Leah: Welcome to Can’t Shelve This, the podcast where we hammer home the importance of school libraries. I'm Leah Gregory and I'm joined by my co-host, Janette Derucki.

Janette: Hey everyone.

Leah: So here we are at the beginning of 2025 and looking at the end of 2024. So what do you have to say about wrapping up last year and starting this year?

Janette: I say good riddance, 2024. That's what I say. No, I mean, I can't really complain because it wasn't a terrible year. There were a lot of really great, exciting things that happened last year, but I am really looking forward to a better year in 2025. How about you, Leah?

Leah: I'm shocked, first of all, that 2024 is over. It seemed like it went by really, really quickly. I'm happy about a lot of things that happened in 2024, but I'm always like recharged by the New Year. I always am looking forward to new things and I always feel like I don't do New Year's resolutions, but I always feel like in January, like, this is the year I'm going to be my best self.

Janette: It does feel like a chance to start fresh, right? Like, so I don't really do resolutions either. I'm like, to be honest, I'm a terrible goal setter. So setting a resolution feels a lot like setting a goal that I probably won't attain. So like, why even try? I do kind of subscribe to the idea of picking like a word to inspire you for the year.

Leah: I once, instead of setting like specific resolutions, I set like really broad open-ended ones. And the best and most successful year I had was, I was just going to waste less and I was going to, like, waste less time and waste less resources. And I went through, that was really a good year for me, meeting my kind of imagined goal because I did, like, I really cut down on like food waste. And I would just, it was really broad and gave me a lot of areas to try to touch upon. So I didn't feel like if I really screwed up and blew a bunch of money, then I wasn't blowing my entire resolution. So.

Janette: I like that because it's like you can, I mean, it can manifest in a lot of different ways, right? So you can succeed by doing even the smallest thing. I know one year, I picked I was just going to say no more. Not just for the fact of saying no, but just because I have a tendency to always want to say yes, like I love to help people with things and people ask me for, you know, to participate in activities or do things. I'm always like, yes, yes, I would love to. But it's like you, I mean, you only have a certain amount of bandwidth, right? So one of the things going into the new year is always trying to be aware of, you know, not overextending myself for the next year. So I guess probably for 2025, that will be another thing I strive for is just trying to make sure that I say no when I need to.

Leah: I just had this conversation with some people at work and I said, I declare 2025 the year of saying no. So we'll see. I'm not going to overcommit myself in the fall conference season this year. That is my resolution. So we will see if that happens.

Janette: Yeah, I am right there with you. Like I even, especially after going through the past conference season, as much fun as it was, and as many amazing opportunities as we had, like I really do need to be more mindful about planning what that looks like. And you know what, it's only January, so we have ten months to figure out what that looks like, so.

Leah: It'll creep up on me and then somebody will ask me something and I will find myself saying yes. But we do have to talk about what we accomplished in 2024 and one thing was that we got this podcast off the ground after many, many years of talking about it. I am having a blast. I hope everyone listening enjoys.

Janette: Yeah, I hope so too. I know for me this has been a real bright spot of 2024 and one of the things I look back most fondly on, obviously always working with you is great for me. I enjoy our work together so much and I think we try to extend that into just about every avenue of work that we have, right? So this is a fun way for us to connect and still talk about the things that are really important to us, but also hopefully make a difference and you know, connect with our listeners as well.

Leah: And I've connected with so many other people who have stopped me or sent me a message to say that they enjoy the podcast. And I've just met so many people that are not people that I would talk to every day. So it's been really exciting for me to, to meet and know a lot of different people.

Janette: Yeah, that's been kind of a fun side effect of the podcast.

Leah: Byproduct.

Janette: Byproduct is probably a better word. I am definitely a person who kind of like, I mean, I'm a data analyst, right? So I'm not used to being like front and center in people's faces. Data is pretty solitary work. So for me to go to conferences and have people like recognize me was a little bit weird. I was like, wait, how do I know you? And they’d be like, oh, the podcast. I'd be like, oh yeah. But it is fun to automatically have that kind of like to talk about and to know that people are listening and engaging with it that way.

Leah: As you know, I was stopped in the bathroom at a conference recently because somebody recognized me. I'm like, okay, now this is the upper echelon of fame here, somebody stops you on your way into the ladies room. If you ever see us out and about, you should stop us any time and say hi because we love talking to all of our library peoples. Peoples, all of our library people. The other goal that we have to talk about is our reading goals for the year because we're both big readers. And I was talking to you earlier about how I, like, failed miserably to meet my Goodreads goal, and I actually went in and you can edit it and I edited it down by about 25 books because this was a reading slump year for me.

Janette: I always, like, I have a friend who every year she sets her reading goal on Goodreads, and every year she's like, I'm not going to make it. I'm like, goals are literally the responsibility of your past self, right. It's something you hope to achieve, but you can change them. I'm a big fan of revising your goal because you never know what's going to happen in your life. Like you know, maybe there aren't any books you want to read. I'm a huge mood reader, so like if I,

Leah: Me too.

Janette: sometimes, yeah, I mean, talking about book slumps and things like that, like, sometimes if nothing strikes me, it's like I will go days without reading, which then my husband asks if there's something wrong with me, and I'm starting to think maybe there is because I can't get into a book. But it is hard to revise those goals, though, like to give yourself permission to say, like, I thought I was going to read, you know, 100 books and I didn't come anywhere close. And I will admit, I did get to like October last year and figured out how many books I needed to hit my goal. And then I had a lot of friends who recommended like short novels, novellas. And I was like, I am all about doing the work to get to the goal. I don't really recommend that.

Leah: It’s going to make it easy for yourself.

Janette: Right? Someone was like, read Heartstopper. You can read all, the whole series in like a day. And I was like, okay.

Leah: Did you read it?

Janette: Yes.

Leah: Did you like it?

Janette: Yeah, I love Heartstopper.

Leah: I haven’t read it yet. It’s on my list.

Janette: Okay, well I highly recommend it. I had been following the webcomic, but I had never really sat down with the books, like to read the graphic novels, so I highly recommend that. I love it.

Leah: I’m doing an audiobook right now. And I was just kind of, when I'm away from my audiobook, where I listen to it normally in the car or on the treadmill or something like that. And then it doesn't occur to me that I could also be listening to it when I'm doing other things. And so I tend to get through audiobooks slower, even though the rest of the world seems to get through audiobooks faster than I do.

Janette: No, say no more. I read an audiobook last year that it took me five months to get through it.

Leah: Yeah.

Janette: Because I only listened to it when I was in the car and apparently I don't go anywhere very far away very often when I'm alone.

Leah: I also hate when you're in the car listening to an audiobook. You arrive at your destination, but you're not ready to stop the story. Oh, now I have to get out and like, get out of my fictional world that I've been in.

Janette: It's like, have you ever sat in your car just because there's a good song on?

Leah: Yes, yes.

Janette: And you’re like, I'm not ready to get out.

Leah: I do that all the time. I read something funny that like if you pick a certain song to listen to in the car and then you get distracted and then you start it over because you failed to appreciate it properly the first time. That's how I am with audiobooks. Sometimes I’m like, I don't even remember this chapter. I'm going to have to go back because I get distracted.

Janette: I will say, like a lot of times, if I'm going to read nonfiction, I'll do that as an audiobook because it's easier for me to stop and start something like a memoir or, you know, another type of nonfiction book. I guess because I'm not so in the plot, you know, like with fiction, it's harder for me to like, leave it. I'll forget completely what happened in the story when I come back. Or, you know, I've disassociated from the characters because I've read three other books in between. So nonfiction is a little bit easier to reconnect like that.

Leah: That's a good idea. I might try that. Well, today we are talking about school librarian and administrator relationships.

Janette: I'm super excited for this episode because this is a topic that a lot of librarians mentioned that they wanted us to discuss on the podcast. I think there are a lot of people out there who are either looking to establish relationships with their administrators or just improve them. And, you know, this is I mean, every time I turned around and asked people for suggestions for topics, this came up.

Leah: I feel like people either have a great relationship with their administrator or they have a relationship that's kind of fraught with different tensions. I don't talk to many people who just have like a very easygoing, like middle of the road relationship, but maybe those are the ones I just don't hear about. I only hear about the ones like, this is great. It's the greatest thing that ever happened. Or I hear about ones where I'm like, what can I do? Because this is not working for me. I'm anxious to hear from this duo because they will hopefully give us some advice. So if you're one of the ones with a less than ideal relationship, maybe you can get some tips.

Janette: Yeah, I know there are a lot of people out there who are really struggling to establish that relationship or to really make it work for them in a good way that's beneficial to them, the administrator, and the school, so they can serve their students better. So hopefully this will be a great session for people to get lots of tips and to walk away with something that they can use.

Leah: We're excited to welcome our guests from Dryden Elementary School in Arlington Heights, school librarian Beth Kovacic.

Beth: Hello.

Leah: And Principal Akemi Sessler.

Akemi: Hi.

Leah: We can tell you the Akemi is the 2024 AISLE School Administrator of the Year and Dryden Elementary was also a 2023 AISLE Exemplary School Library Award winner. But before we start talking about that, we have an important icebreaker. What do you guys like to read? Is it e-book, audiobook, or print?

Beth: Oh, that's a good question. I am not a good audiobook listener. I have to be like confined in a car or something to be able to focus. I like e-books because it saves me carrying everything back and forth from the library and I always return them on time, which is not the case with other things. But my true preference is print.

Akemi: I love reading books in print and I like putting post-it notes all over them and being able to sit or lay down in a really comfy spot with them. So I love that. I have a long commute, which is a little bit longer in the wintertime, so I'll often listen to audiobooks on my way to or from work as well. And sometimes that's really fun to hear it read aloud by the author or somebody that can change the way a character sounds when there's dialogue. So I enjoy that as well.

Janette: That's true, particularly memoirs. I love when the, you know, the person whose story is being told is the one reading the audiobook. It's just more powerful that way. But I think that I've become a print book collector, and I always say, like collecting books and reading books are not the same two hobbies.

Leah: They’re different hobbies, yes.

Janette: Right.

Leah: So let's see, Beth, how did you become a school librarian?

Beth: It was not a straight path. When I was a classroom teacher, I started in high school and then I worked in middle school for a while. And then I wanted to get my Master’s and I debated and I did not take the library path at that time. And then I came to another place where I didn't know what I wanted to do and circled back to library through some circumstances that put me in a really good place to be able to do that. And so I got my MLIS and my school library endorsement, and that's how I came back to schools and became a school librarian.

Leah: Isn't it funny, Janette, that no librarians that we've talked to have just one day like when they were in undergrad, said, I want to be a school librarian. Every single person has a path like yours where they didn't, they came to it a different way. So I find that fascinating.

Janette: We need to fix that. I mean, and like Leah and I both also came to librarianship later. We need to change the pipeline and make it clearer that that's an option to people I think earlier in their careers because we, you know, not that teaching is not a great profession and there's plenty of wonderful like areas that you can work in within schools. But we need more school librarians for sure.

Leah: I would like school librarians to be like one of the number one jobs that you think about when you're going into education.

Janette: Beth, what did you teach?

Beth: I started in high school. I was a high school English teacher in journalism. And then I taught ELA in middle school. My very first job, though, when I was in high school, was a page at the library. And I shelved and that was my very first job. Our public library was on the next block from our high school and it was a library I had gone to growing up, you know, we were regulars and that was my first job. So I came back full circle.

Janette: That's so cool. I love that.

Leah: What about you, Akemi? What kind of relationship or experiences did you have with the school library when you were growing up?

Akemi: Oh my gosh. I loved my school library, especially when I was in elementary school. My family certainly valued education and reading, but we just didn't have a ton of books in our home. And at that time we had one car in our family and my dad needed that for work, and our local library wasn't within walking distance, so I just relied on my school library so heavily to be able to have books of choice to read at home. And I just remember being so excited on school library day.

I went to elementary school in the early ‘70s, well throughout all the 1970s, so we didn't have a lot of like, I don't remember a lot of read-alouds happening in the classroom but in the school library is when I remember getting exposed to just some amazing children's books and literature being read aloud, too, there and then just having free reign of the library and then like just falling in love with certain genres or authors and just wanting to just read lot of biographies or books by Judy Blume or Shel Silverstein or Judith Viorst and things like that. And I just so appreciated it. So I felt like that's where my love of reading and learning really flourished.

Leah: You touched on something that's very important to me, which is that many school libraries are eliminated and people are like, well you can get to your public library or you can use the digital resources. And I'm like many, many families do not have that access. So I'm going to stop myself there because I will talk for hours about, access is an equality issue because many children cannot get to their public library because they don't have a car and they can't use digital resources because they don't have a device or Wi-Fi. So that's so important to me that school libraries stay open for that reason.

Janette: Too, like, kids who have a school library are more likely to engage with and become readers. I think it's really key and important. So I appreciate that you can bring that life experience to this chat.

Beth: And I think too, like, we think we live in a suburban setting or an urban setting that it's more accessible. But, you know, here at Dryden, our library is amazing. Our public library is amazing. And I know that our families go often, but for kids to go independently, they have to cross a very busy major road to get there. And in my last district, the public library was like on the very edge of the school district and it was quite far. The school district boundaries were different than the town boundaries and the library boundaries. And so you couldn't get there if you didn't have a car, like they didn't have the option really to bike there. And that was in a very, you know, urban suburban type of setting. So that's, unfortunately a universal issue regardless of what type of community you live in.

Akemi: And I have to say the library, not only the resources within the library, but the library skills that I learned in elementary school and how to find books by subject area or the Dewey Decimal System or the, you know, the catalog systems and things like that. When I became old enough and independent enough to go to our local library on my own or finally, like make the long trek there, I felt like I had some skills to navigate and had a starting point to know how to utilize and find what I was looking for at the library or even just be able to approach the librarians who worked there and ask them for help. So I just felt that was so critical too.

Janette: I know like, even when I was in library school and we were learning research skills, right? A couple of my classmates were like, how do you already know how to do this? And I was like, didn't your librarians teach you how to do this? Like citation chaining and things like that? I was like, and they're like, no, no one ever had taught them how to do it. So, you know, you can really tell who has had exposure to really great librarians and who hasn't.

Leah: And I find that I, when I meet people and they tell me that they don't go into their public library and a lot of it is because they have never been exposed to one and they fear doing something incorrect or saying the wrong thing, which we all know you can't do or say the wrong thing in the library as long as you're acting appropriately. But they fear, I think, being made to feel stupid or awkward. And I wish that every child had been taken into a library as a child. So they know that even if you've never set foot in a library before, you're still going to get help when you're in there. You don't have to know some code on how to be a library person.

But. So let's talk about Beth and Akemi's relationship. How did your collaboration begin?

Beth: I think I was so lucky to come to Dryden because there was already a really good foundation. There is a culture of reading. It was clear that that was a priority. Obviously, Akemi loves books and reading, and as an administrator she makes that a priority that's clear in our school. And our district, as well. Like we have a full-time librarian and an assistant in every building and our libraries are funded. We have, you know, decent book budgets and it was a priority. And so I was really lucky to come into that structure. And then, you know, personally, then we were able just build on that. And, I was able to say like, okay, what do we already do? Like, where do we go from here? And how can I continue to develop this vision that we have here? And so I'm very lucky that it was very easy.

But I think the first thing you really have to do and even coming into the structure that was really supportive, is that you have to establish trust, especially in the past several years, right? It's really important that your administrator knows that you're going to keep them informed, that you're going to make good decisions, that you're going to be organized and follow through. And so, you know, you have to show that and, you kind of figure out you've gotten to that point when they don't ask 15 questions when you say, I want to do this thing. And they go, okay, cool, let's do it. But, you know, they're responsible for a lot and they see a bigger picture of how what you do fits into the whole school. And Akemi has a really good understanding of how the library can benefit the whole school, but not every administrator does. And so you have to show that. So I think, you know, if your administrator doesn't have a great relationship with the library or with the librarian, like that's where you have to start is, you know, by showing the impact the library can have. But by developing that trust.

Akemi: Well, we hit the jackpot with Beth Kovacic coming to Dryden to be our school library director. I feel like with Beth, she loves books and reading and authors and I feel like she also cares about people so much, too, as individuals and teams. It's not unusual for her to find a book and it relates to something that we're experiencing at school or that we're focusing on at school and she’ll, it'll be on my desk. And she said, this book made me think of you or of Dryden. And I'll read it and of course I'll start crying and then have to buy a copy for all the teachers in all the classrooms in our school. But somebody that just is so passionate and knowledgeable and people-centered like Beth. We’re so, so lucky to have somebody like that. And she truly will work with students and teachers and families on an individual level because she wants, I feel like she genuinely wants each person to find something that they can connect with or be inspired by in the library.

But also with our teacher teams and at the whole school level too. So she really is easily accessible. She takes the initiative to go to grade level teams and check in with people to share some ideas or suggestions, and she does it in just such a gentle way. You know, she understands too, that a lot of people are spinning a lot of plates. And so if one time doesn't seem like a good time to do something or try something new, she'll find another way. She's just also done such an amazing job of like expanding our awareness and understanding of what a library can be for our students and teachers and families in the school setting. And it's more than just the books and the resources, but it's also the makerspace that she has built and grown over time and really finding the resources online, but also in print, that helps us utilize those things in the makerspaces. So combining all those areas together. It's been wonderful.

Beth: I think the makerspace is a good example to bring up here though, too, because there were a lot of ideas and a lot of talk about it when I came to Dryden, but it really hadn't gotten its footing and you know, people wanted this thing, but they didn't really know exactly what it was or what they wanted it to be. And we have space, so that was good. And we had like some stuff, but working with the committee to kind of say like, okay, well like what do you want kids to do here? Like, what does this look like? How do you want kids to use this? Who's going to supervise them? You know, when are they able to come in the schedule? Like, what does that look like? And so, you know, we kind of had more of a vision. And then I said, hey Akemi, we want to do this thing and we need some furniture. Can you buy us some of these really expensive makerspace carts and tables and equipment and things? And, you know, if you can communicate the vision and they see how that's going to impact kids, then, you know, they can work with the structures that they have to get you what you need.

So we have a district foundation and we were able to use some money from that and some other places to buy carts to organize all the stuff that I packrat, scribble-scrabbled, collected, put away in the makerspace. So we have you know, all of these movable carts with, you know, drawers that we can change the sizes and desks that we were able to use that were already in district, like the trapezoid kind of desks. So we can reconfigure them and move them and everything's on wheels. And we added 3D printers and like my library budget doesn't pay for that. I need to convey the value of that to my administrators so that they can use the channels that they have to make that happen. But they can't do if you don't communicate the vision and you're not clear with what you need.

Janette: So can you talk a little bit about what that looks like? You've said like, communicating and conveying the vision that you have for the project or the library to your administrators. Like, in your relationship with Akemi, what does that look like? Is it a report? Is it a conversation? You know, what is that?

Beth: I mean, I feel like we're fairly informal, like it's a lot of conversations. Any time she comes into the library, I'm like, here's what we're doing. We're reading this, and we're doing this project, and look at this thing that we did.

Janette: Nothing better than show and tell, right?

Beth: Right, right. So with the makerspace specifically, like we had a committee that worked on that and so we were able to report out more formally our ideas and kind of our plans for that and say, okay, you know, this is what we need and were able to make a plan to get it funded. But it's lots of like, you know, I was an administrator for a while. So I feel like, you know, I have the benefit of kind of being able to have an understanding of how they think about things. Like, where is this money going to come from? Like, how many students is it going to impact? Like, who's going to be responsible? And you have to answer all those questions for them, whether you do that formally, you know, in some kind of reporting structure or, you know, whether it's conversations or meeting with a committee or whatever.

But the more like robust information you can have, the more data you can collect about how, last year we set up an iPad and had students sign in and out when they came to get materials. So we could say like, do we have enough funding to keep up with the projects that they're doing? You know, how much more air dry clay do we need to buy for all of these, you know, projects kids are doing? And collecting data to show the impact that those things have had and helping decide if we need more things. So, you know, it's lots of conversations. I feel like I'm always talking about what we're doing, you know, always with the show and tell and connecting and not just with Akemi, but with our other librarians, we always have conversations going, when parents come in.

We used to have like regular volunteers, and then we stopped that during COVID, of course. And when we asked them back, it's on a more targeted basis. So they come for a specific project and work with the classes. And so I'm always like, yeah, and when they're in fourth grade, they'll get to do this. And the fifth graders are studying this. And let me show you this hydroponic garden we have in the hallway right now. And so, you know, you're just telling everybody all the time like what you're doing so that they cannot escape you. And they know and have an understanding of, you know, how you're impacting kids like across the curriculum and not just, you know, oh, we're doing this constellation thing in first grade, but when they get to fifth grade, we're going to do, you know, we're going to classify galaxies in Galaxy Zoo and the citizen scientists thing. Like, and how is this going to impact our students and their learning is always the bottom line, I think, for your administrators and you always want to bring that back to the impact.

Akemi: I think Beth does just a phenomenal job of just like shining a little spotlight on something that is going well, you know, or something that the kids are excited about or that the teachers are excited about related to what they're learning or reading. You know, and just doing that frequently, like she said, with, it's like 1001 conversations, you know, a thousand little conversations, but just the little small doses, I think, of celebrations of the things that are going well starts to plant seeds, I think in everybody's mind about how you might want to grow that or just enhance it a little bit more as we go along. And so I think that's just such a really fun and positive way to really start doing things that will help a school library flourish. Sometimes, like you said, it's really important to have the big vision of what it can be and what you want it to be. But it's always just looking at all the little things that are going well and start thinking about ways you can enhance that and grow that.

Janette: Can I ask you a question, Akemi? As an administrator, though, like, how did you begin to develop your big picture view of what the library is and how it fits into the school?

Akemi: Well, I think I've just been super lucky in so many ways to have so many great experiences. First, I think as a student, right, in a school that had a really wonderful library that I loved. But then I was a classroom teacher for about 15 years. And during that time it was just really fun and easy to make friends with the school librarian. And you know, I feel like the school librarian really helped me improve my craft as a classroom teacher because they would be the ones with the ideas of, let's have a young authors program, let's do a big colonial days festival. They were always very interested in the things that we were learning and studying and really want to bring it to life for the students in very fun and creative ways. So I think they really helped me understand all that a library could be. And I just had so much fun working with them and using their resources that they brought to us.

In, I think it was 2013, our school district sent a couple of school administrators, and I was fortunate enough to be one of them, to go to a national school library conference, I think it was in Connecticut at the time. And just being able to go to a conference like that and listen to so many different speakers and experts on all the different ways that, even just like learning standards and coding and really fun things, I think that's when I first learned about like Shannon Miller, who is a great resource as well for school librarians and administrators, they really helped with that vision. And then also getting to visit, I think, different school libraries that were also model programs really, really helped so much. So I just, I can't pinpoint it to one thing, but just feeling super lucky and grateful to have worked with great school librarians and have some wonderful professional learning opportunities as well.

Janette: That conference you're referring to, is that, was it AASL?

Akemi: Yes, yes.

Janette: Okay. So this is a great reminder.

Leah: Great segue, yes.

Janette: Yes, AASL is in St Louis in 2025. So we're hopeful that a lot of really great Illinois librarians and administrators will be able to take advantage of that.

Leah: Another question I have, so, you're talking a lot about your building culture and your reading culture and your library culture. Does this culture of collaborations, is it building-wide? Do you work this closely with teachers from all the grades and that kind of thing?

Beth: I meet every three weeks with each grade level team. So that was another place where Akemi was really helpful because before COVID we had a common team meeting plan, like our whole building has time in the morning before the kids come for, you know, different types of meetings and that's when our faculty meetings are when we have them and, you know, meetings around kids needs and things. And so we used to have a dedicated team meeting day. And so I would rotate and meet with them. And then with COVID like, you know, we scaled back a lot of the things that we do because it was just too much. And then when we came out of that, that structure wasn't in place anymore. And I found it really difficult to collaborate with the teams. Their schedules were all different. They would change it and not think to tell me, you know, it just was, it was not. It was my priority, and they have this huge laundry list of priorities, right?

And so I asked Akemi if we could have that structure back again, so that every team met at the same day of the week. And certainly they meet other times and they do whatever teams do. But if there was a dedicated day where they could expect me. Our tech facilitator who meets with every team, she meets with them every six weeks. So she just does one team a week and I do two. And so she was able to put that structure back in place for us, which makes it so much easier to collaborate and get places they're expecting you. That structure says like, you're going to be at this place at this time to talk to this person and it tells the teachers that this is a priority. Right.

And I just, I was thinking of it earlier and I went to say it before I forget since we were talking about that earlier, Leah, is the teachers in the classroom today are the next administrators. Right. So Akemi was talking about how her librarians helped her when she was a classroom teacher. Right. And then she became an administrator. And so she understands. So the more you can collaborate and work with your teachers, right, you're laying the groundwork for the ones that will become administrators and make decisions. So, you know, that team structure that we put back in place was really helpful to collaborate with the teams. So I see every team every three weeks, give or take, you know, meeting moratoriums and things like that. And so we plan, you know, the next unit or cycle or kind of what we're doing. And so I see them regularly.

Janette: So what advice would either of you have for a librarian who works in a school where a culture of collaboration is not really encouraged? Like, something Leah and I have discovered a lot in the professional development sessions we do is that people are saying that their collaboration time is one of the first things they lose, you know, throughout the school day or throughout the week. It's just not really there for them.

You know, we, I'm thinking about the professional development, that we did last fall where literally no one raised their hand, that they had collaboration time regularly. So I'm like, I applaud you both for having that in place in your school. But, you know, how do you encourage someone to approach that topic? You know, Beth, it was great that you felt confident and comfortable having that conversation, but I'm not sure that everyone does.

Beth: You kind of have to get uncomfortable sometimes, right? I mean, if it's important and you want it to change, you kind of have to be that buzzing little gnat you know, when am I going to meet with this team? How can we get this done? If your teams have like a team lead structure, right, can you just coordinate with the team lead? Like, how can, like, any way you can get an in by being persistent, by targeting, you know, people that you think are going to be willing to work with you and then talking about those successes and then eventually it's going to get to the point where, like, your administrator has to be like, maybe I should help them figure this out. Right? But you may I mean, if you don't have that, it's challenging, but you have to find support wherever it exists, right? If that's you teaming up with a couple of teachers and then pulling in, you know, a few more the next time and a few more the next time, and then they're all in your grasp and you can, you know, work with all of them. Right.

And so, you know, but you just start with what, with where you can and you just never shut up about how awesome the library is and how you can help them. And even now, people email me and go, I am so sorry. Can you recommend a book? I'm so sorry to ask you. And I always say, that's my job. That's what I'm supposed to do. You can ask me any time, like you're a teacher and you want recommendations for your personal kids. No problem. You know, the PTA book club people just emailed me and said, we're thinking about this. What do you think? A teacher is pulling groups of small, a small group of kids to read, maybe they're a reading specialist or they're doing some, you know, some kind of pull out group and they want book recommendations. That's my job, right? You're not bothering me. Like, that's my thing. That's what I do. So, you know, whatever need they have that you can meet,

you know, you just, you just have to reel them in bit by bit. And then you have a foundation to say like, I need more structure, more time, more, look at all the things that we're doing. I could do so much more if you would just schedule a common time or if you, when you're making the master schedule, if you can think about that and you know, there are so many things. Poor Akemi did like so much work to try to, you know, we have more sections, we have full day kindergarten. We have to redo all of this. But if she is working on that and she doesn't know what I need, I'm never going to get it, right.

And that's the other thing, too. Administrators work on a different timeline than the rest of us. Right? So you have to be way ahead of where you think you need to be because they're thinking in January and February about budgets and, you know, they're thinking in March about staffing for next year. And, you know, as teachers, we don't always think about what that timeline looks like for them. But especially, I came from much smaller districts. My last district was a one-school school district, and the one before that has less students at that time than one of our middle schools have. It's a lot harder to get things done in a big district, right? I could walk into the superintendent's office and say, hey, buy me some new tables. All right, what do you want? You know, it's not like that in a bigger district. And so you have to figure out like what the system is and what the chain of command is and what the decision making looks like. Because, you know, your administrator can't make decisions that easily in a bigger district, too. So you really have to kind of back up those timelines and you know, be aware of their restrictions so that you can, you know, get your needs in front of them so that they can help you where they can.

Leah: You were talking about like sometimes you have to be uncomfortable. So this next little section that we want to talk about is the sad fact that a lot of school librarians don't have this great relationship with their administrators. So we want to talk a little bit about what you think contributes to maybe an administrator’s lack of understanding or support for school libraries?

Akemi: It could be just their past experiences with school libraries. It could be the limit of resources that they have available to them, I think to Beth Kovacic’s point, right, being very skillful with scheduling. Right. And prioritizing and valuing common times, planning times, within that master schedule for teams and the school librarian to come together it's not often easy to do. And then really working on tying that sometimes to your school improvement plan. Sometimes there can be, I can imagine, pressure on school administrators or even schools and classroom teachers for school improvement in reading and in math and really being able to tie some of that to how school libraries and collaborating with school librarians really can spark that learning and growth in students through the planning can be really helpful, too. So I think there's just, you're being pulled in a lot of directions and sometimes you can forget like what, the greatest resource that you can have from your school library and your school librarian is right there, you know, with a lot of wonderful and fun solutions, I think.

Beth: I think too, that's where when we advocate, you know, we have to think about what kind of data and research and information our administrators need to help us. Schools with a certified librarian and a strong library program score higher not only in reading but in math. Right. And so, you know, sharing that type of information in those 1001 conversations in your newsletter, in your hey, did you see this new article that came out, you know, littering their desk with, you know, articles and things and saying, hey, did you see this? And give me like the one sentence summary, right, the elevator pitch. They're not going to read all of it. Right. But if you, you know I went to Akemi and I'm like, hey, did you see that email? She's like, I have 95 unread emails, right. You have to make it accessible and easy for them to help you.

And sometimes that's research and data and saying like, you know, this is how I can help with the school improvement plan or the strategic goal or, you know, the things that we're trying to work on. And this is how it works together. And they're not going to see that unless you tell them.

Akemi: You know, we like looking at research, we always, John Hattie and effect size and learning and growth is really big right now and the practice that has the biggest effect size is efficacy, right. Teacher efficacy and that's their belief in their abilities to problem solve and find the resources to teach together. So I feel like the school librarian can build so much efficacy within a school setting amongst the teachers and administrators alike.

Janette: Too, I'll add that, you know, to Beth’s point about research, like there have been dozens and dozens, like more than 60 studies that I know of that are, all point to exactly what she described that, you know, having a staffed library with a certified librarian improves student outcomes in reading and math. So, you know, it's all there. It's just, I guess, bringing it to their attention in a way that is effective is important.

Leah: This next question within a question is interesting to me because I find a lot of school librarians that I’ve talked to are hesitant. So the question is who should make the first move? And I find that many school librarians are very reluctant to approach their administrators. And I'm always coaching them. Like if you go in with a well-reasoned and considered argument, not an argument, even, but like presentation of facts, I don't think any administrator is going to be upset with you.

Janette: Yeah, there's a lot of belief that their administrator is going to feel like they're wasting their time that they don't understand. And it's also like organizing their thoughts and the materials to present that, you know, advocacy argument to them. Like what do I show them? And I know Leah and I have worked really hard to try to create resources for librarians that are those like big picture kind of facts, like single bullet points so that you're not I mean, no one wants to read a five page report about the data, about the, you know, impact of school librarians. Those exist. But it's hard when, you know, you have every department in your school is also trying to show you their five page report about the impact of, you know, what they're doing. So, you know, what does that look like, I guess?

Akemi: I would say in terms of like making the first move, I would encourage administrators just to pop into the school library as often as you can. If you're walking through the building and you're walking by the library, just pop in and take a peek and see what's happening, you know, even if it's for like 30 seconds, because it's going to be great and exciting and it gives you, it's a great conversation starter. Even just asking the kids what books they checked out from the library because they're usually super excited at the book checkout station and telling you what they picked and why. And once you start to see and feel that energy, you're just going to want to help that grow, I think, for sure.

Beth: I think, I don't know, I'm in a lot of like librarian groups, Facebook groups and listservs and stuff. And I find it interesting, like someone just posted the other day and they said, my principal wants me to do STEM classes like what, is there a curriculum I can buy? What can I do? And I'm like, well, you should probably go back and talk to them and see like exactly what that looks like, because maybe they know this much and they're like, yeah, we should totally do that. But, and that's not what you're, like you need that common understanding. So I think sometimes administrators make the first move because they want to add something that they heard about or something some place else was doing, but, and that's a great place to start. Like, well, we already do all of this stuff. And so how does this fit into what we're doing? And like, where are you trying to get and what resources do you have for me to do that? Right? And start that conversation about what the role of the library is. If they don't know you exist or what you're doing, like you need to tell them.

And it doesn't have to be like, you know, the first time you talk about it, you shouldn't march in with a big presentation, right? You want to build that personal relationship, you want to drop those like good news things like, hey, I'm working with Mrs. So-and-so's class and we're doing this thing like, pop in and check it out. They may never come, but you've invited them. You've told them what you're doing. They know that you're collaborating with someone and, you know, maybe the 10th or the 12th time you know, they'll come or you, you know, invite them to be a guest reader. Do you want to come to read to kindergarten? Come and read this book. I have our school nurse come and read “Bob, Not Bob!” Right, about the kid who's sick and his mom thinks he's saying the dog, but he's saying mom. And so she comes and she talks about hand washing and the importance of sanitation. And so like, who else can you pull in and say, oh hey, principal. Nurse so-and-so came and read to our kindergartners. Do you want to come and read a book, too? And, you know, just constantly, I'm very persistent. And so.

Akemi: I think, too, like sometimes the librarian in a team, like they, like, through that collaboration and that good relationship with the teachers, they'll come as a group sometimes. Right. And it's positive pressure because there's a lot of momentum and excitement there. And, you know, I think of like your collaboration with fourth grade on the farming unit and different thing, you know, and now we have hydroponic gardening and things like that as a result. But I feel like the enthusiasm that comes from the ideas and the things that they want to do together as a team and bringing forth a team to your administrator, too, can help. You see like, okay, this might be a little bit bigger priority than what I was originally thinking about because it's really important to, you know, many, you know. So that's something to, to keep in mind as well.

Beth: And I, I'm thinking of a past administrator who didn't really understand the range of books that we should be offering in the library and had a very narrow vision of, of what that should be. And so there was a lot of education that had to happen there to say like, no, that's not really the way it works and this is why and this is what the research shows, and these are the kind of kids that we have and the kind of, this is why we have, you know, this range and you know, really explain our philosophy as a librarian, because he didn't come with that understanding. And so, you know, while in some ways he wanted to be very supportive, he wanted to support his vision of what it should be. And so there was really a lot of education that had to be done to say like, it's not just me saying this, like, this is how you know, this is what I learned in library school. And this is what these researchers say and this is the position of the ALA. And, you know, we just do what we do best, right? We gather information and we put it in a way that's presentable and manageable. And, you know, we sometimes we really have to start from the beginning with, like, we do more than check out books, right? Like, I feel like people should know that by now, but they don't. And so, you know, we really have to show that, just like we take the kids how they are and where they start, right? We take our administrators where they are and with what their background is.

And one like non-library thing that happened that always reminds me of that is we were on a Zoom call with our assistant superintendent for personnel, and they were asking like, what resources we needed during COVID and we, you know, screens and PPE and masks and all this stuff. And our speech path said, well, you know, what do I do when I have to, you know, adjust a kid’s, like, tongue and, like, mouth? And he was like, wait, what? And she's like, well, you know, sometimes I have to like, put my hands in their mouth to, like, position their tongue so they can make the sound and like, adjust them. And he said, let's all just pause for a minute and reflect on the job that we did not know our speech paths did. And you know, we were talking more, I was like, tell me more about that later on. And, you know, I didn't know she did that. And, clearly he didn't either, and probably none of us did. You know, and she was like, well, yeah, of course I do that. But we didn't know, and so you can't assume that they know anything if they're not engaging with you and they're not doing things to support you when they're not, not yet, providing the structure and the administrative support, then you have to start at the very beginning.

Janette: I think this goes back to what you said earlier about how you have to get uncomfortable sometimes, you know, because there are, we do hear a lot from people that their administrators think that they're just checking in and out books and anyone can do that. And that's why, you know, perhaps especially now that there's, with the teaching shortage that we're in the midst of, you know, the librarian gets pulled, especially if they're a certified teacher, to cover something else. And so they're like, we can just stick anyone in there to check out books. But, you know, to your point of, you have readers’ advisory skills, you know what books are appropriate for which students, and, but it might be uncomfortable to have some of those conversations about what the library does and why it's important. You know, there's a lot of research that's been done recently that has really talked about how library funding in schools is directly tied to the priorities of administrators. So how do we change those priorities? You know, you're very fortunate. Akemi is like the best cheerleader. I love your relationship, but it is I mean, not everyone has that and it is hard to build it and sometimes it's really hard to change someone's mind. And sometimes the harder you try, the more they dig in.

Beth: Yeah. And I think, too, remembering that administrators were teachers. Right. And they're people right. And so, you know, what motivates them? Like, what are their goals for your building? Like, how do you fit in to that? Like, I'm not going to say no administrator is ever scary because certainly, you know, they can be. But, we're going to assume positive intent and lack of knowledge and, you know, take it one little chunk at a time.

Leah: One thing I'm struck by as I'm listening to you talk, I kind of was approaching this episode as like, oh, Beth is so blessed to have Akemi, you know what I mean? Like, she has this great administrator and the blessings flow down. But now I'm listening. I realize that Akemi is blessed with Beth. Like, you guys have a very back and forth, I’m like, Akemi is not just making your life easier. I can hear by the things that you're saying that you are doing to make Akemi's life easier, like you are synthesizing information for her and presenting it to her and making it easier for her to make decisions. And do you agree?

Akemi: Absolutely.

Leah: Do you feel that way?

Akemi: I 100% agree. And I think, again, like Beth is just, she just knows how to, like, sprinkle celebration everywhere. Like, it's just such a great culture for our whole school building and so our library, our library media center runs down a very long hallway in our building, probably the longest hallway. But that hallway is covered with pictures and posters, and artwork of all the different kinds of books that are being featured and that students are reading. And the students get to sign their names on there, you know, to show that they're, they've been reading certain books and such. So it is really, she just makes the LMC such an appealing and desirable place for our students and staff and community members. And it's just so easy to want to uplift that and grow that because we know that so much learning and inspiration for learning and reading is happening there.

Leah: So that is a good segue into our last little bit that we want to talk about here. And you've touched on this already, but as an administrator, what makes the school library valuable to you?

Akemi: Oh, everything. Yes. No, it is, the library, just having the, the mindset that the library, the school library, is truly the heart of the school. So, like, every little organism, right, is going in and out of the library. Just, you know, when you think about like an organizational health and well being, like, that library, to have a robust library with somebody who is, who just, who loves their work, is so people-centered but also passionate about books and reading and learning and making and wanting to be creative and take some risks and connect people together and share ideas. I think that's really what it's all about. Just always remembering that your library is the heart of your school. So you want it to be as healthy and robust as possible.

Janette: I don't know, Akemi, maybe you're, you know, you've talked about the value of school libraries to you, but what, like, what would you say to your fellow administrators who maybe don't share your perspective? Like, what advice would you have for them, for where they could start to, you know, either expand their understanding of libraries or to build a relationship with a librarian? You know, like going back to administrative priorities and spending, like administrators, especially, you know, superintendents, but also building principals make a lot of difficult decisions with regard to where money goes, right? Like funding is not infinite in education. You know, you have to make some hard choices sometimes, but how could you maybe speak to your colleagues about ways that they could prioritize the library?

Akemi: I think it comes down to your goals for student growth, right? Student growth and wellbeing. Right. I think knowing what your goals are and trying to really keep the library as a place to include in your action plan. Right. So collaborating with your librarian on how that could be part of it would be really, really helpful. Right. I think sometimes we get very caught up in how the kids are performing in reading and math. And, you know, that's often how we're judged, right, on that. But we can't deny that the library and the school librarians are a critical resource in supporting that learning. And I think making learning and reading joyful and meaningful so that kids will want to persist and persevere and engage in some of that productive struggle to learn and grow. When something is really important and inspirational and meaningful to them, that's when we're going to see their growth personally and academically.

And so keeping the library full of diverse resources and very enriching resources is going to allow us to share them with all of our students in different ways. Whereas in the classroom, you might have a common curriculum or a text that you're using, which is helpful and good, you'll be really able to personalize the learning for students with your school libraries. I feel like one of the big things about administrator and school librarian collaboration is that your goal always is the same, which is good student outcomes. One of the ultimate outcomes is that you're instilling a love of lifelong learning, right within our students. And I don't know if that outcome is measurable or immeasurable, but it's so valuable and so important. And to have, again, a very robust and healthy library with a school librarian who enjoys working with teachers and teams and families and really knowing individuals on a personal level and being able to help them find the books and the resources and the tools just, I think, makes people feel so special and wanting to continue to learn and read and grow. So I feel like you can't do that without a school library at all.

Janette: I love that you're talking about things that aren't academic outcomes, right? Like it's the social emotional aspects of, you know, what kids get from engaging with reading and just the library, the activities. You know, a lot of what you've described is what Beth is doing, very little of it has directly involved books. Right? Like it's all about teaching and learning and experiencing. And I love that libraries have grown to become that space for so many schools. And it's amazing the things that are happening in those environments. So I think that a lot of times we overlook that in favor of the test scores and, you know, because those are measurable things. It's easy to quantify someone's reading scores. It's not easy to quantify like their personal and emotional growth over time.

Akemi: It just makes me think of one story. We had a student last year who was very reluctant about wanting to come to school, having a lot of anxiety about wanting to come to school and just asking him about like, what he wanted to learn about and he said he wanted to learn more about turtles. So I went to Beth and she got me all these books from the library on turtles and gave them to him. And he was just glowing and beaming and carrying his books and showing them off and talking about them with us and with his classroom teacher and his peers. Those are the things, like you said, the social emotional piece where he felt seen and heard and that we could engage his mind on something meaningful and interesting to him to take some of the focus off of his feelings of anxiety, I think is just one example of the power of a wonderful school librarian, for sure. Yeah.

Beth: You know, Akemi was talking about, you know, teachers have this core curriculum and this, you know, are constrained in many ways by, you know, what they have to teach everyone consistently. Right? Especially in a big district where you want kids to have the same experience no matter where they are. But kids are not the same no matter where they are. Right. And so the library can fill that need of connection and engagement and be a place where kids can learn about what they want to learn about.

So I just ordered a bunch of books about black holes because the fifth grade studies space. And so we do an astronomer unit and galaxy classification in the library, but we don't really talk about black holes. And they're like, what about, where are the books about black holes? And I was like, dude, I will order you some. So, you know, we have several kids who are really interested in that. I got one of our district foundation grants. We bought a telescope that they can check out and take. And so, you know, when they have this interest, we can extend and enhance the curriculum. And, you know, when we were talking about it, we kind of get to the end of the unit and like, be honest, some of you never want to talk about space again right now. Where are you? And I'm like, and they're like, me. And I'm like, okay, no problem. But some of you are really into this. And so here are some more things that you can do. And so I anticipate some interesting conversations about black holes once those books arrive.

But the other thing I wanted to say was just going back to like how you can convince your administrator like, that this should be a priority, right. When I was doing the exemplary library application, it really helped me reflect on all of the things that we do and all of the different ways that we impact students and teachers in our community. And one of the things sent me back to our district strategic plan and to our mission statement and to our library mission statement. And there are so many places where what we do in the library supports the strategic plan, not just in reading achievement, but our social emotional learning goals and our diversity and equity and inclusion goals. And there are just so many places that the library supports what the district is trying to do as a whole.

And so if you have an administrator who's not really understanding the impact, right, you know, you have to think like an administrator. Like, how are they accountable for their building, how are they accountable to the superintendent, how is the community holding them accountable? And how can you share with them in a digestible, easy-to-say-yes-to way that what you do helps them do that? You always want to make it easy for them to say yes. And I learned really quickly with Akemi, if I said, hey, can I do this? She had a lot of questions, right, about who this was going to impact and was it worth taking time away from the learning day, and is the P.E. teacher willing to let us take his space for this author visit? You know, did I talk to him? And so I learned very quickly, if I had answers to all of those questions ahead of time, I got a very easy yes. Right.

And so I learned very quickly what her priorities and what her concerns were and then I could meet those without having this back and forth. Right. I wanted to make it easy for her to say yes. And so, and once we got to that point, if I got a lot of questions, I was like, uh-oh, maybe this is not the thing that I should be doing right? But it made me reflect and say like, okay, is this the author that we want to have come that's going to meet the needs of our kids? Do we want to do this program? Is it really going to be too disruptive to the day? And it really made me reflect and say like, okay, like is there another way I can do this? Is this worth pushing back on or can I adapt it to better meet the needs of our building? Because at the end of the day, it's not just me, right? It's everybody, you know, working together to impact the students and administrators have to consider, right, that impact on everybody. So sometimes we're like, but we want to do this because the library is awesome and it’s going to be so much fun. And they're like, but we have to do this math thing right? And I can't take away the gym from the gym teacher who's required to have P.E. So, you know, the better you can understand their concerns, the better you can frame your requests and your asks and tailor your pitch so that they can say yes. Because that's always your goal, right?

Leah: Before we go on, I just want to say that you two and your school, it feels like are the embodiment of one of my favorite sayings, which is that you cannot be a librarian because you love books. You have to be a librarian because you love people. And I can tell that you love your people, your little people that you're in charge of every day. So I just wanted to tell you, it comes through in everything you both say.

Beth: I always say that this job takes all of my favorite things about all the other jobs that I've had. I get to work with kids, a little, not too much. Like I don't have them all day, every day, right? I see them once a week and then they're gone. So I'm always happy to see them again. I get to hang out with books all day. I get to spend other people's money to buy them. I get to work with teachers and collaborate and I love curriculum and I have a bird's eye view, right. To say, like, why are we talking about worms in two grade levels? Like, how do we extend this and make sure we're not duplicating things and how can I fit into this? And so I just love the curriculum piece and it takes all of my favorite things and puts them into one neat little library.

Janette: That's amazing.

Leah: So to wrap this up, we like to end with a segment that we call Shelf Care, and we like to find out how are you taking care of yourself? What is something that you do that helps you unplug and recharge?

Beth: I recently took a linocut printing class in the city. And this was one of my first linocuts.

Leah: Oh, I love it.

Janette: That is so cool.

Beth: So it was really fun. Shout out to the Chicago Printmaking Collaborative in Lincoln Square. I went for four weeks on Sunday afternoon and I did my first reduction of linocut, like an 8x10 floral. So I like to make stuff. Yeah.

Janette: I need to stop going to like webinars and having this podcast because I keep getting all these new craft ideas, like,

Leah: Yes, exactly.

Janette: [..] there was a session I was in where someone had made a bag at like a leather making class, and I was like, I need that, now I need to do this one.

Leah: Sign me up.

Janette: I'm like, oh man.

Akemi: I'm just making sure I get to the gym three times a week. Twice during the week and once on the weekend. I feel like three times a week is a habit, and so just really trying to stick to that.

Leah: I've been really trying to stick to that as well lately because I hate it, but I know I feel better when I do it, so.

Akemi: Yes. Yeah, and just move to have fun, move to feel good. Like, because otherwise you're just going to hate it. I'm going to hate it.

Janette: The mind-body connection. I don't think you can overemphasize that enough.

Leah: Exactly.

Like how much, how important that is for your mental health, right, just to keep moving.

Leah: Well, we would like to thank Akemi Sessler and Beth Kovacic so much for being our guests today. And thank you to Janette, my co-host.

And until next time, stay legit. Don't quit.