



New Jersey Library Association Calls on New Jersey to Support Highly Effective School Library Programs

"And finally, this bill upholds the core value that animated the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act signed by President Lyndon Johnson -- the value that says education, the key to economic opportunity, is a civil right. With this bill, we reaffirm that fundamental American ideal that every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make out of their lives what they will."

President Obama, speaking about ESSA legislation, December 10, 2015, <http://1.usa.gov/1Nf75F3>

The New Jersey Library Association (NJLA) recognizes the value and importance of highly effective school library programs and believes that access to a quality school library/media center staffed by a certified school media specialist is a necessary part of every student's education. The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), with proper implementation by the NJ Department of Education, legislators and school boards, can provide financial support to help schools achieve vibrant literacy, information literacy and school library media programs for our state's students.

School libraries are a safe learning environment where all students have equal and equitable access to learning, support, and information for personal and educational purposes. NJLA believes that our schools must serve as an "equalizer" to provide all students with equal and equitable access to the resources, support and instruction necessary to succeed academically and become productive and engaged citizens in a democratic society.

Research on the value of reading, information literacy, school library programs and certified school library media specialists is extensive and clear. Yet, New Jersey schools have been dismantling these proven programs at an alarming rate over the last 8 years. According to a recently published joint NJLA and New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL) study we know now just how serious the problem is. Key findings of this study include:

- 20% fewer School Library Media Specialists (SLMS) in New Jersey than there were in 2007-2008
- 20% of High Schools have no Certified School Library Media Specialist available to students
- 150+ School Library Media Specialists cover more than one school. One SLMS covers 7 schools in one district.
- 91 School Districts have no School Library Media Specialists
- 33 districts have no School Library Media Specialists at the Elementary Level
- Over 280 Elementary Level schools are without School Library Media Specialists

In a society growing more and more dependent on information literacy we cannot justify failing to educate our children in these critical skills. We cannot produce students able to compete effectively in a modern information and technology based world without the most basic skills in navigating the vast amount of information in our society. Skills in navigating information literacy (which includes digital, visual, media, textual, and technological literacy) are best taught by certified school library media specialists.

NJLA stands ready to work with all stakeholders in support of implementing the elements of ESSA that recognize the need to re-invigorate student's education in this critical area. We particularly urge decision makers to pay special attention to school library media programs and school library media specialists when designing implementation plans for the following ESSA programs. ESSA provides resources to states to:

- Develop effective school library programs to provide students an opportunity to develop digital literacy skills and improve academic achievement.
- Provide professional development to support instructional services provided by effective school library programs and develop, administer, and evaluate high-quality comprehensive literacy instruction initiatives.
- Provide time for teachers (and other literacy staff, as appropriate, such as school librarians or specialized support personnel) to meet to plan comprehensive literacy instruction.
- Promote literacy programs in low income communities. This may include providing professional development for school librarians, books and up-to-date materials to high need schools.
- Block grants can be made available to increase "access to school libraries" and provide training to "use technology effectively, including effective integration of technology, to improve instruction and student achievement.

In New Jersey, as well as many states, the economic downturn and expanding expectations from schools has forced difficult fiscal decisions for many New Jersey school districts. However, the research clearly shows that schools with high test scores also have highly effective school library programs which ensure their students will have the best chance to succeed in the 21st century. Now is the time to reverse course and restore the school library programs, so all New Jersey students have access to certified school library media specialists, and a standards based information literacy curriculum. ESSA presents a critical opportunity to reinvest in school library programs, to unlock the potential in New Jersey students and prepare them for college and beyond.

**Adopted by the Executive Board of the New Jersey Library Association
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