

# Life as a Library Media Specialist within a Juvenile Detention School

When I was in graduate school, we always heard the phrase, "library media specialists wear many different hats." But I never knew just how many and what a wide variety of hats that I would be wearing in my daily routine. As I walk through the parking lot to enter my school building, there are no students talking with their friends, getting out of their cars, or being dropped off by the bus or their parents. It is quiet, as it almost always is. I enter the building, wave to the Control Staff, and the first heavy, locked steel door opens and lets me into a small room. Then I am let through another locked steel door into the hallway of my school. Then I am off to the media center to begin my day as a library media specialist in a Detention School.

The children detained in this facility are between the ages of 11 and 18, are both male and female. The majority is African American and have committed some type of crime (everything from truancy to murder). The average length of stay for most students is 30 days, but many have spent years here. Many of our students have not been to any type of school in years, and many of those who do attend other schools are overage for grade level. It is a state law that while a child is in detention, they must attend school.

When I arrived on the job, the library collection was 500 books that had been purchased following guidelines for books that were recommended for a middle school collection, not by considering the type of student that would be using

our students and their education, but would also stay within detention guidelines to which our school adheres?

## Working Within the System

Our school followed a strictly fixed, rigid library schedule when I arrived. Classes visited the media center on a weekly basis for a 45-minute period. During this time, I provided general library instruction and students checked out books. After six years, things have changed. Now, classes come to the library on an as-needed basis, and never exclude book checkout time for each student. Students come to the media center during the day as I or a staff member watch them walk down the hall. When detention center staff are still hesitant about sending students "alone" to the media center, the teacher and I will walk the student back and forth to the media center.

## Readers from Non-Readers

To promote and encourage reading among a student population that, for the most part, is not made up of avid readers, I purchased the *Accelerated Reader* program (AR). The way AR is normally run in schools would not work in detention. Here, any student, regardless of grade or reading level, may check out, read, and take quizzes on any book he wants. Because our student body is so transient, it is almost impossible to find each student's reading level. Allowing students free choice of reading material gives these students the feeling that they have an option in something that they are doing while in detention school. For monthly AR contest prizes, students are grouped roughly by grade level. The student in each group who reads the most books and earns the most points wins a prize bucket full of sodas, chips, cookies, popcorn, and candy. (In detention, food is one of the only items that we can give children.)

Other reading contests and events encourage reading, many of which are centered around holidays. For example, for a Mother's Day reading event, students have two weeks to read

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## Library in a Detention School

Norfolk Detention School is an alternative school for juveniles under the age of 18 who are awaiting adjudication by the court and those who are awaiting transfer to another facility. Instruction in the detention school parallels the regular curriculum of middle and secondary schools in the areas of English, math, science, social studies and physical education/health. Norfolk Detention School offers a GED program, as well as a post GED vocational program for those students who have received a GED.

these resources. I purchased many books that I believed would be appealing to our students, such as young adult urban novels and biographies about famous athletes. So, on to the next phase: what type of library program would our school have?

Because this is a secure detention facility, there are many rules and regulations that "normal" schools do not have. Our students may not walk down the halls by themselves to come to the media center. Our students may not take their lunch period in the media center. Our students may not visit the media center before and after school. Our students may not have access to e-mail. The male and female residents may not speak to one another. Students must walk down the hall in a single file line, with their hands behind their backs. So, how can you develop a program that not only would benefit



By Meredith Parker

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a certain number of books (based on ability and grade level) and write a book review of each book. The student then gets a plant to give to her mother during visitation. During our bi-annual Parent-Teacher Night, I booktalked *Drive By* by Lynne Ewing. I selected this book for two reasons: it was not too long (to not intimidate non-readers) and it dealt with a subject that many of our students and parents can relate to: gang activity. All parents who attended took a copy of the book with them, read it, and returned in two weeks for a Family Book Club. All children whose parents took a book also got a copy. Over half of the parents returned and were eager to talk about the book, and they wanted to know the name of the next book we would be reading.

### The Other Hats

In addition to being the library media specialist, I have taught technology and workplace skills, and am also the orientation teacher for all new students. I also tape a student-anchored news show before school starts each morning. Because students are not allowed to spend time after school in classrooms or the library, I write the script and do all of the editing myself. I would like the students to help with this part, but right now I can only do what I am allowed to do.

### The Payoff

I have many people question why I do what I do where I do. I see no difference between the children I work with and those that other library media specialists work with in a “regular” school setting. I do not care what crimes they have committed; I do not want to know. All I care about is doing the best I can with each child during the time she is in my school. If I can get the student that is 17, in the sixth grade, and hasn’t been to school in two years to read a book and participate in a reading contest, or talk to me about what he has read, then I have done my job. I don’t know if I will always be the “detention school library media specialist,” but I know

that while I am employed in this school, I will continue to believe that each child, regardless of his background, deserves the same education that other children in “normal” schools receive. ■

**Meredith Parker** is a national board certified library media specialist at Norfolk Detention School in Norfolk, Virginia and can be reached at [mparker@nps.k12.va.us](mailto:mparker@nps.k12.va.us).

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