



Testimony

Presented to

**Pennsylvania House of Representatives
House Education Committee**

on

School Libraries in Pennsylvania

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Thank you for inviting the Education Law Center to testify today. We especially thank the House Education Committee for the collective work you did in initiating House Resolution 987 of 2010 which resulted in the State Board of Education compiling the 2011 Pennsylvania School Library Study. We also acknowledge the Pennsylvania State Board of Education for tackling this work and bringing this issue to the forefront.

The Education Law Center (ELC) is a non-profit legal advocacy and educational organization, dedicated to ensuring that all of Pennsylvania's children—especially the most vulnerable children—have access to a quality public education. We focus our efforts on helping parents and grassroots groups to improve educational opportunities for children facing barriers in school—students with disabilities, learning English, living in poverty, experiencing homelessness, or navigating the foster care or juvenile justice systems. We have operated statewide for more than three decades serving as a resource for children, families, and communities and fighting for their education rights. We've focused on opportunities to learn for all children and have worked to examine how state and local policy should prioritize those needs. In examining research-based practices and discovering the critical role school libraries play in student achievement, it makes sense that we come before you today to address the status of our school library system and what it will require in policy and resources to make it effective for every student.

The compilation of the 2011 Pennsylvania School Library Study was a huge step forward in gathering not only data but making recommendations for improvements. The study revealed several findings I'd like to review:

- The data collected from school districts was from April and May 2011. Many districts made significant cuts to their library staffing and programs shortly after that in response to budget deficits at the local and state levels. School libraries are vulnerable to such cuts because the state does not provide any dedicated funding or maintain any standards for this aspect of public education.
- The study revealed that best practices for operating school libraries have been outlined in guidelines established by PDE and Commonwealth Libraries. However, these guidelines are only voluntary.
- In schools where no guidelines are followed, the study indicated that school libraries are not operating effectively and not serving their proper role in the instruction of students, resulting in lower student achievement. Two (2) out of five (5) libraries have fewer books per student than recommended by the State Guidelines; three (3) out of four (4) libraries have an average print collection older than ten years; three (3) out of five (5) libraries do not have adequate resources and programs for student with disabilities and for English Language Learners; and one in five (5) libraries are not physically accessible for students with disabilities.

One of the initiatives we have pursued since the release of this report is to do public outreach to those beyond the school library doors, many of whom assumed every school had a school library serving all students. Participants included business partners, community organizations, public librarians, education consultants, students, parents, and others. Working with the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association (PSLA), the Health Sciences Library Consortium (HLSC), and Dr. Mary Kay Biagini from the University of Pittsburgh, we organized four statewide focus groups in the spring of 2012 in Pittsburgh, Greensburg, Hershey and Philadelphia. The sessions were both informational and consensus building. Participants were surprised by many findings of the State Board of Education Library Report and showed strong public support for strengthening all aspects of school libraries--including staffing, program, resource collections, technology, funding, and access.

We have also initially reviewed what other states have done to provide school library services to students and have discovered that many other states have more commitment to the infrastructure of their libraries than Pennsylvania does. A few selected state statutes that provide for school library infrastructure are outlined below in my written testimony.

Florida, Massachusetts, Montana, Iowa, and Kentucky are among the states that require public school libraries. In addition, Kansas has adopted standards and guidelines for libraries, and Oregon requires school districts to include school libraries in continuous improvement plans.

- Oregon: Legislation adopted in 2009 under “Continuous Improvement Plans” requires school districts to identify goals toward implementing a “strong school library program.” These questions concern management, staff, K-12 library skills, equitable access, development and maintenance of library collections, and staff development.
OASL on Strong School Library Programs.” Oregon Association of School Libraries. <http://oasl.memberclicks.net/hb-2586>
- Kansas: The State Board of Education shall adopt and maintain standards, criteria, guidelines or rules and regulations for school libraries and other educational materials with the exception of textbooks. *KAN. STAT. ANN. §72-7513 (West 2001)*
- Florida: A district school board, district school superintendent, and school principal of K-12 schools must establish and maintain a program of school library media services and center for all public schools in the district. *FLA. STAT. ANN. §1006.28 (West 2011)*
- Massachusetts: Requires school districts to establish school libraries and non-print media services including acquiring or renting library and non-print media material, resources, and appropriate equipment as well as appropriate personnel.
GEN. LAWS ANN. Ch. 15, §1R (2012)
- Montana: Requires trustees of each school district to maintain a school library in each school. *MONT. CODE ANN. §20-7-202 (West 1971)*
- Iowa: Passed a 2006 amendment to state school code requiring the Board of Directors in each school district to establish a K-12 library program and employ a qualified teacher librarian licensed by the board of educational examiners. *IOWA CODE ANN. §336.8 (2006)*
- Kentucky: Obligates the Board of Education for each local school district to establish and maintain a library media center in every elementary and secondary school to promote information literacy, literacy and technology in the curriculum, and to facilitate teaching, student achievement, and lifelong learning. *KY. REV. STAT. ANN. §158.102(1) (Baldwin 2000)*

Some state statutes that specifically address school library personnel include Arkansas, New York, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. A ratio of librarians to students is created in some instances or specifically staffed by grade levels. In addition to addressing minimum personnel, Arkansas law requires a minimum size of school library collections, and New York allocates a state allocation per pupil.

- Arkansas: Requires public schools to budget and spend yearly for purchasing and maintaining library resources and include input from teachers, parents, and students in the acquisition of instructional materials. Schools with fewer than 300 students are entitled to employ a half-time, licensed library media specialist. Schools with more than 300 must employ a full-time, licensed library media specialist. Arkansas also requires a collection of at least 3,000 volumes or at least eight (8) books per student enrolled and that each media center be equipped with one computer for administrative purposes only for multimedia/networking capacity. *Ark. Admin. Code §00.5.15.2-16.0 (2010)*
- New York: While school librarians are not required in Grades K-6, the state requires a certified library media specialist with one additional full-time assistant certified library media specialist in each secondary school for every 1,000 pupils enrolled. The state increased its school library funding to \$6.25 per student in 2007, the first change since \$4.00 per student in 1998. The Board of Regents has suggested increasing the figure to \$10.00 per student. *N.Y. COMP. CODES R & REGS. tit. 8, §91.2 (1976) and N.Y. [Aid for the purchase of school library materials] LAW §711 (McKinney 2011)*
- Oklahoma: Requires a certified school library media specialist in every school district and a half-time certified library specialist in schools with student enrollment lower than 300. *O.A.C. §210:35-9-71 (1992)*
- Tennessee: Requires one full-time library information specialist for K-8 schools with student enrollment of 550 or more or high schools with an enrollment ranging from 300 to less than 1,500 students; one half-time library information specialist for K-8 schools with 400-549 students and high schools with an enrollment less than 300 students; and a staff member designated by the principal to serve as the library information coordinator for K-8 schools with less than 400 students. *TENN. R & REGS. tit. 0520, ch. 0520-01-03.07(2)(a) (2002)*

Other state statutes specifically address state resources directly allocated to school libraries. Alaska, Colorado, California, Illinois, Indiana, and New Mexico make this distinction, one using an innovative regional library system, some uniquely established state funds for school libraries, and one a grant award system matched by local school districts.

- Alaska: Established a public school library collection development grant program with maximum grants of \$3,000 per fiscal year for eligible public school libraries to expand and improve their library collections. To be eligible for the grant program, a library must be a public school library established and supported by the school district where the district contributes from its budget an amount no less than the grant award or contributes in-kind value of services. *Alaska Stat. Ann. §14.56.360(a),(b) (West 2008)*
- Colorado: Utilizes a regional library service system which is a consortium of publicly supported libraries within a designated geographic area whose members are comprised of public libraries, school districts, academic libraries, and special libraries and cooperatives. Funding is appropriated by the Colorado General Assembly and allocated by the Colorado State Librarian or designee. More than \$5.7 million was appropriated for statewide library programs in 2010. *Colorado Department of Education*
- California: Funds school libraries through the California School and Library Improvement Block Grant. *West's Ann.Cal.Educ.Code. §41570 (West 2005)*

- Illinois: The state not only requires a library and media center available to students and staff, but established a grant program in 1989 to fund its school libraries, providing for 75 cents per student based on official enrollment of the preceding September 30 of the academic year. *23 ILL. ADMIN. CODE tit. 23 §1.420(o) (2011) and Illinois Library System Act, 75 ILCS §10/8.4 (Sept. 22, 2008)*
- Indiana: The state requires schools to have a media program as an integral part of its educational program where each school must spend at least \$8 per student per year to maintain its media program. *IND. ADMIN. CODE tit. 511, r. 5 (2007)*
- New Mexico: The state established a school library material fund in the state treasury from which the State Department of Education may distribute money to school districts, state institutions, and governmentally controlled schools to pay for the cost of purchasing school library material. Funding is obtained through appropriations, gifts, grants, donations, and bequests and distributed through state administration. *N.M. STAT. ANN. §22-15C-5 (West 2006)*

The reductions in school library programs—closing of school libraries, reduction of programs to part-time, laid-off librarians and support staff, and non-investment in updated materials and equipment—demonstrate the need to establish a stronger state role in this field, as well as ongoing data collection and monitoring by the state. While the Pennsylvania State Board of Education’s Council of Basic Education has the power and duty to develop a Master Plan for Basic Education in the Commonwealth for adoption by the Board, the Pennsylvania General Assembly plays a key role in legislative direction for making policy reforms.

ELC encourages the State Board of Education, the Department of Education, and the General Assembly to take decisive action based on the information contained in the 2011 Library Study. While we understand that some recommendations from the study are being implemented, there are others that demand attention:

- Pennsylvania mandates libraries in many educational settings, but not in public schools. For example, the state mandates libraries in: (i) private, **not public**, elementary and secondary schools (22 Pa Code 55.33, 57.21, 59.23); (ii) hospitals (28 Pa Code 101.31 and Chapter 145); (iii) clinical laboratories (28 Pa Code 5.32); (iv) practical nursing programs (49 Pa Code 29.211); (v) barber schools (49 Pa Code 3.73); (vi) cosmetology schools (49 Pa Code 7.130); (vii) the General Assembly (101 Pa Code 3.38); (viii) institutions of higher education (22 Pa Code 31.41); and (ix) juvenile facilities and adult prisons (based on court orders). **Access to libraries is mandated in private schools, and prisons—but not in our public schools.**
- School librarians in Pennsylvania are certified teachers. Six (6) of our universities offer library science programs—some undergraduate degrees and some Master’s programs. A certified school librarian is recognized as part of the professional teaching staff and is responsible for managing the acquisition of and access to print and digital instructional resources that form the foundation for student learning and teacher instruction. We need requirements that assure that quality school library programs are led by certified school librarians in Pennsylvania’s public schools and that certified school librarians receive continuous professional development in order to collaborate with teachers and students in their buildings.

- The state should establish binding standards for school libraries, beyond the voluntary nature of the current guidelines. Such standards must ensure that every student in public school has access to a quality school library program and to adequate instruction in information literacy skills linked to academic standards.
- The state should make a commitment to operating a central office responsible for overseeing school libraries and providing coordination and technical assistance for their successful operation. It should likewise annually collect and publish data from every public school about library operations, staffing, and funding. It is important to remember that 30 percent of all public schools in Pennsylvania did not respond to the State Board of Education Survey and that it is possible that many of these schools do not have functional libraries.
- The state should perform a more detailed audit of school libraries and implement reforms needed to ensure both access and effective instruction in information literacy skills for children with disabilities and English Language Learners. Reforms should include ongoing training and implementation of universal design, improved use of assistive technology, and adequate collaboration time between school library staff and staff with expertise in the needs of children with disabilities and English Language Learners.
- The state should reverse the severe cuts in ACCESS PA, POWER Library and budget line items for public libraries that also benefit school libraries by ensuring access to these statewide programs for the common use of electronic resources and sharing of print resources. State funding for these programs has been reduced over 75 percent since 2008 and has had the greatest impact on public schools in low-income communities that cannot afford to obtain similar resources on their own.

Quality school libraries must be viewed and supported as a statewide resource necessary for the achievement of each and every student, not as optional or disposable functions within individual public schools. The overwhelming data on the impact of school libraries on positive student achievement must be the driving force for this to happen. In order to achieve this desired result, state policy must ensure that school libraries exist and meet basic standards for operations, staffing, and funding.

While we have been led to believe that the deepest cuts to school libraries have been in school districts with the most poverty and the greatest numbers of children with high needs, we're discovering that the erosion of quality school library programs is occurring in all types of school districts. The 2011 State Board of Education Study was a first step forward in examining our school library programs. We respectfully request that this body take a leadership role in making the reforms happen to ensure that Pennsylvania provides a quality school library program as part of its public education system.