

I Love My Librarian!

2018 Award

Linda Robinson

Mansfield Middle School
Storrs, Connecticut

Nominators: Candace Morell, Larry Barlow, Julie Hodgson, Sherry Andrews, Ryley Zawodniak, Rochelle Marcus, and Jenn McMunn

1. Please tell us in 2-3 sentences why your nominee should win this award. What sets them apart?

As Library Media Specialist for the district, Dr. Linda Robinson creates opportunities for the community to come together in order to grow the love of reading for our children. Whether she facilitates professional development for the staff, garners student participation in building lending libraries for our community, or plans evening events that welcome families into our schools, all is done to develop and strengthen the bonds of the larger community. Dr. Robinson is a vital part of who we are as Mansfield Public Schools. She is a master teacher, commensurate collaborator, team player, and cheerleader for all of our children. In Linda's eyes, nothing is ever impossible. She believes that with hard work, a little creativity, and a keen eye for the end result anything is possible. All the while, she continually reflects on how she can engage our children in the process. Linda is more than a librarian: she is a creator, innovator, and an imaginer into the future of Library Media Centers. We are fortunate to have her.

2. How has the nominee helped you and/or students at school? For example, did the nominee help you with a project, recommend resources or collaborate with you to enhance student learning?

Dr. Robinson's leadership consistently reflects her commitment to honoring proverbial wisdom about promoting independence: "Give a person a fish, and you feed for a day. Teach a person to fish, and you feed for a lifetime." In equipping the staff and students with skills they can use independently and teach to others, Dr. Robinson has helped all staff and students at MMS. Her work is exponentially "paid forward" since she designs projects and instruction that promote critical thinking and inquiry in multiple settings and formats.

Dr. Robinson helps MMS teachers maintain a strong Readers Workshop program. Her ability to lure students with quality texts is thorough and responsive to all learners. Her thoughtful selections and engaging Book Talks provide reading material for each of our heterogeneously-grouped readers. Consider the circulation numbers for our 557 students. In 2010, the library circulated 17,033 books. Even though our school has experienced significant declining enrollment, Dr. Robinson's outreach programs resulted in increased circulations --- all the way to 27,064 in 2018. Her work results in more students reading quality books. Dr. Robinson tirelessly matches students with books. Each winter, she hosts a Winter Wonderland extravaganza, complete with cocoa, snowflake bubbles, and cheer as she greets each child. Last spring, she arranged a Speed Dating event in which 8th graders spent a minute or two with specific books before making selections. Each child left with a smile, Hershey's Kiss, and a book. Her creative touches mean something to the students.

All teachers report that Dr. Robinson's support is essential to classroom instruction. For the 8th grade debate unit, Dr. Robinson finds both print and digital resources. This has been especially challenging some years when the debate topic is a controversial subject, and Dr. Robinson completes her own investigation of the issues prior to selecting age-appropriate materials. In addition, she helps teachers learn strategies for instructing students how to use the numerous online databases she makes available, as well as methods for teaching students how to evaluate websites and to be critical consumers of information. 7th grade teachers note the same level of assistance and contend that Dr. Robinson's support is instrumental. Last year the 7th grade team unveiled an "outside the mainstream" book circle unit and provided a number of high-interest titles at varied reading levels to ensure that all students could engage with a thematically appropriate book at an accessible level. Dr. Robinson also made skill set resources available to help teachers instruct various literary skills, providing children's texts that reinforce classroom instruction. 6th grade teachers indicate that when gathering resources for a historical fiction book club unit, Dr. Robinson generated an annotated bibliography by topic. Each book had a synopsis, reading level, and number of available copies in the district. Her work made teachers' jobs so much more efficient when assigning kids to book clubs.

Each year, our school produces a number of students who win awards at the National History Day's regional competition, and several students win at the state level and proceed to the national event. Our enrichment teacher reports that Dr. Robinson is a critical member of her team and assists students in finding primary and secondary sources about their topics. She doesn't just give students the sources, but she teaches them how to use various primary source databases.

Finally, Dr. Robinson understands the necessity for students to read for pleasure and with frequency. As a result, she has initiated several district-wide projects to keep students engaged in summer months. Through Summer Online Adventures in Reading (SOAR), Dr. Robinson gave students a chance to discuss online their selections. She completed all technological duties to run this program and collaborated with teachers to be sure the students had someone to respond to their ideas. Another wildly successful summer program Dr. Robinson implemented was Books on The Bus. She stocked a school bus with engaging reads for students from preschool to 8th grade and brought it to various neighborhoods in town three days a week throughout the summer. This program's highlight was Dr. Robinson's work to reach the population that can't always get to the public library, and so she deliberately chose neighborhoods that are more likely to have low-income families who can't get their children books. Always seeking improvement, Dr. Robinson was overheard saying: "I'm just upset that I didn't get to provide meals with the books. That would have drawn in more people." Most recently, Dr. Robinson tried a new approach: Lending Libraries. She collaborated with our school's Technology Education teacher and student workers to create appealing Lending Libraries and placed them in strategic locations around town: the soccer fields, parking lots, and town hall. In doing so, she's making sure that children of all ages can keep reading, even when school is not in session.

3. How does the nominee make the school a better place? Please be specific.

As you can see, Dr. Robinson does quite a bit to support literacy instruction across the district. In addition, her work impacts the school culture in several profound ways. First, Dr. Robinson makes the school a better place through the manner in which she organizes the physical space in the library. When incoming fifth graders take their first building tour, their reaction to seeing the library is invariably a coo of oooooos and aaaaaahs. The whole atmosphere is calming and inviting, supporting the notion that reading is an enjoyable and cozy pursuit. While traditional libraries may feel intimidating, ours is welcoming. There are plants, vaulted ceilings with high glass windows, and cozy pillow-lined nooks for curling up with a good read. Bright, engaging bulletin boards and displays persuasively coax readers to check out specific genres or texts. Special events- a book fair, a snowman-decorated winter wonderland- draw in readers with raffle prizes, riddles, and giveaways. In short, the library celebrates literacy in all forms and Dr. Robinson has designed it to not only welcome visitors but pull them in.

Dr. Robinson also improves our school culture through spearheading our One School, One Read program. OSOR is a well-known initiative in which students and staff read a book together to foster communal dialogue and connections through a common

experience. This basic endeavor sounds simple enough to pull off, but what we experience is an OSOR Dr. Robinson-ized.

In Dr. Robinson's thoughtful and collaborative style, even the initial planning for OSOR is deliberate, thorough, and involves all parties involved in the process. A representative team of teachers from various grades and subject areas read a variety of books to consider for OSOR. Dr. Robinson holds high standards for the text of choice: it must be appropriate for grades 5-8 in terms of difficulty and subject matters, the plot should progress in an engaging and quick manner as suitable for a read-aloud, and the text should provoke meaningful dialogue that will challenge and extend both students and teachers. That last point is taken very seriously, and because teachers feel comfortable with the supports Dr. Robinson provides we've been able to tackle some sensitive texts that deal with controversial issues and salient themes. These include *The Breadwinner* (educating girls in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan), *Under the Same Sky* (the struggles of undocumented migrant workers) *Zane and the Hurricane* (Hurricane Katrina and institutional racism).

Once the book is selected, Dr. Robinson empowers teachers to lead their groups. At least one staff meeting is given to OSOR preparation, and teachers are given time to conduct research and create lessons to share with one another. Dr. Robinson creates a resource bank with videos, articles, background readings, and activity ideas to supplement the text. Her goal with developing this resource bank is to not only allow students to hear the story but also to feel and experience it. Because of Dr. Robinson's rich professional development prior to the OSOR experience, teachers feel equipped and empowered to lead an interactive read-aloud and choose from a myriad of engaging and authentic extension activities.

With the teachers primed and ready, the students are brought in to the experience. Dr. Robinson (because staff buy in to the value of OSOR) is able to assign every staff member in the building a small group of students for the weeks of the OSOR duration. Each group consists of a cross-grade assignment of students who may or may not know each other, with the goal being that through this experience we foster connections outside our comfort zones. Each child is given a book to keep, and Board of Education members and parents are invited to partake in the reading as well. There are an immense amount of details that go in to such logistical planning, and Dr. Robinson does this all so seamlessly that I don't think any one person can comprehend how much goes in to planning and launching One School, One Read.

The experience culminates with schoolwide lunch which is multisensory circus that brings the text to life. Dr. Robinson consults with the cafeteria staff to plan a meal that

reflects the book's setting (Jambalaya to reflect the Cajun and Creole cultures of New Orleans! A typical Afghan meal of jasmine rice and tea!). All students are encouraged to purchase the lunch, but even those who don't are offered some free delicacies. Staff members dress up and assume a character at a booth, and through decorations, music, props, and the characters the cafeteria becomes an Afghan market, a colonial New England village, a fictitious sci-fi planet... Reading becomes a passport to another land. The text comes alive, and students delight in celebrating the OSOR experience. As you can see, Dr. Robinson seeks to create celebrations of reading both within and beyond the library.

4. How has the library, and the nominee in particular, had an impact on students and the learning process?

Imagine walking into your school's library; it's not your ordinary library, but rather a cafe. Tables set up in the center of the room with tablecloths, place settings, and decor match different themes: mystery, romance, graphic novels, historical fiction. You walk around, enjoying mood music and lighting. Instead of food on the plates, you see books that fit the table theme's genre. It's a book tasting! This is one of many events that Dr. Robinson has planned for MMS students to ensure the right books get into students' hands. In this and other inventive ways, she supports our students' learning process.

Over the years, Dr. Robinson has had a tremendous impact on thousands of students. She regularly teams with teachers and staff to design, co-teach, or teach lessons on a variety of technology, research, and project-based learning initiatives. She begins the year ensuring that incoming fifth grade students are familiar with the online catalog to find books. Then, for grades 5-8, every other week she gives a book talk to each reading class, highlighting both new and past books that students may enjoy. Having read every book in the library, she makes evident her knowledgeable recommendations and prowess in suggesting books to all learners. Students cannot wait for her to finish before pouncing on the collection she pulls weekly!

Additionally, for fifth grade she collaborated with reading teachers to provide lessons using an online program for students to demonstrate learning. She set up an Animoto account for the students to promote their favorite books. Students learned the importance of carefully choosing words for maximum impact, as well as selecting graphics and music to complement the book's mood. This was one of the most engaging projects, and in the end, videos played on the school's televisions sharing them a real world audience—their school community. As part of our project-based learning initiative during our nonfiction unit, Linda worked with teachers to devise lessons to help students focus research on choice topics. She explained that research today is not like it was in the past – that you don't just read about a topic and write reports. Based on students' interests,

she selected varied books related to topics and taught how to take a larger topic and narrow it down to a manageable topic. She pulled resources for students to use during the research process. In fact, no matter what subject a teacher teaches, or what topic they're working on, Linda pulls books even from other libraries to ensure the right books are available.

One event that the whole school looks forward to is the library's Winter Wonderland before winter break. She and her staff decorate the library, complete with a roaring fire on the television, twinkle lights, music, and tables of books filled with a variety of genres. Students leave with books they have selected in a themed bag she created. You can't help but become a reader in this school because of Dr. Robinson!

Another important contribution Dr. Robinson has made to our students is PAWS for Reading program. Dr. Robinson has two dogs, Virgil and Dante, whom she has had trained as therapy dogs and are also certified reading dogs. She uses the dogs to help students who perhaps struggle with anxiety, or who feel a bit disconnected, to feel more connected to the school by interacting with the dogs. Students come in a half-hour before school, bringing a book, hanging out with the dogs while they read and chat. She also regularly brings the dogs to the classroom that supports students with profound disabilities. The students have a wonderful time reading and interacting with them. Teachers and students also enjoy following the dogs' Twitter account for book recommendations!

Most recently, she worked with the fifth grade teachers to develop the D.O.T. (Digital & Offline Tools) Program as a means for teaching students important 21st Century Skills. This technology and research initiative teaches students online and analog research skills, as well as the importance of developing a positive online persona. The program teaches students about plagiarism and how to take and organize notes, and moves into evaluating websites. They learn about curation and explore the idea of digital footprints and keeping safe. Finally, they learn about the importance of creating a positive online persona. After completing the 12 lesson sessions, students create their own blogs within the safe confines of our intranet to apply the skills they have acquired. This is the first year of this program and Dr. Robinson intends to continue this initiative at the 6-8th grade levels, developing learning opportunities that widen students' scope and experience in a positive, supportive, safe way.

It is difficult to measure the innumerable creative, cutting edge, and innovative ways Dr. Robinson supports students and their learning at our school.

5. How has the individual demonstrated leadership in the school community?

Each of the previous answers illustrates how Dr. Robinson is not only the consummate professional, but she is also a leader among our staff and teachers. MMS students see her as a leader through her work with the Little Lending Libraries, One School One Read, class projects and resources, and seasonal events in the library. However, not only is Dr. Robinson committed to the teachers, staff, and students of our schools, but she is involved in almost every aspect of our school district. Only a few years ago, Dr. Robinson earned her Ph.D. in adult learning from the University of Connecticut. It is this additional experience that has really put her over the edge as a teacher-leader.

Dr. Robinson is one of the guiding forces for our district as we are currently experiencing some change and new direction for curriculum, philosophy, and buildings. Dr. Robinson participates on our Professional Development and Evaluation Committee (PDEC). This committee is responsible for designing our teacher evaluation process and documents as well as organizing and facilitating district-wide opportunities for professional learning. In the state of Connecticut, the social studies standards and frameworks have been revised, so teachers are designing new and improved curriculum. Dr. Robinson acts as one of the co-leaders for the Mansfield Public Schools in this endeavor.

Another initiative running concurrently with these others is our UBD (Understanding By Design) committee, working towards improved curriculum design using backwards design. Again, she has been formally trained in this process and will in turn train Mansfield staff.

Currently, Dr. Robinson is providing professional development for our fifth grade teachers to support their implementation of a new digital citizenship curriculum. No matter the initiative, Dr. Robinson is often leading the charge.

Our district is comprised of three elementary schools and one middle school, so our district leadership committee includes the administrator of each building, support services personnel, our superintendent, our director of technology, and Dr. Robinson. She contributes to all district decisions. In addition to this leadership committee, she also is a member of our Mansfield Middle School Team Leaders and the MMS Leadership Team.

Did I mention that in her spare time, Dr. Robinson reads EVERY fiction book before she offers it to students? Her wealth of knowledge and information about books sets her apart from other librarians and teachers. She can match every student with an appropriate text.