

Wednesday, August 22, 2012

To the Education Committee of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives,

Pennsylvania PTA is the largest all volunteer child advocacy association in this great state. We are 70,000 members strong. We are committed to making "Every Child's Potential a Reality". Our mission is to be a powerful voice for all children, a relevant resource for families and communities and a strong advocate for the education and the well-being of every child.

Over the years, PTA members have dedicated countless volunteer hours, dollars, and donations to public school libraries in an effort to support them for the benefit of all students. While this support is often vital, it is not adequate to replace trained school librarians. Professional librarians are the most qualified to assist students with their information needs and collaborate with educators to engage students in developing reading as a foundational skill, critical thinking and research skills. Those very skills are extremely important to student success today and tomorrow.

Trained librarians are better equipped to help a child find a book that best suits their reading skills and their interest. This will help develop their reading skills much better than a volunteer who can often only be guided by labels on the books that indicate the age or level of the reader. A trained librarian is also equipped to analyze reading skill levels and assist individuals in increasing their reading proficiency. Increasing reading skills is integral for life-long learning and personal growth.

I have spoken with parents, librarians and teachers and they all agree that while parents can support the school library they cannot replace trained librarians, nor can they develop and run library programs. Additionally, in these tough economic times, we see a significant decrease in volunteer time and funds. Volunteers are currently assuming the obligation of running school libraries because their school districts cannot or simply will not maintain or hire a professional school librarian. They do it because they understand the importance of the library, not only as an information center, but for some students, their only access to computers and the internet. Even for the students who do have these tools, trained librarians are needed to be the "myth busters". Librarians teach ethical and skilled use of technology. Classroom teachers are not trained to evaluate information from the web for accuracy or impartiality. All too often, our students fall upon unreliable resources within our digital communities. They then pass on bad information to classmates and others through classroom reports or even social medias. They are often only a few clicks away from real facts but do not have the skills to find it. Librarians understand how information is organized. That benefits students and teachers.

While the so called digital divide is shrinking by some accounts, PTA's experience is that it

is still quite large. We have a PTA program called "Reflections", which is a national showcase contest for the arts including dance choreography, film production, literature, musical composition, photography, and the visual arts. Last year National PTA attempted to increase capacity by mandating that many forms and some artwork be submitted electronically. That decision reduced our total entries state-wide by nearly 75% in Pennsylvania. While there were other contributing factors, we heard from numerous PTA units stating that their students did not have the means or the computer skills to abide by the new rules.

In some cases students without access to a school library can choose to visit a public library. However, in many of Pennsylvania's rural school districts, there is NO public library for many miles. Many miles will cost their families time and money that many do not have in these tough economic times. Access to public transportation is not available in many parts of Pennsylvania. Private vehicles are costly to own and operate so many families function with only one or none in some cases. NO access to public school libraries with trained librarians will have negative effects on the educational success of our students.

Parents welcome the opportunity to volunteer in school libraries, and do so in many schools in Pennsylvania. Parents also want to continue to participate in fundraising for school libraries. However, we believe that many questions will be raised if public schools do not have libraries or those run strictly by volunteers: Like, "What happens when the volunteer can't make it? Who will decide what resource materials will be purchases, if any? Who will review all the new publications? Will this put my child at an educational disadvantage? Will this hurt my child's potential of a good living later in life?" Parents are concerned about their children's future. They rely on not only on trained professionals within our public schools, but also on good policy that guides programs. The obligation of funding and supporting public school libraries lies with Pennsylvania and its commitment to educate all children, not with volunteers. Volunteers look to legislation to set some minimal standards for public school libraries. They need you to help them be able to support their public school libraries as volunteers.

In January, 2011 the Pennsylvania PTA developed a position paper on this very subject.

As adopted January 11, 2012:

Pennsylvania PTA realizes that effective school libraries should include a variety of instructional and educational programs designed to meet the needs of all students. Students and teachers need school library services and related educational resources in order to meet Pennsylvania academic standards for research and learning in all core academic subjects. All Pennsylvania's public schools should have available a school library, including impoverished, rural and urban communities which service a larger number of at risk children. Pennsylvania Public School Code requires school libraries and

staffing for private schools although there is no requirement for public schools to operate a school library or to have certified staffing.

- Therefore, Pennsylvania PTA advocates for policy and regulatory reform that sets standards for public school library programs.
- Pennsylvania PTA calls upon its constituent associations to build partnerships with other associations, agencies, policy makers, educators, and school board members to build a statewide network for public school library programs.
- The Pennsylvania PTA through on-line articles and *PTA in Pennsylvania* shall educate parents of school aged students in learning the value of public school library programs and the importance of professional librarians.
- Pennsylvania PTA is mindful that public school library programs contribute to student achievement.

The bottom line is that although having volunteers in public school libraries is fully supported by PTA, they cannot replace professionally trained librarians. It is our opinion that every student in Pennsylvania should have access to a school library under the supervision of a trained librarian and it is your responsibility to provide the regulatory reform and set those standards for public school libraries.

Thank you for allowing me to address you today.

Julie

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