Walk outside the main doors of the school library. Pretend you have never been there before. Now, as you stand there, ponder these questions:

▶ What might the first impressions of the school library be for students, staff members, parents, administrators, or community members?
▶ Is the facility a warm, inviting place where they want to be?
▶ Is it clearly organized and labeled for ease of use and access?
▶ Is it in such pristine shape that it looks like no one has ever used it?
▶ Is it full of clutter and over stimulating?
▶ Is it stark and bare reminding you more of a sterilized hospital than a school library?

The responses to these questions can be very telling. Environment isn’t just the space itself; it also includes the feelings and vibes—the atmosphere. As with all environments there are elements that can’t be controlled. So, the focus needs to be on what can be changed and modified to make the environment better.

The environment in the school library can be compared to others in the real world. For example, think about the rain forest. What elements have come together to make it a place where animals and plants can grow and flourish? On the other hand, animals from the rainforest will probably not function well in a desert. Not all environments are the same. Elementary students probably won’t grow and thrive in a high school library and vice versa. It is, therefore, important for school librarians to be aware of their patrons so that they can alter and adjust the environment to meet specific needs.

Absence of Threat

It is important to remember that the library does not belong to the school librarian. It isn't his/her room. It is a space that belongs to the entire school—a space that the school librarian coordinates and guides. Students need to think that this is a space where they are respected and valued. They need to perceive the library as a place to read, to relax, to research, to explore, and to create. The greatest compliment to a school library program is when students feel comfortable coming to the library on their own, during free time.

It is also important to build a culture of trust. Each student using the school library should know the expectations and procedures. This doesn’t mean reams and reams of rules and someone glaring at them the entire time they are present. Instead, there
should be a clear set of procedures and expectations for students while in the library. These should be phrased positively so only the best behavior is assumed and expected. There should be procedures for checking out books, as well as procedures for what to do when coming to the library during recess. Don’t assume students will know what to do or what is expected unless they are told.

Students also need to know that the school librarian and library support staff are there to help them when they need it. Every student needs to feel that his or her problem or issue is valid and important. An environment needs to be created where students feel comfortable asking for help and guidance. Just as respect from students is wanted and expected, that behavior must also be modeled by library staff.

It is much like animals in the wild who find a place where they can be safe from predators. When they feel threatened, it is impossible for them to think of anything else. The same applies for students; perceived threats must be eliminated for learning to take place.

**Food Chain**

In successful environments, there is a balance in the food chain. Every living organism in the environment has its needs met. There is a balance with sufficient food and sufficient space. There are many similarities in the school library.

The library collection must provide resources in multiple formats, at multiple levels, and for multiple purposes. There should also be sufficient resources to help meet curriculum and academic standards as well as materials that support recreational reading and personal interests. Everyone needs to feel as if his or her needs are being met.

Beyond the physical facility, the collection should include online resources that can be accessed throughout the school, in the library, and from home. This is an opportunity to increase the reach of the school library beyond the physical space of the library.

**Physical Space**

Just as individuals have different ideas on how to decorate their homes, school librarians have different ideas on how to decorate school libraries. The tops of library shelves offer a great space for creating a comforting environment. Plants and greenery do wonders to soften the space. Strategically positioning statues and other objects can help guide students to certain areas. Displaying student work also helps students feel that they are a part of the school library environment.

**Virtual Space**

Environment can extend beyond the school library walls with an online presence. Web 2.0 tools can be used to make the library Web site more dynamic and interactive. Relevant information, links, and databases for students to access at school and at home can be listed. Students can be informed about the school library program and other resources through blogs, wikis, podcasts, Twitter, and Facebook groups. Not all of these will work for every school library, but it is necessary for school librarians to consider an online presence and what it can reveal about the library program. Does a welcoming and helpful environment extend beyond the library walls? It should.

**Adaptations**

The environment of the school library needs to be flexible and quick to adapt. This can be challenging because it may require moving past the perspective, “We’ve always done it this way.” But, any growing and thriving environment should constantly be changing to be more effective for users.

If students are clamoring for graphic novels and they are scattered throughout the collection, then it is time to shelf them in a special section. If room for small groups is needed, then shelving or furniture should be moved to provide it.

Changes in curriculum, standards, and/or faculty can also require change in the library program. For example, the new American Association of School Librarians Standards for the 21st-Century Learner may call for parts of the library environment to be changed in order to successfully implement the standards. What needs to be provided in school libraries to ensure students are learning and using the skills outlined?

The economy is affecting school budgets and has resulted in resource and staffing cuts in school libraries. These changes, in turn, impact the library environment. It forces school librarians to identify the essential elements of the program and any changes needed to protect those elements. It means that some things will have to go away since it isn’t possible to do everything.

**Extinction**

Much like the rainforest, school library environments are being threatened. Leadership is needed to make sure new school library environments are created where students can grow and thrive. Just as there have been “Save the Rainforest” campaigns, students, teachers, and administrators need to be clamoring to save school libraries.

Sometimes the first place to start when reevaluating a school library program is the physical environment. Open the doors wide and create a place where students, teachers, and administrators want to spend all day.

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