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AASL and Parents: A Partnership for Power

Sara Kelly Johns, 2007–2008 AASL President

I have vivid memories of my mother doing jigsaw puzzles. She would sit at the dining room table, patient and tenacious, searching for just the right puzzle piece, scanning the loose pieces, checking the fit, gently nudging them into place. As the image emerged, faster and faster, her excitement was evident. Then, that moment of delight, the last piece fit!

The Spokane Moms—Lisa Layera Brunkan, Denette Hill, and Susan McBurney—brought her memory back to me. Like my mother they are persistent and patient. They see the fit between funding and twenty-first-century skills—puzzle pieces that strengthen school library programs—and are hard at work making them come together. They recognize that the *AASL Standards for 21st Century Learning* is exactly how they want their children to learn. In fact, the moms themselves are part of the big picture puzzle I wrote about in KQ 36, 1—without parents, the strong school library wouldn't be complete.

Committed parents are the most powerful advocates we can have. This doesn't happen unless your program makes a difference for kids. And it won't happen unless you have laid the groundwork for others to advocate for you.

AASL has developed excellent resources and training for advocacy, marketing, and promotion of school libraries, and each of us needs to include all three efforts as part of our work. School librarians must show up to support our causes, but when others show up to advocate on our behalf, decision-makers pay attention. The Spokane

Moms were outraged by local cuts to school library positions and thus started their quest to restore school library positions in their own district. Unsuccessful in Spokane, they moved “upstream” to the state capitol, realizing that so many other Washington school districts had the same problems:

No one is arguing about the importance of school libraries. I don't think anyone believes that a district or a school board *wants* to cut its library program and the fact is that districts around this state have done so *because they don't have the money to pay for it*. This is the great hope for SB#6380 that the school library program would never be at risk again. The longer this debate lingers, the more kids are denied equal opportunity education in this state. (Blog entry, 1.27.08)

Later in the same blog entry, the Moms admitted that the biggest problem of being neophyte grassroots lobbyists was their lack of public relations skills. Their personal lobbying skills increased rapidly, but they also realized that connecting with state and national library organizations gave them partnerships that increased their power. Washington Library Media Association (WLMA) and Mike Eisenberg (University of Washington, Big6) jumped in to help them by providing the expert research and contacts for planning a rally and summit.

I personally found out about this effort through a Google news feed of an *LA Times* story and then quickly received an e-mail nudge from Doug Johnson: “What can AASL do about this, Sara?” I promptly forwarded it to ALA Executive Director Keith Fiels: “Keith, when is ALA

going to fight against school library position cuts?" As I have advocated over the years for ALA's activism for school libraries, Keith has pointed out that ALA could fight school library cuts most effectively when there was a community group to work with, and here it was!

AASL, the ALA Advocacy Office, and the Public Information Office (PIO) got busy. AASL Executive Director Julie Walker communicated with the Spokane Moms almost every day about strategies and the research supporting strong libraries. The AASL Research and Statistics, Advocacy, and Legislative Committees developed talking points. And, before we knew it, five of us—Julie, Macey and Marci from PIO and Advocacy offices, ALA President Loriene Roy, and I were on our way to Olympia to rally with the Moms and WLMA.

Even though the weather was wet, windy, and cold, the rally was uplifting as speaker after speaker spoke about the importance of school libraries and support for the proposed bills . . . and people dressed in black and white (it's a black and white issue, after all) shouted their approval. There were kids, librarians, teachers, and parents, including a mother named Suzie Kabeiseman from Oregon who drove up from Portland to announce the beginning of a *Fund our Future Oregon*. It was so exciting when it was reported that House Bill 2773 moved out of committee while we were there!

Within a few days of our return, Senate Bill 6380 was passed unanimously. The Moms' Jan. 20th blog reported: "What an incredible moment to hear Senators' speaking passionately, earnestly and profoundly about school libraries, librarians and how important they are to others and have been to them." The Moms were lauded on the floor of the Senate for listening and learning how to lobby, how to know the facts, how to market their message. What a gift their passion is to the students in Washington! The Spokane Moms have vowed to help parent groups in other states become as politically savvy as they are now. And, on March 12, four million dollars was allocated for school libraries in the final budget! The groups are gearing up already to add to that figure next year.

At ALA Annual in June 2007, AASL's grassroots organization, the Affiliate Assembly, raised as one of their concerns the lack of resources for parents to act advocates for school libraries. To answer that need, the

AASL Board created Parent Outreach Task Force to help state affiliates seize opportunities to partner with parent organizations. Simultaneously, the AASL Board and the Affiliate Assembly examined the Strategic Plan Mega Issue: *How do we maximize our influence and collaboration with the educational and professional community?* As a result of these discussions and encouraged by the Spokane events, the Executive Committee is identifying parent organizations to work with AASL to extend their influence in the educational community. A subcommittee of the Board will develop an action plan for collaboration with parent groups. Watch for online resources, which will help you work with parent and community groups on both the local and national level.

Is it worth it as a parent to set aside your life to work for school libraries? Lisa Layera Brunkan wrote in a February 14th blog entry after SB#6380 passed unanimously in the Senate:

Please, consider meeting with parents, educators and business people. Fundourfutureoregon.org has already launched. The ALA and fundourfuturewashington will help. I KNOW we can do this across the country and make this right for our children, for our economies and for our democracy. BUT people have to stand up in order to take a stand. It is a tremendous amount of work but it has been one of the most special things I have ever been involved with and the rewards are great. I flew home from Olympia last night so I could be here to wake up with my young children and walk them to school. My 8 year old daughter had left a homemade newspaper on my (very messy) desk. It read,

"Lisa Layera Brunkan who fought for school libareians won! The score was 49-0. Congratulations. She worked on this for a year. Thank you for saving school libareins! Thank you thank you thank you says school libareans. Isabel Brunkan 8 years old."

Parents are our strongest advocates, whether it is the small group who shows up at school board meetings to defend a program cut or a group of moms (and dads) who, armed with a website, blog, e-mail, phone calls, and visits, challenge a state legislature to provide funding for school library programs and resources. AASL and ALA recognize

the power of partnerships with parents and will work side by side to make a difference for twenty-first-century learners, to see all the puzzle pieces of advocacy come together in a grand picture of nationwide strong school library programs.

Works Cited:

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