

I Love My
Librarian!
2011 Award

**NOMINATION FOR
Jennifer U. LaGarde**

Teacher Librarian
Myrtle Grove Middle School
Wilmington, North Carolina

NOMINATED BY

Kate Tayloe
Wilmington, North Carolina

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

The reasons why Jennifer LaGarde should win this award are too numerous to mention, but if I had to boil it down to just one thing, it would be that Jennifer has completely changed my view of school librarians and their role as an instructional partners and school leaders. Jennifer's passion for and dedication to her craft is truly unparalleled. Jennifer demonstrates daily her commitment to students and teachers through her desire to serve both populations as a resource, a collaborator, an instructor, a coach and a team teacher. Jennifer approaches each day with boundless energy and a desire to improve the services she provides for our students and staff through our library. While her ideas are always innovative and admired by those with whom she works, Jennifer is never satisfied. Her passion for meeting the diverse learning needs of our student population and serving as a leader among our teachers keeps her constantly seeking opportunities to improve our library, our school, our district and her contributions to each. What's more, Jennifer's energy, enthusiasm and skill as an educator have reshaped my thinking about the role of the school librarian and have turned this skeptic into a true believer.

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?

As a teacher who takes her craft very seriously, I've been collaborating with other classroom teachers for years. However, when it came to asking the school librarian for anything beyond help in finding a specific book, I was skeptical. The truth is, I'd never worked with a librarian who seemed interested in doing more than just telling students to "hush." But Jennifer changed all that.

A few years ago, while I was serving as our school's Gifted Education Specialist, I found myself seeking a new way to assess my students' independent reading that would both hold them accountable for completing the reading while challenging them to think more critically and analytically about their self-selected texts. Having overheard me explain this dilemma to another teacher, Jennifer approached me with an idea for what she called a "Literary Research Project." The tool she envisioned would require students to examine groups of books based on theme, author, genre or subject (TAGS). She explained that she'd been thinking about a project in which students would hypothesize about what they thought might be true of all books in a specific category and then test a sample of those books (their self-selected independent reading) to prove or disprove their hypothesis. Immediately I was hooked.

Over the coming days, I collaborated with Jennifer in person, via email and through Google Docs to develop our plan, design both formative and summative assessments, as well as create a schedule of implementation. Once we were ready, Jennifer and I acted as team teachers to introduce the project to our students. In all my years of teaching, I've never seen students more interested and excited by an independent reading project. From the beginning, my students recognized that this project was different from anything they'd ever been asked to complete. They were immediately excited by the challenge, recognizing that the Literary Research Project would require a deeper level of thinking than the typical book report while also being completely respectful of their ability to self select texts based on their own interests and likes. Before the first class was over, students were clamoring to share their hypotheses and pick books for their samples.

Throughout the process, Jennifer acted as my co teacher, as a resource, a collaborator and a coach to our students who came to rely on her expertise and guidance in the same way they'd come to rely on mine. Together, we collaborated with students in person and through online discussions to help them identify their TAGS, establish a hypothesis, and select books for their sample. Jennifer used her love of reading, her knowledge of children's literature and her skill as a teacher to guide students as they searched for books that were developmentally appropriate and that also piqued their interest(s). As the reading began, Jennifer sat in on

student book talks, asked questions that generated meaningful discussions and challenged student hypotheses until they could produce text evidence to prove her wrong; she, literally, became my second set of eyes in the classroom – identifying student needs and meeting them without me having to ask. Finally, Jennifer even helped me grade the students' final product – a task that I have NEVER entrusted to another colleague before (or since).

This collaborative project changed both my instructional life and the reading lives of my students forever. As readers, my students were given the opportunity, for perhaps the first time in their instructional lives, to tackle reading for school in the way strong readers tackle reading for life. At the end of the project, students reported that this was the first time they'd ever actually read a book for an outside reading project; that in the past, they'd simply used the back of the book or an online summary to create a poster or diorama, etc. I'm so grateful to Jennifer for helping me give my students this experience. I know that their lives as readers have been impacted in ways that I can't even imagine.

As a reading specialist, I was exposed to new ways of thinking about student reading and the collaborative process. I learned to trust my students when it came to selecting texts and to expect more from them than the typical book report. Additionally, this project caused me to rethink my role as the teacher and to value the process of thinking about a text over the product at the end. For me, it was a game changer, and I know it wouldn't have occurred without Jennifer. Finally, as a result of this project, I have come to see my school librarian as a collaborative partner; a fellow teacher who is just as skilled and dedicated as I am to the task of impacting student learning.

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

Myrtle Grove Middle School, where Jennifer and I teach, is a Title 1 Middle School in southeastern North Carolina. This means that a large percentage of our student population receives free and/or reduced lunch. Our diverse student population includes students from all backgrounds and walks of life. We have students for whom English is not their first language, students who have been identified as highly functioning autistic, students with Learning Disabilities and students whose instruction is modified as a behavioral intervention. Our 750 students speak 7 different languages and come from equally diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. The one thing they all have in common, however, is the knowledge that their librarian is dedicated to making sure they all have what they need to be successful. Jennifer has made our diverse school better in numerous ways, but none so meaningful than her passion for providing the very best resources for our unique group of learners, regardless of their background, abilities and/or challenges.

One of the ways Jennifer has made our school a better place includes putting Nook eReaders in the hands of our students. Last year, Jennifer spearheaded a pilot

eReader program, one of the first in the country, in which our students used eReaders for both reading assignments and reading for pleasure. In addition to writing the proposal that ultimately garnered our school the monies necessary to fund the project, Jennifer used these new devices as a means to impact our school climate as well as student learning. First, she insisted that the first group of students to use the Nooks be a group of struggling readers in the 7th grade – many of these students were repeating the grade and all had scored, on average, well below their peers on state end of grade assessments in reading. Jennifer felt strongly that these students, “who had never been first for anything,” would benefit most from having the opportunity to be “eReader Ambassadors” for our school and the district. She trusted them with these expensive devices, worked with them to unlock all of their features, allowed them to self select many of the titles that were first loaded onto the Nooks and then let them shine as readers and newly established leaders in our school community. This project changed these students’ outlook on reading and ultimately made our school a better place. As is so often the case, through this project, Jennifer became a champion for students who often have no one fighting for them and she proved that she has every student reader in mind as she implements her numerous, and often very cutting edge, ideas.

Similarly, Jennifer also makes our school a better place by creating a culture of reading that values all readers, regardless of their abilities and backgrounds. During her five years at our school, Jennifer has applied for and received numerous grants that have more than tripled the library’s collection of bilingual books, graphic novels and non-fiction texts that appeal to students of varying reading levels. Jennifer engages students with these texts by recruiting students to create video trailers for popular books, linking student book reviews to book covers via QR codes and constantly book talking titles that appeal to readers of all stripes. Jennifer is an expert at putting the right book in the right student’s hand and she makes sure that every student at our school sees themselves as a reader. What’s more, her love of reading and knowledge of literature is positively contagious. It’s impossible to spend even a few minutes with her, without leaving with what is certain to be the “best book ever” in hand. Jennifer has created a positive and empowering culture of reading at our school that has truly made it a better place for both student and teacher.

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

If ever anyone ever embodied the phrase TEACHER librarian, it's Jennifer LaGarde. Everything Jennifer does is centered around her desire to make an impact on student learning and it is evident in the outcomes she, and her library programs, produce. Although the library at our school operates on a completely flexible schedule, Jennifer co-teaches numerous classes each day, attends weekly department meetings and helps teachers plan instruction and gather resources - even if she is not going to co-teach the unit.

One example of this includes an integrated unit on career readiness that Jennifer helped to develop with 8th grade teachers at Myrtle Grove. Jennifer played numerous roles throughout this project. For example, she helped teachers design a wiki – through which students could collaborate with one another and “an expert” in a career field that they chose to explore throughout this project. Additionally, Jennifer taught mini lessons on the research process and helped create research pathfinders for students to use when locating information on their chosen career field. She also helped locate “experts” who helped evaluate student products and she assisted in planning and judging a culminating project: a student film festival – in which students created documentary shorts that identified what they felt were the 5 characteristics/attributes that all job seekers in the 21st century would need in order to be successful.

In another example, Jennifer helped 7th grade teachers develop an integrated unit on homelessness. For this project, students read texts related to homelessness, researched the problem of homelessness in our region, used math skills to build the type of shelters used by homeless people and then attempted to develop a solution to the problem of homelessness – in this case, a Food for Fines program in which students donated non perishable food items in lieu of paying library fines. As a result of this project, students donated over \$5,000 non perishable food items (much, much more than any possible accrued library fines) which were then donated to a local food kitchen that helps feed the homeless.

Similarly, Jennifer also worked with 6th grade teachers to create an annual storytelling festival at Myrtle Grove. As part of this unit, Jennifer helped introduce students to folktales and stories from around the world, using examples like the Cinderella story to point out commonalities among diverse peoples. Additionally, she showed off her considerable storytelling skills by telling numerous stories followed by a lesson in which she shared her process for memorizing and delivering a good story. She also worked with teachers to develop a storytelling rubric and even organized a visit to our school from master storyteller and author/poet Allan Wolf.

Examples like this go on and on, but Jennifer's role as a teacher in our school can perhaps be seen most at the end of the year when she analyzes her impact on students and shares data about library usage as compared with student scores on the state end of grade tests with our entire staff. Each year, Jennifer engages in the same work classroom teachers do by measuring her impact and sharing how her programs and instruction impact student learning. Jennifer sees herself as a part of the instructional team – a partnership that she recognizes doesn't end when she closes the book or resource that she is sharing during any given lesson. By sharing the data she compiles each year (data that always shows a relationship between library usage and good reading scores) she not only proves her value as a teacher but also shapes the way teachers at our school use the library and its resources. At Myrtle Grove, the library and its librarian have become an integral part of the instructional plan that all teachers at our school implement each. This is due entirely to the fact that Jennifer is always available to plan lessons, she delivers quality instruction and she holds herself and her programs accountable by sharing data at the end of the year.

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

In the five short years that Jennifer has been at our school, she has demonstrated leadership in numerous, invaluable ways. In addition to being Myrtle Grove's School Improvement Team chair, she is also the co chair of our Media Technology Advisory Committee and serves as our school's representative on our superintendent's Teacher's Advisory Committee. In all of these positions, Jennifer helps shape and implement policies that, eventually, impact every teacher in our district. The fact that she, (as opposed to a traditional classroom teacher), has been chosen for these positions of leadership, speaks volumes about the level of trust our faculty and staff place in Jennifer's judgment, skills and abilities as an educator. Additionally, Jennifer also acts as our school's Public Relations Liaison and both develops and delivers a series of professional development opportunities for our school known as "Web 2. Grove" in which Jennifer provides year long staff development on the latest instructional technologies and web 2.0 tools. Even the most technophobic teacher takes advantage of this opportunity each year as Jennifer's knowledge and expertise is balanced by her ability to make every teacher feel comfortable in implementing some of the many, many resources she shares. Jennifer's leadership extends beyond our school and throughout the district. After just 3 short years in our district, Jennifer was asked to serve as the Lead Media Specialist in our district. Through this role, Jennifer coordinates, develops and delivers numerous staff development opportunities for school librarians and acts as a liaison between the media staffs at 43 schools and our senior leadership staff at central office – all while still being the best school librarian ever at Myrtle Grove! And as if that isn't enough, Jennifer also serves on the district Media and Technology Advisory Committee, which helps develop district wide policies and conducts strategic planning related to technology usage throughout our school district.

However, Jennifer's leadership role does not stop there. Jennifer also serves as the Advocacy and Governance Chair for the NC School Library Media Association, is a founding member of their Young Adult Book Award Committee and recently redesigned the association's webpage. As part of these roles, Jennifer often shares her ideas and skills at conferences such as the NC Technology in Education Society's annual Conference and most recently at the NC Teaching Fellows Conference (where she was chosen to provide new teachers with the tools they need to create and maintain a personal learning network). A life-long learner herself, Jennifer doesn't just deliver staff development, she participates in it too, attending numerous conferences each year including the Florida Educational Technology Conference and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills Institute. Jennifer truly embodies what it means to be a leader. She shares what she knows, inspires and empowers her colleagues to do their very best work; she pushes teachers to step outside their comfort zones to try new things and is constantly on the hunt for new learning opportunities herself. She is active on Twitter and shares her professional growth through her blog: The Adventures of Library Girl <http://lib-girl.blogspot.com>.

I truly do LOVE my librarian, and given all that she does for and gives to our school, district and state, it is easy to see why. It is without hesitation that I nominate her for this award. If ever anyone deserved to be recognized for their contributions to the field of school librarianship and to student learning, it is Jennifer LaGarde.