

Implications of Using Focus Groups to Improve Library Services

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Focus groups have been used to improve services in a variety of arenas. In educational settings, they have been used in improving classroom teachers' performance, in general professional development, and in addressing areas of concern in the school setting. This research explores the effectiveness of focus groups in a school library media setting to improve library services to users, with particular emphasis on prioritizing concerns and generating solutions. Recommendations of the focus groups were compared with recommendations from the school librarian based on analysis of the data. As a result, a combined action plan was developed for guiding the future practices of the school library.

Background of the Study

The school library program has the potential to influence every aspect of teaching and learning processes. It touches each student in the school and is an essential partner for teachers and their curricula. Recent studies conducted by Lance (1999) and numerous others have shown that the quality of the library program directly relates to student achievement (Baughman, 2002; Baumbach, 2002; Lance). The last 25 years have changed the direction of school library programs. The library is much more than a collection of print resources. Technology has become an integral means of achieving learning goals. Research shows that users, both students and teachers, require a broad spectrum of resources, instruction, and also a skilled school librarian to guide them in their research journeys.

A broad paradigm shift has taken place in school libraries in the United States. According to Lamb and Johnson (2004), "Over the past several decades the focus of the library media program has shifted from building a warehouse of materials to an emphasis on creating a collaborative community of lifelong learners" (Overview, para 2).

As school librarians in the Baltimore County Public Schools, we are excited and encouraged by these changes and have committed ourselves to designing a program that welcomes users and supports their interests and learning needs. According to the American Library Association (2003), the school library should be a place of opportunity for students:

- Where all students can strive for and achieve success
- Where quality collections are provided, in print and online, that support the curriculum and address a variety of learning needs
- Where students develop a love of reading and literature
- Where library media specialists help students explore the world around them through print and electronic media

- Where students can work individually or in small groups on research and collaborative projects. (p. 2)

The role of the school librarian involves various roles: teacher, instructional partner, information specialist, and program administrator (American Association of School Librarians & Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 1998). In Baltimore County Public Schools, school librarians work as information specialists by finding authoritative information electronically, as well as building and maintaining a broad scope of print resources. We work as instructional partners who collaborate with classroom teachers to support the curriculum and help design their instruction. We are teachers concerned with helping students develop information literacy skills. As program administrators, we also have the responsibility for allocating funds for building collections that support the curricular areas offered in the school and maintaining an efficient and effective program readily available to staff, students, and the community. Ultimately, we are the decision-makers for the school libraries.

As school librarians, we are concerned with the quality of our programs, especially as our users perceive it. Often we may think we are providing all that is needed; yet our users may see our program differently. Certainly they can offer other perspectives and insight. Hughes-Hassell and Bishop (2004) argue that, "Experienced librarians understand the importance of involving their users in the development and evaluation of the programs and services they offer" (p. 1). We feel strongly that both teachers and students are stakeholders in our program with important contributions to make. They are a key part of the evidence network that shapes quality school library programs.

In order to determine aspects of our library program that are in need of improvement, we believed that a needs assessment or user survey would be useful to gather evidence for decision-making and continual improvement. Properly designed and used, a user needs assessment can provide evidence of gaps between the needs of users and the resources provided by the school library, as well as evidence of the strengths of the school library. Needs assessments support the development of policies, procedures, and programs. They are useful in the selection and evaluation processes involved in developing collections. In general, it can be said that better information and data can result in better decisions.

This study began with user surveys administered and analyzed by the school librarians. The results of these surveys were presented to a focus group; the focus group then made recommendations for the improvement of the school library based on the evidence it reviewed. This process raised an important question: Would the focus group identify and prioritize perceived needs for change as the school librarian would, or would their suggestions differ?

Focus groups are not new. They have been used for many years in the business world to assess and implement change. According to Greenbaum (1992),

Focus groups are generally recognized to be the most widely used form of market research in America. A recent study by the Advertising Research Foundation reported that virtually all business organizations use focus groups as an evidence base to learn more about reactions to their products and services. (p. 1)

However, when it comes to school libraries, few studies have explored the usefulness of focus groups in the educational realm.

As a support center for teachers, students, administrators, and the community, the school library by design must be in a continual state of assessment, evaluation, development, and change in order to meet the needs and interests of its users. Accordingly, the primary goal of this research was to determine if using a focus group to examine evidence from user groups would be a useful means of establishing the nature and direction of school library improvement. In addition, in taking an evidence-based approach, the study sought to build opportunity for collaboration among stakeholders and to reach out and develop new partnerships.

Review of the Literature

In order to gather information on focus groups and other means of evaluating school library programs, we examined a wide range of sources from ERIC, Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, and ABI Inform/ProQuest.

One approach to evaluating school library programs is to examine the academic achievement of students who have access to school library programs. The body of work undertaken by Lance and colleagues (Lance, 1999; Lance, Rodney, & Hamilton-Pennell, 2000; Lance, Wellborn, & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993), which involved 3,000 schools and school libraries and over 3,000,000 students, showed a direct correlation between student/school success as measured by standardized test scores and school libraries that have the following characteristics.

Credentialed staff and support staff engaged in a curriculum-centered library program; school librarians' involvement in collaborative information literacy instruction; provision of high quality collections and an information technology infrastructure for information access and use; and motivating students to read. (Todd, 2003, p. 1)

The study of student learning through school libraries in Ohio (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005) found that 99.44% of the 13,123 students' responses collected indicated that the school library and related services helped them with their learning as specified on the survey instrument. This study produced a typology of key building blocks of school library success that can be used to assess and improve school libraries. These key blocks are resources, technological infrastructure, reading resources, information literacy, technological literacies, and reading engagement. This raises a key question: How can an organization determine whether these building blocks are meeting the needs and expectations of its members or users?

Johnson (2001) affirms that using assessment and evidence-gathering tools that involve the building staff and school library users such as surveys, checklists, and focus groups will result in maintaining a school library that will be a vital part of the entire school program. For example, Perry (2002) used focus groups to help determine a plan for improving library services in a university setting. She used focus groups to provide direction in redefining the immediate goals and the longer-term Five-Year Strategic Plan of the library. Perry points out that focus groups can be used in many ways including assessing needs, designing plans, generating information, constructing questionnaires, and improving existing programs.

The main purpose of focus groups as a research method is to draw on participants' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions such as is not feasible using other methods such as observation, one-to-one interviewing, or questionnaire surveys (Gibbs, 1997). Focus groups are particularly useful when power differences exist between the participants and the decision-makers or professionals, when the everyday use of language and culture of particular groups is of interest, and when one wishes to explore the degree of consensus on a given topic. Another advantage to clients, users, participants, or consumers is that focus groups can become a forum for change.

Focus group research needs to be carefully planned. Sufficient time needs to be allowed for the process of designing the groups. About six to eight weeks are needed: (a) to identify participants; (b) to develop and test questions; (c) to locate a site; (d) to invite and follow up with participants; and (e) to gather materials for the sessions (Perry, 2000). When determining the size of the focus groups, Krueger and Casey (2000) noted that several small groups are easier to establish and work with and recommended that a group not exceed 10 members.

The role of the moderator can determine the degree of success for the focus groups. The moderator plays an important role in setting the tone, establishing the comfort level for participants, keeping the session moving, and ensuring that all participants have the opportunity to respond to each question (Perry, 2002). Hughes-Hassell and Bishop (2004) argue that a skillful moderator is essential for a successful focus group. This requires someone who is an expert gatherer of information, a listener, and a guide for discussion. The moderator needs a detached perspective and should not be personally invested in the study (Webster, 1992). Questions are the heart of the focus group interview. The quality of the participants' answers is directly connected to the quality of the questions. Although the questions may appear to the participants to be spontaneous, in fact they must be carefully selected and ordered in advance if they are to gather the maximum amount of information (Webster, 1992).

In summary, focus groups can be a useful tool for gathering in-depth information if they are carefully designed. Focus groups can be used to assess needs, design plans, generate information, construct questionnaires, and improve existing programs.

Design of the Research Project

In designing our research project, we used the guidelines outlined above. We were also guided by the experiences of Kershaw (2001), whose study addressed the variables that affect students' use of the library in high schools in New Zealand. Through the use of questionnaires and focus groups, Kershaw attempted to determine students' satisfaction level with the resources in their secondary school library. Her study used input from student users based on responses to a questionnaire, as well as student focus groups mediated by the school librarian. Kershaw's study used focus groups as a means to gain in-depth information about students' perceptions of their school library. However, Kershaw was disappointed with the results from her focus group. She believed that participants were reluctant to be candid about their feelings toward the school library because the school librarian was present as a group moderator.

In our study, the focus group consisted of eight members and a moderator. Questions used in the focus group session were based on the action plan format (see Table 3 for a sample) and on the results of the patron surveys (see Table 1 for students' and teachers' survey questions and results). The moderator for the focus group session was the library secretary, selected for her familiarity with the surveys and the evidence emerging from them (as she was a significant contributor to the data-collection process), as well as for her knowledge of the workings of the library.

We wished the focus group to take a strong evidence-based approach in evaluating the results from the student and faculty use surveys in order to design an action plan of recommendations for the school library. A secondary goal for the focus group included establishing prioritized initiatives with specific plans for implementation in a one-year action plan. Primarily, this study used a focus group to try to determine a better practice for long-term planning than the current process, which involved only the school librarian in long-range planning. In addition, the use of a focus group might generate new perspectives and ideas to make the school library as good as possible for users. The process might also possibly open the door for new partnerships to develop. The use of a focus group might provide an additional means for collaboration and ultimately develop a sense of ownership among the library users.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine if and how using a focus group to examine evidence of program practice for program planning for the school library might be beneficial. Like Kershaw's (2001) study, this research program used an initial survey to establish students' and teachers' use and perceptions of their school library. Unlike in Kershaw's study, the purpose of the focus group in this research study was to analyze the results of the user surveys to develop a prioritized action plan for the school library.

The overall study answered the following specific research questions.

- What are the results of user surveys designed to assess the library program?
- In what way does the school librarian utilize the survey results to design the action plan for the school library?
- In what way does the focus group utilize the survey results to design the action plan for the school library?
- In what ways are the recommendations of the focus group comparable to those of the school librarians?
 - To what degree will the focus group be able to generate new perspectives?
 - To what degree will the focus group generate applicable solutions?
 - How will the priorities of the focus group differ from the recommendations of the school librarians?
 - Will utilization of a focus group prove to be more beneficial than the individual views of the school librarians? If so, how?

Participants

Participants were selected from the general population of Dulaney High School (DHS) in north central Baltimore County. The school is multicultural and serves a large suburban residential community of middle to high socioeconomic level. Of its 1,960 students, 77% are Caucasian, 12% are Asian, 9% are African American, and 1% each are Hispanic, Native American, or other. The school has consistently made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as determined by the *No Child Left Behind Act*, a US law that addresses gaps in public education. The school has a 95% attendance rate, a 92% graduation rate, and a less than 3% dropout rate: all well within acceptable state standards. In the senior class, 20% of the students are members of the National Honor Society, having outstanding performance in the areas of scholarship (a grade point average of 85%, B, or 3.0 on a 4.0 scale), service, leadership, and character. Most of the teaching staff are considered highly qualified, with over 92% holding masters' degrees and beyond.

In this study, 275 student participants were chosen from the population of six English classes based on grade and ability level. One class from each grade level participated (freshman: grade 9; sophomore: grade 10; junior: grade 11; senior: grade 12) and at least one class of each ability level including advanced placement (AP), gifted and talented (GT), honors, standard, and inclusion. English teachers were given informed-consent forms to distribute to students in order to solicit volunteers to participate in the study. Only those students who returned signed consent forms were allowed to participate in the survey process. Surveys were distributed to faculty at a meeting in January 2005. Staff members including teachers, administrators, and support staff (about 100) were asked to complete the survey before leaving the meeting.

Limitations

The participants for this study were selected using purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Most participants had been library users or at least had regular access to the school library. Because the objective of this study was to know how focus groups could possibly improve school library services, the study sampled only those students and teachers who had used the library enough to be familiar with the current services provided. Therefore, the results of this study may not be generalizable beyond the population of DHS.

Research Instruments and Data Collection

During the course of the study, two data collection instruments were used, the first being the student and staff surveys and the second the action plans of the focus group and the school librarians. The surveys, along with tabulated data, are shown in the *Findings* section below. Most of the survey questions were closed-ended and used Likert scales, rating scales, and checklists to gather information about attitudes, perceptions, and current school library use practices. Several questions were also open-ended. In addition, in some places on the survey form, respondents had the opportunity to explain their responses in short-response comment sections. The questionnaires were analyzed to show the percentages and ranges of response for each question. Written comments were recorded and analyzed for themes and patterns. To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, several students and teachers not directly involved in the study were asked to read through the questionnaires and make suggestions for deleting or adding questions. This preliminary testing of the surveys was conducted before the general surveys for faculty and students to ensure that respondents would find the questions clear and unambiguous.

The second part of the study involved the use of qualitative techniques to compare the responses of the two school librarians and the focus group. Both groups were asked to examine the summarized data results from the teacher and student surveys and then independently form action plans on this evidence that first, prioritized the concerns for improvement of school library services and second, offered suggestions to correct these deficiencies. Specifically, the study looked for new ideas generated by the focus group participants that differed significantly from the suggestions of the two school librarians. The action plan form used in this study was modeled after the school improvement form that is currently used in all Baltimore County Public Schools.

Of the 275 student surveys completed, six were found to be incomplete and could not be used. The final count for student surveys was 269. Of the 96 teacher surveys completed at the end of the January faculty meeting, nine were incomplete or noted that the teacher had not visited the library. These were not included in the data collection, which resulted in a final count of 87 teacher surveys. Once the surveys were collected, the informa-

tion was entered into the database Microsoft Access, and data were then processed through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to obtain percentages and mean scores for each item. The surveys and the final results appear in Tables 1 and 2.

On reviewing the evidence in both surveys, the library staff felt that both student and teacher surveys showed an overall high level of satisfaction with the school library, which resulted in a positive and encouraging boost to the library staff morale. Results showed that students mostly came to the library to find materials for assignments (80.7%), to study or do homework (58%), or to access the Internet (50.2%). Results showed that teachers mostly came to the library to facilitate students' research or projects (70.1%). Second, they come to find materials for teaching (54%); a close third was for Internet access (48.3%). Areas of strength for the library were reflected in high scores for the library staff, for the reference collection, and for patrons' comfort level with resources and the staff. Areas of weakness identified included the need to continue to build and promote the fiction collection, to make the library as accessible as possible, and to educate students and staff more in depth about the databases.

In our evidence-based approach to developing school library practice, the results from the surveys were then examined by the two school librarians involved and by the members of the focus group. In April 2006, the focus group, consisting of four teachers, two students, a parent, an administrator, and a library secretary serving as moderator, met for approximately 90 minutes. The moderator established the following ground rules: (a) All ideas are important; (b) Everyone should participate; and (c) The session would end within 90 minutes (Perry, 2000). The focus group was given the results of the student and teacher surveys as shown in Tables 1 and 2 and had the opportunity to examine survey responses. The moderator explained that the goal of their meeting was to determine and prioritize several recommendations for the school library that they felt would most improve services to its users based on the results of the two surveys. In addition, the group discussed possible ways to implement its recommendations. All their thoughts and suggestions were placed into an action plan format similar to that used by the school librarians and then compiled into one proposed action plan for the school library.

After the independent meetings of the focus group and the school librarians, the recommendations and action plans from both groups were compared, noting differences, common thoughts or ideas, suggestions from students or teachers that were not considered by the school librarians, and solutions to concerns and how they were prioritized. The school librarians then determined how they could respond to the focus group's suggestions and whether use of a focus group in the decision-making process would be a good practice for the future.

Table 1
Student Survey Data Results

1. I am a:		
34 (12.6%) Freshman		98 (36.4%) Junior
21 (7.8%) Sophomore		116 (43.1%) Senior
2. Check the type of English class you are in:		
9 (3.3%) Standard		158 (58.7%) Honors
1 (4%) Gifted and Talented (GT)		101 (37.5%) Advanced Placement (AP)
3. I am a:		
150 (55.8%) Female		119 (44.2%) Male
4. On a weekly basis I visit the school library:		
126 (46.8%) 0 times		108 (40.1%) 1-3 times
26 (9.7%) 4-6 times		5 (1.9%) 7-10 times
4 (1.5%) more than 10 times		
5. Please check all the reasons you visit the library:		
(a) Yes: 217 (80.7%) find materials for assignments		
No: 52 (19.3%) find materials for assignments		
(b) Yes: 45 (16.7%) find materials for pleasure reading		
No: 224 (83.3%) find materials for pleasure reading		
(c) Yes: 76 (28.3%) socialize		
No: 193 (71.7%) socialize		
(d) Yes: 156 (58.0%) study or do homework		
No: 113 (42.0%) study or do homework		
(e) Yes: 96 (35.7%) use computers for word processing		
No: 173 (64.3%) use computers for word processing		
(f) Yes: 92 (34.2%) access databases		
No: 177 (65.8%) access databases		
(g) Yes: 52 (19.3%) prepare a presentation		
No: 217 (80.7%) prepare a presentation		
(h) Yes: 20 (7.5%) read magazines or newspapers		
No: 249 (92.5%) read magazines or newspapers		
(i) Yes: 135 (50.2%) access the Internet		
No: 134 (49.8%) access the Internet		

Ratings below are based on this scale: 5 Excellent, 4 Good, 3 Average, 2 Poor, 1 Nonexistent.

6. Please rate the library staff for helpfulness. Mean (average) score: 4.34
 7. Please rate the libraries fiction collection. Mean (average) score: 3.71
 8. Please rate the libraries nonfiction collection (examples are Taking Sides, Careers, etc.). Mean (average) score: 3.96
 9. Please rate the libraries reference collection. Mean (average) score: 4.18
 10. Please rate the library's facilities (examples are tables, chairs, climate, attractiveness). Mean (average) score: 3.84
 11. Please rate the library's availability (examples are hours, pass system). Mean (average) score: 3.71
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Table 1 (continued)
Student Survey Data Results

12. Please rate the following statements. Mean score: Never—Always

	1	2	3	4	5
(a) I feel confident using the library resources.					4.09
(b) I feel confident using the electronic databases.			3.93		
(c) The library is a pleasant and comfortable place to visit.					4.02
(d) I can find the resources I need.			3.86		
(e) The library staff is available to answer questions.					4.22
(f) I feel comfortable asking the librarian a question.					4.28

13. When are you most likely to visit the school library on your own?

— Before school	Yes: 78 (29.0%)	No: 191 (71.0%)
— During lunch	Yes: 110 (40.9%)	No: 159 (59.1%)
— After school	Yes: 116 (43.2%)	No: 153 (56.8%)

14. On a weekly/monthly (circle one) basis I visit the Baltimore County Public Library:

84 (31.2%) 0 times	158 (58.7%) 1-3 times
20 (7.4%) 4-6 times	5 (1.9%) 7-10times
2 (.7%) more than 10 times.	

15. Are the rules in the library fair?

242 (90.0%) Yes	27 (10.0%) No
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16. Which subject most often requires you to conduct research in the library?

8 (3.0%) Math	34 (12.6%) Science
209 (77.7%) English	70 (26.0%) Social Studies
20 (7.4%) other EPI and Health	

17. When you read for pleasure, which authors or types of books or magazines do you most often choose?

18. Please rate the following databases in terms of effectiveness:
Least effective—Most effective

	NA	1	2	3	4	5
(a) Literature Resource Center	68	6	10	51	90	44
(b) BrainPop	158	5	14	46	34	12
(c) SIRS Citizenship	160	7	11	43	38	10
(d) Historical Newspapers	140	5	10	44	52	18
(e) SIRS Renaissance	162	7	10	39	39	12
(f) CultureGrams secondary	148	3	12	41	39	26
(g) SIRS Knowledge Source	136	3	9	42	58	21
(h) SIRS Researcher	145	3	9	36	57	19
(i) eLibrary secondary	120	4	7	37	65	36
(j) SKS Webselect	171	9	7	46	31	5
(k) SIRS Government Reporter	168	7	9	42	35	8
(l) Book of Popular Science	171	9	7	42	30	10
(m) SIRS Leading Issues	166	8	7	38	37	13
(n) United Streaming	178	10	11	34	32	4

19. Do you use our BCPS databases from home?

86 (31.9%) Yes	183 (68.0%) No.
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Several questions provided full comments as well.

Table 2
Teacher Survey Data Results

- Years of teaching experience:

10 (11.5%) 0-2	12 (13.8%) 6-10
31 (35.6) 20+	12 (13.8%) 3-5
22 (25.3) 11-19	
- On a monthly basis I visit the school library with my class(es):

40 (46.0%) 0 times	42 (48.3%) 1-3 times
3 (3.4%) 4-6 times	1 (1.1%) 7-10times
1 (1.1%) more than10 times.	

Ratings below are based on this scale: 5 Excellent, 4 Good, 3 Average, 2 Poor, 1 Nonexistent.

3. Please rate the availability of the library. Mean (average) score: 4.29
4. Please rate the scheduling process for library use. Mean (average) score: 4.07
5. Do you have the opportunity for sufficient collaboration with the librarian about your lessons?
79 (90.8%) Yes 8 (9.2%) No
6. Please check all the reasons you visit the library with or without students:
 - (a) Yes: 47 (54.0%) find materials for teaching
No: 40 (46.0%) find materials for teaching
 - (b) Yes: 20 (22.9%) find materials for pleasure reading
No: 67 (77.0%) find materials for pleasure reading
 - (c) Yes: 61 (70.1%) facilitate student research or projects
No: 26 (29.9%) facilitate student research or projects
 - (d) Yes: 31 (35.6%) use computers for word processing
No: 56 (64.4%) use computers for word processing
 - (e) Yes: 31 (35.6%) access databases
No: 56 (64.4%) access databases
 - (f) Yes: 14 (16.1%) prepare a presentation
No: 73 (83.9%) prepare a presentation
 - (g) Yes: 12 (13.8%) read magazines or newspapers
No: 75 (86.2%) read magazines or newspapers
 - (h) Yes: 42 (48.3%) access the Internet
No: 45 (51.7%) access the Internet
7. Please rate the library staff for helpfulness. Mean (average) score: 4.95
8. Please rate the library's fiction collection. Mean (average) score: 2.90
9. Please rate the library's nonfiction collection. Mean (average) score: 3.56
10. Please rate the library's reference collection. Mean (average) score: 3.78
11. Please rate the library's facilities (examples are tables, chairs, climate, attractiveness).
Mean (Average) score: 4.13
12. Please rate the following statements. Never—Always

	NA	1	2	3	4	5
(a) When needed, the librarian is available to assist me.						4.62
(b) My students feel confident using the electronic databases.						3.51
(c) The library is a pleasant and comfortable place to visit.						4.48
(d) I can find the resources I need.						4.25
(e) I feel comfortable asking the librarian a question.						4.64
(f) My students feel confident locating the library print resources.						3.59

Table 2 (continued)
Teacher Survey Data Results

13. When are you most likely to visit the school library on your own?
- | | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| ___ Before school | Yes: 33 (37.9%) | No: 54 (62.1%) |
| ___ During lunch | Yes: 33 (37.9%) | No: 54 (62.1%) |
| ___ After school | Yes: 33 (37.9%) | No: 54 (62.1%) |
| ___ I never visit without students | Yes: 6 (6.8%) | No: 81 (93.1%) |

14. Please rate the following databases in terms of effectiveness:
Least effective—Most effective

	NA	1	2	3	4	5
A Literature Resource Center	48	0	1	6	15	17
B BrainPop	52	0	3	8	14	10
C SIRS Citizenship	58	0	1	8	15	8
D Historical Newspapers	49	0	1	7	10	20
E SIRS Renaissance	61	0	1	6	14	7
F CultureGrams secondary	59	0	1	9	10	8
G SIRS Knowledge Source	59	0	1	8	11	10
H SIRS Researcher	64	0	1	5	12	7
I eLibrary secondary	60	0	1	6	12	9
J SKS Webselect	70	0	1	6	9	3
K SIRS Government Reporter	71	0	1	5	8	4
L Book of Popular Science	69	0	1	5	7	7
M SIRS Leading Issues	67	0	1	6	7	8
N United Streaming	70	0	3	6	7	5

15. Do you use our databases from home?

13 (14.9%) Yes

74 (85.1%) No

Development of the School Library Action Plans

One of the purposes of this study was to determine if the use of a focus group could be an effective tool to improve library services. Based on analysis of the evidence and recommendations of the action plans generated by the focus group and by the school librarians, the answer to this overall question was a resounding Yes. A much broader scope of ideas for improvement of the services offered by the school library resulted from the use of a focus group.

The two school librarians began developing their school library action plans (see Table 3) by examining the results of the student and teacher surveys. They read through each question looking at the mean scores, percentage results, and comments. They developed a list of strengths and weaknesses that revealed areas of focus that needed to be addressed in the school library action plan.

The two school librarians felt that a broader knowledge of the databases was a primary concern. Many student and teacher surveys reflected a lack of awareness of and use of the databases. Second, the school librarians felt that the surveys showed a need for a strong effort to promote the fiction

Table 3
School Librarians' School Library Action Plan Based
on Combined Student and Teacher Surveys 2006-2007

Priority One: Improve database awareness and use with both students and teachers.

<i>Description</i>	<i>Responsible Time Person(s) Frame</i>	
Task A: Design an Awareness Program that will the entire school. Focus on the uses of the databases and their authoritative features.	School librarian	Plan now to touch implement in the fall
Task B (if needed): Discuss obligatory use of databases by English, Social Studies and Science as at least one resource.	School librarian's (SL) with Principal and Dept. Chairs	On going
Task C (if needed): When collaborating with staff about assignments, the school librarians will strongly encourage the use of the databases. Students should be required to use them for at least one source for their research.	School librarian's and teachers	On going

Priority Two: Promote our book collection to help student and teacher awareness of its broad scope as well as the quantity and quality of books supporting the curricula.

<i>Description: Based on HSA (High School Assessment) reading scores, we need to encourage independent reading.</i>	<i>Responsible Time Person(s) Frame</i>	
Task A: Address each department at the beginning of the year to let them know what books in the library collection that support their curriculum.	School librarians	September
Task B: Encourage teachers to look at their curriculum to incorporate at least one research project or outside reading into their assignments.	School librarians and teachers	On going, particularly at start of school year.
Task C: Encourage student feedback for topics or titles of books for personal interest and curricular research. This will be done when classes come into the library for research or when students are looking for pleasure books by asking them to make suggestions.	School librarians and teachers	On going

Priority Three: Fiscal Improvement—Replacement of library ceiling

<i>Description: Stained and missing ceiling tiles detract from the overall appearance and academic environment of the library. Questionable possibility for mold build-up due to moisture and prior leaks.</i>	<i>Responsible Time Person(s) Frame</i>	
Task A: We will submit our third request for replacement of the ceiling. We have been told in the past that there is asbestos in the upper ceiling so that replacement must occur over the summer.	Assistant principal	Immediate
Task B: Compile statistics for number of students visiting the library.	School librarians	Immediate

collection. Students' and teachers' comments reflected a negative feeling about the fiction collection, yet the school librarians believed that the collection was excellent as it contained books that supported the curriculum as well as more popular titles for recreational reading.

The focus group process evolved as follows. The moderator initially discussed the procedures to be used in the focus group's meeting. Each focus group participant was given one student and one teacher survey to examine and to become familiar with the survey form, the questions, and how participants responded. They were then given the overall survey results as shown in Tables 1 and 2. Discussion began once the participants had had time to examine the results and comments. Students, teachers, parents, and an administrator spoke openly about what they believed would be the top priorities in an action plan for the school library. The results of their discussion are represented in both the Student Suggestions Action Plan (Table 4) and the Teacher Suggestions Action Plan (Table 5).

The members of the focus group made decisions by looking closely at students' and teachers' comments and at the lowest mean scores or percentages in the surveys. Students believed that the library should work on improving availability, limiting students' socializing, providing a better lunch system, and staying open later after school. Second, students wanted a more teen-directed fiction collection, showcasing the newer and more popular books along with offering a broader scope of magazines. Finally, students wanted HSA (High School Assessment) materials to be available for checkout; some online magazines; more teaching about databases; and a more comfortable, cleaner library. Their final suggestion was to change from the Dewey Decimal system to the Library of Congress system.

The responses from the school librarians to each of the recommendations in Table 4 (from students) and Table 5 (from teachers) appear in the Final Action Plan for the DHS school library as shown in Table 6.

An important question that emerged at this point in the process was how the recommendations of the focus group compared with those of the school librarians. The overall purpose of this project was to find out if a focus group could offer new perspectives when compared with the school librarians' perspective. A comparison of the responses with the evidence presented revealed that most were completely different. Students and teachers felt that the highest priority was library availability, whereas the school librarians felt that it was knowledge and use of the various databases. This result again validates the use of the focus group to offer different perspectives on improving the services of the library and to encourage the librarians to change their thinking when evidence is presented. They perhaps need to observe the minds and goals of various stakeholders and to understand the library from their context, needs, and perspectives. This was an important outcome for us, as we came to realize that using the focus group had broadened the scope of possible actions to improve the services of the school library.

Table 4
Focus Group School Library Action Plan
Based on Student Surveys 2006-2007

Priority One: Availability of library

<i>Description</i>	<i>Responsible Time Person(s) Frame</i>	
Task A: Priorities should be given to students who come to do work, research, computers. Not socialize. Need noise monitoring. Use of passes—asked to leave if noisy.	School librarians	September 2006
Task B (if needed): possible sign up day before to get passes Kids intimidated by groups socializing	School librarians	2006
Task C (if needed): use of computers lab at lunch Manned by teachers; Signed up in morning	Administration teachers	2006
Task D: stay open later—flex schedule with staff monitoring	School librarians	2006

Priority Two: Availability of age-appropriate books

<i>Description</i>	<i>Responsible Time Person(s) Frame</i>	
Task A: more teenaged books—nonfiction and fiction	School librarians	2006
Task B (if needed): showcases that highlight new/popular books	School librarians	2006
Task C (if needed): Larger magazine display with new magazines—music, ESPN, cars	School librarians	2006

Priority Three References/Databases

<i>Description</i>	<i>Responsible Time Person(s) Frame</i>	
Task A: HSA test materials—not for checkout	Teachers	2006
Task B (if needed): Online magazines	School librarians	2006
Task C (if needed): More teachings of databases to students, make it easier to use—shortcuts	School librarians	2006
Task D : make library more comfy—chairs Pit—cushions, cleaner	Cleaning staff	2006
Task E: Library of Congress vs. Dewey Decimal System	School librarians	

Another key question was: To what degree did the focus group generate applicable solutions? Part of working with evidence is the meshing of data with professional wisdom. In the area of library availability, students suggested that a pass system be used; the possibility of signing up a day earlier

to come to the library independently at lunch time; opening the computer lab, which is not a part of the library, but is nearby, and using staff to manage the lab; and finally, that a flex schedule be used by the library staff to allow it to remain open later. In the same area of library availability, teachers suggested online sign-up for their classes to come to the school library; and to avoid any overlapping of classes, have teachers put the date next to their name as to when they sign up for the library. In the area of book collection, students suggested acquisition of more teen fiction and nonfiction, as well as showcasing the newer and more popular books. Detailed solutions for most suggestions were not given by the focus group participants. It should be stated that because almost all the participants in the focus group were not familiar with the inner workings of the school library,

Table 5
Focus Group School Library Action Plan
Based on Teacher Surveys 2006-2006

Priority One: Availability of library

<i>Description</i>	<i>Responsible Time Person(s) Frame</i>	
Task A: make sign ups easier, maybe like the morning announcements—on line	School librarians	2006
Task B (if needed): Let the teachers know more what is available for their specific subjects—databases, books, references	School librarians	2006
Task C (if needed): have teachers sign up and put date next to their name so it is first come first served	Teachers/School librarians	2006

Priority Two: Databases

<i>Description</i>	<i>Responsible Time Person(s) Frame</i>	
Task A: Department presentations great. Time restraints on teachers is the reason it is not used more. Part of Professional Day?	School librarians	2006
Task B (if needed): How can the databases be made easier for the kids to use? Shortcuts? More instruction?	School librarians	2006

Priority Three Availability of New Books

<i>Description</i>	<i>Responsible Time Person(s) Frame</i>	
Task A: Find a way to emphasize new department books Display case? (Before we had the book preview)	School librarians	2006
Task B (if needed): possible audiotapes		

Table 6
School Library Compiled Final Action Plan
with Responses 2006-2007

A indicates focus group suggestions based on student comments and suggestions.
B indicates focus group suggestions based on teacher comments and suggestions.
C indicates school librarian (SL) comments and suggestions.
D indicates SL responses and plan of action to all comments and suggestions offered by the focus group

Priority One: Availability of library		
Description	Responsible Person(s)	Time Frame
Task A: (A) Priorities should be given to students who come to do work, research, computers. Not socialize. Need noise monitoring. Use of passes—asked to leave if noisy. Possible sign up day before to get passes. Stay open later (after school) using a flex schedule with library staff.	School librarians	August 2006
(B) Make sign ups (for classes) easier, maybe on line. Have teachers sign up and put date next to their name so it is first come first served.	School librarians, tech liaison and/or web team	As online resource becomes available.
(D) After experimenting with several different systems for students to sign up for library use during lunches, we feel our current procedure has proven to be best. We will more closely monitor those students who are primarily attending to socialize and ask that they do so in the cafeteria. We will consider staying open later two days a week next year, perhaps to 4:00, although teacher contract times are from 7:30 to 2:30 and secretarial contract times are from 7:30 to 3:30. We will consider online sign-ups as our library Web site becomes established or possibly through Microsoft Outlook a School library Calendar could be established. We do feel strongly, however, that personal contact for collaboration with teachers about their lessons is extremely important and would be reluctant to move in this direction without some provision to maintain collaborative interaction. Our new sign-up sheet should eliminate conflicts with overlapping classes in the library, so that no date is required.	School librarians, tech liaison and/or web team and library secretary	As soon as computer programs become available.
Task B: (B) Let the teachers know more what is available for their specific subjects—databases, books, references.	School librarians	Ongoing, but especially at the beginning of the year
(C) Design an Awareness Program that will touch the entire school. Focus on the uses of the databases and their authoritative features. Discuss obligatory use of databases by English, Social Studies and Science as at least one resource. When collaborating with staff about assignments, the school librarians will strongly encourage the use of the databases. Students should be required to use them for at least one source for their research.	School librarians	Ongoing, but especially at the beginning of the year

Table 6 (continued)
School Library Compiled Final Action Plan
with Responses 2006-2007

Priority One: Availability of library

<i>Description</i>	<i>Responsible Time Person(s) Frame</i>	
(D) We offer, both by department and on an individual basis, ongoing staff development, beginning early in the year. After new books arrive in the library, a New Book Preview is hosted where all teachers are invited in for a special display throughout the library of new books, by subject area. We will continue to offer these services and events.	School librarians	Ongoing, but especially at the beginning of the year
Task C: (A) Use of computer lab (rm. 203) at lunch—manned by teachers. Sign up in morning.	Teachers and Administrators	Start in August and ongoing throughout the year
(D) Computer Lab 203 is not associated with the library, but we will pass this suggestion along to the administrative staff. Due to overlapping class times and lunch times, this could be a very difficult suggestion to fulfill.		

Priority Two: Availability of age-appropriate books, database access, references, and systems

<i>Description</i>	<i>Responsible Time Person(s) Frame</i>	
Task A: (A) More teenage books—nonfiction and fiction. Create showcases that highlight new/popular books. Larger magazine display with new magazines—music, ESPN, cars. Make on-line magazines available and offer HSA test materials on a non-circulating basis. Convert to Library of Congress system instead of the current Dewey Decimal System in order to orient college-bound students to the classifications used in academic libraries.	School librarians	Ongoing
(B) Databases: Department presentations are great. Time restraints on teachers are the reason it is not used more. Could this be part of Professional Day? How can the databases be made easier for the kids to use? Shortcuts? More instruction?	School librarians, Department Chairpersons and teachers	September or as early as possible in the school year
Books: Find a way to emphasize new department books. Display case? (Before we had the book preview).		

Table 6 (continued)
School Library Compiled Final Action Plan
with Responses 2006-2007

<i>Priority Two: Availability of age-appropriate books, database access, references, and systems</i>		
<i>Description</i>	<i>Responsible Time Person(s) Frame</i>	
(C) Address each department at the beginning of the year to let them know what books in the library collection that support their curriculum. Encourage teachers to look at their curriculum to incorporate at least one research project or outside reading into their assignments. Encourage student feedback for topics or titles of books for personal interest and curricular research. This will be done when classes come into the library for research or when students are looking for pleasure books by asking them to make suggestions.	School librarians and Department Chairpersons	September or as early as possible in the school year
(D) Promote our book collection to help student and teacher awareness of its broad scope as well as the quantity and quality of books supporting the curricula. Purchase a special book display to highlight new and more popular books. New books will also be introduced to the faculty by hosting a "New Book Tour", where we set up all new items by major curricular departments and invite teachers for a sneak preview. Design a "Book Suggestion Box" to keep on the library desk for student to make title suggestions to update the collection. There is no easier way to access the BCPS databases. We have put them under "favorites" once students get onto the Internet on all library computers. On-line magazines have not been approved through the BCPS selection policies for school libraries. We have already ordered new magazines for next year, including ESPN, Rolling Stone and Car and Driver. We will look into the possibility of housing HSA materials. Use of the Dewey Decimal System in our library is not an option. The vast majority of high school libraries in the country use this system; it is used state wide in Maryland and county-wide in Baltimore County.	School librarians	Ongoing

Table 6 (continued)
School Library Compiled Final Action Plan
with Responses 2006-2007

Priority Three: Fiscal Improvements

Description	Responsible Person(s)	Time Frame
Task A: (C) Stained and missing ceiling tiles detract from the overall appearance and academic environment of the library. Questionable possibility for mold build-up due to moisture and prior leaks. Compile and offer statistics as to the number of student who visit our library weekly, monthly and yearly to demonstrate how many times students are repeatedly experiencing an unattractive library classroom.	School librarians and Building Administrator	May-June 2006
(D) This is an ongoing concern and has been requested for the past three years. We will continue in our efforts to have new ceiling tiles installed by repeatedly placing a formal request through the proper channels.	School librarians and Building Administrator	May-June 2006
Task B: (A) Make library more comfy, soft chairs, cushions for the ledge in the "pit" and keep things cleaner.	Students, staff and maintenance crew	Ongoing
(B) A request to the faculty to donate soft armchairs of recliners was made. To date there have been no responses. In the past these types of chairs have been a problem for the library staff, however, we would be willing to try again. Cleanliness is a concern for all, students, staff and maintenance crew. We must all continue to keep our areas clean and neat in appearance. We will approach the Key Club next year about assigning three or four student volunteers to help maintain the cleanliness of the library. Other aspects of cleanliness have been discussed with the maintenance staff and will be addressed over the summer months.	Students, staff and maintenance crew	Ongoing

designing detailed solutions to their suggestions for improvement was beyond their abilities and a somewhat unrealistic expectation. However, as seen Table 6, solutions to most recommendation could be worked out by the library team.

Will use of a focus group prove to be more beneficial than considering only the individual views of school librarians? If so, how? Based on the overall results of this research project, the answer to this question is certainly Yes. A school library exists only to provide support services to its users. This research shows that user input is a useful part of the evidence framework of a school library to improve services and practice. When the

decision-making process is left only to the school librarian, gaps in offering users the best services possible may result.

Conclusions

The school librarians were satisfied and excited with the recommendations of the focus group. The group offered fresh perspectives that were not part of the school librarians' vision. This was the motivation for this research, and so from our perspective, we considered the research project to have been a successful endeavor. We value the evidence-based approach to decision-making, especially when the evidence is derived from various user groups.

Overall, the response of the school librarians to the focus group recommendations showed that the suggestions were not only well received by them, but easy to incorporate into the Final Action Plan for DHS school library for 2006-2007. Both school librarians felt that taking an evidence-based approach to planning and decision-making that involved key stakeholders offered them enlightenment and insight, as well as exciting opportunities to serve the users better. Examination of the action plans showed that the use of a focus group could be beneficial to the improvement of school library services. I hope that other school librarians will consider the results of this research and use, with permission, the procedures and forms in this report to see their services through the eyes of their users and thus improve their services.

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