A 21st Century Library in a 20th Century Space

No need to wait for a total redesign.
Careful use of space and resources can transform a school library.

Alanna S. Graboyes

In 2007, when I became head librarian at George C. Marshall High School, a Fairfax County, Virginia, public school with 1,600 students, the library was frozen in the 1960s and 1970s. Nearly a decade into the 21st century, the library had barely made it past the middle of the 20th. The space was designed for a slide-rule-andmimeograph student who searched in a card catalog, not by Internet or computer. The place needed new energy and life to entice current students to visit.

The school is preparing for a major renovation to be completed in 2014, but our move into a newly designed space won't come soon enough for students who are already here. My co-librarian, Judith Watson, and I needed to make short-term changes with a minimal budget. We began by considering how students use a high school library.

What Is a High School Library?

Today’s well-functioning high school libraries are learning centers where students can study, read, research, collaborate, explore, think, create, discover, and just be. A high school library should be a sanctuary—an inviting and comfortable refuge in which to escape distractions. It should be an exploration center, where creative thinking and discovery flourish. It should be easily adaptable—a fluid space filled with movable pieces that can respond to changing needs. It should be accessible and have an easy-to-use collection of books and other media.

A high school library should constantly be reevaluated and updated so that it remains all these things. High school libraries shouldn’t be computer labs, detention rooms, testing centers, or depositories for outdated books.

Once we had a vision of what a library ought to be, we began considering how our library could better fulfill this vision. In reevaluating our library, we looked at everything we were putting into the space, from furniture to books to online resources. We examined how students were using the materials and the space and considered how we could make the library more usable and appealing without spending more than we could afford.

What’s in the Space?

Our library was previously crowded with 84-inch-tall, dark, heavy bookcases that blocked a range of windows and created hiding areas. The room was cluttered with large wooden tables. Computers were jammed together in the center of the room. The walls were hidden behind posters highlighting students who graduated long ago.

Bookshelves. We decided to cut most of the bookshelves to 48 inches so that natural light would flow into the room. We purchased light-colored, slatted-wood end-panels for the bookcases, giving them a contemporary look and providing an attractive place to display books we wanted to highlight. The books that appear in these and other display areas throughout the library change frequently and keep students aware of new and interesting items in our collection.

Chairs and tables. Brightly colored chairs and modular tables replaced the long wooden tables and chairs where...
students sat to work. The new tables can be grouped together or pulled apart, making them useful for group study or individual use. We also purchased comfortable reading chairs to create an inviting area for leisure reading. The bright colors and lively matching rug make the space vibrant.

Walls. We stripped the walls of all the old and outdated posters and replaced them with a series of abstract paintings I created that complemented the brightly colored chairs, plus a series of paintings representing literary genres. The paintings make the room livelier, more cohesive, and more adult.

How Is the Space Arranged?
Our library was previously divided into separate areas for bookshelves, tables, and computers. Either you located a book, sat at a table with four other students, or used a computer amid other students’ constant chatter. There were no spaces for quiet reading and studying. The library’s design served the furniture, not the students. The new comfortable chairs and contemporary book displays encouraged leisure reading, but there were more spaces that needed work.

Instruction area and quiet zone. Our instruction area, off to one side of the library, was directly in the path to our busy technology office. Whenever a class used the area, tables and chairs needed to be rearranged for better visibility and then moved back again to create a clear path for moving technology equipment to the office.

We moved the instruction area to another part of the library and kept two rows of tall bookshelves to serve as a boundary between the central library area and the instruction area. When not used by classes, especially before school and during lunch and remediation periods, it serves as a quiet zone that students may use for silent reading and study. We updated the area with new chairs, tables, and an interactive whiteboard. It was no longer a walk-through.

Computer area. Ideally, computers should be placed throughout the room and integrated into the rest of the library space, but our computers have dedicated lines for accessing the school’s network, so we could not disperse them throughout the room without great cost. Our technology department was able to loosen up the crowded computer area by moving four computers to an unused network portal. We fanned the rest of the computer stations out so they no longer formed a severe line. We purchased flat-screen monitors, which take up less space, and replaced the heavy wooden tables the computers sat on with used but more computer-suitable tables that were donated to the library. The library looks more modern and less cluttered, even though only the monitors and tables were changed.

Additional rooms. Several rooms flank the perimeter of the main library space. One room that housed education journals and out-of-date books was reserved for faculty use, but faculty members rarely used it. To better serve
the busy lunchtime crowds of students, we cleared the room out and made it available for student group study, by reservation. The bookshelves are filled with our growing foreign-language collection. We relocated the useful education journals to a faculty lounge. Another room filled with file cabinets and boxes has become a media viewing room for students who missed an in-class video or for faculty who want to preview a video.

A formerly dingy dumping room for audiovisual equipment and old periodicals became a brightly lit special collections room with an academic atmosphere. We distributed functioning equipment to faculty and moved old and malfunctioning equipment to the discard warehouse. We cleaned the room, added used but perfectly suitable furniture, and organized an archive of out-of-print magazines, primary resources, and memorabilia.

**What’s in the Collection?**

The book collection was aggressively weeded before I arrived, but even after two more years of removing dross, the collection contained far too many worn-out, outdated books. We continued removing unsuitable books, and once we felt comfortable with the dramatically reduced collection, we beefed up areas that support the departmental curriculums and students’ individual pursuits.

Current content. We want to make sure that the materials in our library are up-to-date, particularly in subjects like science that are constantly changing.

**Improvement often came through removing, not adding.**

We purchase print books on popular science topics, but we acquire research materials through online sources, electronic books, and databases to ensure that information is as current as possible.

Our students come from around the world, and they enjoy showing their friends pictures of where they’re from. We acquired colorful, image-rich guidebooks, and we make sure to keep our collection up-to-date. Books with faded photographs of people wearing outdated clothing are immediately discarded.

Appealing content. We’ve seen an increase in the number of students reading for pleasure. During lunch, the library is filled with students reading in our comfortable chairs and our quiet zone. Because teens’ tastes change so rapidly, we purchase the most current fiction and make sure to replace the most-read titles with fresh editions.

Popular manga, graphic classics, and graphic nonfiction books attract a variety of students, including students interested in cartooning, English
language learners, and students—many of them former nonreaders—who enjoy the visual content. Students reread these books so often that replacements occur quite frequently.

Our visual learners love books filled with colorful and graphically pleasing, up-to-date material. These include art books, cookbooks, and historical nonfiction. If we want our students to look at our collection, it must contain textual and visual information.

**Virtual content.** We designed a comprehensive website (www.gcmhslibrary.com), providing easy access to our web-based collection of databases of magazines, newspapers, reference books, and primary resources. Our website also includes instructional tutorials, book discussions, our catalog, and dozens of recommended websites and collections. Many of these virtual materials are available both in the library and remotely.

**How Is the Collection Arranged?**

Like most school libraries, our library uses the 135-year-old Dewey Decimal System. The system is foreign to most of our students. We tell them “generalities” are found in the 000s, but what’s a “generality”? We have students from nearly 100 countries, yet Dewey ranges remain woefully Eurocentric, and many subject divisions (such as economics) represent the intellectual sensibilities of a century ago. Dewey is also too one-dimensional. Why does a book have to be either a biography or an art book? Why can’t it be both? Dewey is a start, but it can easily be altered to become more powerful.

**Color-coding.** Many of our students love looking at books about specific countries and regions. We’ve made these books easier to locate by shelving them together and color-coding them by geographic area. For example, the books about Africa have blue labels on the spine, and books about the Caribbean have red labels.

Our art books and cookbooks, with their beautiful illustrations, were appealing to many students, but they were getting lost amid the more text-heavy nonfiction books. To show them off, we pulled them from their original locations and coded them with transparent pink labels for the art books and transparent brown labels for the cookbooks. They’re now more visible and easier to reshelve. The color-coding system proved immediately successful.

**Biographies by subject.** The Dewey Decimal System treats biographies differently from other nonfiction books. Biographies have a separate shelf number, 92, followed by the first three letters of the subject’s name. (A biography on James Dean would be 92 DEA.) Students are mystified by this arrangement, which requires them to either know whom they’d like to read about or browse the entire section to find a book of interest.

For ease of browsing, we eliminated the separate biography section. Each biography has a fluorescent orange label...
at the top of the spine and a subject indicator—a book on Joe DiMaggio would be SPO 700 (“SPO” for sports, 700 for Dewey range). These books are integrated into our nonfiction area at the beginning of the subject range in which they belong.

**Lessons for Renovation**

Many librarians would love to update their space, but in a time of tight budgets, such improvements require creativity. By enlisting the help of people interested in the library’s welfare—librarians, students, parents, staff, administrators, and Friends of the Library—we were able to make significant improvements at minimal cost.

For us, improvement often came through removing, not adding. Weeding the collection and removing or altering extraneous furniture, technology, and decoration does not require extensive funds. Reorganizing the space mainly requires labor. Showcasing new acquisitions costs nothing. Using student and staff artwork to decorate the library personalizes and revitalizes the space—and costs nothing.

The entire project cost approximately $14,200, but the cost to the school—including money obtained from grants, the Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA), and Friends of the Library—came to about $6,550, roughly $4 per student. (See fig. 1 on p. 76 for a breakdown of our costs.) To expand your budget, my advice is to apply for grants; ask your principal whether there is discretionary money available; and form a Friends of the Library group to raise funds, solicit donations, and provide free labor.

We’re continuing to monitor how our students use the space and how they adapt to our changes, and we’ll assess whether other changes should be made in the more large-scale renovation to come. The lessons learned from this experiment will help us build a space that, in 2054, will still be relevant.

**Author’s note:** Many of our ideas for improvement were inspired by Sullivan, M. (2011). Divine design: how to create the 21st-century school library of your dreams. *School Library Journal*, 56(4), 26–32.

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