

FEATURE



WHY DO WE NEED FUTURE READY LIBRARIANS?



That Kid.

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In 1986 MTV featured a video by Timbuk 3 titled “The Future’s So Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades.” In 2017 I’m still wearing shades, but now they’re part of my bug-out survival bag to weather The Big One. Between reading the news and seeing ash fall from the sky last summer in Portland, Oregon, the future does not seem as bright as it has before. Yet, despite my First World existential angst, I have never been more optimistic about the future of school libraries. It’s not because of the success of the Future Ready Librarians (FRL) initiative. It’s because of *why* we need Future Ready Librarians. Let me explain.

Over the last few years, I answered, presented, and wrote to the prompt “What is Future Ready Librarians?” Put simply, the FRL project and framework are intended to help school librarians strategically connect to an initiative that has the support of over 3,100 superintendents who have signed the Future Ready Pledge. The Future Ready Librarians Framework (available at <http://futureready.org/program-overview/librarians>) helps define how librarians might lead, teach, and support schools based on the core research-based components defined by Future Ready. The framework and initiative are intended to be ways to change the conversation about school libraries and librarians by connecting them to the strategic work of schools and districts. All of this speaks to how Future Ready Librarians define themselves and how the FRL Framework might be implemented within a school.

In Simon Sinek’s 2009 TED talk “How Great Leaders Inspire Action” he explains that identifying “what” and “how” is less powerful and less important than defining the “why.” If you’re not one of the 3.4 million people who’ve viewed his talk, it’s

worth eighteen minutes of your time. His argument is that “people don’t buy what you do; people buy why you do it.” By defining the why, we can connect more effectively with others to lead, to inspire, and to motivate.

What does that mean for Future Ready Librarians? With the benefit of some time to process, listen, and reflect since the initiative was launched at the ISTE Conference in 2016, my thinking is evolving about Future Ready Librarians. Since that launch, the FRL initiative has become moderately viral both among school librarians and district leaders. That’s a great thing. But I think, to date, we’re focused on the *what* and *how* rather than the more essential *why*.

From my perspective, the Future Ready Librarians initiative is not really about school librarians. It’s not a Facebook page. It’s not a hashtag. It’s not about technology. It’s not about reading. It’s not a blueprint for changing the profession of school librarianship. Despite those Future Ready gears labeled Robust Infrastructure, Community Partnerships, and Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, it’s not really even about schools. At the center of all the Future Ready frameworks is the phrase “Personalized Student Learning.” [Cue anticipatory soundtrack!]

Have we arrived at our answer?

Not so much. [Cue “WAH wah” sound effect.]

At a recent Future Ready Institute, a school librarian asked me “How do you define personalized learning?” In that moment, I recalled the scene in the movie version of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* when Cindy Lou Who (who was no more than two) asked the Grinch why he is taking her Christmas tree. The Grinch, taken aback for a moment, is at a loss for

words. Both he (and I) came up with a response that moderately satisfied the interrogator, but I was never really satisfied with the answer I provided at the institute. I didn’t lie. But I definitely dodged.

“Personalized student learning” is like the bumper sticker that reads “Visualize Whirled Peas.” Are we talking about global comity? The 1990s surf-rock band? Or baby food? Within education, personalized student learning means something different to everyone. Outside of education circles, it often doesn’t mean anything at all. If I were to ask our district language interpreters to translate “personalized student learning” for our Russian, Spanish, and Chuukese families, I’m pretty sure I would get a note back seeking clarification of the phrase. As a result, it feels as though the phrase doesn’t really mean anything. Like Michael Pollan’s concept of “edible food-like substances” that make up much of our diet in the U.S. (2009), personalized student learning is ersatz, a stand-in for something real. In spite of this, personalized student learning is on the ingredient list of countless strategic plans and vision statements. However, if we lack a shared understanding of what personalized student learning means, then it is not actionable. We can’t do anything about it. While the Future Ready Librarians Framework gears or wedges may represent research-based elements to support personalized student learning, I think we need to peel away the label “personalized student learning” to reveal the hidden *why*.

In my view, the why behind Future Ready and Future Ready Librarians is very simple. It’s about *that kid*. I’m not talking about students in a vague third-person way or an anodyne student as a placeholder in the center of a graphic

organizer. I'm talking specific and granular. Pollan argues that we need to eat real food. We similarly need to focus on real kids, not aggregations, percentages, or populations on data dashboards. If we have a problem with English language learners not succeeding in our school, then we need to focus on that one kid who is an English language learner. That Kid has a name, a culture, hopes, dreams, fears, and a future that may or may not include sunglasses.

That Kid is one specific child in your school who depends upon you to prepare him or her for a future that is uncertain, dynamic, and challenging. I would challenge you to choose a child—not the one you see every day and who is featured in your Flipgrid makerspace videos. It's the kid who doesn't like to read or that one who thinks the library (or librarian) is scary. It's the kid who reads in a different language than most of the books in your library or that one you suspected of hacking and kicked out of the library. It's the kid who can't check out books because she has book fines and lives in a car with her family (or whose house just flooded).

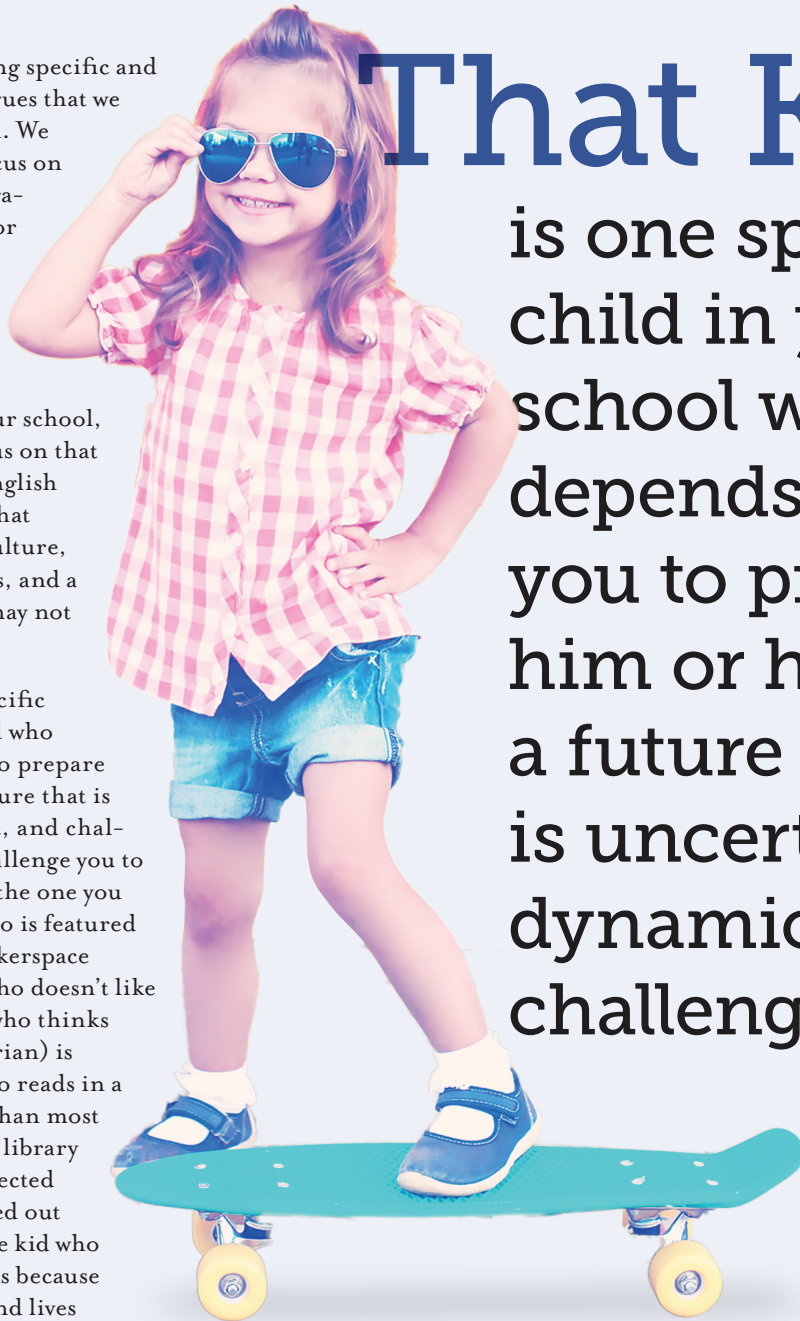
The future of Future Ready Librarians is That Kid. In my TEDx talk, I reference a tweet about school librarians sent in 2016 by Vancouver School District superintendent Dr. Steve Webb: "[School librarians] are indispensable to our strategic vision. #FutureReady graduates. Period." As he always does, he focused on kids. He gets the *why*. Why do we need Future Ready Librarians? Because

we have a responsibility to ensure our students are ready for the future—and districts and educators, including school librarians, are rising to the challenge.

If you agree with my superintendent and me on this *why*, then we have a different way of looking at the Future Ready Librarians initiative, defining the *what* and *how* by working backward

from the *why*. Because every kid is different, your plan will necessarily be local, personalized, and specific. In effect, you are beginning to personalize student learning. One kid at a time.

What does this look like in practice? Start by identifying one kid in your school. That Kid might speak Spanish at home, didn't eat breakfast



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this morning, or is wearing shoes she got at Goodwill last weekend. That Kid could be a boy who doesn't do his math homework but spends lunchtime on computers writing code. That Kid is a student who was issued a Chromebook but doesn't have wireless at home. That Kid is a bully who torments his classmates on Snapchat.

As a Future Ready Librarian, how can you change your philosophy, practice, program, or space to better meet the needs of That Kid? How can you as a Future Ready Librarian change that student's future trajectory?

Maybe it's having more Spanish-language books in your library, a bowl of granola bars on the counter, and taking down the harsh "No Food or Drink" sign on your door. It could be digging out an old laptop, installing Scratch coding software and making it available to your furtive coder. Maybe it's purchasing some wireless hotspots instead of a new set of encyclopedias. Perhaps it's setting aside the digital citizenship lesson and instead engaging with the bully about why he is harassing others.

Why?

If you don't reach That Kid with a great book, a safe and fun place to learn, or tools to be an effective digital citizen, what does her future look like? To date, the Future Ready Librarians initiative has been affirmational and aspirational about the potential role of school libraries in 21st-century schools. It has focused largely on the *what* and *how* of Future Ready Librarians: What actions will you take to become a #futurereadylibs librarian and how can you change the conversation with your principal and district leaders about libraries?

If Simon Sinek is correct, these questions will get us only so far. They may not actually change the conversation because if the conversation is

only about libraries and librarians, then we've got a problem. Sinek says, "People don't buy what you do" (2009). And frankly, a lot of people don't buy school libraries anymore.

But what if the future of school libraries is not about books, technology, or even librarians, but about the needs and hopes for That Kid? That Kid is a living, breathing *why* that every educator, every parent, and any decision-maker with a soul can get behind. Taking it a step further, what if you as a Future Ready Librarian truly embrace the idea and take action to serve not only That Kid, but all students, including those who bully, those who lost their library books, and those who never come to the library? What if you, as a Future Ready Librarian, actually define personalized learning for That Kid and do something about it? School librarians are perfectly positioned to lead, teach, and support in ways that ensure the success of That Kid. Because they ostensibly serve all students and teachers in a school, librarians have the means, permission, and ability to respond to this essential *why right now*.

Why do we need Future Ready Librarians (and Libraries)? Because That Kid needs to be future ready. And so does That Kid over there. And That Kid hiding out in the back corner. And if there aren't librarians who intentionally serve EVERY kid in the school, then the future isn't very bright at all, is it?

In less than two years, the concept of Future Ready Librarians has become a thing. Librarians across the U.S. are seeking to use the Future Ready Librarians Framework to change both conversations and practice. Education leaders can be heard using *future* and *librarians* in the same phrase.

Thanks to Dr. Kristen Mattson, the Future Ready Librarians Facebook group grows by another thousand participants every month or so. As Future Ready Librarians look to the future, let's next define our *whys*. That Kid is in every school. Find every That Kid. Help all of them. Bring them into your library. Change their future. And we'll all be reaching for our sunglasses.



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Vancouver (WA) Public Schools and Future Ready Librarians Lead with the Alliance for Excellent Education. A long-time advocate for strong school libraries and innovation in education, in 2011 Mark was awarded the Washington State Individual Award for Influencing Instructional Leadership and Professional Growth of Educators, awarded by the Washington State ASCD affiliate. In 2012 the State of Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction named him Teacher of the Year. In the April 2012 issue of *Teacher Librarian* he was among those recognized as visionary leaders of the learning commons concept. In 2015 he was included in the National School Boards Association's list of "20 to Watch" as emerging education technology leaders.

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