Procedures: Where’s the Light Switch?

Whether we like it or not, school libraries, like all organizations, are dependent on routine. We keep regularly scheduled hours; we shelve books consistently in the same manner; we use the same procedures to check out materials and check them back in; we catalog materials using the same system, day in and day out. If we did not follow these routines, our libraries would be disorganized, no one could ever find anything, and our customers would never know what to expect from us.

An important component of keeping the library running smoothly and consistently is the ability to develop good procedures. Procedures are the practical statements that explain how we get it done.

The Procedures Manual

Procedures should be written down. Details, such as the location of important equipment, should be included in a procedure description.

Procedure manuals do not have to be great works of art. They can be written in an outline format, step-by-step with only the most basic information.

What procedures should be included in a procedure manual? Certainly any routines that occur daily, weekly, or monthly should be covered. These would include:

- Procedures for opening and closing the library
- How to create or renew a library card
- How to assign a computer
- Circulation procedures: checking out, checking in, placing holds, and dealing with overdue fines
- Interlibrary loan procedures
- Procedures for ordering materials
- Procedures for receiving new materials (including newspapers and magazines)
- Technical processing procedures
- Procedures for collecting statistics and running reports
- Procedures for handling challenges to library materials
- Procedures for requests for information from law enforcement agencies
- Information about drill and lockdown procedures
- Sign in and sign-out procedures
If any of your library's procedures require special forms, copies of the forms should be included in the procedure manual.

The procedure manual should contain emergency procedures and telephone numbers. It should tell what to do in case of a break-in, a medical emergency, and a fire, for example.

In addition to routine activities, the procedure manual should include a calendar that shows procedures that must be carried out each year. Such annual procedures might be budget preparation and annual reports.

First thing is to discover if a procedure manual exists. If it does, then all you have to do is make sure it is accurate and complete. If it is not accurate or complete, or if no procedure manual exists, you will need to develop and document the procedures.

Writing the procedure manual can be done in an outline format. It does not have to be great literature. A master manual containing all procedures should be kept by the library manager. The procedure manual should be reviewed annually to make sure it still reflects accurately how routines are really done.