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# Small Schools and Libraries: A Combination for Success

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# SMALL SCHOOLS AND LIBRARIES

## A C o m b i n a t i o n f o r S u c c e s s

Seventh-day Adventist educators know that school libraries are a critical component of success, and efforts are being made to provide both teachers and students adequate access to library resources. For example, in 1981, Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists (now Southern Adventist University) and the Georgia-Cumberland Conference Education Department launched a program to provide elementary schools with high-quality library materials.<sup>1</sup> In 1991, planning was underway for the construction of a library at Inca Union University in Peru. The plans for this library were unique in that they included a floor dedicated to children's books. "You see," said Wolfhard Tou-

chard, one of the people behind the new design, "the elementary and secondary schools have no books: they can't afford any. So I suggested they include libraries for these two schools in with the university library. If you want students to successfully use their reference skills when entering college, they need to develop them while in the elementary grades."<sup>2</sup>

### Meeting the Challenge

In 2005, Annette Melgosa published an article in this journal that affirmed once again that "the school library, properly set up and properly managed, can provide [a] window of faith, academic excellence, and opportunity."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, not all

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BY KATIE McGRATH





**Many public libraries have trained staff that are more than willing to work with local school children.**

Adventist schools are within reach of a university-sponsored support program, and few small schools are able to acquire, much less staff, substantial libraries on their own. But this is not a reason to abandon the idea of exposing students to libraries—the stakes are much too high for that. Rather, schools can find creative solutions that utilize the resources they are able to access.

The first place to look for these types of solutions is in the local community. Many communities have public libraries—often with trained staff—that are more than willing to work with local school children. If the school is small enough, the classes might make regularly scheduled field trips to the community library. If the school is too large or transportation too expensive, perhaps a partnership could be formed in which the public library provides the school with pre-selected materials. Some public librarians might even be willing to come to the school, or if the public library is also understaffed, possibly a volunteer could transport materials back and forth between the school and the library. In these types of solutions, everyone wins. The children have access to library materials and trained librarians, and the community library experiences a significantly increased demand for its services—something it needs to justify its budget to local officials.

The next place to look for solutions is parents and the local church. After a careful background screening, volunteers can be trained by local public librarians or classroom teachers (who perhaps have taken an undergraduate or online course in school librarianship), or by enrolling in online courses, to perform the essential functions of the library. The importance of carefully selecting people to manage the library cannot be overemphasized because in the eyes of students, the person who plays the role of the librarian *is* the librarian. Thus, the volunteer must be someone who truly loves children, loves lit-

eracy, understands the essentials of library organization, and is ready to step in and fill this critical role in students' lives.

If there is no community librarian or volunteer, then the responsibility returns to the classroom teacher. Even if lacking the space for a formal library in the school, teachers can set up a library corner in their classrooms. One of the advantages of the small school model is that teachers often enjoy a great degree of flexibility in structuring the school day, so they can build library time (or library corner time) into the daily routine. While it is important to have a large selection of excellent library materials, it is high-quality experiences with books that matter most. This can happen with small groups of students, older children reading to younger ones, students talking with one another about what they have read, and everyone working to create positive memories that center around reading.

### **Early Positive Experiences With Reading**

In a best-case scenario, literacy begins in the home, with parents making available a wide variety of quality books carefully selected to fit each child's interests. Unfortunately, children too often enter school without having had a story read to them and not owning even one book of their own. When students have not had early literacy experiences at home, the school must not only teach them to read, but also create an environment that fosters positive attitudes toward reading and information discovery.

This is why library time is invaluable. Formal instruction focuses primarily on the mechanics of reading—letter recognition, phonics, sight words, etc. The library's focus is the *joy* of reading. While students are working hard to achieve reading fluency, the library (or library corner) becomes a safe haven with no pressure to perform.

In the early years of formal schooling, students are forming



lifelong attitudes toward reading. Early positive experiences with books are a vital component in nurturing an “I can do this; this is fun” attitude, which will greatly enhance students’ ability to succeed. Because reading is the foundation for all other knowledge acquisition, schools must create an environment where this skill is not only mastered but also enjoyed.

During library time, the primary goal for young children is to simply enjoy reading, free from pressure to perform or fear of failure. However, a wide range of foundational literacy experiences can be tucked into these moments of joy. Here is where educators and librarians can repeatedly revisit both the “I’ll do it and you watch” and the “I’ll do it and you help” stages of learning.

During story time, adults model fluent, expressive reading—demonstrating how words on a page can come alive. During reflection time, library volunteers allow emerging readers to think about what has been read, check their understanding of various passages, and explore their personal reactions to a text. During open library time, educators talk to children about literacy, helping them to not only discover their personal interests, but also recognize that their curiosity can be both stimu-

lated and satisfied by reading.

The library is an affirming place where children can be peacefully immersed in literacy. During these lightly structured, pressure-free moments, the imagination can be sparked, the love of reading can take root in small hearts, and children can be set on a path of lifelong learning.

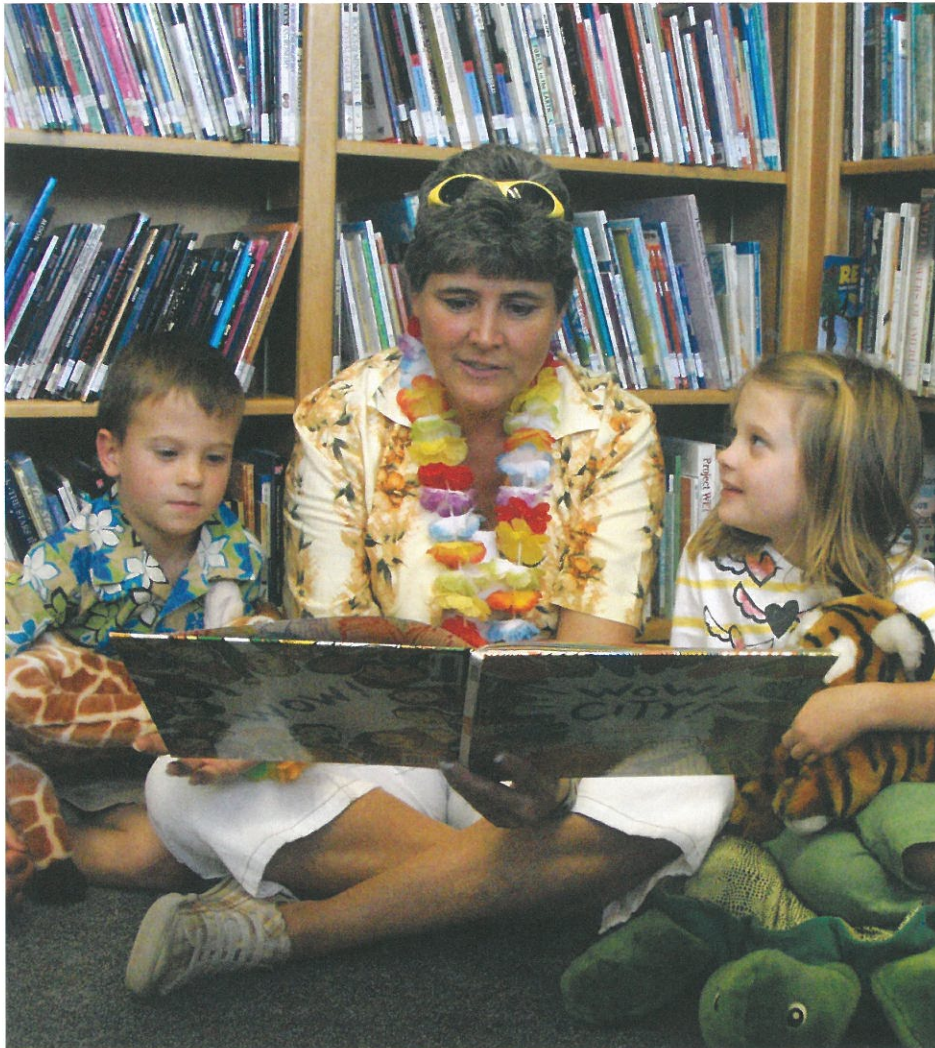
### Building Fluency

Once students have mastered the basic mechanics of reading, the focus shifts to increasing vocabulary, building fluency, and exploring the amazing variety of genres, formats, and illustration styles. Here, too, the library can play a central role in developing student literacy.

As children progress through the grades, the pressure to perform continually builds while opportunities for downtime decrease. As teachers struggle with the sheer amount of knowledge that students must master for state-mandated standardized tests, it becomes increasingly difficult to find time for pleasure reading. Thus, library story time becomes an important highlight in the students’ school day. It is one of the few times when they can simply enjoy a text, without the lurking worry that this might be on a test.

Yet there is much more going on in the library than relaxed reading. Adults continue to model fluent, expressive reading, revisit the “I’ll do it and you watch” and the “I’ll do it and you help” stages of learning, and even make forays into “you do it and I’ll help” and “you do it and I’ll cheer” stages of learning. Erlene Killeen, district media coordinator and elementary library media specialist, notes that the librarian is the person who introduces both students and teachers to new authors and illustrators, genres and formats, ideas and cultures. While there is still room for serendipity and spontaneous discovery, the librarian must be consciously strategic about bringing readers into contact with new materials, keeping in mind the developmental, emotional, social, and spiritual needs of each child, as well as his or her interests, abilities, and comfort. “The joy of reading is our message. What we do best is unite the right reader with the right book [in the right format] at the right time.”<sup>4</sup>

The “right format” aspect of literacy is receiving greater attention. Even in the very early years of schooling, students are being introduced to information technology. They quickly learn which buttons to push to make a computer work, but



During story time, volunteers model fluent, expressive reading and help establish a foundation for a lifelong love of learning in young children.



need a great deal of help to evaluate the information they discover and to use it effectively, ethically, and legally. Library time is a perfect opportunity to introduce students to specialized, child-friendly online sources of reliable information and to discuss what they find online. If the school lacks the ability to provide computers, an online catalog, or instruction in accessing electronic resources, there is often someone in the community or church who can provide such expertise.

Having at least one trusted adult who routinely models reading fluency, information literacy, and the love of reading and information discovery is important for each child's academic growth. As Killeen points out, "Reading is a strong indicator of an educated person."<sup>5</sup> Students need to be able to look at someone they know and say, "This is what an educated life looks like." Through the liveliness of story time, personal conversations with students about information, and the ubiquitous book in the librarian's own hands, the library communicates that reading is important, reading is fun, and reading is the key to academic success.

### Expanding Horizons

As students mature and begin to explore their identity and their place in the world, they need both someplace and someone safe. No other professional is as uniquely positioned to fill this role as the school librarian. In the library, students find that they are free to explore new areas of knowledge without fear of judgment and to talk with a trusted adult who offers appropriate information to help them figure out how to solve their own problems.

In addition to being a place to go for recommendations of reading material, the library plays an important role as information provider, knowledge hub, and source of guidance for budding young researchers. Teachers and librarians should carefully design print and digital collections that are sufficient but not overwhelming, challenging but not impossible, authoritative and yet accessible. As more information technologies are introduced, students should learn how to use sophisticated tools to navigate the sea of information available online. Librarians are skilled at providing the right mix of guidance and encouragement, giving students both freedom to explore and direction for their explorations.

In this way, the library provides a framework to help students develop confidence in themselves and their capabilities—



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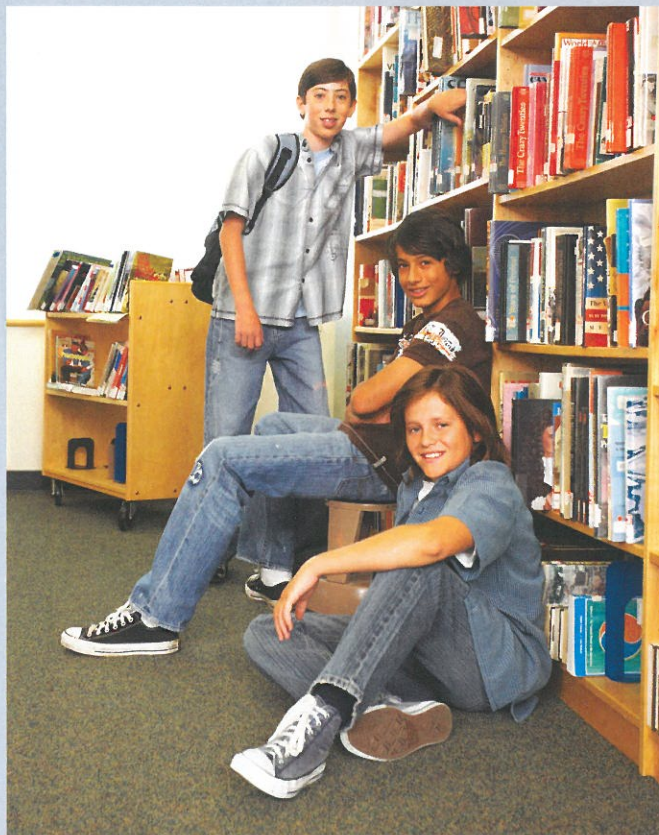


confidence that will stay with them throughout their educational and professional careers.

## Staying Connected

As students become young adults, performance pressures continue to mount, and in-class downtime becomes a thing of the past. With classes, social events, extra-curricular activities, and family obligations, the hectic pace of a school schedule can take its toll.

During times when everything seems to be changing, students need something that remains constant. For many, this is the library. Just as it has been since they first entered the doors of the school, the library is their safe haven, the one place in their world where they can explore whatever interests them, and where they can take a break from the hectic pace of their



**For many students, the library provides a safe haven where they can develop confidence in themselves and their capabilities—while at the same time, learning valuable research skills.**

lives to read for fun. In the library, young people are free to be who they are, express what they really think, and know that this adult will not only accept and value them, but also lead them to others who share their interests and opinions.

The library is a connecting point. It links students to something stable in their past while also building a bridge that will take them into their future. It connects students with similar interests and hobbies and offers a common, neutral ground where they can collaborate on class projects, pursue passions, and make new friends.

## Putting the Pieces Together

As students enter adulthood, reading provides continuity for their thoughts and supports their interests.<sup>6</sup> They are becoming familiar with their own inner landscape, learning what sparks their interest, what they enjoy, and what builds them up. The library plays an advisory role to able readers, while enticing the more reluctant students to experience the joy that comes from reading.<sup>7</sup>

From their introduction in the early years of school, research and information discovery play an ever-increasing role in a student's academic experience. Students must learn to use information technology, conduct specialized searches, and develop detailed research plans. If they have had consistent library instruction, students facing their first major library research project can locate needed information both in print and online; evaluate sources for accuracy, authority, and relevance; and then use what they have found effectively, ethically, and legally.

## Conclusion

Libraries represent freedom—freedom to read, to think and express one's ideas, to explore knowledge, to expand one's mind, to become an educated person. School libraries play a key role in giving students this freedom and teaching them to use it responsibly. Libraries provide early positive experiences with reading and consistently support student learning. Through partnerships with public libraries, use of qualified volunteers, and library training for classroom teachers, even small schools can offer students the library's safe haven—a dependable, predictable place where students can go for acceptance, guidance, and tools for lifelong success. ✍



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