

Testimony

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Allison Burrell, K-12 Librarian
Southern Columbia School District
alburrell75@gmail.com

Good morning. Thank you, members of the House Education Committee, for the opportunity to speak to you today about a subject that is very near to my heart- the status of school libraries in our state. My name is Allison Burrell. I am a resident of Bloomsburg, PA and the librarian for kindergarten through twelfth grade in the Southern Columbia Area School District in Catawissa, in rural central PA. I earned my bachelor's degree in education from Penn State University, a Master's Degree from Wilkes University and a Master's Degree in School Library and Information Technologies from Mansfield University. I have been teaching at Southern Columbia for the past 13 years; the first 10 as a fifth grade teacher and the last three as a school librarian. For my first two and a half years of being a school librarian, I served grades 7-12. However, last December when my district's elementary librarian retired, grades K-6 were added to my responsibilities as my district attempted to balance its budget. When school resumes next week, I will continue serving 3 schools, contained in 2 neighboring buildings, which house a total of 1450 students and 95 faculty.

In order to be the sole librarian, my schedule was arranged so that I spend alternate weeks in the K-4 building and the 5-12 building, with a paraprofessional staffing the opposite building. This arrangement negatively impacts both students and staff.

During the weeks I am at the elementary school, I meet with each class once, for a 40-minute period. Of that period, approximately 25 minutes is available for instruction, with 15 minutes for book selection. The alternate week consists of the paraprofessional conducting story time and book selection with the scheduled classes. She is not qualified to provide library instruction or reader's advisory, creating an inconsistency within the program.

Students at the middle and high school level (grades 5-12) are impacted to an even greater degree by the change in my assignment. On our current flexible schedule, I see some students 4 times each year with their classes. However, in order to see all 900 students in the 5-12 building, I would only get to see each student 2.5 times each year. At this level, students need instruction in effective research strategies, selecting reliable resources, ethical use of information, organizing and synthesizing information from a variety of resources and being responsible users of information in a global digital society. However, due to the alternate-week schedule and six-day gap, I cannot address the students' instructional needs with their ongoing assignments. As a result, my interaction with students is largely on an individual basis, such as doing reader's advisory or assisting them with specific research issues and regular homework assignments. My ability to collaborate with teachers, which research has proven increases student achievement, is severely restricted because of my inconsistent availability in the building.

With the current schedule, I have also limited time to support teachers' needs for professional development with regards to current and emerging technologies, new resources, and social media. Additionally, my ability to provide curriculum support for our teachers by gathering resources they need for instruction has been restricted.

I am currently assisting with the creation of a model library curriculum for Pennsylvania, which focuses on the PA Common Core Standards. Based upon the working document, it would be extremely difficult for our elementary students, who will only receive a maximum of 18 library classes each year, to accomplish this entire curriculum. As the rigor increases for older students, the amount of instructional availability should likewise increase. However, in my school district, the opposite occurs. In order for students to be able to perform at the level required by the PA Common Core, a full-time librarian in each library will be necessary.

My school district serves an area with a population of about 10,000 and covers approximately 108 square miles, including parts of both Columbia and Northumberland Counties. Students in this rural school district have limited access to public and academic library services. Our schools are approximately 15 minutes from Bloomsburg University's Andruss Library, which aids in addressing the needs of our academically advanced students. However, in order to borrow materials there, students must be 18 years old. The Ralpho Township Library is located within school district limits, and the Bloomsburg Public Library is about 20 minutes away. Neither of these public libraries provides easy physical access for the majority of my students, and the latter requires each family outside town limits to pay an annual fee. Students can access Bloomsburg Public Library's catalog online, but not that of the Ralpho Library. Therefore, the school library remains the best source for students' information gathering and independent reading needs.

Our students deserve the opportunity to learn all they can in their journey from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Libraries and librarians can be great assets to that learning, but when these resources are stretched as thin as they are in my district, the students' learning suffers. Unfortunately, my situation is not unique. PSLA recently formed a special interest group consisting of 25 PA librarians, and growing, who are serving as the sole librarian in their districts. Our goal is to provide a professional learning network that would deal with solving problems specific to solo librarians and find ways to meet the state standards when instructional time with students is extremely limited.

We all want our students to be able to perform successfully on our state assessments, but beyond that, we want our students to be productive citizens in our global society once they leave high school. We need to improve situations in which a single librarian is required to meet

the needs of students in multiple schools. In those situations, students' achievement in all subject areas is in jeopardy. Thank you for your time and dedication to the future of our children.