place where they feel welcome and comfortable to collaborate and actively engage in their learning."—Phyllis Robertson, gifted and talented education (GATE) teacher

Principal Lewis noted, "Our goal was to transform the library into a digital hub and knowledge center for our students. We changed the traditional library setting into an eclectic 21st-century learning environment that our students would flock to for creative and innovative ideas."

Note: Lamar Middle School students will matriculate at a high school with a genre-fied fiction collection; that library is also in the process of developing a learning commons model.

## How Will You Respond to This Challenge?

Practitioners in the school library field must continually demonstrate to school administrators, classroom colleagues, students, parents and caregivers, and the public at large that their daily practice results in improved student learning. School librarians realize that everyone is "from Missouri" and needs to be shown that school library resources make a difference. Regardless of the strategy you choose, to the right are ten questions to ask yourself and discuss with your principal and colleagues as you rise to meet



the challenge of engaging students, particularly reluctant readers, with library resources.

Perhaps there is no “one-size-fits-all” organization scheme for 21st-century school libraries. In the near future the topic of this conversation may be a moot point, and we will be facilitating the use of library resources like those described by the *TeachThought* blog staff in an April 2013 post. Libraries could use “RFID [radio frequency identification] or near-field communications systems, tiny chips inside the spines of books that communicate with smartphone apps, e-reader tablets or special book-finding devices available at the front desk. Not only would it feel

more familiar to students raised on digital tech, but imagine scanning rows of stacks with an augmented reality viewfinder, looking through the screen instead of at the shelves, hunting for a book that lights up when you’ve found it.”

How cool is that? Still, as long as we have physical objects in our library collections we must have some way to organize and locate them. We all hope the day will come when all children and youth have efficient and effective access to print and electronic resources—resources designed to engage them in reading and involve them in school library learning spaces.

## ask yourself...

1. On what data are you basing these innovations?
2. What are your strategies for ensuring support from all library stakeholders?
3. How will you get others involved and make sure they have ownership in the process?
4. What has been the response from the administration and faculty to the idea of making these changes in the organization of the library and its resources?
5. Would a pilot project or intermediary step be a way to test the effectiveness of the changes you are proposing?
6. What kinds of library organization schemes will students experience as they advance through the instructional levels in your school district and in post-secondary education?
7. How will you align the organization schemes of both print and electronic resources in the library collection?
8. What kinds of human resources do you have at your disposal to help you make the desired changes to the collection and physical environment of the library?
9. What are the financial resources you will need to achieve these goals?
10. How will you measure whether your innovations are successful?

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