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Critical Issues in K-12 School Libraries

By Elizabeth Crawford Reisz

School funding continues to be a challenge at local, state, and national levels. Federal stimulus funds that helped balance school budgets for several years are now gone, and declining revenues mean difficult choices. ALA President Maureen Sullivan, in a blog on the Huffington post web site, predicts a “stormy horizon for our nation’s school libraries.”¹ According to American Library Association (ALA) *State of America’s Libraries Report*, across the country, some school districts have already cut library media specialist positions for the coming year due to budget shortfalls, and many other districts are considering plans to eliminate these positions. Sullivan expresses concern that such reductions in school library media specialist positions along with funding for school library resources will have a significant impact on student learning and success. Sullivan questions if school administrators fully understand the role that school librarians play.

In 2011, Molly Raphael, during her tenure as president of the ALA, created the ALA School Library Task Force. According to an ALA press release about the task force, it is charged with “leading a campaign addressing the urgent need for advocacy for school libraries, as well as the impact of the de-professionalization and curtailment of school library instructional programs on students and student achievement” (www.ala.org/news). Raphael, in an article by Ballard (2012: 15), observed, “from cities and towns across the country, we have been hearing increased reports of threats to school library instructional programs. Whether it’s the elimination of school librarians or budget reductions, it’s become impossible to ignore the impact that cuts of this sort could have on future generations.”

At the ALA Executive Board meeting in January 2013, the task force reported the goal of creating a school library campaign to “raise awareness about the value of school librarians that will ultimately lead to ongoing, sustained support for school library programs” (ALA 2013: 3). The campaign will target three distinct audiences: (1) parents and local communities, (2) school administrators and local and state decision-makers, and (3) national policymakers (ALA 2013). The report identifies a number of factors to support the campaign. Perhaps most urgent is the implementation of Common Core Standards (CCS) in 45 out of 50 states and the District of Columbia; Maine is one of the 45. Coupled with a focus on career and college readiness, CCS require students to do research and read complex text.

School librarians are well positioned to teach research skills. As educators, their priorities are to help students to “employ critical thinking and evaluation skills; conduct research independently; develop a deep understanding of content; synthesize information—beyond reporting, to create new knowledge; and engage students in the love of reading” (ALA 2013: 5). In the blog mentioned earlier, Maureen Sullivan reminds us that school librarians can and should be valuable members of teaching teams in schools. However, if they are recognized more as guardians of book collections than as educators, the essential skills they teach—inquiry, critical thinking, digital citizenship, and technology—are lost. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards recognizes that the instructional practice of school librarians can be measured to meet standards for professional teaching excellence. More than 60 education and library studies provide evidence that school library media programs staffed by qualified school librarians have a significant impact on student academic achievement.

Too often technology is seen as the answer to preparing students for success in the 21st century. Digital resources alone will not help students do research or read complex text. The expectation that technology will meet the CCS misunderstands what such tools do; they cannot replace the research expertise and guidance of school librarians. Today’s students, despite their perceived ease in navigating the digital highway, lack skill in judging the quality of the information they find,

often choosing what they find quickly and easily. Teachers surveyed by The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project Online Survey of Teachers report that access to the Internet and digital search tools has a generally positive affect students' research skills. Yet, almost as many indicate that digital technologies are more of a distraction than academically beneficial. The report, *How Teens Do Research in the Digital World*, identifies a number of positive effects including access to a wider range of in-depth information and multimedia educational materials (Purcell et al. 2012). On the negative side, teachers expressed concern about students' reliance almost exclusively on search engines, their inability to assess the accuracy and quality of information found online, and the ease it is for them to borrow from others' work (Purcell et al. 2012). The teachers surveyed mostly agreed that teaching students how to evaluate online information needs to be a top priority, instruction qualified school librarians want to provide in meaningful ways, but with which they may have limited success due to lack of support.

In less than a decade, school librarians have moved from the Information Literacy Standards (1998) to the Standards for the 21st-Century Learner (2007). A rapidly changing educational landscape requires constant evolution, as was evidenced when the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) responded to the release of CCS in 2010 by creating the *Crosswalk of the Common Core Standards and the Standards for the 21st Century Learner*.² This resource is designed to assist school librarians align their understanding of the needs of 21st century learners with the major changes in the newly adapted nationwide curriculum. Many of the standards dealing with information literacy and a library curriculum are embedded in CCS.

Seven key points describe what it takes for a student to be college and career ready under CCS: students demonstrate independence; build strong content knowledge; respond to demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline; comprehend as well as critique; value evidence; use technology and digital media strategically and capably; and come to understand

other perspectives and cultures. This describes the heart of what school librarians do on a daily basis (Kramer 2011: 9).

"A Library for Every School: A Proclamation" was presented April 2, 2010, by Stichting ENSIL, the European Network for School Libraries and Information Literacy based in the Netherlands, with the intent that it be used by individuals as well as organizations to advocate for libraries in all schools. Supported by research findings, existing principles of best practice, and policy guidelines, the proclamation concludes: "The need for a library, staffed by a full-time, professionally trained, educational information specialist (librarian), in every primary and secondary school (not just at the university level) is an absolute 'must' if countries are to survive, prosper and compete successfully in the 21st century, in the context of the Global Information Society" (ENSIL 2010: 3).

This universal recognition that libraries are essential to 21st century education is yet one more indicator that advocacy must be a priority if the current trend of cutting positions and funding for school libraries is to be reversed. Maine Department of Education Rule Chapter 125, §9.01A, mandates that "each school shall maintain a library-media program.... A certified library-media specialist shall oversee the library-media program in a school administrative unit. However, this shall not be interpreted to mean that each school must have a certified library-media specialist." Maine may mandate a library for every school, but that does not ensure that the library will be staffed by a state-certified library media specialist. Moreover, the rule's interpretation in today's economic climate often means that in school districts made up of a number of schools there will not necessarily be a full-time certified library media specialist overseeing the library-media program, and schools may or may not have paraprofessionals staffing their library media centers.

It is imperative that awareness be raised about the role of school librarians if further losses are to be prevented. For libraries, the Common Core presents an extraordinary opportunity just as the title of Albanese's (2013) article asserts. School librarians can play an important role in the adoption of CCS by demonstrating to administrators the wealth of resources that

are already in their school libraries, including the professionally trained, educational information specialists, and by collaborating with fellow educators and librarians.

Promoting awareness, whether locally, at state or national levels, is the responsibility of all librarians, not just school librarians. When the decision was made that all divisions and key committees would be represented on the ALA School Library Task Force created in 2011, Raphael responded: “Because libraries of all types depend on each other to develop and sustain independent learners in an information age, clearly we need an ‘all hands on deck’ approach to this potential crisis” (Ballard 2012: 15). 🐼

ENDNOTES

1. www.huffingtonpost.com/maureen-sullivan/state-of-americas-school-_b_3063055.html [Accessed April 23, 2013]
2. The crosswalk may be found at www.ala.org/aasl/guidelinesandstandards/commoncorecrosswalk

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