School libraries: A gateway to resources

By Steve Zalusky, @ your library staff

The sun-filled, three-story-high atrium holds a strong visual appeal for students. In the atrium, one can find students seated among the 28 study carrels, using technology at the library’s charging station high-top table or its walk-in computer lab or reading on the lounge-style furniture.

There are tables where students work in groups, as well as a section of the library floor for instruction using a computer projector and screen.

The mission of the Cherry Creek School District is “to inspire every student to think, to learn, to achieve, to care.”

This mission is amply illustrated by the school library at Eaglecrest High School, the recipient of the 2014 National School Library Program of the Year (NSLPY) award from the American Association of School Librarians' (AASL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA). Sponsored by the Follett Corporation, the NSLPY annually recognizes a school library program that meets the needs of the changing school and library environment and is fully integrated into the school's curriculum.

Principal Gwen Hansen-Vigil wrote to the award selection committee, said, “Kristin McKeown and Hollie Hawkins are teacher-leaders as well as teacher-librarians. Both have the respect of colleagues needed to facilitate the learning of others. They are obviously leaders in areas traditionally considered that of librarians: research and reading, but I also rely on the library team to be leaders in school-wide initiatives.

The library is the hub of Eaglecrest, with teacher librarians seamlessly supporting and sometimes taking the lead on educational initiatives to serve the students.

“We definitely, I think, would be described as a suburban district,” said Kristin McKeown. With six high schools, it is one of the biggest in the Denver metropolitan area. The main area it serves is Centennial, Colo., south of Denver.

“Our district kind of runs the gamut in terms of demographics. So we have some part of the district that average to low economic areas and some that are affluent. It’s kind of an interesting mix in that regard.”
This is her eighth year at Eaglecrest. She has basically been the head librarian since she arrived.

During that time, she has fostered key relationships between the library and the rest of the school. She is part of the coordinator’s group, or school leadership committee, which affords her an excellent opportunity to collaborate with the leaders of the other departments in the building.

“We really tend to focus primarily on instruction, research and reading and leadership/professional development, staff development kinds of stuff,” McKeown said.

The school provides the library with excellent support.

She said, “We have two full-time teacher librarians, one full-time clerk and we just got the staffing for an additional half-time clerk.”

The staff helps the students who visit the library while working on larger research projects.

“A lot of what my fellow teacher librarians and I do is work with classes,” McKeown said. “The other thing we’re really passionate about is igniting and encouraging a love of reading,” explaining that the library works closely with English classes and supports literacy with sustained periods of silent reading.

Teachers will bring their classes to the library for book talks, to focus on a particular genre or examine the gamut of what is currently popular.

The library focuses on bringing the library to the classroom as well. This year saw the infusion of several hundred Chrome books that were put on carts and disseminated throughout the building.

An important focus for the library is instilling in students the habit of accessing reliable sources of information.

“Any research that they are doing should in some form or fashion include what we’re calling academic sources, which essentially is the term that we’re using for the databases,” McKeown said, with the library requiring students to cite their sources and not slapping a URL onto the bottom of a slide during a PowerPoint presentation.

The library tries to make itself available to support the teachers outside the library as well, checking Kindles out to students and making available iPod Nanos loaded with audiobooks. It also encourages teachers to promote online sources like animoto for use by their students.

The library website serves as a gateway to a variety of library resources, including links to databases, ebooks and online tutorials.

Databases connect students to ABC-CLIO, Gale and EBSCOhost.

The “Research Resources” page is customized for each research assignment, including database links, instructional videos and links to downloads.

A window on the main page of the library website shows a live Twitter feed that includes links to the latest parent newsletter article and provides a window into what books the library is featuring.

Twelve Kindles are available for checkout, with some 100-plus ebooks loaded on each device, including all required readings for English Language Arts Classes, all Summer Reading Program books and many high-
demand titles. There are also more than 100 audiobook titles available on CD, with an option for downloading onto an iPod Nano.

“We work really well in terms of supporting teachers and helping them to figure out what it is that they are essentially looking for and decide what are the tools and what are the processes that they may want to have students follow,” she said.

Librarians have input on several research assignments, including the English Language Arts 9 issues research paper, the freshman Biology Disease Project and the U.S. History research paper.

For the English Language Arts paper, the librarians created short video tutorials.

The ultimate goal for the library is preparing students for college success.

The library program aligns itself with the district by focusing on national initiatives like the Common Core Standards and integrating complex texts into every classroom.

Librarians support critical thinking by integrating the use of Thinking Maps as a tool for student research, allowing students to use a Double-Bubble map to organize information on two sides of an issue or use a Flow Map to reflect on their thinking and research process for diagnosing a disease scenario.

The book checkout rate has been increasing steadily over the past several years, with the current average at seven books per student per year. The correlation between the school’s average checkout rate and ACT reading scores is .94, with 1.0 being the highest.

Eaglecrest has been honored as a Colorado Power Library and an Exemplary Performance School Library Program.

More than three years ago, the district began a staff development initiative to train all teachers in Thinking Maps. McKeown was one of the teachers chosen to become a leader in Thinking Maps, based on her leadership and her experience with collaboration. She was instrumental in integrating the maps into the classroom.

Hansen-Vigil wrote, “As specialists in research and information literacy, the library team has made a difference in the achievement of EHS students. Seven years ago we examined our state assessment item maps and realized that information literacy was a much larger part of the test than we first believed. The English department made information literacy a priority, but it was the library department that made it happen. When I shared our data, the team identified changes in the research and information literacy curricula. The changes were small, but the emphasis they added made a big difference. The next year, Eaglecrest moved from being an “Average” to “High” performing on the state indicators.

“Kristin and Hollie work regularly with our professional learning teams (PLT) to improve student achievement. Hollie has teamed with the English 9 PLT revising the research curriculum to reflect skills outlined in the Common Core Standards. Kristin has been integral in increasing the depth and rigor for a culminating U.S. History research paper and working with the Geography/World History team on resource development. When our Biology Department struggled with a dated project with diseases, it was Kristin who encouraged them to use Thinking Maps to increase the depth of their students’ thinking and output. In short, our teacher-librarians’ impact on student learning is widespread.
She wrote that she was particularly struck with the culture of reading the library has created at Eaglecrest.

“Data across multiple assessments indicate our students are not reading at the same levels as they are writing and doing math. English teachers agreed to invest fifteen minutes of every class in sustained silent reading. The teacher-librarians realized the key to the success of the SSR would be a dynamic, exciting, and more diverse collection. They weeded out dated and unread books and created book displays that feel more like a bookstore. Kristin and Hollie’s book talks are a model of salesmanship. They lay books out on tables grouped by genre, and highlight a book in each group. As soon as they finish, students rush to “their” table to grab a book. Their genuine enthusiasm for books and knowledge of trends in popular fiction make reading appealing.

“The success of this initiative and the addition of a summer reading program have impacted student achievement. Our checkout rate is approximately 7 books per student – more than double that of any other high school in the district. As Kristin and Hollie reflected on their goals from last year, they worked with our data specialist to see if the checkout rate correlated with test scores. The results were astonishing. Our checkout rate has a high correlation with an increase in our ACT reading scores.”

Harry C. Bull, Jr., superintendent of the Cherry Creek Schools, said that for more than 60 years, the Cherry Creek School District has been a nationally recognized high-performing school district that serves more than 52,000 students.

The district mission statement is to inspire every student to think, to learn, to achieve, to care.

This depends, he said, on excellent programming and skilled personnel.

“For many years, the school library program has been successful because it has been consistently ahead of the times, and it has been intentionally staffed by personnel who are knowledgeable of their content and the instructional needs of the school.”

“One component of district philosophy is that all district resources are outside of classroom instruction are responsible for enhancing classroom instruction. School libraries in Cherry Creek School District have been charged with the responsibility of transitioning student learning from ‘finding information’ to ‘developing information literacy skills’ that will catapult student achievement to higher levels. This is an example of the current shift in programming in Cherry Creek School District libraries, but it also exemplifies that the strength of our libraries is in their flexibility. We enjoy libraries with collections that have grown over the years, and programming that has morphed to meet the needs of the 21st century student.”