

It's Not Futile: Fighting Job Cuts

Elissa Malespina won her battle, offers plan for others to keep librarians on staff

BY KARA YORIO

From Oakland to Dallas to Scranton, PA, and in large and small towns across the United States, school librarian positions are being eliminated. When the jobs are cut, it is difficult to know what to do. Besides, says Elissa Malespina, it's against the nature of most librarians to cause trouble.

"We like to push, at points, but [mostly] stay in the background. Librarians are helpful and like to never make anyone mad at us," says Malespina, a teacher librarian at Somerville (NJ) Middle School and president of the ISTE (International Society for Technology in Education) Librarians Network.

But that stereotype must be shed when necessary, and Malespina did just that. In February 2016, the South Orange-Maplewood, NJ, board of education proposed cutting three district librarians and all library funding. A parent and former librarian in the district, Malespina began attending board meetings to make a case against the cuts and started a social media campaign and Change.org petition to rally support.

A month later, the board eliminated the positions of two middle school librarians and a high school librarian, but Malespina did not go away. Instead, she increased her efforts.

It took nearly two years, but in the end, she succeeded—all three librarian positions, as well as funding for books and supplies, were restored.

How did she do it? Malespina was admittedly in a unique case. A respected and award-winning school librarian who had previously worked in the district, she knew the people involved and had connections to access resources. As a former administrator, she knew how budget decisions were made. As a parent, she was not only personally invested, but she knew the day-to-day impact of the loss of librarians. In the end, though, even she had to figure it out along the way.

Now Malespina offers the wisdom of her experience. There is no definitive checklist to success, she says, but consider her "multitiered" approach as a guidebook to fight cuts before they happen and get positions and funding reinstated if they do.



Elissa Malespina

Photo by Joy Yaid



Advocate for yourself

Self-promotion may not come naturally, but consider it a required job skill. Make yourself invaluable; then make sure everyone knows it. This is especially important in middle and high schools when parents aren't as involved. Tell people what you're doing. Tweet it. Blog about it. Post pictures on Instagram. Contact the local media for a story on something you and your students did. Invite parents and the superintendent in to see something you're doing. You can't keep the district from attempting cuts, but you can keep your name off the list.



Pay attention

School boards go through budget workshops, and there are often clues before cuts are proposed. At that point, start going to meetings to advocate for the positions, and start to rally public support.



Become a budget expert

Position cuts are almost always explained as a budget issue, but that doesn't mean there wouldn't be money available if the budget were managed differently.

"You have to understand the money, so you can question it," says Malespina.

WHEN CUTS ARE PROPOSED



Contact EveryLibrary

EveryLibrary, a nonprofit organization that helps school, public, and college libraries with funding, legislation, referendums, and fighting cuts, has become involved in 25 to 30 school librarian situations, including with Malespina in South Orange-Maplewood, NJ.

EveryLibrary is currently working with library advocates in Oakland, Chicago, and Philadelphia, among other locales. EveryLibrary helps structure the most effective petition, and then sends it out. The platform will generate customizable

emails to specified people, such as members of the board of education and school administrators, with every new signature. In South Orange-Maplewood, the petition generated so many emails, the district's email shut down. There was no ignoring the issue anymore.

Teaming with EveryLibrary was a game changer, says Malespina, but it's impossible to measure the organization's overall success rate right now, according to EveryLibrary's political director Patrick Sweeney. They have only ramped up their school-related efforts over the last year, and it usually takes at least 18 months for positions or funding to be restored.



Communicate effectively

How do people in your community get news to one another? Are there Facebook groups or is it text groups, or mass emails? What about your local paper or hyperlocal news website? Maybe there's a diner, coffee shop, or community center where people still gather to chat.

Find the best way to reach every group within the community, and put your story out there.



Find a spokesperson or two

The person who knows the issues best may not be the best public speaker. You will need people who can stand up at meetings and speak clearly, calmly, and with conviction. Tone matters. At times, Malespina stepped aside and had someone else make a point, "because they could do it in a way that I couldn't."



Start with the facts

Have the statistics and research. It won't be the silver bullet, but it is necessary for building a solid case. The American Library Association has research and resources available to pass along to board and community members. Make a list of

the specific impacts the cuts will have on students and staff, as well.



Find your allies

Administrators, parents, educators, and students can all be allies, but so can some members of the board of education. Talk to them individually, outside of a meeting, and identify the member or members who are most sympathetic to your cause.



Apply the pressure

Board of education members are politicians and figures in the community. They need to face friends and neighbors each day, and they want to get reelected. Make them answer questions about cutting positions, the impact of those cuts, and how the positions could be saved, as often as possible from as many different people as possible.



WHEN CUTS HAPPEN

Understand the situation and be honest

Sometimes a cut is made to rid a school of an underperforming employee. Know the details, and fight the correct fight. If you go in praising someone who wasn't particularly good at the job, you lose credibility. Make it clear to the board of ed members that people can be replaced but positions are hard to get back once they are cut, Malespina says. They should never eliminate a position because of an individual.



Continue to monitor the budget closely

Every line can be important. Don't accept anything without inquiry.

"I became very good at questioning consultants," Malespina says. "I was seeing them come in for \$100,000 and \$75,000 and I was like, 'If you have \$100,000, why don't you have a librarian?'"



Focus on long-term solution

Individual communities or parent teacher organizations often step up when a librarian is cut. They raise funds to save the position. But for how long, and at what cost to equity in a district? Certainly not all schools have those financial resources. But even if they did, it is never a long-term answer. Instead ask those people to pressure the board, at meetings, or via email or letters, and talk to people in the community about speaking out.



Develop a thick skin

Things can get ugly. "People will start saying things to try to discredit you," says Malespina. You will alienate people whether you want to or not.



Stay vigilant

You must continue to pressure the board and administrators. Point out every issue that arises. It can help to have a core of people who can share the duties. The only way to get things done is to prove that you're not going anywhere.



Use your resources

You are not alone. Use available resources, including:

- American Association of School Librarians
- EveryLibrary
- I Love Libraries
- Save School Librarians
- State AASL Affiliate

There is also a free, four-part webinar series, "From Advocacy to Activism" from ISTE Librarians and EveryLibrary. Upcoming programs include: "Fighting Back When Cuts Are Threatened" (April 29) and "Using Social Media and Email to Maximize Visibility" (October 23).

Kara Yorio is SLJ's news editor.