



Testimony before the New Jersey State Board of Education

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As members of the State Board of Education, you face tremendous challenges guiding the Department of Education in developing policies and curriculum which will provide the foundation of student learning for years to come. Unfortunately, in a society growing more and more dependent on information literacy, we find many schools do not provide students with access to a qualified school library media specialist nor to an information literacy curriculum, both of which provide the foundation for the development of lifelong learning skills so necessary for job and career growth in the future.

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

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, and technological literacy, are best taught by certified school library media specialists.

Through their educational training, school library media specialists receive graduate level training in literature, research and technology skills essential in a

twenty-first century learning environment. No other faculty member is uniquely qualified to ensure that a student has the literacy background and research skills to succeed in the increasingly competitive global educational environment that all student must face.

Unlock Student Potential

The New Jersey Library Association (NJLA) and our colleagues in the New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL) established the *Unlock Student Potential* campaign to focus on the need for qualified school media specialists in every school and the development of an information literacy curriculum.

We worked with legislators to introduce two pieces of legislation to help us meet the goals of *Unlock Student Potential*

- A1995/S2394 Requires a certain ratio of school media specialists to student populations
- A132/S2933 would establish an information literacy curriculum in grades k-12.

These bills have gained bipartisan support.

Why the need for A1995/S2394

New Jersey schools have been dismantling school media programs at an alarming rate over the past decade. We do not have a precise number of positions which have been lost. Statistics are difficult to find since, currently, the Department of Education does not keep a record of how many school media specialists are currently employed as librarians in New Jersey schools. Frequently, when a school media specialist retires the position is not filled. Parents and other faculty members often are not notified until the beginning of the next school year when there is no opportunity to fill the position.

During the past year, I have attended several board of education meetings where the elimination of school media specialists was being discussed. I was extremely pleased to see many parents attending and protesting this action. They valued having a school media specialist available for their students.

We have been told that the most recent school report card does count school media specialists and we are anxious to see this data. This will give the public a better opportunity to understand if their students have the services of a school media specialist in their school. This is a significant step forward to understanding how many schools do not have school media specialists.

Unfortunately, this points to a deficiency within the Department of Education. To our knowledge, no staff person is responsible for overseeing the role of school media specialists within our schools or within the Department. For many years the Department did have a dedicated staff person but when she retired the position was not filled. This absence gives little guidance for districts wanting to evaluate school library services and their impact on student achievement. Although the department does have many individuals who recognize the important work of school media specialists, without a dedicated individual with expertise in this area to oversee these services, districts have no one to contact when questions or concerns arise. In reviewing the websites of other state departments of education, we see that many do have a specialist assigned to this area. A dedicated staff person within the Department would be a significant achievement.

Future Ready Schools

I am sure that you are familiar with the Future Ready Schools (FRS) initiative which has been developed by the Alliance for Excellent Education. The NJ Department of Education is a key partner in New Jersey's *Future Ready School* program housed at NJIT. One of the requirements of the program is that a district must have one school media specialist as part of the district's learning team. We believe this is a very significant requirement recognizing the unique skills that the school media specialist brings to the successful development of a Future Ready School program in a district. It also supports our position that a school media specialist should be in every school and that the Department of Education should employ a staff member who is a specialist in school media programs. As more and more districts embrace the *Future Ready School's* framework, the important work of the school media specialist becomes fundamental to the success of this program within a school district and within each school building.

.Why the need for A132/S2933

The second goal of our program is the development of an information literacy K-12 curriculum. At present there is no requirement for information literacy in the K-12 level; in contrast, NJ Higher Education Regulations under NJAC Title 9A require that all colleges have qualified library professionals and, in addition, require that every institution shall have in place a plan that articulates how students will obtain information literacy skills as they progress through the curriculum. The plan shall identify outcomes for information literacy skill development, and how those outcomes are measured and assessed.

It is certainly the position of the New Jersey Library Association that every student must learn information literacy skills **before** they enter higher education.

A statement by the NJ academic library community expresses its frustration that many students from NJ high schools coming into their libraries are not prepared for the demands of academic study. They stated “We see that many college freshmen are poorly prepared to conduct college-level research, requiring professors and libraries to spend more time than they should on basic skills. We live with the cause and effect, frustrated in knowing that many of these students could hit the college ground running with proper training beforehand. All educators comprise a continuum of intervention necessary to help students gain essential career skills. School media specialists have a well-regarded place on this continuum.”

The membership of the New Jersey Library Association (NJLA) is comprised mostly of public and academic librarians. You might ask why we are so concerned about the loss of school media specialists in our schools. The answer is very simply- we see the impact on students every day. Students who come into the public and academic library and try to use the resources but simply can't. Students need to be taught how to use these resources in school as part of the curriculum to successfully navigate our challenging information environment.

It is hard to believe that Google.com (something which we all use every day) was only incorporated as a company 21 years ago. Most of us here remember life before Google but our students do not. And that is the point. Changes in technology and learning are impacting our students and teachers at a rapid pace. Each school must have a school media specialist and an information curriculum to meet the demands of the twenty-first century which will require students know

how to use information effectively throughout their lives. A school media specialist can deliver the services that our students need for the future.