

Back to (School) Basics

Jenna Nemec-Loise



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I love fall for a whole bunch of reasons. First off, you can't beat the Midwest maples, oaks, and birches on fire with autumn color. I wonder if there's anyone who sees those dazzling hues splashed against gray skies and doesn't think they're spectacular.

How about apples? Sure, you can get them year-round, but there's nothing quite like the apple pies, apple cider, apple anything made from fall's red, green, and gold bounty. And if you can get to a local orchard to pick your own pecks and bushels—well, that's even better.

And let's not forget the glories of what my mom calls "sweater weather." Summer can have its bathing suits and heat indexes because forty degrees and a crisp breeze are where it's at in my book. Really, what's more awesome than a warm woolen, a cozy blanket, and a steaming mug of something delicious on a chilly night?

Of course, fall is also back-to-school season for students across the country. When I was a kid, I loved the new shoes, new school supplies, and new starts that went along with another year of learning and discovering at St. Mary School on Cleveland Avenue in Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin. I couldn't wait to walk into the classroom on that first day and find out what new adventures were waiting for me.

This fall I get to rekindle that back-to-school magic in my new role as head librarian at North Shore Country Day School (NSCDS) in Winnetka, Illinois. There's so much to learn and know about the tweens, teens, colleagues, and families I'll be serving, and I want to make sure I'm putting them first in every aspect of my work.

Sounds like the perfect time for Everyday Advocacy, doesn't it?

You don't have to be taking a new career direction to join me in making a new start. As libraries nationwide welcome students back during the busy back-to-school season, you can start fresh with a back-to-basics agenda that celebrates the five tenets of Everyday Advocacy: Be Informed, Engage with Your Community, Speak Out, Get Inspired, and Share Your Advocacy Story.

What in the world am I on about? Here's a sneak peek at my plans for taking on new advocacy challenges this fall.

Be Informed: Clarify Your Advocacy Role

What I'll do: Since I'll be brand new at my school, the very first thing I'll do is talk with our Assistant Head of School about my advocacy role in three different capacities—as head librarian, as a member of the NSCDS community, and as someone working in the Village of Winnetka. Even though I'm ready to dive right into my advocacy work, I want to make sure I don't go cowboy right off the bat (or at any other time, really). We're not talking anything fancy or formal here. A fifteen-minute conversation with my

supervisor to clarify expectations and limitations should give me a few solid starting points.

Why it's important: You can't advocate successfully for a library community's kids and families if you don't know your boundaries. More often than not, you don't get to make the call about what those are—your library director, library board, or supervisor does. Make sure you know what's allowed and what isn't, both on work time and on any occasion you're representing the library. Ask questions about who's done what in the past and how you can contribute to the efforts of others. Seeking forgiveness rather than permission isn't a sound philosophy here. Know before you go and do.

Engage with Your Community: Listen—Especially to Kids

What I'll do: From the time I submitted my application to NSCDS, I knew school leaders were seeking a candidate who could build library momentum amongst tweens and teens. What kinds of things can elevate the library experience for sixth through twelfth graders? I'll have to ask them. In fact, I've already started doing just that. As part of my on-campus interview, I had lunch with five upper school students eager to share their thoughts on the future of Hall Library. I told them I couldn't make the library awesome without their help and that I hoped our conversations could continue if I got hired. All five students were thrilled to have my ear, and I was equally pleased to have their voices. I'm ready to make good on my promise this fall.

Why it's important: How can we advocate on behalf of our library users unless we listen to what they want and need? In the April 2016 issue of *Everyday Advocacy Matters*,¹ I wrote about the silent side to advocacy and the art of listening to understand. When we listen to understand, we let go of preconceived notions and the urge to respond right away. Setting aside our biases lets us really hear what others are saying and allows us to be better Everyday Advocates for them. Sadly, adults don't validate kids'

experiences, beliefs, and opinions as often as they could. As librarians and library workers, we can be the adults who "get it."

Speak Out: Articulate the Library's Vision

What I'll do: As part of my application to NSCDS, I was asked to submit a vision for Hall Library and to be creative within that vision. I made an infographic (Fig. 1) to visually present my ideas, and I plan to include it in my outreach efforts to students and colleagues this fall. Naturally, I expect my vision to grow and change as I have great conversations about how to create meaningful experiences for Hall Library users. However, using my current vision as a starting point can help me foster learning partnerships with faculty and cultivate understanding about the role of twenty-first-century school libraries in shaping global citizens.

Why it's important: Getting the word out about what libraries can do for kids and communities is just the beginning. As Everyday Advocates, we must be ready to articulate both the short- and long-term impacts of library engagement on the youth we serve. That's where great elevator speeches crafted using value-based language (VBL) come in handy. Instead of saying, "I conduct a volunteer program at the library," you can say, "I help teens increase their civic engagement at the library so they can become global citizens who vote on the issues that matter to them." That's a vision if I've ever heard one, and it's a message that keeps the focus squarely on the role of libraries in kids' lives.

Get Inspired: Seek Feedback from Interest Groups

What I'll do: What am I most excited about this fall? Recruiting interest and participation in what I'm calling the Hall Advisory Team (HAT). See, one-time focus groups just aren't my thing. I want an enthusiastic group of middle and upper school students to keep me on

HALL LIBRARY VISION

for an award-winning program

Guided by North Shore Country Day School's mission and values, Hall Library empowers 21st-century leaders through access to experiential learning, peer-to-peer engagement, diverse media collections, and caring mentor-librarians who inspire students to:

<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; color: #c0392b; margin: 0;">TALK OPENLY.</p> <p style="font-size: x-small; margin: 5px 0 0 0;">Free from judgment and censure, students step outside their comfort zones to ask challenging questions and exchange ideas on issues and topics that matter to them.</p>	<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; color: #c0392b; margin: 0;">READ BROADLY.</p> <p style="font-size: x-small; margin: 5px 0 0 0;">With high-quality print and digital media at their fingertips, students read an array of fiction and nonfiction to meet their scholarly, recreational, and developmental needs.</p>
<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; color: #c0392b; margin: 0;">IMAGINE VIVIDLY.</p> <p style="font-size: x-small; margin: 5px 0 0 0;">Imbued with agency and choice, students turn <i>would</i> and <i>could</i> into <i>will</i> and <i>can</i> through library programs that celebrate the artist, writer, speaker, and leader in each of them.</p>	<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; color: #c0392b; margin: 0;">DISCOVER PERSONALLY.</p> <p style="font-size: x-small; margin: 5px 0 0 0;">In a vibrant, supportive atmosphere, students ignite connected learning and self-discovery through resources that are both mirrors and windows to diverse experiences.</p>
<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; color: #c0392b; margin: 0;">THINK CRITICALLY.</p> <p style="font-size: x-small; margin: 5px 0 0 0;">By welcoming and understanding multiple perspectives, students refine information-seeking behaviors to distinguish between trustworthy and unreliable media sources.</p>	<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; color: #c0392b; margin: 0;">ENGAGE GLOBALLY.</p> <p style="font-size: x-small; margin: 5px 0 0 0;">As they "become self-confident, ethical citizens of the world," students seek knowledge of diverse cultures, backgrounds, abilities, and experiences in the global community.</p>
<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; color: #c0392b; margin: 0;">SERVE MINDFULLY.</p> <p style="font-size: x-small; margin: 5px 0 0 0;">Skilled in knowledge-based decision making, students embrace their roles as 21st-century change agents committed to shaping positive outcomes for future generations of world leaders.</p>	

Jenna Nemecek-Loise | Librarian Candidate | January 2017

my toes, inspire me to try new things, and help me keep things fresh and fun throughout the year. As HAT members share their hopes and dreams for the library with me, I can make sure my Everyday Advocacy efforts align with what I'm hearing them say. Tweens and teens don't just need me to be their cheerleader and champion. I need them to be mine, too.

Why it's important: We all love talking to colleagues about how we can make libraries awesome for kids and families. Sometimes, though, we need to get out of our own way and let library users inspire us to take our next great steps. When we do that, we're doing more than opening ourselves to a wealth of diverse perspectives. We're saying, "You matter. You belong. You're so welcome here!" Limiting ourselves to library lenses limits our Everyday Advocacy impact. Let

yourself be inspired by kids, teens, parents, teachers, co-workers, and community members, and take your advocacy efforts to new heights.

Share Your Advocacy Story: Keep It Strong and Simple

What I'll do: You probably already know my plan, right? I'll keep you posted on my new adventures through this column and the quarterly *Everyday Advocacy Matters* e-newsletter. But I'll also tweet, post to ALSC-L, blog, and even send handwritten notes now and again. I can't wait to share my successes and challenges with all of you!

Why it's important: We all struggle from time to time with this whole advocacy thing, so it's critical we embrace our roles as advocates for one other. You don't have to write a research-based journal article or publish a book to spell it all out. Snapping up informal opportunities—conversations, phone calls, e-mails—to share what's worked for you and what hasn't helps you cultivate the next generation of Everyday Advocates. With demands on our time growing by the day, keeping it simple and strong keeps us all ready and relevant. 🔄

References

1. Jenna Nemec-Loise, "The Silent Side to Advocacy," *Everyday Advocacy Matters* 3, no. 3 (2016).

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