



FUTURE READY FRAMEWORK:

Instructional Partnership

TURNING AN ELEMENTARY LIBRARY INTO THE HEART OF A SCHOOL

PROMOTING COMMUNICATION, CRITICAL THINKING, CREATIVITY AND COLLABORATION IN ONE SMALL, BUT HIGHLY ADAPTABLE SPACE

"I love how we moved the bookcases into aisles because the library looks really big now. I like the rocking chairs, because a lot of people like to rock in their regular chairs and they tip over. Now they can rock without falling. I just like how you set it up. It looks creative. The white board tables, the little LEGOS®."

- Makayla
Grade 5



LONGWOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

INDIAN PRAIRIE SCHOOL DISTRICT 204, NAPERVILLE, IL

At Longwood Elementary School in Naperville, IL, teacher librarian Donna Kouri has been quietly but consistently working for six years to transform both the school's physical library space and the way the space is used. The challenge? A relatively small room in an older building. Her approach? A willingness to step outside her comfort zone, an enthusiasm for building strong partnerships, a determination to meet students on their own ground and an innovative approach to problem solving.

As Kouri says, "I learned that in order to build an area for students to create and explore, I had to do what I would be asking them to do. I had to think outside of the box and wonder 'what if,' which is not always easy. I learned I needed to look around and see what others were doing and to enlist the help of others. Sometimes it takes someone outside of the situation to see the possibilities. I also had to just take the first step and try."



Six years ago, Kouri began her job in what many might consider a traditional school library space. A computer lab, offices and a large circulation desk dominated the areas not filled with large tables and bookshelves. Through a series of small and large changes to the library program and the physical space it inhabits, Kouri has reinvented and remixed. (Sound familiar? Mark Ray mentions this in his groundbreaking [TEDx Talk](#).) This helped to create a dynamic place where students are excited about reading, working in teams, creating and sharing what they're doing with their classmates and teachers.

"I had to put on my creativity cap and make things happen."

- Donna Kouri
Teacher Librarian

"It was easy to fall into the trap of thinking it was an unfortunate situation, but nothing could really be done about our physical space," Kouri admits. "I tried to make it as inviting as possible but didn't really think I was able to make drastic changes.

As I heard other LMCs talk about the changes they were making, I finally decided enough was enough."

She visited other schools in her area to learn both how they were addressing similar challenges and what they liked and disliked about any recent changes they had made to their spaces. "One thing I noticed was that most libraries were adaptable so things could be adjusted on the fly," Kouri said. "Bookshelves or tables were on wheels and the library could be changed as needed. I also noticed cozy reading areas in each library."

First Steps

One of Kouri's top priorities was creating inviting areas within the library for students to curl up and read. But where? Every inch of the library was already utilized, and there were more laptops available in the classrooms than in the computer lab, which meant students weren't using the library regularly. At that point, Kouri and staff decided to break down the computer lab and add those computers into classrooms where

they would get more use and free up space for the reading area. At the same time, she gained a comfortable area for the couch and chairs purchased with several years' worth of saved book fair funds.

"It was a perfect reading lounge, but I knew alone, it was not enough. I needed to create a space that could be adjusted quickly to meet student needs as well as program needs," Kouri explained. "If students wanted to come read or work together, I needed space to make it happen. Students and teachers needed to be able to adjust their environment so it would work equally well for individuals, pairs or larger groups," says Kouri.

Building Partnerships

Kouri had the ideas and know-how, but lacked the budget to bring her plans to fruition. After some brainstorming, she realized she had the perfect partners already in place: parents. Requests to the PTA soon saw the addition of bolsters (goodbye, clunky circulation desk), movable tables (no more calls

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- Donna Kouri, Teacher Librarian
Longwood Elementary
Indian Prairie School District



to maintenance to rearrange the space), and even a new Creation Station (thanks to some thoughtful scheduling reducing the need for multiple office spaces). Finally, she had the space she'd been working toward – a true hybrid of a traditional library and a Makerspace.

The partnerships Kouri has developed don't always focus on improving the physical space of the library, though. She's the first to admit that libraries are so much more than just tables and shelves. As Longwood is a longtime partner with Follett, she worked with Follett Destiny® and utilized its networking/social media feature as a tool to “open up our walls and make the students the driving force.” Kids communicate, share, explore and create using Destiny's student-friendly and beyond-the-walls features.

The many changes in Longwood's library have only been possible because, in Kouri's words, “my administration trusts what I do and

what I suggest. It's truly a team effort – we work together to decide how best to implement new ideas and how to bring teachers along on this journey.”

Looking Back

As she reflects on the process of transforming Longwood's library, Kouri has some advice for other teacher librarians. “To advocate for a stronger role, you must become more visible. The library needs to grow past a place where students go to check out books. You have to work to make reading and literacy a school-wide celebration. You have to be bold.”

Her supervisor – Allan Davenport, Director of Instructional Technology – is thrilled with the progress at Longwood and enthusiastically supports her efforts there. He agrees with Kouri's advice to other teacher librarians who may be searching for ways to advocate for themselves and their libraries. “It is critical to have a vision and to communicate the vision. Do you

need your library space to be more flexible? Communicate this to your administration, teachers and your PTA and provide suggestions for how this can be accomplished,” Davenport said.

Kouri encourages all teacher librarians to blaze a trail and work toward future-ready learning for their students at all costs. “Most of all, I think it is important to have a positive attitude. Whatever your limitations might be, decide you aren't going to allow these limitations to keep you from growing and improving. You must stay current and take the lead. Use social media to make connections with others in the field of literacy. Reach out to others for their ideas and you will find gems.”

