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# The School Media Advisory Committee: Key to Quality

Frances Bryant Bradburn

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The media advisory committee has long been an assumed component in the selection of materials in North Carolina's public schools. While one would be hard-pressed to find any school in the state which did not have a list of its media advisory committee members on paper, one also would be hard-pressed to find many schools in which the MAC is working to its fullest potential. And yet in schools with superior budgets and program, the media advisory committee is oftentimes the key.

The make-up of the media advisory committee is standard. Usually appointed by the principal who serves on the committee as well, the MAC generally is composed of a representative from each grade level in an elementary school or the department head or his representative in a junior or senior high. Ideally, the committee should also have student and parent representation. The media coordinator chairs the committee, any other media staff are members, and the system-level media supervisor or contact person serves as a resource person.

## Selecting Materials

The basic role of the media advisory committee is to help the school media coordinator in the selection of materials for that specific school's media center. Implicit in this is the assumption that everyone on the MAC knows what the selection policy is in his particular school system. Yet this is not always the case.

Media advisory committees should meet at scheduled intervals throughout the year, ideally at least once every four to six weeks. At the first meeting of the school year, each MAC member should be given a copy of the system-wide selection policy. At the same time, each member should also receive a copy of the *Library Bill of Rights* and *Access To Resources and Services in the School Library Media Program: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*. What should

then ensue is a careful reading and discussion of all three documents. The selection policy should be examined in the light of both Library Bill of Rights documents, and the media advisory committee's philosophy thus begins to take shape. Be aware, however, that this process forces committee members to come to grips with their own beliefs about children's rights to information. Inevitably, there will be differences of opinion, but it is vitally important that the entire committee at least wrestle with the issue of how materials should be selected for this particular school and why they should be included in the first place. Complete unanimity may be impossible, but at least the dialogue has begun. Any assumptions under which the committee will function will have a consensus base, and those areas of disagreement will be out in the open for everyone to consider.

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The second meeting should follow soon after the first. It is in this meeting that committee members are introduced to the selection tools available. All schools in North Carolina have copies of the state Materials Advisory Lists, in-depth annotations of books, AV, and computer software published by the Division of Media Evaluation Services in the State Department of Public Instruction. Hopefully, additional selection tools such as *The Elementary School Library Collection*, *Booklist*, *School Library Journal*, *Science Books and Films* and other subject area and educational journals will be accessible as well. Pointing out the difference between the information offered in these reviews and the hype, propaganda, and oftentimes complete lack of specifics in a publisher's catalog will focus the committee on the process of responsible selection. At this

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same meeting, the school's curriculum, its educational goals, and the selection policy should be emphasized. These are the basis for the inclusion of *any* material in the school's media center no matter how glowing the review. They cannot be overlooked.

The actual selection of individual titles can be both formal and informal. Ideally, it is a continual process, unrestricted as to meeting date or advisory position. Many media coordinators keep selection tools and individual reviews circulating among the committee or the entire faculty, with subject area or grade-level teachers often asked specifically, "Do you need this?", "Can you use this?", or "What do you think?" Every teacher and student in the school is encouraged to make suggestions for the purchase of materials, bringing reviews, information, or curriculum justification to either the media coordinator or to her representative on the MAC. As this process continues throughout the year, the media coordinator keeps a "wish list" of everything suggested, with reviewing source and/or requesting teacher or department noted. Then, when actual ordering takes place, the librarian can choose individual titles with the complete assurance that faculty members in general and the media advisory committee in particular have had clear-cut input in the choice of materials.

### Determining Budget Priorities

The inevitable problem with the selection process is that there are always more materials requested than there is money to pay for them. Thus the second basic role of the media advisory committee—and the most powerful one—is the setting of budget priorities. Sometimes this involves making decisions about how to spend a small, pre-determined portion of an overall school budget; other times it necessitates the allocating of an entire instructional budget.

One example of this complete budget process can be found in several schools in Durham County. In these schools, the media advisory committee and the building's budget committee are one and the same. The media coordinator either co-chairs the committee with the principal or chairs it herself. The make-up of the committee is standard, but its influence is far-reaching—it determines how the entire instructional budget is spent. Thus, in schools which use this system, the MAC may decide such important issues as: how much money will we spend on consumables as opposed to materials of lasting value available to every student?; do we replace the microscopes in the biology lab this year or buy enough overheads

so that each teacher has one?; and do we buy the new set of science encyclopedias or order the filmstrips and computer software to support the new unit on Vietnam? The advantage to this process is that the entire school program is analyzed carefully. Not only is it difficult to "play favorites" by consensus, it is equally difficult to get approval for a poorly justified request. Peer review is a formidable obstacle to shoddy work.

But there are also disadvantages. Some media coordinators in various North Carolina schools have felt that they would have received more money to spend on library-specific materials had they been given a set budget rather than their program becoming a part of the negotiating process. It is a rude awakening to find that other teachers don't view the media center as the hub of the school! And the paperwork can be overwhelming. If the media coordinator is chair of the committee, she is usually purchasing agent and at least informal keeper of the books as well. This is a monumental task, particularly in larger schools. But when asked specifically whether or not she would prefer to return to the "set library budget" of before, every Durham County media coordinator involved on the school-wide budget committee said "no." Each would do the extra work to give her program a financial place in the school's instructional budget and to allow her to have an input in the entire school's budgetary process. She who controls the purse-strings controls the program!

Although the school-wide budget committee aspect of the MAC is being seen more frequently, the most common budget process available to media centers today is still the "set amount." Generally principals or central office staffs allot a specific amount of money to be used for the purchase of materials for the media center. From this money, the media advisory committee is asked to determine what materials can be purchased to best fill the needs of the school's children and teachers.

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In order to do this intelligently, each media advisory committee should develop a five-year plan based on the school's educational goals and priorities. Again, the burden of work will fall on the school's media coordinator, for she must carefully analyze the entire media collection to determine whether or not it can support the school's curriculum and the needs of its students and faculty. After she has done so, she should report

her findings to the MAC. Are there areas of the curriculum where there are no supporting materials? If so, these areas should be immediate priorities. Are there instructional areas where the book collection is adequate, but for which there are no audiovisual materials or computer software? Are there specific subjects that are the focal point for reports and papers which need more and varied materials? Are there areas of the collection which are outdated or which have not kept up with new and breaking information? All these are questions which must be considered by the media advisory committee before decisions can be made. It should be the committee's responsibility to determine the areas of priority and the time table for addressing them. The media coordinator should take care, however, in guiding the MAC to understand that some resources must remain to continue purchase of new and necessary materials throughout the collection. Priorities cannot so overwhelm the planning process that we force the same problems to creep into other areas of the collection because we have not been able to maintain them. A five-year plan should provide a solution to correcting weaknesses, not create new ones in its wake.

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### **Weeding the Collection**

One of the ways a media advisory committee can be most helpful to a media coordinator is by helping to weed the collection. But weeding the collection is a two-way street; it also allows the MAC to become familiar with the collection and consequently aids it in making more intelligent overall collection decisions. While many high school media coordinators will ask the MAC to weed their specific departmental areas of the collection, elementary librarians are more apt to divide the collection into equal parts and ask the entire MAC to weed a specific portion.

It quickly becomes apparent that the media advisory committee is being asked to take on many time-consuming tasks which, while vital to the optimum functioning of a school's media program, may not fairly go uncompensated. One school system in North Carolina is addressing just this concern this year.

Granville County Schools has, for the past

two years, operated under a performance-based supplement for its system's teachers. Kindergarten through twelfth grade teachers are offered the opportunity to earn up to four percent of their annual salary based upon the achievement of goals and objectives they have drawn up for themselves with the approval of their principals and supervisors. Goals and objectives can involve activities requiring work outside the parameters of the specific school day. This school year, two individual schools have adopted membership on their media advisory committee as a "one percent supplement" activity.

In order for this to be successful, guidelines have been drawn up to include bimonthly meeting dates and committee expectations. The schedule stipulates one monthly meeting for decision-making responsibilities such as materials selection and five-year plan formulation. The other meeting is specifically for weeding. Because of the monetary stimulus, a high degree of quality input has been achieved.

### **Public Relations**

While the selection of materials, allocation of the media center budget, and weeding of the collection are the traditional roles of the media advisory committee, ideally the MAC is more than the sum of its roles.

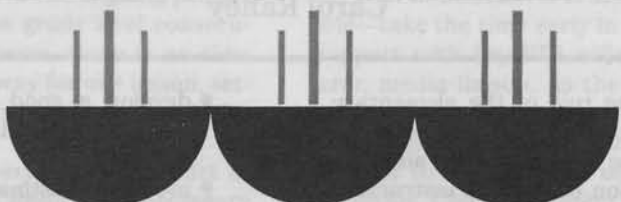
Any media advisory committee worth its name is a public relations tool for the school's media program. Since its members work so closely with the materials housed within its doors, they also realize the potential for increased instructional enrichment and enhancement when they are used. Because, by nature of their positions, they are usually the instructional leaders within their schools, media advisory committee members can model the effective use of the exciting books, AV, and computer software available in their library to supplement the textbooks. They can also make media center needs known to the principal and other teachers. Often, a single media coordinator is a voice crying in the wilderness; the media advisory committee can offer a concert of concern. The MAC can, in turn, be a wealth of information, conveying new curriculum offerings, program ideas, and educational trends to the media coordinator. In short, the media advisory committee can be the eyes, ears, and mouthpiece for the media center and its program. It is the key to quality.

*Editor's Note: For more information about the performance-based supplement, contact Dr. G. Thomas Houlihan, Superintendent; Granville County Schools; Oxford, N.C. 27565.*

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