



Pennsylvania School Librarians Association

Testimony

Presented to

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House Education Committee

On School Libraries in Pennsylvania

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Introduction:

Good morning. My name is Eileen Kern. I am the president of the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association. PSLA represents over 850 school librarians who hold an instructional certificate in library science and the school library educators from the six universities within the Commonwealth that offer bachelors and/or master programs in school librarianship. For 33 years I was an elementary librarian and library department chair in the Parkland School District School located in suburban Allentown. Additionally, I was adjunct instructor for the Library Science and Instructional Technology Department at Kutztown University until 2009. I am happy that you have asked us here to discuss the role that a quality school library program plays in our students' education. PSLA wants to thank you for requesting the study by the State Board of Education under the auspices of HR 987 and for taking time today to review its findings.

A recent New York state report estimated the value of the books and resources in their school libraries at \$1.2 billion. A Texas study found an average operating budget for school libraries to be around \$22 per students per year. If a CEO of a business suggested that we abandon a room full of resources -- a program that is a significant contributor to the bottom line of the business -- and do away with the people that supervise those resources and make them accessible to our customers, that CEO would be laughed out of office. But in Pennsylvania, we see library services to our students being reduced or eliminated in school after school. This truly does not make good business sense or education sense.

I'd like to share several points that our Association feels strongly about when it comes to school libraries and student learning.

Point 1 - Even our most recent studies are not able to document the long-term effect that today's budget cuts are having on the school library programs for the children of Pennsylvania.

While we commend the State Board of Education for implementing the Pennsylvania School Library Study in the 2010-2011 school year -- we know based on our own follow-up survey in 2011-2012 that 198 schools eliminated or severely curtailed library services to students. This amounts to almost 100,000 students with limited access to library programs. One consequence is that many Pennsylvania school districts have reduced staffing to a single K-12 librarian to serve all buildings and all students. We have seen these decreases in services to kids in all but 2 of the 29 intermediate units. These cuts in programs have been across all grade levels and in all parts of our state -- not just the urban districts but also the suburban and rural ones as well. These financial stresses have even impacted districts, like mine, which most people would consider fairly affluent. This results in huge inequities in terms of equitable access to library resources and learning opportunities for students throughout the Commonwealth. SO why are these inequities so troubling?

Point 2 - These inequities in school library programs matter to our students.

In 22 states over the past 25 years, research studies have confirmed that effective school library programs directly impact student achievement. Students in schools with

quality school library programs learn more, earn better grades, and score as much as 22% higher on standardized tests than their peers. The lead researcher in many of these studies, Dr. Keith Curry Lance has studied the effectiveness of Pennsylvania school libraries in the past and is now engaged in a new study of the gap between current Pennsylvania school library programs and what is needed to develop students with 21st century skills.

The new Pennsylvania School Library Impact Study is a partnership among PSLA, the Health Sciences Libraries Consortium, and the Education Law Center. Dr. Lance and his colleagues are using some of the data gathered in the State Board of Education's Study and the 2011 PSSA reading and writing test scores. They will determine what school library infrastructure, defined as staffing, budgets, collections, technology, and hours of access contributes most to student achievement, while controlling for socio-economic conditions. The findings of this federally funded research project, not yet complete, will be made available this October.

During the spring of 2012 Dr. Lance conducted online interviews of school administrators from across Pennsylvania. He found that 85% of participating administrators strongly assessed their library program as an integral and necessary component in teaching Common Core English Language Arts Standards. School administrators value their school librarians in motivating students to read -- but so much more than that. They also recognize school librarians to be instructional resource managers, technology integrators, information literacy teachers and collaborators with teachers in delivering instruction and assessing student learning. As school administrators have come to see our usefulness to Pennsylvania's children, we ask you to consider that we are not school librarians that are just keepers of books. Which brings us to...

Point 3 - School librarians play a dramatically different role in schools than they used to.

We seek to enable every student to effectively pursue information and develop ideas as they construct and share knowledge through independent and class-based explorations in excellent school library programs.

We are in the Age of Information -- the "knowledge economy" is going to keep Pennsylvania competitive with other states and nations. What are the prerequisites? According to a World Bank study -- efficient production relies on information and know-how; over 70 per cent of workers in developed economies are information workers; many U.S. factory workers use their heads more than their hands. New media increases the production and distribution of knowledge, which in turn, results in collective intelligence. Existing knowledge becomes much easier to access as a result of networked databases, which promote online interaction between users and producers. The global village is a reality and, as a result, goods and services can be developed, bought, sold, and in many cases even delivered over electronic networks. But who works with our students in Pennsylvania schools now to prepare them for the knowledge economy?

Finally, Point 4 - School librarians teach 21st century skills to our students

PSLA continues to work with PDE and Commonwealth Libraries to focus on cutting-edge skills for our students and to strengthen school library programs across the state. For example, the model library curriculum writing project is a joint effort of PSLA, Commonwealth Libraries, and PDE. This model library curriculum is based upon Pennsylvania Common Core Standards and the American Association of School Librarians Standards for the 21st Century Learner that is included in your packet. Many of the PA Common Core Standards reflect our work as school librarians. For example, Standard 1.4.9-V. asks students to conduct short, as well as more sustained research projects. Librarians teach the skills listed under this standard. Google does not. It cannot teach students how to generate a research question, narrow or broaden the scope of the research, and synthesize multiple sources on a subject. Google cannot teach students how to demonstrate understanding of a subject. In short, a school librarian's work today is far more complex than maintaining a collection and checking in and out the books.

Instead of spending our days "shushing" Pennsylvania students, we teach them to access, analyze, interpret, synthesize, and critically evaluate information. We try to develop them into responsible consumers of information and communication media. We teach our students the reflective inquiry process and model that process in our practice. We teach about cyber-safety and work to prevent online bullying.

School librarians help students to create and build knowledge, tell stories, share research, collaborate, and contribute as ethical citizens by using innovative technologies like podcasts, video productions, and social media tools.

So you see -- school librarians help students achieve the very goals that you set out for our Pennsylvania students when you approved the PA Common Core. In order to do this good work, we continue to ask that school districts be required to address gaps in library resources and services for our students. Further, we know the importance that basic data has to decision-making so we ask that questions about library programs be added to the annual PIMS reporting. Because we know that at least 600 public schools in Pennsylvania depend on POWER Library as their only online resource, we request that POWER Library be strengthened not cut back. Finally, because we know that vast inequities from school to school and district to district exist, we call on the House Education Committee and the State Board of Education to strengthen its requirements concerning library programs and resources.

We thank you for taking time today in this public forum to examine the state of school libraries in Pennsylvania. I am happy to answer any of your questions about our study of school library program cuts, the impact study that we are conducting, and the changed role of school librarians or the 21st century skills that we teach Pennsylvania students.