

Testimony offered to House Education Committee Hearing on School Libraries

By Martin J. Hudacs, Ed.D., Superintendent of Solanco School District

Thank you for the opportunity to express my thoughts on the critical need for support for school libraries and librarians. Their role in schools and school districts is critical, although often underappreciated.

To my surprise, some people feel that technology, and the Internet searches (particularly through such search engines as Google) make the librarian less important. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

When you consider the role that school librarians play in a building and in a district, they are – to use a baseball term – one of our best utility players. They serve as classroom instructors, research assistants, curriculum developers, professional development providers, technology experts, and classroom support specialist.

Instructor: The librarian is responsible for direct instruction of students and staff to improve their 21st Century skills. At the elementary level, the student learn the organization and accessibility of library resources; at the middle level, the students learn the research capabilities within a library; and at the high school level, they learn the value of a place that provides solitude for study, room for collaboration, technology for investigation and resources for research. It is the hub for engaging in authentic 21st Century skills. Students are required to master 21st Century skills. While these skills are integrated into all classrooms and all curriculums, the school librarian is critical to ensuring consistency and permeation of the skills through practical application.

Research Assistant: Teachers and students alike rely on school librarians to help them identify resources that they need. Although it would seem a Google-search would generate all of the resources one needs, the school librarian is the trained professional who can suggest online and hard copy resources, offer ways to focus the search for resources, and provide strategies to assess the validity of website.

Staff and students may not be familiar with the significance of certain professional journals or publications (online and hard copy) that provide the best direction to follow, but the librarian knows the many paths worth exploring when looking for resources.

At Solanco we recognized that a lot of classroom time was lost as individual teachers taught students how to do research in preparation for a project in their classroom. Teachers tend to use the research skills that they are most familiar with. As a result students learn a variety of ways to do the same basic task, and never getting a sense that research skills are life skills. We developed a single research curriculum, beginning in 4th grade and spiraling through 10 grade, with students learning more intricate and advanced skills to build onto those learned in previous years. The common thread to this is the school librarian, ensuring a consistency in the methodology and philosophy behind research and presentation.

Professional Development: The librarian is perhaps the most cost-effective provider of professional development in a school district. The school librarian must be abreast of all developments in

information retrieval and research. Then he or she must be able to train all teachers within the building how to use the resources in the library. And, he or she needs to be familiar with the role those resources can play in all content areas. This person must be an expert in information retrieval and research, and must be generalist enough to know how that skill applies to all content areas.

Technology and curriculum expert: The librarian is the one professional in every building who is trained and familiar with all aspects of media and technology. The librarian, often called the media specialist, often provides teachers with the tools (and sometimes the training to use those tools) to enhance their classroom instruction. These individuals are not the dispenser of slide projectors, as they may stereotypically be thought, but rather they are experts in various media – visual, auditory and kinetic – that enhance instruction. They are critical partners in curriculum work and best practice instructional strategies. They are the common denominator in buildings in every district for providing technology and media support.

Ideally, every school should have their own full-time librarian. However, funding makes that option vulnerable to cuts. Many districts around me have reduced either the number of librarians in a school or demoted the position to part-time. With options disappearing with each year's budget for public education, this trend could be much more common in years to come. The pressure to focus on math, reading and science because of the emphasis on assessment results forces districts to use their dwindling resources in those specific areas.

While I, personally, see that as a very short-sighted solution, it is, unfortunately, a forced choice in many schools, especially small and rural schools, such as Solanco. When one considers the investment that a district makes in the materials housed in a library, it only makes sense to have a certified, competent person responsible for the development of the resources, the maintenance of the resources, and the accessibility to the resources..

I can tell you that in the Solanco School District, the librarian is integral to our students' achievement from their early experiences in primary grades to their expertise as upperclassmen. The librarian provides life-skills that complement and deepen the content and skills learned in every classroom.

Benjamin Disraeli said, "Upon the education of the people of this country the fate of the country depends." The librarian is a critical part of that education and needs to be recognized as such.

Thank you for the opportunity to present my opinions for your consideration as you investigate the reasons for and the manner of support that you can provide to school librarians.

Sincerely,

Martin J. Hudacs, Ed.D.
Superintendent, Solanco School District
121 S. Hess Street
Quarryville, PA 17566