

Legislatively Speaking... Becoming Politically Active

by Debra E. Kachel, PSLA Legislation Chair

While school librarians traditionally have not felt a need to be politically active, in today's environment we are poised to become excellent champions for school library services and leaders in political activism because we possess a unique skill set. School librarians know how to find and use credible data and information. We have developed excellent collaborative and communication skills in order to "lead from the middle." We are also very committed to the school library profession and helping students learn and teachers teach. All that is needed is the spark to ignite, a "call to action," if you will, to force us to step out of the school librarian "invisibility" and become proactive. Unfortunately, this impetus has come to pass with the tragic reductions in the Access PA and POWER Library database projects incurred with the 2009-2010 state budget.

Gone are the days when school library advocates dominated Pennsylvania's Department of Education (PDE) and its School Library Services Division lead by the likes of Doris Dorwart and John Emerick. In fact, today it is clearly evident that support for school libraries has waned significantly in PDE. A division of school libraries no longer exists. It is unclear what role Commonwealth Libraries can play in the leadership of school library services. Most legislators are confused about the differences between public and school libraries and how they are funded. Many legislators do not realize that there are no state regulations requiring that students have access to a school library and the instructional services of a school librarian. With the 73 percent cut to the combined line items for "Library Access" and the "Electronic Library Catalog" in the 2009-2010 state budget, school librarians got a wake-up call. The state-provided electronic resources we thought would always be available to our students and teachers, regardless of district library budgets, were cut to the bone! The pending 2010-2011 budget calls for a further one percent cut to those lines.¹ We now recognize there are no longer "other" voices to advocate for school libraries. The "call to action" requires us to become vocal and politically active.



PA Rep. Mark Longietti and Deb Kachel, PSLA Legislation Chair

As school librarians we know the value of credible research and how to use it. PSLA has been requesting PDE to collect data on the status of school libraries for years. For whatever reasons—financial, logistical, or political—it simply has not happened. Finally, with the advice and coaching from Baruch Kintisch, a lawyer and Director of Policy Advocacy at the Education Law Center (www.elc-pa.org), the PSLA Legislation Committee drafted and sought sponsorship of Pennsylvania House Resolution 720 to request the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee to conduct a year-long study concerning the status of school library services for K-12 students.² If passed by the House, we will finally have the evidence needed to justify increased staffing, budgets, resources, and library services for all Pennsylvania school students. The resolution specifically requests data on the number of schools without school libraries, the ratio of certified school librarians to students, the availability of support staff in libraries, the number of hours that students have access to a school library per day, the amount of up-to-date and useful print and electronic resources, the average age and condition of books and technology in school libraries, annual library budgets over the past ten years, the number of student computers in the library, and other library services and programs provided to students and teachers.³ By July 2011, the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee will provide recommendations to improve and update public school library resources, services, and facilities for all students in Pennsylvania, including recommendations for appropriate levels of resources, staffing, and hours of access. School librarians

know how to use research and will publicize these data and recommendations through hearings, publications, blogs, and elsewhere to inform our educational partners—parents, teachers, and administrators—why regulations and standards are needed to ensure that all students have access to a quality school library program.

School librarians are great storytellers and communicators. School librarianship is steeped in a culture and expectation of collaboration and “leading from the middle.” As described in *Information Power*, “leading from the middle” means coaching others, bringing people together and taking the risk of leading when an opportunity presents itself (AASL and AECT 53). This skill set makes us natural networkers capable of cultivating permanent partners to help advocate for equitable school library services. As Baruch Kintisch stated at the 2010 PSLA Conference during the pre-conference session entitled “Building Support for School Libraries: A Strategy Panel Discussion,” school librarians need to use their storytelling abilities to communicate how student learning is being compromised by program and staffing cuts in order to foster a cadre of “champions” who will stand up for library programs and funding. These “champions” need to be parents, teachers, administrators, legislators, and community and business people. To this end, the Education Law Center created a website at www.schoolvictories.org for various non-profit educational organizations to collect stories of successes and frustrations, budget and staffing cuts, and other anecdotal information about what is happening in Pennsylvania’s education system today. The PSLA Legislation Committee has created a web presence there and needs your personal and individual stories to produce an emotional response from potential champions.⁴ Such stories are as important and often more impactful than the “hard,” statistical data.

As a final point, school librarians are invested in long term objectives, seeing the whole child and incrementally over time helping students master reading, questioning, research, technology, and using information to create new knowledge. We understand and respect the time to learn, time to connect ideas, and the time to help children develop into productive and creative individuals. Unlike some in education who seek the quick “magic bullet” to improved standardized test scores, librarians understand that only time, hard work, and consistent commitment and nurturing leads to student learning and success. No other type of educator works with students throughout an educational level, ranging from four to twelve years, assessing learning, coaching children and teens along in their pursuit of academic achievement. Librarians are persistent and know how to work incrementally over time to achieve goals—a required attribute in advocacy work.

In conclusion, it has never been more important for school librarians to become politically active. Only 70 schools of the 284 public school in the School District of Philadelphia have certified school librarians and more are slated for reductions for 2010-2011. In the School District

of Pittsburgh, most of the 57 schools will operate with only part-time school librarians or none next year (Rujumba). Despite the fact that Pennsylvania public schools received a 5 percent increase in the Basic Education Funding for 2009-2010, school libraries across the state are bracing for more position losses as our aging profession retires and more library budget cuts. Increasing numbers of school libraries operate annually on what monies can be raised through commercial book fairs.

School librarians are among the most talented and collaborative group of educators, yet remain “invisible” to those who hold the purse strings and control the inputs needed for successful programs. Can it be that some librarians are so committed to defending everyone’s right to an opinion and try to represent multiple positions on controversial topics in their collections that they are afraid to take a stand to defend their own profession? As Gary Hartzell said at the 2002 White House Conference on School Libraries, “What’s it Take?” to wake up the education world to the benefits of school library programs. Will the draconian reductions to the only equitable library services to Pennsylvania’s K-12 student population—Access PA and the POWER Library databases—finally be enough to unite us in saying ENOUGH? School librarians have the necessary skills to become effective political activists and to communicate the research, data, and stories to create champions who will take the stand with us. The fire has been ignited, we are capable of the task, and now we must lead.

Notes

1 The PSLA Legislation web pages provide additional information comparing the funding of library line items in the past three state budgets. Refer to <http://www.psla.org/index.php/legislation/state-legislation>.

2 The text of HR 720 and its co-sponsors can be found at <http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/billinfo/BillInfo.cfm?syar=2009&kind=0&body=H&type=R&bn=720>.

3 At the time of this publication, HR 720 is in the House Education Committee waiting for approval before it goes to the Pennsylvania House for a vote.

4 Go to <http://www.schoolvictories.org/content/pennsylvania-school-librarians-assn> to add your stories or email them to Deb Kachel kachel@bellatlantic.net to be added.

Works Cited

- AASL and AECT. *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning*. Chicago: ALA, 1998. Print.
- Hartzell, Gary. “What’s if Take?” *Proceedings of the White House Conference on School Libraries, June 4, 2002*. The Laura Bush Foundation for America’s Libraries. Web. 17 May 2010.
- Rujumba, Karamagi. “School Librarians losing Jobs as City Schools feel Pinch.” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* 1 May 2010. Web. 17 May 2010. <<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/10121/1054771-53.stm>>.