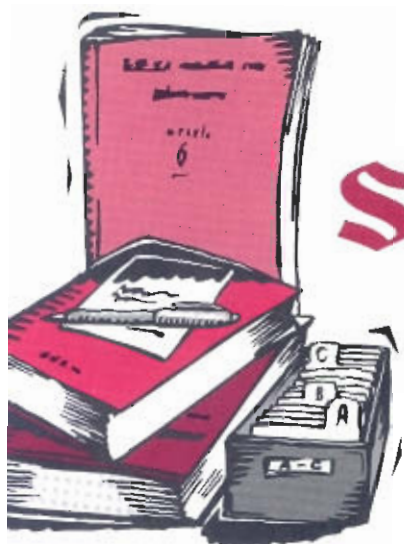


How Old Is Your School Library Media Center Collection?

by Ramona Kerby



If you spend your days teaching hundreds of students, checking books in and out, doing hall duty, and completing all your other immediate responsibilities, you simply might close your eyes to the condition of the books in your library media center. After all, there is only so much you can do. Still, take a few moments and look at your shelves. Do you have some books that have seen better days?

In 1999, I examined the science and technology sections in elementary school library media centers in Maryland, and I discovered that the books averaged twenty years old. I found titles such as *The Atom* (1955), *A Book of Astronauts* (1953), and *Your Telephone and How It Works* (1952). Most of the buildings I visited had a mission statement posted in the entry hall stating the importance of learning and reading. Wonderful, I would think. Then, I would go into the library media center and find outdated books. Were the school administrators completely oblivious to their subtle message? Students using these library media centers were learning one thing—their teachers did not mean what they said.

Looking at these old books made me sad. I was even more disheartened when I learned that thousands of school library media centers throughout the United States have collections that are twenty years old or older. While we live in an age of information explosion, our students read books that were written before they were born.

Generally speaking, the 1990s were tough on school library media centers. Federal funding for school library books dried up, and districts staggered with the exorbitant costs of purchasing computers and software. Library media collections suffered.

But in 2001, for the first time in over twenty-five years, there is hope for school library media centers. Now that computers are cheaper and labs are already in place, school library media specialists are beginning to have some money for books. What's more, the federal government has realized the drastic state of the nation's school library media centers. On May 16, 2001, the Sen-

ate approved an amendment by Senator Jack Reed of Rhode Island to help improve the condition of school library media centers across the country. The Reed Amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education bill provides \$500 million to local school library media centers to purchase new books and advanced technologies, provides training for library media specialists and allows school library media centers to remain open longer.

If it hasn't already happened, it's likely that in the next few years, you will have a sizeable budget to purchase books. Will you spend it? As I write this article, I know of one elementary school library media specialist who had \$8,000 allotted for books and one high school library media specialist who had \$40,000, and neither spent the funds. Why? They said they were too busy.

Yes, you're busy. Many of you work in less than ideal situations. Somehow you must find the time and the energy to begin building your collection.

In the coming months, I'll discuss different aspects of collection development—evaluating the collection, examining the curriculum, weeding, and selection sources. I'll try to provide a framework, a simple plan to follow.

Don't work alone. Work with a library media specialist at a neighboring school, work as a district team, or even work with some of your long-distance pals on LM_Net. If we do it together, perhaps we'll not only share ideas, we'll get excited. Enthusiasm for books and learning is the very lesson we want to share with our students!

Evaluating the Collection Objectives

- To determine the age of your materials (the entire collection as well as individual sections—everybody, fiction, and the ten major Dewey divisions);
- To identify what percent of the books were found in a professional selection source;
- To determine how many books you have per student;
- To estimate the costs to upgrade your collection; and
- To prepare a brief report for the principal about your findings.

Ramona Kerby, Ph.D., is Coordinator of the School Library Media Graduate Program at Western Maryland College in Westminster, MD.

Rationale

You want to complete a pre-assessment for several reasons. One, the report will serve as your “before picture,” so that you can pat yourself on the back as you begin to make improvements. Two, by presenting the report to your principal, you’re going to get his or her support. It’s tough for a principal to ignore written facts about outdated, inaccurate books that don’t meet the learning needs of the students. After all, this could impact test scores.

How to Figure the Age of the Collection

Most circulation systems provide the option of printing reports. If your library media center is automated, take advantage of this feature. Print out a report that gives the average copyright age of the entire collection as well as the average age of individual sections—fiction, everybody books, and the ten major divisions of the Dewey Decimal System.

You also can figure the average copyright age of your entire collection by completing a systematic random sampling of 200 books. Don’t worry if your students have books checked out. After all, this is an estimate. This method takes about two hours to complete if you work with a partner—perhaps an older student or a parent volunteer.

1. Before you begin: (a) Decide if you want the average copyright age of the entire collection or a specific section—perhaps the science books in the 500s. (b) Have a set of 200 index cards for each systematic random sampling that you do.

2. Count every item in the section(s) to be evaluated.

3. Divide this number by 200 to determine the interval size. For example, if there are 1,000 books in the section, divide 1,000 by 200. Since $1,000 \div 200 = 5$, the interval is 5. This means that you will examine every fifth book.

4. To get your starting point, use the last digit on the serial number on a dollar bill. For example, if the last digit is 8, start with the eighth book in the section. Then count forward to the fifth book.

5. Continue to examine every fifth book and write down the title, publisher, call number, and copyright year for each book, until you have completed the 200 cards.

6. Average the copyright years of 200 books by inserting the figures into one column of an *Excel* file, following the directions. The answer is the average age of your total collection.

Comparing Your Collection to a Professional Selection Source

We’ll discuss selection sources in another column, but for this report, compare your collection to either Wilson’s 18th edition of *Children’s Catalog, Middle School Catalog*, or *High School Catalog* (2001); or Brodart’s 22nd edition of *The Elementary School Library Collection* (2000), available in print and CD-ROM. (This is the last edition of ESLC; Brodart will introduce a new web-based K-12 selection service.)

1. Take the 200 index cards that you prepared earlier and manually look up the titles in the selection source. Write “yes” on the card if you find the title; write “no” on the card if you don’t.

2. Count the “yes” cards. Divide this number by 200. The answer will be what percent (estimated) of your total collection matches the professional selection source. For example, if you have 17 “yes” cards, then $17 \div 200 = .085$, or 8.5%.

How to Estimate the Cost of Upgrading the Collection

Go online (<http://www.carr.org/read/schoollibrary.html>) to download the *Excel* file created by Dr. Brad Smith, sociology professor at Western Maryland College. Within seconds, you can estimate how much it will cost to upgrade your collection. Instructions are posted.

Sample Letter to Principal and Supporting Fact Sheet

Here’s a sample letter to a principal. I took some of the wording from a letter that one of my students, Pat Ottel, wrote to her principal. (She received the funds.) The data, however, is not from Pat’s school; it’s from one of the school library media centers I visited. The fact sheet provides visual support of your letter. Do not make your report longer than two pages—it should be easy to duplicate if your principal decides to share it with your PTA or with school administrators. It must be obvious that your collection is old and that you need funds.

Dear Principal,

I’ve just completed an evaluation of the Science and Technology sections (the 500s and 600s of the Dewey Decimal Classification System) in our school library media center. To my dismay, I discovered that the average copyright date is 1977. In other words, in an area in which books become outdated after just five years, our books are twenty-four years old.

It’s important that our students and teachers have access to current information in these rapidly changing fields. After all, inaccurate facts affect learning and test scores. Besides, I’d like to think we have many budding scientists and inventors in the (insert the name of your school) community!

I am requesting funds to update our science and technology sections. I’ve prepared a fact sheet with tables and charts to help you with your decision on how much to spend.

To conduct the evaluation, I used the method of systematic random sampling to select a representative sample of 200 books. While the figures are estimates, they provide a good overview of our collection. I discovered that:

1. The average age of our science and technology books is 1977.
2. We have 3.5 science and technology books per student.
3. Only 7% of our collection matches a professional selection source (a tool that provides annotated lists of quality materials worthy of purchase for school library media centers).
4. To upgrade our science and technology books to:
 - 1990, we’d need to replace 407 books at a cost of approximately \$6,700;
 - 1995, we’d need to replace 638 books at a cost of \$10,600;
 - 1998, we’d need to replace 1100 books at a cost of \$18,300.

After much thought, I am requesting \$8,000 for this year. This amount is in addition to the funds already allocated for school library books. As you can imagine, if our science books are this old, the rest of the collection is old too.

I am not requesting \$18,000 because I want to purchase recom-

—Continued

mended titles, and I'm not sure that I can find 1100 recommended science and technology books that are also new.

Thank you for taking the time to examine this report and for any support you can give me in my attempt to update this important collection.

Sincerely,
(Your Name)

Sample Fact Sheet

Science and Technology Books In Our School Library

Chart 1: Science Books (500s) and Technology Books (600s)

# of Students	# of Books	% found in ESLC	# of Books Per Child	Average Copyright
337	1,105	7.0%	3.8	1977

Upgrade to 5 Bks Per Child	Upgrade to 1990	Upgrade to 1995	Upgrade to 1998
\$9,662.80	\$6,777.55	\$10,624.27	\$18,317.71

Notes:

These numbers are estimates. To obtain them, I used an Excel file found at *The Reading Corner* (<http://www.carr.org/read/schoollibrary>). The amounts in the last two columns do not include the funds needed to upgrade the collections so that there are five books per student.

According to *SLJ Online* (March 1999), the average price of one hardcover children's and Young Adult book is \$16.66. This is the cost used to figure the cost of upgrading the collections (<http://www.slj.com>).

ESLC—*Elementary School Library Collection*, 22nd edition published by Brodart in 2000. This source provides materials that are recommended for purchase in school library media centers.

Most state guidelines for school library materials recommend a minimum of 10-20 items per student.

Chart 2: Top Ten Golden Oldies Still On Our Shelves

While the following books may have some historical significance, they have seen better days and should be weeded from our shelves.

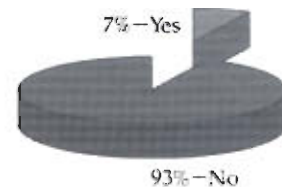
Top 10 Golden Oldies

1. *A Book of Astronauts*: 1963
2. *At the Frozen Food Plant*: 1959
3. *Beyond the Solar System*: 1957
4. *Computers at Your Service*: 1962
5. *How the Derrick Works*: 1930
6. *I Want to Be a Homemaker*: 1961
7. *Television Works Like This*: 1965
8. *The Atom*: 1955
9. *The Space Ship Returns*: 1958
10. *Your Telephone and How It Works*: 1952

Chart 3: 71% of Our Books Are Ten Years or Older
29%—1990s



Chart 4: 7% Match a Professional Selection Source
7%—Yes
93%—No



In your report (feel free to use any of the wording or formatting here), list a few of the worst titles that you found on your shelves. Also, show how the sample matches up to a professional selection source. Sometimes principals don't understand the necessity of purchasing these tools. Give your principal some choices on how much to spend.

In Closing

Again, please don't get overwhelmed with all these instructions. Work with other library media specialists and fine-tune these suggestions to meet your own needs. You'll find that you'll enjoy doing the evaluation. It is work that has a real purpose. After all, our students deserve the best school library media centers we can provide.

Playing... —From page 21

"game" allows for trading if the child gets an insect for which he or she doesn't care. After locating some facts about the insect, such as what it eats and where it lives (I still use the worksheets), each student creates a visual of this insect. More play opportunities are available in this portion of the project because the students get to choose what kind of visual to make. Some make models out of clay, some choose dioramas, some prefer posters. A student once turned in a mobile that depicted the life cycle of her insect, the butterfly. The visual was wonderfully creative and she had great fun making it. I guarantee, she'll never forget what she learned by playing with this project! Just by including choices of visual projects, chances to trade insects, and a book search and selection game, the children gain so many more opportunities to grow in imagination, creativity, cooperation, and ingenuity.

These are just a few examples of ways I have combined learning and play. As you can see, allowing the students to "play" in the library media center doesn't necessarily mean leaving them to their own devices. By carefully looking at my existing lesson plans, I was able to offer more creative, stimulating learning opportunities by incorporating many types of play into them. This

allowed me to address more learning styles than before, made the lessons much more meaningful and memorable for the students, and made my job as a teacher, facilitator, and evaluator much more interesting and fun as well. Many of you are probably already "playing in the library media center" and don't even realize it! I invite you to take a look at your lesson plans and see how much more fun you can have by simply making a few playful changes. Enjoy!

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