



The New Jersey Reading Disabilities Task Force Testimony

Topic: Students Who Struggle with Reading

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April 30, 2012

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on strategies and ideas to help students in New Jersey's schools who struggle to read. I am Peg Lawlor, Government Relations Consultant for the New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL), the professional organization of school librarians in our state representing over 900 members and an affiliate of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL).

Reading is a window to the world. How many times have we heard this? Yet, children throughout our state continue to struggle to read. Why? How do we ensure that every child learns to read? And what is the school librarian's role?

School Library Programs Promote Learning

AASL's learning standards recognize reading as a foundational skill for learning, personal growth, and enjoyment. The degree to which students can read and understand text in all formats (e.g., picture, video, print) and all contexts is a key indicator to success in school and in life. As a lifelong learning skill, reading goes beyond decoding and comprehension to interpretation and development of new understandings.

AASL's Position Statement on Reading

Guiding learners to become engaged and effective users of ideas and information and to appreciate literature requires that they develop as strategic readers who can comprehend, analyze, and evaluate text in both print and digital formats. Learners must also have opportunities to read for enjoyment as well as for information. School librarians are in a critical and unique position to partner with other educators to elevate the reading development of our nation's youth.

Reading skills involve thinking skills. The extent to which young people use information depends upon their ability to understand what they read, to integrate their understandings with what they already know, and to realize their unanswered questions. To this end, school librarians model and collaboratively teach reading comprehension strategies: assess and use background knowledge, pose and answer questions that are appropriate to the task, make predictions and inferences, determine main ideas, and monitor reading comprehension as well as the learning process.

In addition, 21st-century learners must become adept at determining authority and accuracy of information, and analyzing and evaluating that information to synthesize new knowledge from multiple resources. School librarians model and collaboratively teach these skills and strategies.

With a deep knowledge of the wide variety of authentic reading materials available in the school library and beyond, the school librarian has a key role in supporting print and online reading comprehension strategy instruction in collaboration with classroom teachers and reading specialists. School librarians co-design, co-implement, and co-evaluate interdisciplinary lessons and units of instruction that result in increased student learning.

While the responsibility for the successful implementation of reading promotion and instruction is shared by the entire school community, library programs serve as hubs of literacy learning in the school. The following components of school library programs position school librarians in leadership roles in developing reading comprehension strategies and in promoting free independent reading:

- School libraries provide students, staff, and families with open, non-restricted access to a varied high quality collection of reading materials in multiple formats that reflect academic needs and personal interests.
- School librarians practice responsive collection development and support print-rich environments that reflect the curriculum and the diverse learning needs of the school community.
- School librarians take a leadership role in organizing and promoting literacy projects and events that engage learners and motivate them to become lifelong readers.
- Classroom teachers, reading specialists, and school librarians select materials, promote the curricular and independent use of resources, including traditional and alternative materials, and plan learning experiences that offer whole classes, small groups, and individual learners an interdisciplinary approach to literacy learning.
- Classroom and library collaborative instruction is evidence-based, using research in librarianship, reading, English-language arts, and educational technology in order to maximize student learning. School librarians partner with classroom teachers, specialists and other literacy colleagues to make decisions about

reading initiatives and reading comprehension instruction, and to develop all learners' curiosity in, and intellectual access to, appropriate resources in all formats and media.

- When learners follow an inquiry process they assess and use reading comprehension strategies. The skills identified in the Standards for the 21st-Century Learner align with the reading process.
- Opportunities for planned and spontaneous library use best serve learners as they identify, analyze, and synthesize ideas and information by using a wide range of materials in a variety of formats and media. Availability of library resources and professional staff at point of need develops intellectual behaviors that transfer to future academic pursuits and lifelong academic and public library use.
- Along with classroom and reading specialist colleagues, school librarians provide and participate in continual professional development in reading that reflects current research in the area of reading instruction and promotion.¹

The Research is Clear

Since 1999, 22 different states have conducted empirical studies documenting the positive impact school libraries have upon student learning and achievement. The results of these studies are summarized by Mansfield University in the booklet *School Library Research Summarized: A Graduate Class Project*, Spring 2011 and on the website, <http://library.mansfield.edu/impact.asp> Attached for your review is the brief summary of the research. This work complements and updates the Scholastic Booklet, "*School Libraries Work.*"

When the 22 studies are examined, the findings confirm that schools with full-time certified librarians and library support staff have a direct positive impact on student learning. The research shows that quality school library programs guided by certified school librarians offer resources and academic support that help to close the achievement gap for those students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Research results remained significant when accounting for all other school and community variables, including poverty, ethnicity, community education levels, and the quality and pay of teachers.² The research is clear, school library programs and school librarians are actively engaged in developing and supporting literacy and in preparing students with the 21st century skills they need to succeed.

¹AASL Position Statement on Reading
<http://www.ala.org/aasl/aaslissues/positionstatements/roleinreading>

² Achterman, Douglas L. 2008. "Haves, Halves, and Have-Nots: School Libraries and Student Achievement in California." PhD diss. University of North Texas, UNT Digital library.

New Jersey Study of School Libraries and Literacy Support

In 2011, Rutgers University released New Jersey's Study, One Common Goal: Student Learning. Phase 1 of the study examined NJ School Libraries in terms of staffing, resources, instruction, and budgets while Phase 2 followed a sample of effective school libraries selected from Phase 1 to determine what it is that makes them successful.

Participants in Phase 2 of the Study identified the school library as a major contributor to developing and supporting literacy in the traditional sense: Reading motivation; reading engagement; reading fluency; reading comprehension; sustained reading; strategic reading; reading for pleasure; and reading remediation. Access to diverse, quality reading materials is viewed as essential for nurturing and sustaining students as active readers, and for supporting individual reading interests.

Participants acknowledge that sustained reading that develops comprehension is promoted by the school librarian who guides student reading choices and encourages enjoyment of reading. The school library provides diverse media that promote transliteracies. Reading flows into career choices and the writing process, and teachers value school library support of conventions of citation and writing formal papers.

Participants in the study identified a range of outcomes from the sustained focus of the school library on reading and literacy development such as student achievement, test scores, vocabulary development, and fostering interactions around reading. These outcomes are the result of supporting emerging literacy development for older elementary students and adolescents after they learn to decode and read. Without this support and deep and sustained reading, comprehension may not develop on its own.³

On behalf of the students we serve, we ask the Task Force to recognize and affirm in its report to Governor Christie the essential role of certified School Library Media Specialists and quality library programs in the positive development of students' reading abilities, particularly students who struggle with Reading. And we ask you recommend to Governor Christie a policy to support and require quality school library programs with certified School Library Media Specialists in every school in New Jersey at all grade levels.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on strategies and ideas to help student in New Jersey's Schools who struggle to read.

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³ The NJ Study http://cissl.rutgers.edu/images/stories/docs/njasl_phase%202_final.pdf