Status Report
State Legislation
Requiring School Librarians

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Librarians often ask how many states legislatively mandate certified school librarians in their public schools. Extensive research reveals that 22 states have requirements, either in actual state laws or regulations, to employ school librarians: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming (Kachel, 2017). Unfortunately, in most of these states, the requirements are not enforced, especially since the recession of 2008.

The next question often pondered is: How do states go about requiring school librarians in schools? Typically, this requirement is legislatively authorized in educational statutes or enacted laws. In today’s economic environment—when many believe that the Internet is an acceptable alternative for a school library—trying to get a school library staffing mandate is considered heavy lifting in the vernacular of legislators. Regardless of the difficulties and obstacles, determined library advocates in several states have embarked on the good fight, knowing what’s best for kids: a certified school librarian in every public school. Here is a summary of the strategies and progress in several states.

Massachusetts

As with other states, Massachusetts lacks a state-level library director, and therefore no data has been collected about school library staffing and programs for several years. The Massachusetts School Library Association (MSLA) formally requested the legislature to address the issue. With the guidance of two legislators who are library advocates, Senate Bill S.1906 authorized a special school library commission consisting of educational leaders that includes librarians, administrators, state education officials, superintendents, public librarians, the business community, charter schools, and teachers unions (Commonwealth of Massachusetts. 2013–2014).

Two researchers, Carol Gordon, principal of Gordon Consulting and former Rutgers professor, and Robin Cicchetti, Concord Carlisle High School librarian, developed a survey that they administered to public schools with the assistance of MSLA, the Massachusetts Library System and Board of Library Commissioners, the Massachusetts Library Association, Massachusetts Teachers Association, American Federation of Teachers, and the state’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The survey assessed school library staffing and student ratios, support staff, equitable access to school library programs, available technology, collections, and funding. The commission’s final report will include recommendations, long-range plans, and further legislative action.

School and public library associations strategically initiated legislative breakfasts, held in public and school libraries across the state (Gershowitz, 2017). Stakeholder groups, including parents, teachers, and business and community leaders, were invited, as well as legislators. The breakfasts were hugely successful and popular with a variety of speakers, including students. (See the legislative breakfasts’ toolkit offering tips, talking points, handouts, and contacts at the MSLA website http://www.maschoollibraries.org/legislation-breakfasts.html.) Kendall Boninti, former MSLA’s Legislative Committee cochair, who also served on the commission and recruited hosts for the legislative breakfasts, stated that the partnerships formed with administrators, teachers, parents, and others throughout this process “have really heightened the recognition of the role of library teachers in educating students and made all the difference in our advocacy work” (personal communication, April 7, 2017).

Missouri

The Missouri Association of School Librarians (MASL) is working to pass its first legislation to mandate school librarians and define the work of the librarian. House Bill 577 (2017) states that two-thirds of the librarian’s time must be spent with duties related to “information specialist, an instructional consultant, and a teacher of information,” with only one-third on library management tasks. “Duties shall not be assigned outside the library media center for the li-
library media specialist that interfere with library media center responsibilities.”

Missouri lost its state-level school library advisor years ago, resulting in the lack of data regarding school library staffing, collections, budget, and other relevant factors. MASL is currently analyzing recently collected library data that will be used to create talking points for their campaign and for use during their Library Legislative Day, annually held in cooperation with the state’s public library association.

Lysha Thompson, MASL’s library advocacy chair, remarked that many legislators are unaware that school libraries and librarians are not required and that there is no direct funding for them. She believes that passing a library staffing mandate will likely take 3 to 5 years. However, MASL has committed significant resources to passage of HB 577, including printing and distributing Scholastic’s School Libraries Work! to all state legislators and chief school district officials. Embracing new technologies, MASL developed 360-degree videos viewable in a virtual-reality format created for use with Google Cardboards. A foldable cardboard was sent to each legislator this year with a QR code to access the videos, showing what effective school library programs look like. In addition, MASL launched a Missouri School Libraries Transform website (http://www.missourischoollibrarytransform.org/) advertised on billboards near the capital. The website includes videos (click “Media”) and an “Advocacy Challenge” to-do list for members (click “Advocacy”).

NEVADA

In Nevada, pending legislation S.B. 143 would require public schools to establish and maintain a school library program that has a licensed librarian. Senator Becky Harris introduced legislation, and the Clark County School Librarians Association (CCSLA) ignited a grassroots advocacy effort that extended statewide. Clark County, with two-thirds of the state’s population and the sixth largest school district in the nation, has 9 high schools, 14 middle schools, and 22 elementary schools without certified school librarians. CCSLA president Susan Slykerman, who testified at the Senate Education Committee Hearing, called her learning curve on the process to pass legislation “eye-opening.”

According to Slykerman, one of the most effective advocacy strategies has been their website Save Our School Libraries (http://libassoc.ccsd.net/sosl.html). She also stated that “having a physical presence at events with banners and handouts, plus attending community and parent meetings, adds to the personal interaction and makes it real” (personal communication, March 25, 2017). CCSLA successfully participated in several town halls, advertising the events, and hosting a table with school library information for attendees.

Nevada is one of the few states that have direct state funding for school libraries, but it’s only $1.00 per student. Slykerman states that librarians are grateful for this money, as it is sometimes the only money the libraries get for new resources. She does fear, though, that if and when such a mandate for certified school librarians becomes law, the state will not have enough trained school librarians to fill positions. Universities in her state and elsewhere have closed school library science programs.

CCSLA received valuable advice on advocacy strategies from John Chrastka, executive director of EveryLibrary.org, and Megan Cusick, ALA grassroots specialist, and Office of the Library Advocacy. The Nevada Library Association is also supporting the effort by collecting statewide statistics from school districts to create a database for future advocacy research.

NEW JERSEY

New Jersey Library Association (NJLA) initiated Assembly Bill A4500 this year, with leadership from Pat Tu multy, NJLA’s legislation consultant. It would require certified librarians in schools based on student population (part-time librarian for less than 300 students; full-time librarian for 300–1,499 students; two full-time librarians for 1,500+ students).

Since accurate staffing data were unavailable, an initial step, sponsored by NJLA and the New Jersey School Librarians Association (NJASL), involved administering a survey to present a snapshot of school library programs. The 2016 survey revealed 20% fewer school librarians than in 2007–2008. More than 20% of high schools and 280 elementary schools had no certified librarians; 89% of school libraries were receiving flat, decreased, or no funding. In addition, 40% of school librarians’ time was spent performing nonlibrarian duties, including acting as substitute teacher, art teacher, basic skills instructor, electives teacher, and locker room monitor. Some 71% of librarians indicated that they “never” or “rarely” had time to collaborate with teachers (Donohue & Keehl er, 2016).

Mary Moyer Stubbs, NJASL consultant, stated that a majority of New Jersey legislators must agree to cosponsor a bill before it can proceed. Stubbs acknowledged that funding is the un-
An influential partner for New York school librarians has been the New York State Council for the Social Studies (NYSCSS). During the past three years, NYLA’s SSL has partnered with the NYSCSS and presented at their conference, organizing an author luncheon and bookstore. In addition, library parent volunteers in local schools, mostly members of the state’s parent–teacher association (PTA), have become strong legislative advocates.

Jill Leinung, working as SSL’s legislative representative for over 10 years, knows that requiring elementary librarians in schools will be difficult but believes New York is making progress each year as their partnerships with other associations and their local advocacy efforts grow (personal communication, April 7, 2017).

NEW YORK

New York has had a requirement for secondary school librarians for several years, and in the past 4 years the New York Library Association (NYLA) has worked with legislators to introduce bills to add elementary librarians, as well as library clerical staff, to state regulations (New York Library Association, 2017). Jill Leinung, legislative representative for the Section of School Librarians (SSL), NYLA, credits the combined efforts of the 3,700-member state library association for lobbying legislators, creating and disseminating public relations, and training librarians in grassroots advocacy strategies. NYLA, through the 41 state-funded School Library Systems, administered a survey last year to collect accurate data on the status of school librarian staffing.

NYLA also organizes an annual State Library Advocacy Day and schedules librarian visits with legislators. School librarians are encouraged to host legislative visits. Through NYLA’s Online Advocacy Center (https://www.nyla.org/), more than 9,000 preformatted emails have been automatically emailed to legislators over the past year. New York is also one of the few states that allocates school library funding directly to schools at $6.25 per student (Library Materials Aid, 2015).

A House Education Committee hearing were consequently conducted in 2012. Since then, two House bills have been introduced in consecutive legislative sessions calling for a certified school librarian in every public school. The latest, H.B. 740, is now in the House Education Committee (Pennsylvania General Assembly, 2017). PSLA works in tandem with a Harrisburg public relations firm, Quantum Communications, to inform legislators and other stakeholders about the pending legislation and to build partnerships. The bill is already endorsed by the state’s teacher unions and PTA. A second House Education Committee hearing was held in August 2016. For additional resources, go to http://www.psla.org/membership/plsa-legislation/.

Successful advocacy strategies employed include placement of statewide op-eds, participating in radio talk shows, presenting at the state’s PTA conference, training members to reach out to the 253 state legislators, and providing continuous communications via state listservs. PSLA also joined the Campaign for Fair Education Funding (http://fairfundingpa.org/), a statewide nonpartisan effort made up of more than 50 organizations that works to ensure an adequate and equitable system of funding public education. In addition, a Senate Resolution was passed recognizing April as School Library Month (General Assembly of Pennsylvania, 2017).

While mandating staffing will be a “heavy lift” in Pennsylvania as in other states, legislators are now open to other possibilities, including some direct funding for school library resources that Pennsylvania does not currently have. Debra E. Kachel, PSLA’s legislative liaison and author of this article, believes that no legislator, parent, ad-
ministrator, or any other stakeholder she has spoken to is against having quality school library programs with the instructional benefit of a certified school librarian. “It is a matter of two things: money and priorities. There is not a lot that library advocates can do about money. However, we can develop influential champions to increase the priority that every student has access to an exceptional school library program led by a trained school librarian.”

WASHINGTON

In Washington State, the movement to ensure certified teacher librarians was inspired by the three “Spokane Moms,” who organized a statewide advocacy campaign from 2007 to 2011. In 2008, the legislature funded $4 million to help districts support school librarians (Murvosh, 2013). Since 2009, language was added to the state’s Basic Education Law that defined a “prototypical school,” requiring .663 librarians per 1,000 students at the elementary level, .519 at middle school, and .523 at high school. The Washington Library Association (WLA) has been successful in having teacher librarians and library materials included as part of basic education spending. However, education funds are allocated to each school district as a lump sum; thus districts have discretion over how the money is ultimately used.

The education funding bill is expected to be finalized by July 2017. Although the Senate version removed the prototypical school language, the House maintained the language and it is expected that the prototypical school model will remain when the budget bill is resolved. Both sides put almost $2 billion of additional funds into K-2 education, in part to comply with a Washington Supreme Court ruling that requires the legislature must fully fund basic education by 2018 (“McClean,” 2017).

Adding library language to related education bills is a strategy employed in Washington. In 2015, Senate Bill 5294 expanded the role of the teacher librarian and identified quality criteria for school library information and technology programs to support student learning (State of Washington, 2015). While this was a significant victory, the final passed bill fell short of requiring teacher librarians. According to Carolyn Logue, WLA’s lobbyist, with each such bill, the role and presence of teacher librarians expand and set the stage for future legislation, strengthening teacher librarians’ position. Although she states that continued strong district advocacy is needed, she believes that when the legislature finalizes education funding this year, teacher librarians will be in a better position to ask for stronger teacher librarian requirements, possibly beginning with high-poverty schools (personal communication, March 28, 2017).

COMMONALITIES OF STATE LEGISLATIVE EFFORTS

Several common strategies emerge from examining these seven states and their efforts to ensure that students have access to school librarians.

1. Identify and cultivate a school library champion in the state legislature to introduce legislation and guide the process.
2. Collect, summarize, and disseminate accurate and persuasive data on the status of school library programs and staffing.
3. Energize and educate school librarians to become politically ac-

tive, providing advocacy resources (talking points, how to contact legislators, etc.).
4. Implement an effective public relations campaign that reaches all potential stakeholders (teachers, administrators, community, school boards, parent groups, etc.)
5. Create partnerships with stakeholders and their organizations, such as teachers’ unions, PTAs, and public librarian associations, and collaborate with educational organizations that advocate for improved basic education funding.

School library staffing is really about education funding. Unfunded mandates are nearly impossible to pass in today’s economic climate. Library advocates receive great lip service from legislators, but not positive votes. As Kathy Lester, advocacy chair of the Michigan Association for Media in Education (MAME), summarizes, MAME has been advocating for changing the state school code law to include a library media specialist at every school. However, Republican legislators (who have the majority) are staunch supporters of local control, and a statewide requirement for media specialists would violate local control policy. Democratic legislators are reluctant to sponsor a requirement like this because they believe it will not get anywhere in the current legislative session. However, MAME will keep advocating since Michigan currently ranks 46th in NAEP fourth-grade reading and 47th in ratio of students to school library media specialists. (personal communication, April 9, 2017)

The bottom line is that if school librarians don’t advocate for what students need to learn in terms of school library services, no one else will. And this requires political action, seeking
champions in our state legislatures, and working with them to enact laws that ensure a certified school librarian in every public school. Hopefully, the campaigns of these seven states will give other states the encouragement necessary to fight the good fight.

REFERENCES


CONTACTS

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