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Chapter One: The Start of the Learning Commons Approach

ELIZABETH "BETTY" MARCOUX

Editorial note: This article features a newer school with an arrangement that has significantly affected the school library. Transformation may be thrust upon you instead of you initiating the transformation yourself. Thus this school. It is important to examine what has happened as a result of this transformation—and what will be happening. This article features a first chapter of what a learning commons begins to look like. The concepts of a learning commons are truly in beta form at this time, and this is an example of how the process might begin. More will follow in subsequent chapters.



Marysville Getchell HS campus

What happens when a school campus is designed without designating a traditional library space, and you are hired after the design and most of the construction has been completed? What happens when you are instructed to make the library "work" in such a design? Such has happened at the new high school in Marysville School District in Washington state.

Marysville Getchell Campus, opened in 2010, is a 193,000 square foot facility designed for 1,600 students. The facility has four (4) Small Learning Communities (SLC)—or separate buildings—that house each school of up to 400 students. A shared common building houses security, physical education, cafeteria, and other services. Each multiple-story school building has a principal, a registration desk, a snack area, individual classrooms, and a learning commons. The schools include the Academy of Construction and Engineering, Bio-Med Academy, International School of Communications, and School for the Entrepreneur. Incoming freshmen choose a school based on a variety of reasons, including interest in the theme or focus of that particular school. While students can switch during their years in high school, most don't. The curriculum core classes, taught in each school, follow state-mandated graduation requirements, but the electives are defined by the academy in which the student is enrolled. These SLCs focus on high school and beyond, and many of Getchells' gradu-



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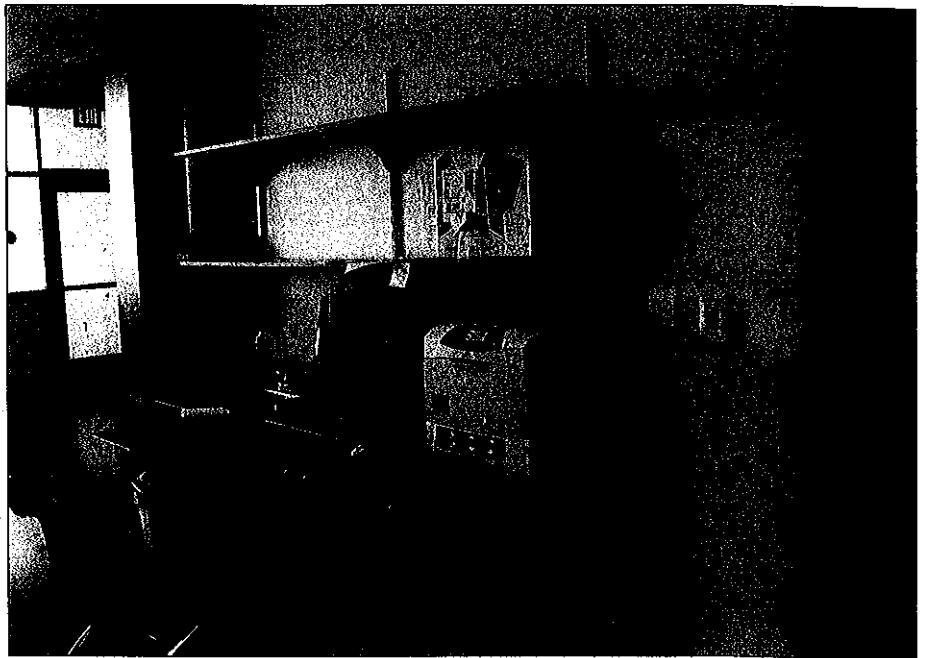
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ates go on to community colleges and universities.

It is a beautiful, modern campus and is located on property that overlooks Puget Sound, the Olympic Mountains, and much of the city of Marysville. Funding for the project came from bond monies that were passed by the school district in February 2006. With state matching funds in excess of \$19 million, the construction of this facility began. Plans for library resources were developed with input from other district librarians, the vendor, and a review of information about non-traditional library resources.

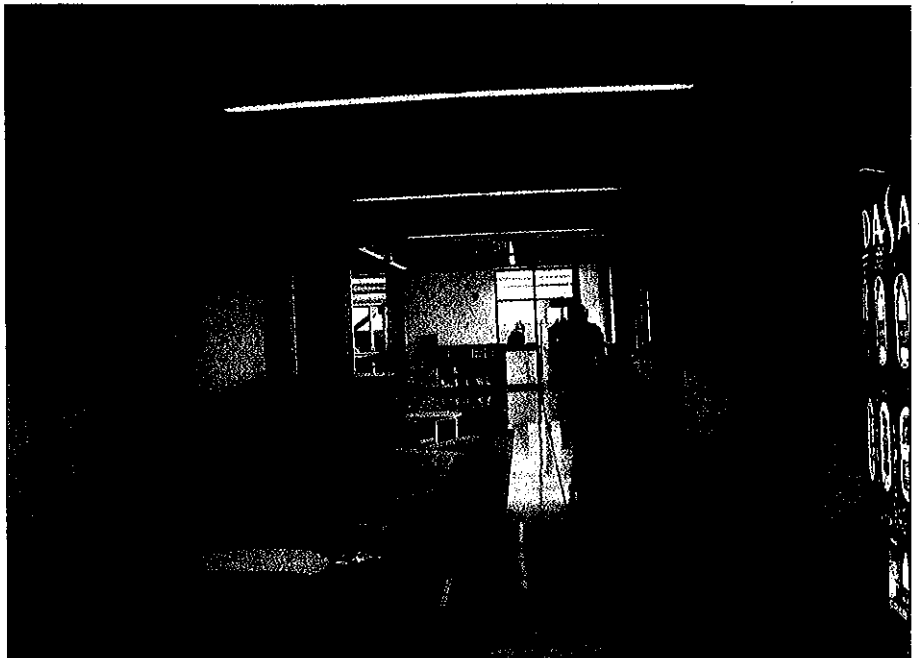
A distributed library resources concept sprang from the district's philosophy that students should have free and open access to reading and study resources in real time. Relying both on electronic data bases and resources, as well as books and magazines distributed throughout the four schools, distributed library resources would be available to all students. Now finished and in use, these distributed library resources are being put to the test. All resources on the campus are electronically linked through the campus library's website. This website is available to all students and staff in all buildings, as well as from their homes. Any resources that are checked out are done so by students using self-checkout stations in each school.

Susan Gregerson is the teacher librarian at Marysville Getchell High School. Susan is assisted by one full time library para-pro for all four schools, co-located on the Marysville Getchell Campus. A graduate in Communications-Editorial Journalism, Susan also has a Masters in Education and a school library endorsement. She has worked for various software /telecommunications companies, including Microsoft, Qwest, and Verizon. She is a technical writer with expertise in end-user documentation and training materials. This expertise has been quite helpful in her present work, but both K-12 research and infor-

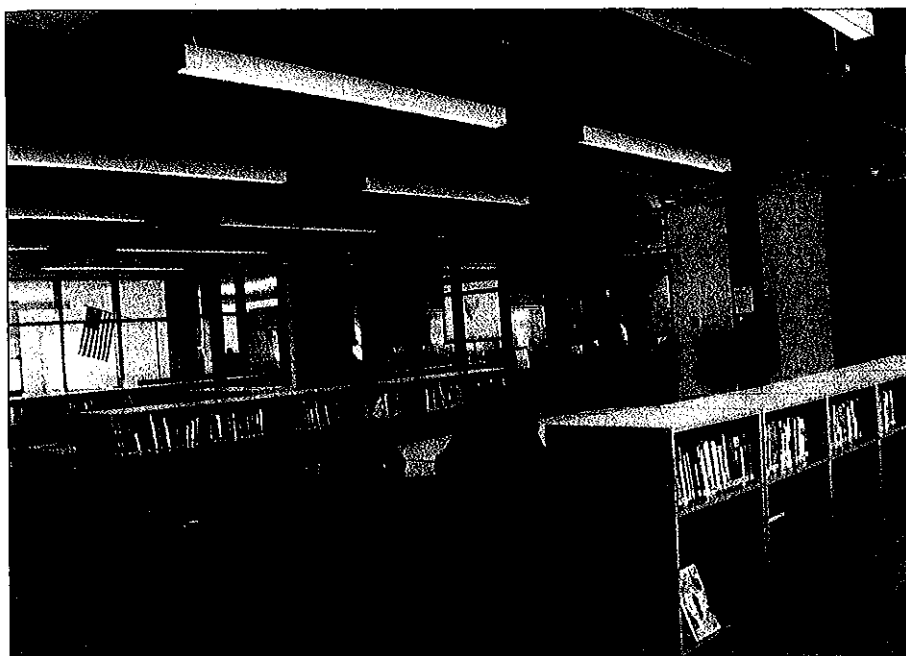


Getchell HS self checkout station

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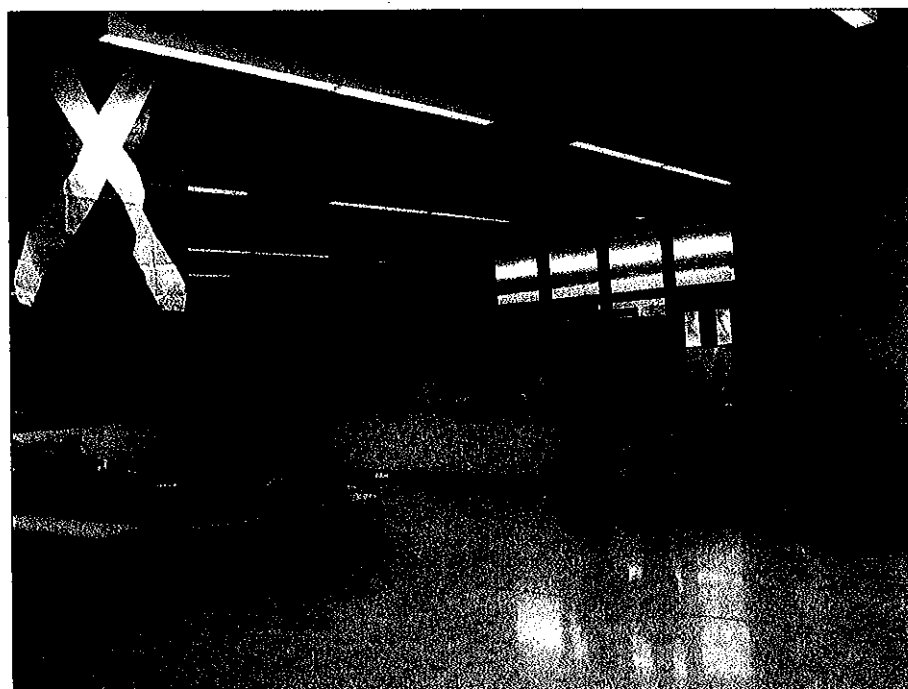


Getchell casual reading area



Faculty planning in the Getchell LC area

Susan believes that a learning commons (or "library commons," as she calls it) requires a flexible learning space where collaboration and learning access occur among all who use the area.



Another Getchell Learning Commons area

mation mining require her to apply all of her talents of being an information junkie. Exploring how learning happens as well as facilitating digital learners, Susan is taking on all of the educational changes that face her, including the ideas of a learning commons.

Susan believes that a learning commons (or "library commons," as she calls it) requires a flexible learning space where collaboration and learning access occur among all who use the area. Equipped with various resources, the learning commons area is a dedicated space on two of the three floors in each school. Classrooms surround the areas, and often coursework spills out of the classroom into these areas. Using low level, moveable shelving, Susan has facilitated discussions, presentations, exhibits, and meetings of all kinds. With self check-out in every building, Susan promotes the honor system and recruits students to be library "ambassadors." While Dewey still trumps, her system for placing resources is crafted by the needs of each school and the students more so than Dewey. The collection is website organized; textbooks are not in the same area as the library resources but available in separate book rooms for classes to use as necessary. Her connections outside of the building are to the public library and various databases and academic sources.

Susan works to manage the areas in the four buildings similarly but also customizes each to its specialized curricular areas and courses. In each of the buildings, she has established informal but intimate and casual reading areas that are adjacent to both the non-fiction and fiction titles. English/Language Arts classrooms in each of the four schools have a paperback library of 500-1000 books containing mostly fiction titles. Booktalks occur as needed—in classrooms and learning commons—with many students and teachers. There is significant overlap of student and staff activities in the commons areas. The newness of this model to the district is a challenge, but she finds administrative support especially strong in the building where she maintains an office.

Susan interacts well with both faculty and students. While she is housed in one

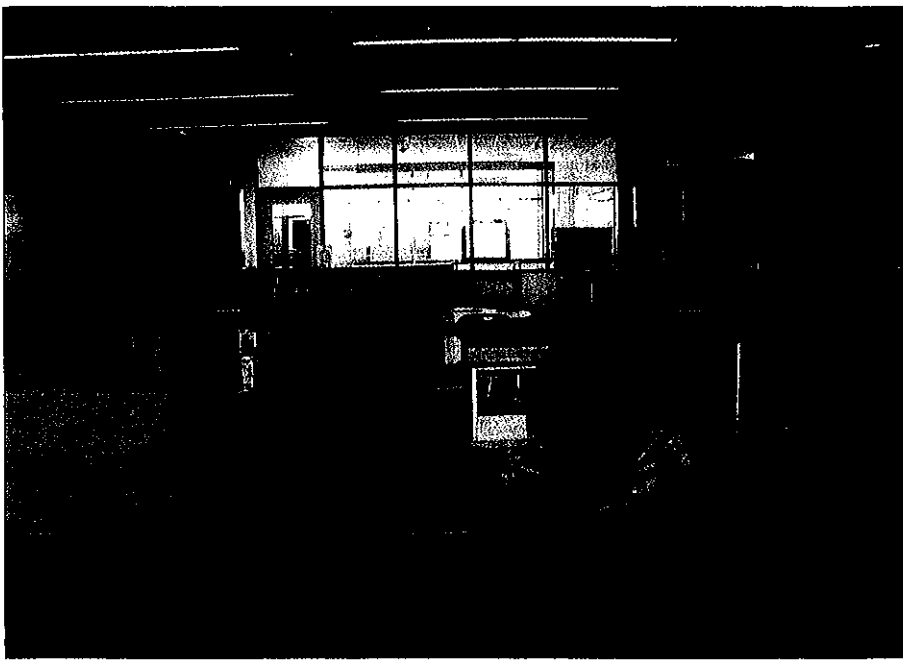
GRAPHIC NOVELS

CONSPIRACY

The Lives of Sacco and Vanzetti. Rick Geary. NBM/ComicsLit, 2011. \$18.99. 978-1-56163-605-1. Grades 7 and up. Were Vanzetti and Sacco murderers or victims of judicial prejudice? Either way, their case said something dire about the America they called home. Geary's historical mysteries always sparkle with clarity, both in the artwork and plot, and in this book he also resists the urge to decide that one side was right, all while delivering the most up-to-date information possible.

RASL: Pocket Book One Jeff Smith. CartoonBooks, 2010. \$17.95. 978-1-88896324-3. Grades 9 and up. Robert doesn't travel through time—he jumps between worlds. Now, two things are chasing him: a long-buried secret and the monster sent to kill him for breaking the silence. You'd have to live under a rock not to have heard of *Bone*. Smith's all-ages quest story, *RASL* is even better. Take all the most frightening moments of *Bone*, spice them up with Robert's lovers on multiple worlds, and what you've got is a dizzying tale of intrigue that's bigger than even a man of many worlds can imagine.

The Homeland Directive. Robert Venditti and Mike Huddleston. Top Shelf, 2011. \$14.95. 978-1-60309-024-7. Grades 9 and up. When a new satellite operation in the Regan era goes wrong, the secret service and Homeland Security. And two of them vanished dead. A conspiracy thriller in the best tradition, *The Homeland Directive* ties segments of old-timey spy thrillers together in a new, slick, modern style. It's got the moral ambiguity of the spy novel and the mystery of the thriller. Both, they say.

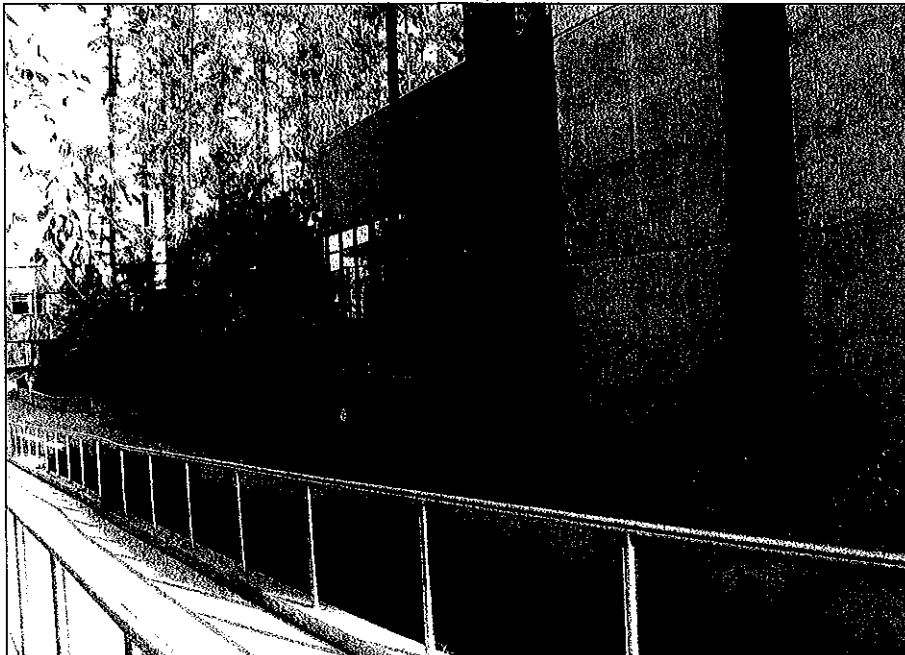


Getchell Learning Commons area

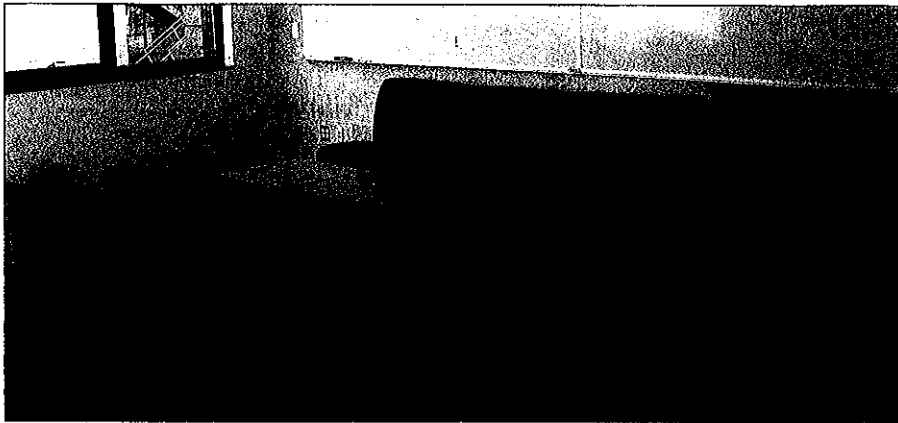
building, she maintains connections to both faculty and administrations in each of the four schools. She carries a cell phone with her and can be contacted by anyone at any time while she is on campus. Her website allows anyone to browse and see what is happening and to send her questions about how and what they are doing, as well as when and why. She is quick to respond to these emails, so that the information is received on a timely basis. Her hope is that these communications will

become even more interactive as she goes along.

While some faculty are ready to let the kids use all kinds of technologies, some aren't, and Susan notes that these types of changes tend to come slowly. Her website includes information about the resources available to students and faculty, as well as connections they have with the public library. Units of study are supported and facilitated by resources she makes available to the classes, regardless of where

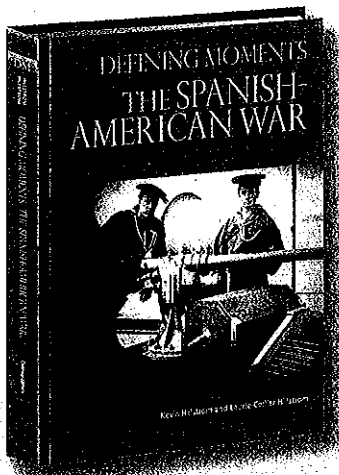


Getchell students working outside the building



Getchell planning area for students and teachers

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these resources come from. Her administrators and many of her faculty see her position as vital to student learning, so she is included in the planning of how to best utilize the facilities, as well as what is to happen and when. She does outreach on a regular basis to parents, other community connections (particularly Sno-Isle, the local public library), and the academic facilities around her.

Susan readily admits that the distributed library resources model that uses learning commons spaces in each school isn't like a "traditional" library model (whatever that is in today's world). These commons areas were built with flexibility in mind: Classes can move in and out of their class areas, bookshelves can move around depending upon focus, and with this open and flexible learning area, differentiated instruction can really happen both inside and outside the classroom. And while much flexibility is in place, Susan is already beginning to determine what will need to change to meet learning needs even more effectively. She sees great potential for different kinds of learning to occur in the commons areas, as well as ways to use them simultaneously for different learning reasons. The teachers enjoy the freedom this type of design gives them. Wireless access throughout all of the pods allows for instant communication, so that everything can be right there at the time and place they need it most.

The inquiry process in the school is based on the iSearch model. While Susan has been involved in planning how to implement this process, she notes that this model is one that is embraced by the school district. Much of her work is supporting it and connecting it to state requirements of high stakes testing.

Susan has a vision that augmenting virtual connections will only increase student learning potential. As such, she is working toward going beyond a self-serve website to creating a virtual self-presence for the students and faculty to use. While the website is still one-way, she is looking into the possibility of making it interactive for staff, students, and parents. She sees a future of e-discussion areas, e-portfolios, more student-generated electronic work,

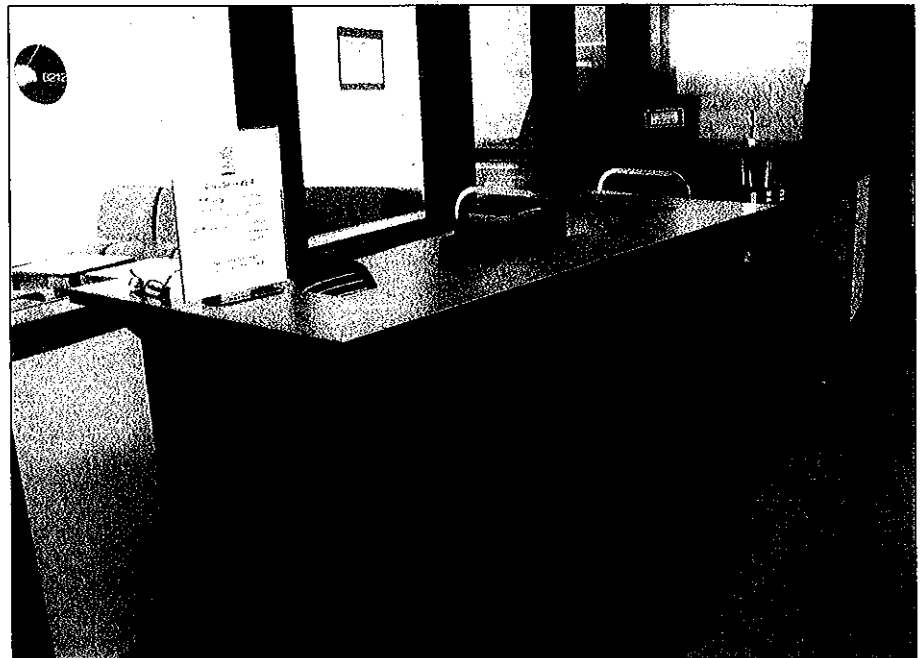
etc. She is excited by the prospects of this work. Being a relatively new teacher librarian in what can be a very high technology environment—but in a school district that is still learning about that potential—Susan envisions how to keep going up and up. Though faced with a financial challenge—as the economy has forced the district to postpone some of the original measures—Susan keeps these dreams alive for better financial times.

Susan builds her situation around the needs of students and the accomplishments of the four standards of the AASL 21st Century Skills. She looks at how she can bridge these with what the state is mandating and the district must follow, informing her faculty and staff of the connections they can make. Whether working with the Video Production teacher and students in the International School of Communications to spread the concepts of the commons to all faculty and students, or working individually with a student consumed by his research paper on world conflict, Susan concertedly acts to see that all these needs are fulfilled adequately. From basic information to outreach, Susan finds the commons ideas to work well with her goals.

Susan's work is not done. From the smallest academy (Academy of Construction and Engineering) to the largest (Bio-Med Academy), she strives to give equal but individual support to every learner in the building. She troubleshoots in conjunction with the technology department, and kids are invited to communicate with her via email or phone at any time. She works hard to build relationships with the students, regardless of the academy a student is enrolled in. While there are some discipline and management challenges with this model, Susan loves being able to know the students so well. While some in the district still cling to the idea of a traditional library walled off in a space with detectors at the entrance, for Susan this model is both a gift and a challenge. The learning commons areas are open, whether or not there is a professional present. Anticipated needs are key to Susan's work, and planning and organization are essential for her



Getchell Library Commons area



Getchell HS checkout stand

to spend time in each area. Susan works hard to maintain an equal physical presence in each of the four academies. Her flexibility is demonstrated quite often, as she fields student and staff needs on a minute-by-minute basis. And yes, she walks all the time! Susan has taken many baby steps toward her goal of every student a learner, but she realizes that the potential is unlimited and she has a long way to go. She spends much of her free time learn-

ing from others who are blazing new trails in information and literacy education. She utilizes websites, attends webinars, and always keeps her heart and mind open to new ideas. A learner herself, she isn't fearful of change or design, but embraces them both as opportunities.

Susan Gregerson can be contacted at Susan_gregerson@msvl.k12.wa.us.