



Jennifer Otremba with some of her students [at Osakis Public School]

Contributed photo



By [Lisa Johnson](#)

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**This is not your parents' school library
And Jennifer Otremba in Osakis is not your
parents' librarian**



Standing, from left, Stan Moore, Justin Dahlheimer, Senator Mary Kunesh, Lindsay Kugel, Deputy Nicole Swanson, Shad Schmidt, Kyle Kostrzewski, Alyssa Fahrendorf, Lindsay Hinnenkamp, Konnie Christopherson, Jennifer Otremba, Brad Hoffarth, Chelsea Thompson, and seated, from left are Katie Ferris, Tonia Kostrzewski, Alisson Vogel, Mikayla Johnson
Contributed photo

OSAKIS — Most of us have memories of our school library: Either bad ones (of having to sit still, be quiet, and occasionally wrestle with the Dewey Decimal System) or great ones, of being surrounded by books.

But Jennifer Otremba’s job at the Osakis Public School is so different from “librarian” that so is her title: District Media, Innovation and Design Specialist. And Otremba is completing the graduate course work to become a licensed media specialist.

All this is to say her job has a crucial component that previous iterations did not have. Jennifer Otremba is tasked with teaching students how to navigate information resources successfully — and safely. That means learning how to acquire valid information from reliable sources, how to make those determinations, how to become digitally literate — and how to stay safe.

“It's a really fascinating time to be in this type of role,” says Otremba. “Fascinating to see how the definition of a school library or a school media specialist has expanded and grown as educational needs have changed for students. We need to not only be literate as in knowing how to read and consume information, but we also need to be literate and find valid, reliable sources. Knowing how to navigate the online world in a safe way. The other thing that's become really common both in school as well as in public libraries is integrating places like maker spaces and STEAM labs or STEM labs (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) to really just broaden exposure for students that they could someday explore in their studies or in their career.

And that begins with kids in kindergarten

“We use [common sense media's digital citizenship curriculum](#) which is really great,” says Otremba. “It's a comprehensive curriculum and it's got ready-to-use resources for teachers. Today I was talking with second graders about digital trails or your digital footprint: what information is safe to share online, what information is not safe to share online, and then with the third graders today, we had a lesson called the power of words. How you choose to communicate with people online and how they choose to communicate with you is really powerful and it can be powerful for the good or powerful for the bad and so we talk a little bit about that. What's OK and not OK to say online, what's OK and not OK for other people to say to you online, and then what do you do if you find yourself in a situation that's uncomfortable or hurtful or feels dangerous in any way.

“So starting from a very young age we're talking with kids about that,” Otremba continues. “We know kids are getting devices in their hands at younger and younger ages and it's a lot of work as a parent to try to figure out how to put safeguards in place. We want to be sure kids are equipped with information about how to keep themselves safe, knowing that the adults in their lives aren't always going to have the time to put those guard rails on every device that they touch.

“Then our fifth through ninth grade students use a tool called [Neptune Navigate](#) which is a really great tool available to school districts. There are eight modules and they focus on everything from cyber bullying to digital information, digital footprint, security; all sorts of different topics and all of

our fifth through ninth graders complete those modules every school year so that we know they're getting exposure to that information as well.”

Enter Northern Lights Library Network

Last spring and again this fall, Otremba approached the Northern Lights Library Network for a grant to update the library’s collection. While both celebrated novelists Lin and Leif Enger devoured the books in the Osakis Public School library, many of those same books were still on the shelves some forty years later. The Northern Lights Library Network serves 23 counties in north-central, northwest, and west-central Minnesota and brings resources from the state and national level to the local level as well as discovering resources in the region and sharing them universally.

After the second request from Otremba, Northern Lights Library Network’s executive director, Kathy Enger, contacted State Sen. Mary Kunesh, who is, herself, a media specialist, in addition to being the Education Finance Chair and Assistant Majority Leader. Kunesh was instrumental in securing funds for school districts across the state to build school library resources and support additional personnel in libraries. “I was in touch with Jennifer and I was sending Sen. Kunesh information about what's happening in the Osakis Public Schools,” says Enger. “I was sending that to her to say ‘Look! It's working! What you decided at the legislative level to get to the local level is working and I want you to see that it's working here.’”

Enter Sen. Mary Kunesh

That prompted Kunesh to visit the Osakis Public Schools this past October and see the money in action. She visited with library staff and administrators and toured the media center.

“What has come out of the trifecta in Minnesota is good,” says Enger. “The intent is good and I've seen that with Senator Kunesh. I've seen it with Senator Kupec. I've seen it with Representative Keeler. People are really trying hard to make life better for Minnesotans and that's what we saw with Senator Kunesh as this funding came to Osakis Schools, and then Osakis Schools was willing to put into effect the vision that she has to make life better for school children in rural Minnesota. So you know it's real — that's real.”