

I Love My Librarian!

2017 Award

Marcia Kochel

Druid Hills Middle School
Atlanta, Georgia

Nominator: Jennifer Green

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

We are a group of parents and teachers who wish to nominate Marcia Kochel for this award because we love our school librarian and, more importantly, so do our children! Mrs. Kochel is incredibly hardworking, committed to excellence, passionate about literacy, and a believer in her students. Even with limited resources, she has worked to transform the library from a traditional book repository to a “learning commons” that engages kids in creative and inviting ways. The library is now buzzing with activity as a center of community, collaboration, and creativity, and Mrs. Kochel has made it happen.

Mrs. Kochel came to Druid Hills Middle School after teaching most recently at a private school in Atlanta where students had unlimited access to books and technology, and they were both consumers and creators of media. Her heart, however, drew her to back to a public school where she could make an impact with students from less privileged backgrounds and students from many different countries. We are so grateful for her and would love to honor her for what she has done for our children.

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?

Mrs. Kochel has shown us through action that the library is a place for collaboration, sharing ideas, and action. Teachers shared with us various ways that Mrs. Kochel has worked with them to enhance learning for students from a range of academic abilities. One teacher told how Mrs. Kochel often works with teachers to develop collections of materials and resources that link to and expand their curriculum. Another teacher and parent shared the following example of collaboration from last year when Mrs. Kochel worked with a teacher of English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) and an English/Language Arts teacher of U.S.-born students to create a powerful learning experience. First, Mrs. Kochel arranged book readings and an author visit by Marie Marquardt who has written novels about young people and immigration issues. Then she brought to school the leader of a non-profit organization in Georgia (El Refugio) that helps families visit their loved ones in detention centers for immigration issues. When meeting with students (ESOL and U.S.-born students together), he described the

loneliness, isolation, and hopeless feelings of many detainees. The middle school students then asked if they could write encouraging letters to detainees, and the non-profit leader matched them to detainees based on shared languages. Students were able to write in five different languages to detainees; some wrote in their own languages and others used dictionaries or got help from each other. In a profoundly moving moment, one student found his own brother's name on the list of detainees, and he and his friends were able to write to him in Spanish. The student had not even known it was possible to write to his brother before that day. Other students as well found new inspiration to read, write, and research when they learned about issues of social justice and how they could make a difference.

Building on that experience, Mrs. Kochel has proposed another opportunity for collaboration with the middle school's ESOL teachers. They hope to develop a program for English language learners that they are calling Library Literacy Leaders. In this collaborative program, ESOL students will become members in book clubs that will select a wide variety of new books for the library. Students will look at sample of books from publishers of high interest/low reading level books as well as catalogs and websites to select books for the library. They will then work with a budget and learn how to use spreadsheets to make orders. After the books are ordered and received, the Library Literacy Leaders will get the books ready for library circulation and select books that they want to read and review. In weekly meetings, the students and teachers will discuss the books and work on writing book talks that the students will then film and add to the school's morning announcements. To make the films using film and editing equipment purchased through this grant, middle school students will receive training and mentoring from international students at Emory University and Georgia State University. Through this program, the Library Literacy Leaders will not only be reading and writing, but also working on public speaking, filming, and video editing. The goal is that students will become better readers and gain valuable communication and technology skills, and they will share their talents with the Druid Hills Middle School student body as a whole and inspire an enthusiastic community of readers there.

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

Not only has Mrs. Kochel made the library a better place, but she has truly made the school a better place. Her work in the library has had a ripple effect across the entire school in direct and indirect ways that has built community, nurtured collaboration and creativity, and supported a culture of learning and curiosity. Importantly, this has happened for students from all levels, not just advanced readers or strong academic students.

Mrs. Kochel has made a difference in the school by taking a deeply relational approach to her work. She plans amazing events and activities, but she doesn't just leave at that. She learns the names of all the kids who come to the library; she finds out their interests and suggests great books; she finds out how they need help. She lets kids know that the library – and the school – is a welcoming place where they gain a sense of belonging.

One way that Mrs. Kochel has built community is through creating incredible book clubs. She works hard to make this a very special experience by recruiting students to join, matching kids across reading levels, and leading the book clubs in intentional and engaging ways. As a result, over 130 kids signed up this year to meet voluntarily in book clubs before and after school and during lunch. Recently, one parent watched a book club animatedly discussing the book *Wonder*. The kids in this group, from India, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Myanmar, Mexico, and the U.S., enjoyed the experience so much that they came the next week (due to an incorrect office announcement) and didn't leave when they realized the mistake. Instead they ate together and discussed books. The vibe was that these middle school kids - unconnected in other ways - felt like they had a place where they belonged and where they'd be missed if they weren't there. Interwoven with this community-building is the development of a literary culture at the school. Talking about books is a way to make friends and something to do outside of the library too – in the lunch room, walking to class, and after school.

One parent wrote this: "I love that the school library is becoming the safe space for every kind of child - the introvert, the bookworm, the "cool" kids, the creative/artsy kids, the extroverts – Mrs. Kochel creates a space for everyone. The library is becoming a hub at the school." In these middle school years, this nurturing of community and inclusion at school is truly a gift.

Mrs. Kochel also builds community by holding special literary events, like an overnight read-in with book-related activities through the night. She also holds creative reading contests: for example, kids took pictures of themselves reading in funny or interesting places during winter break, and these pictures were displayed in the school halls. This encouraged reading during the break and also had the great effect of building community as students learned about each other's interests and how they spent the break.

Key to building community at school has been encouraging collaboration and working together. Mrs. Kochel, recognizing this doesn't always come naturally for middle schoolers and that not all middle schoolers are instinctively drawn to the library, has drawn in students by setting up creative stations around the library where kids can work together on jigsaw puzzles (the "puzzle challenge" before school one morning had so many participants there had to be a waitlist), a 3-D printer, Legos, or group art projects. Having worked together on these activities, it now becomes much more natural to work together on a class project or research academic ideas. What is more, working together in these activities gives kids the chance to recognize their own and each others' strengths even if they have not excelled in academic areas previously. Recently while volunteering, I heard one student compliment another student on his ability to work a puzzle. "You must be good at math," he said. "Nah, not really," the puzzle-worker replied. And then the first boy said, "I bet you'll be good in geometry."

Finally, Mrs. Kochel has encouraged collaboration by painting tables with white board paint and the sides of the front desk with chalk board paint. Last week we noticed one table covered with a multi-step math problem (in several different handwritings) and a poem written in Burmese. Mrs. Kochel gives kids the space and tools to work together,

and they respond! Learning these skills of working together then informs other classes in the school. One teacher wrote this: “In the short time Mrs. Kochel has been at DHMS, she has transformed the library experience for both students and teachers. She has created an inviting, engaging, and creative space for all of us to explore, learn, and share.”

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

Since coming to Druid Hills Middle School, Mrs. Kochel has made the library a place that encourages learning for students of all academic levels. The school where Mrs. Kochel teaches has 930 students and is a Title I school with many students eligible for free and reduced lunch. This year there are 148 students at the school who are classified as English language learners or are being monitored by ESOL teachers. There are 23 different languages spoken by students at DHMS. Mrs. Kochel has worked hard to make the library accessible to all students regardless of their English literacy level. She begins by offering a fun, engaging, and thorough orientation to all students using i-Pad scavenger hunts. The visuals used in this hunt make it possible for English language learners or reluctant readers to learn about the library and what it offers, and it does so in a way that is not intimidating.

After orienting students to the library, Mrs. Kochel continues to work with them and teachers to ensure that they know how to engage the library and make the most of its resources. An enthusiastic reader herself, Mrs. Kochel makes fantastic book recommendations to individual students after having conversations with them in the library, and she also gives compelling book talks to classes that leave kids clamoring to check out books. What is more, Mrs. Kochel orders books based on student interest. One parent shared this story: “When I was volunteering in the library one day, a girl came and asked for books about women’s rights in the Middle East. She was from Afghanistan and had been a refugee. When leaving her country, she had to leave her precious books behind because there wasn’t space for them. Now she was so happy to use the library in middle school.” The parent volunteer helped the girl, but they found that there weren’t many books about women’s rights in the Middle East and shared this with Mrs. Kochel. Mrs. Kochel promptly ordered books on this topic! The parent said later, “I could see how much this meant to the student who realized that her interests were important.” Mrs. Kochel also regularly orders novels and other books based on student recommendations, adding to the library collection and validating student interests. Additionally, she uses Library Trac software to collect data about how kids and teachers are using the library in order to update titles and resources.

It is perhaps no surprise that book circulation numbers in the library rose in the month of August from 900 to 2,700 in the two years that Mrs. Kochel has been at the school. Numerous teachers have commented that something new is happening in the library as Mrs. Kochel has generated fresh energy and enthusiasm for learning in the school. Additionally, Mrs. Kochel has brought authors to talk at the school and meet with students. Recently when Jennifer Nielsen gave a great talk to sixth graders that left them chattering with excitement in the hallways. It may have been just as exciting to overhear Jennifer Nielsen talking in the library with a student who discussed her ideas for a novel

with the author. Authors regularly talk with small groups of students who show a special interest in writing.

Not only does Mrs. Kochel connect students with books and writers, but she also connects them with technological resources that can deepen their learning. One teacher explains, "One of the most defining characteristics of Mrs. Kochel is her willingness to help students and colleagues achieve technological literacy. She is always willing to demonstrate and help implement the newest apps to help engage students in instruction. Whether it is a lesson in Chromebooks, an IPAD scavenger hunt, or an escape box, Mrs. Kochel is always enthusiastic to get others on board with technology." She helps teachers find efficient and effective ways to use technology in their teaching and helps make learning exciting.

Recognizing that many students in the school do not have access to technology at home, Mrs. Kochel has opened up the library both before and after school to let students do research and work together using the internet.

Not to be overlooked are the ways that Mrs. Kochel actively engages with faculty to support curriculum and keep them aware of ways that the library can enhance their teaching. She enthusiastically gathers and displays books for students, sets up work spaces for creative collaboration, and demonstrates how to search the web and follow leads online to dig deeper to learn more.

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

Marcia is a recognized leader, innovator, and role model among administrators and colleagues throughout the school district. In addition to managing the library, Mrs. Kochel runs the school spelling bee and supports the Helen Ruffin Reading Bowl team, which won the county prize last year.

In addition to leading the school in these established ways, Mrs. Kochel has shown incredible leadership in developing plans for a library renovation that transforms the space from a book repository to an engaging learning commons. Mrs. Kochel has spent hours studying innovative learning commons spaces, working on her own plans, and reflecting on how the library is currently used and how teachers expressed their needs. She has created a brilliant presentation that portrays her ideas with schematic drawings and photographs. To be sure, Mrs. Kochel's great ideas go beyond the funding available, but this has not stopped her! Mrs. Kochel has broken down the overall plan into stages that can be implemented over time, and she has recruited and mobilized a committee of excited parent, teacher, and student volunteers to help with fundraising and publicity.

Equally as impressive as ways she has worked on behalf of the school, Mrs. Kochel has been attentive to the larger community in our school district. Recently when a local bookstore offered Mrs. Kochel new novels for the school library, she generously offered many boxes to another middle school in the district that has few resources. She truly seemed as excited about the books going to the other middle school as she did about the

books coming to our school. To us, that is the kind of leadership we value the most as our kids learn from her.