Call them whatever you want — media specialist, teacher-librarians, instructional technology specialists — today’s school librarians manage a lot more than books, embracing technology and evolving with an ever-changing world.

Their value and adaptability was particularly demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as their brand of tech-savvy and versatility was exactly what the moment called for.

Take one example: in addition to her usual duties, Kathleen Rauth, media specialist at Center for Inquiry School No. 2 (Indianapolis), created digital content for remote learning, taught kindergarten classes part-time, and operated the media cart for in-person students. Her example was not out of the norm. “I know one librarian who was asked to teach sixth-grade science,” Rauth said.

Here’s another illustration: John Hochstetler, teacher-librarian at Riverside Intermediate School (Fishers), juggles the familiar tasks of a school librarian (acquiring and distributing books, curating the collection, co-teaching lessons, and so on) with grant writing, updating the district’s STEM site, developing STEM student activities, acting as district coordinator for Project Lead the Way, facilitating teacher professional development, and more. During the pandemic, Hochstetler repurposed a school bus, using it a book mobile to deliver to students learning from home. “It’s a lot, trying to juggle it all,” he said.

Emily Wilt, media specialist at Chesterton High School, echoes that sentiment. “I am becoming convinced I’m part octopus,” she said. “I’m often surprised at how many different directions my brain can go and still keep track.”

In interviews with various school librarians, that sort of strenuous schedule was the rule, not the exception, both before and during the pandemic. “I frequently worked 10- to 12-hour days before, but with the pandemic, every day is a 10- to 12-hour day,” said Leslie Preddy of Perry Meridian Middle School (Indianapolis), the sole school librarian for 1,300 students.

Michelle Houser, school librarian at Bellmont Senior High School (Decatur), agrees. “I was often online 16 to 18 hours a day,” she said. “Even
It’s a lot, trying to juggle it all.

To counter that fallacy, Hochstetler believes school librarians need to tell their story, particularly on social media. “If we don’t control the story, someone else will,” he said. Hochstetler walks the walk with an active presence on Twitter (@hselibrarydude). “I had a kindergartener stop me in the hallway once and say, ‘Hey, you’re HSE Librarian Dude!’”

Supporting literacy in all its forms

Although the position has evolved, school librarians still work diligently to instill a love of books and reading into their students. “The greatest joy in my job is getting a student that says they don’t like to read, giving them a book, and have them come back and say, ‘That was the best book ever!’” Houser said.

School librarians work diligently to diversify their collections, offering students of color (and those who are LGBTQ+) materials that reflect their life experience (“mirror” books) and also giving students (particularly those who are white and straight) books that show them different perspectives (“windows” books).

“They need to be able to look into experiences that are not their own,” Rauth said. “We’re really seeing that playing out now with all the recent hate crimes. It has to start somewhere, and one of the ways it can stop or at least be slowed down is to provide access to narratives of all different experiences.”

School librarians aren’t just helping develop traditional reading literacy. They also prepare students to become more digitally literate. This is particularly important for those students who have limited access to the Internet or other technology at home. Wilt says the instruction is sometimes limited access to the Internet or other technology at home. Wilt says the instruction is sometimes.

In an age of “fake news” and vast amounts of information available at their fingertips, school librarians teach kids how to sort it all out. “We’re not born knowing how to use the Internet,” Houser said. “Information is information, but they have to learn how to find it, evaluate it, and cite it in an efficient manner.”

Getting deserved recognition & support

It should be noted that Indiana school librarians are licensed teachers; they also possess the additional certification needed to be a librarian. Two-third have a graduate degree (most with a Master of Library and Information Science). As with their traditional teacher colleagues, they often operate with limited resources.

Rauth believes many school administrators recognize the value of school librarians but also have to make tough choices given limited state funds. “They value what we do,” she said. “They know our importance. But lots of things are competing for those dollars and push comes to shove financially.”

The state funding formula dedicated to library materials — $8 per student per year — has not increased since 1989, despite a twofold increase in print and digital material costs in that time. Dr. Jeffrey Butts, superintendent of MSD Wayne Township Schools, is one school administrator who recognizes the value of school librarians.

“What a shift I have seen in the role of our school media specialists during the last 50 years of my life,” he said. “I am so honored to live in a community and work in a district that values having full-time certified media specialists in every school to support our students and staff.”

Butts further highlighted the “amazing” efforts of the district’s media specialists in helping support at-home learning during the pandemic.

For many school administrators, Preddy says, it is merely a case of not having worked with a school librarian. “If they came from a place that didn’t have a school librarian, they often don’t know what an effective school librarian can do,” she said.

To that end, Houser recommends decision makers who are curious about how the job has expanded and changed should follow them around for a day. “Given proper funding, we can provide resources that every student might need, no matter what their intended vocation is,” she said.

No matter how the position might change, Indiana’s school librarians stand ready. “The most permanent part of being a school librarian is that it’ll continue to be fluid,” Preddy said.