



School Libraries June 2009

School Libraries

The skills needed to function successfully in a 21st century global workforce have gone beyond reading. President Obama stated in his FY 2010 budget outline, "To give our children a fair shot to thrive in a global, information-age economy, we will equip thousands of schools, community colleges and universities with 21st century classrooms, labs and **libraries**."

Education is not exclusive to the classroom; it extends into school libraries. Students visit school library media centers 1.5 billion times a year. Long regarded as the cornerstone of the school community, school libraries are no longer just for books. Instead, they have become sophisticated, 21st century learning environments offering a full range of print and electronic resources that provide equal learning opportunities to all students, regardless of the socio-economic or education levels of the community.

Some of the major skills that school librarians teach are the techniques and methods for locating and answering curriculum needs through critical thinking. Using the library's many and varied resources, school librarians also teach students how to work collaboratively, which, combined with the information literacy skills, is ideal for ensuring college readiness and success in the workforce. Across the United States, numerous studies have shown that students in schools with strong school libraries learn more, get better grades, and score higher on standardized tests than their peers in schools without libraries.

In October 2007, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), released its *Standards for the 21st Century Learner*. These standards focus on 21st century skills such as the ability to inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge; draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge; share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society; and pursue personal and aesthetic growth.

The over 62,000 state-certified library media specialists in public schools and 3,909 state-certified library media specialists in private schools in the United States fill multiple roles – teacher, instructional partner, information specialist and program administrator – ensuring that students and staff are effective users of information and ideas.

In order to be hired as a school librarian in all 50 States, a school librarian must have a state teaching certificate. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards considers "library media specialists" a teaching position and provides certification in library media for school librarians who teach students ages 3-18 and demonstrate expertise in information literacy, instructional collaboration and technology integration.

Improving Literacy Through School Libraries

The Improving Literacy Through School Libraries program improves student literacy skills and academic achievement by providing schools with up-to-date library materials, including well-equipped, technologically advanced school library media centers, and ensuring that school library media centers are staffed by professionally certified school librarians. The Department of Education's January 2009 evaluation of the Improving Literacy Through School Libraries program found that it has been successful in improving the quality of those school libraries receiving the grants.

In FY 2008, out of approximately 496 applicants, only 60 grants were funded. In the seven years that grants under this program have been awarded, five states have never received funding. Considering that grants would be distributed by formula to all 50 states once the \$100 million threshold is attained, funding the program

at this level will help dramatically improve reading achievement and information literacy skills among students in every state.

No Child Left Behind Act

In 2001, with strong bipartisan support, the nation embarked on an ambitious school reform plan titled the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Among other things, NCLB requires states to set high standards for all students and holds schools accountable for the results. Across the United States, numerous studies have shown that students in schools with strong school libraries learn more, get better grades, and score higher on standardized tests than their peers in schools without libraries.

With limited funding and an increased focus on school performance, administrators are trying to stretch dollars and cut funds across various programs to ensure that maximum resources are dedicated to improving student academic achievement. Because NCLB does not highlight the direct correlation between school librarians and increased student academic achievement, library resource budgets are increasingly being used to mitigate the effects of budgetary constraints. Approximately 25 percent of America's school libraries are operating without a state-certified school librarian on staff.

In the 110th Congress, Sens. Jack Reed (D-RI) and Thad Cochran (R-MS) and Reps. Raul Grijalva (D-AZ) and Vernon Ehlers (R-MI-3) introduced a bill to address the school library crisis facing the nation: the Strengthening Kids' Interest in Learning and Libraries (SKILLS) Act. The SKILLS Act requires school districts, to the extent feasible, to ensure that every school within the district employs at least one state-certified library media specialist in each school library. While there are plans to reintroduce the SKILLS Act in the 111th Congress, as of June 30, 2009, it has not been re-introduced. The inclusion of the SKILLS Act in the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is vital to school libraries.

110th Congress co-sponsors in the House included: Robert E. Andrews (NJ-1), John Barrow (GA-12), Steve Cohen (TN-9), Jerry Costello (IL-12), Bob Filner (CA-51), Bart Gordon (TN-6), Gene Green (TX-29), Luis V. Gutierrez (IL-4), Tim Holden (PA-17), Paul Kanjorski (PA-11), Frank LoBiondo (NJ-2), Dave Loebsack (IA-2), Zoe Lofgren (CA-16), James McGovern (MA-3), Michael Michaud (ME-2) and Janice Schakowsky (IL-9). In the Senate co-sponsors included Sens. John Kerry (D-MA) and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI).

Action Needed:

When the SKILLS Act is reintroduced, library advocates should contact members of both the House and the Senate and urge them to sign on as a cosponsor.