

MINI-PROFILE

SEEING THE
BIG PICTUREJAN ALLEN AND LYN MCKINNEY'S
LIBRARY REVAMP IS RIPPLING
THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL

By Bracken Reed



BILLINGS, Montana—At Billings Senior High School, a fortuitous double hiring four years ago quickly became a dynamic force for change. Two nationally recognized librarians—Jan Allen and Lyn McKinney—have transformed the library into a model for the 21st century—a transformation that has had an impact throughout this school of 2,000 students in this town known for its Wild West history. “The fact that we came in at the same time allowed us to develop a shared philosophy right away and to decide what we wanted the library to be,” says McKinney. “We are a good team.”

First on their agenda was updating the space. The unspoken message was, “It’s not your father’s school library.” School and district funds, along with contributions from the student council and two other service clubs, paid for the face-lift.

The shabby, decades-old carpeting (“gold, with duct tape”) went to the landfill, a sparkling blue one rolled out in its place. Shelves that had blocked the windows were moved, letting lots of natural Montana light pour in. A new sofa, love seat, and coffee table were grouped to create a roomy, L-shaped reading space near the well-stocked magazine shelves, forging a perfect balance between the rigors of academia and the comforts of home. A traffic jam of study carrels, many of them equipped with out-of-date microfiche/microfilm readers, was pared down to two. Low-slung shelves were brought in to divide the open space into two teaching areas. A laptop and a digital projector make the space ideal for teacher and student presentations.

And then there were the finer details—the subtle touches designed to draw kids, irresistibly, into the room—such as covering the drab, cinder block support columns with international symbols for peace and happiness. Festooning the walls with colorful posters and decorations, such as the American Library Association’s “Star Wars,” “Global Rock,” and “Sisters” series. Applying warm colors—vivid yellows and vibrant reds—wherever possible. And, finally, filling the display cases with rotating, student-suggested exhibits, such as a collection of graphic novels and comic books.

The effects were immediate and wide-ranging. “Every morning before school, we have between 50 and 75 students in the library just

because they like to be in this space,” says McKinney. “Making that kind of connection, earning that trust, is so important for the rest of the work we do.”

The new mood in the library precipitated physical change across the school, she says. “We started a policy of cleaning the library, top to bottom, every Friday afternoon because we wanted to send the message that we’re proud of this space and want to keep it this way. That attitude, along with being student-centered, can spread to the whole building, and I think it has.”

Allen and McKinney also sent a strong message by seeking national certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Certification involves the submission of four portfolios, each one documenting a candidate’s accomplishments in realizing student achievement. The portfolios—which include videotaped lessons, student work, and a variety of other materials—are assessed using a rigorous set of national standards.

“The whole focus is on student achievement—how do I help students learn,” says McKinney. “The certification process requires you to ask that over and over.”

Allen and McKinney exemplify the changing nature of school librarianship. “I think the role that technology plays now—somebody had to take the lead within the school, and librarians, by default, have usually been the ones to do that,” says McKinney. “We’ve also become more active in shaping curriculum, usually by designing lesson units without requiring the teacher to be involved. They can bring in their students and know that it will fit with the larger curriculum.”

For one of her portfolios, Allen included a career unit she designed with another teacher. The librarians

adopted the unit, adapting it to fit into the freshman English curriculum. The English teachers bring their students to the library for presentations from the state Job Service, the National Guard, and community members. Students take the Harrington-O’Shea survey, which helps them identify possible careers that match their interests and skills. After narrowing these potential career interests to two, they use a variety of sources—the Internet, magazine indexes, print materials, vertical files, and interviews with local employers—to explore the kind of education required and the average rates of pay. Students then look at this information in relation to Montana’s eclectic job market and educational opportunities, from the pharmacy, law, and forestry schools at the University of Montana, to architecture, agriculture, and veterinary programs at Montana State University. There are schools for truck driving, heavy-equipment operations, nursing, and culinary arts.

“It’s an opportunity to get them thinking about their future, but it’s also a way to teach them about research methodology,” notes Allen.

Today’s school librarians clearly have emerged as leaders in technology. But perhaps less obvious is the librarian’s role in helping to shape curriculum and support the work of teachers. “We see ourselves as facilitators,” McKinney says. “Because we work with the whole school, we can see the whole curriculum and how it ties together. We see the big picture—sometimes even better than administrators—and we can help teachers see that bigger picture and connect with each other.” ■