

# Seeking Community Support and the Power of Passionate Presentation

**Jane Prestebak**  
Library Program Director,  
Robbinsdale Area Schools, MN



Jane Prestebak, Library Program Director for Robbinsdale Area Schools in Minnesota, suggests that, when looking to fund your library transformation, you may not need to look further than your local community.

In the introduction to one of the first versions of standards for school libraries, a principal wrote that ideas presented to school leaders and boards of education in a compelling way would

be supported. This is as true now as it was in the 1920s. Don't believe me? Let me tell you a story about how Robbinsdale school librarians' dreams of transforming our libraries became a reality.

Our district has a charitable foundation called Seven Dreams—so called because we have seven different cities in our school district. For many years, this foundation has gathered donations

and awarded small, hands-on learning grants to teachers who apply. About five years ago, they started a gala fundraising event to support one major project in the district each year. The event is called the "Bird Bash" gala because all of Robbinsdale's mascots are birds. The Bird Bash's fundraising target is \$50,000. At the gala, the community turns out in their finest duds. They wine and dine and participate in a variety of activities to make giving fun.

Two years ago, Robbinsdale high school librarian Carol Tracy suggested that our transformation from media center to learning commons be the target for the Bird Bash gala. She presented the vision to the Seven Dreams board, who hired

LSTA grant, our libraries transformed. You can watch it happen in this [video](#).

This year, the middle school media specialists made a similar request. The Seven Dreams board choose three

board and the chairs that are, “designed for comfort.” Plymouth started their transformation with money the principal came up with when she heard about the transformation plan. Library Media Specialist at Robbinsdale Middle School, Mary Kunesh-Podein summed up the need saying, “Every student deserves a productive place to work.”

## When looking to fund your library transformation, you may not need to look further than your local community.

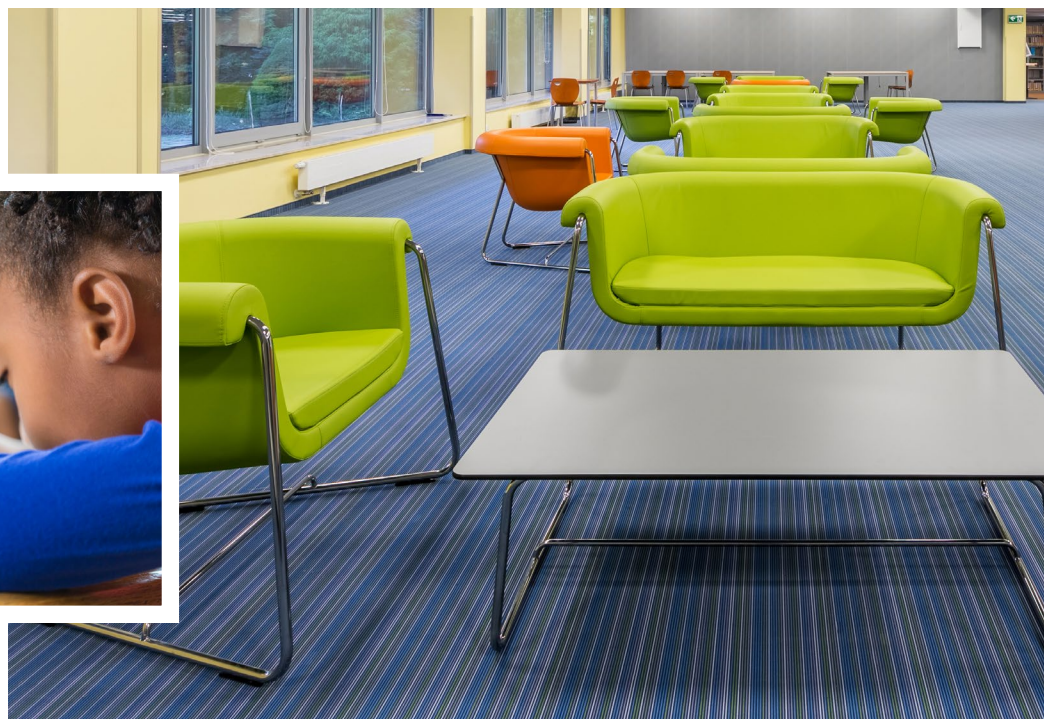
a student [videographer](#) to explain the project. The resulting video was used to advertise the event and to introduce the project at the Bird Bash. In the video, media specialists and Seven Dreams board members explained how the transformation would affect learning and current students explained how they use the media center. A student asks for community support saying that, “We expect great things from our community. Help us do this.” A student chorus ends the video with, “Thank you for believing in us!” You can find the videos for all projects [here](#).

During the course of the gala, community members raised their bid numbers to give \$1,000, \$500, \$281 (for District 281) and so on. Everyone was cheering and giving for school libraries. Dream come true? Yes, they surpassed their goal and the two high schools had \$60,000 to work with. Using these funds and an

projects to consider. The media team made a presentation to the board explaining the need for flexible furniture, audio and video production equipment, and makerspace materials. They built on what the high schools had proposed but added a middle school twist: Although some of the middle schools needed updated furniture, others focused on student creation including video equipment and makerspaces.

The students in the middle school video were definitely having fun. One student, Michael provides a tour of the Plymouth Media Center, describing it as “a chill place ... a new style.” He guides viewers past the tables with electrical jacks for ChromeBooks, the collaboration

The board, made up of district parents and leaders, understood the positive change that had taken place in the high school library media centers and were willing to support the middle schools. Again at the Bird Bash gala, our community raised \$50,000 in one night to support the transformation! **(Video used)** At the same time, we were awarded another LSTA grant focusing on diversifying our book collections. Grant funders recognized the need to promote reading through author visits and stories that reflect our diverse community. As a first-ring suburb of Minneapolis, our student population reflects changing suburban demographics. We explained our need to have books that provide both windows and mirrors for all of our students. We want to send the message that all are welcome here and everyone





will reach high standards. The middle school media specialists have had a busy year redesigning their space and adding thousands of new books.

Are we just lucky to have this kind of foundation? While that is true, I believe that anyone can reach for the support of their community. In my career of over 30 years, I have witnessed multiple districts in both rural and urban communities respond positively to well-prepared presentations that are delivered with passion and an obvious love of learning. School communities have supported media collections with new-fangled, auto-advance film strips in the '80s, expanded media center networks to connect to the Internet in the '90s and initiated 1:1 device projects in the last 10 years. Some requests were small enough for parent to simply write a check (e.g. For cases for video equipment), but some were large (e.g. a technology levy to provide a device for every student). All were accompanied by thoughtful planning and passionate presentations.

As you can see through my examples, many people were involved in creating



plans and securing funding. **These efforts, however, were all initiated by one passionate librarian.**

The 1920s library standards also stated that librarians must teach and inspire. Use well-selected data from *your own* action research to inform and genuine enthusiasm to inspire action. Get rid of your bullet points and clip art. Use complete sentences and images to tell your story. Get your students, parents and teachers to join you—and make sure that your administrators are on your side.

Communities will support library resources when you ensure that your message is about student engagement and success. Do your homework and make connections with key school and community leaders. As they say—all politics is local. People in your own community are the ones who care most about their students. Make sure that your small successes are visible. Tell stories about your students' success at every opportunity. Let setbacks serve as lessons, keep a smile on your face and never, ever give up.

**Communities will support library resources when you ensure that your message is about student engagement and success.**