

**Building Elementary School Libraries:
An Essential Element for Education Reform**

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“...the library media center should become
a magnet for teacher and student alike.”
--Alliance for Excellence

Massachusetts Elementary School Libraries: An Overview. The Simmons' Survey conducted during the spring of 1999 produced significant data pointing toward glaring discrepancies in the elementary school library media programs being offered by school districts across Massachusetts. According to this information, it is at the elementary level that the presence of a library media program demonstrates the strongest connection to increased MCAS scores, and yet in Massachusetts it is at the elementary level that there exists a most intolerable situation of school "haves" and "have nots."

A careful study of the school library collections, their instructional programs, and the level of staffing available to the schools that responded to our survey observe this inequity.

Looking at the survey statistics, we can see that half of the elementary schools reporting, *the haves*, had a nonfiction collection with copyright date of 1989 or later, but the other half of our schools, the *have nots*, are training the students of the Information Age in research skills by using nonfiction collections that are older than 1989.

Half our elementary schools are teaching students search techniques for automated collections; but the other half of our schools are only planning to automate their collections in some distant future, or have not even begun to discuss automating their collection, and automation can be a three-year process!

Instructional programs offer some consistency to public elementary school libraries in Massachusetts. Instructional programs of some type are available in 85 percent of our elementary schools, and 84 percent of the personnel in charge of those programs target the statewide curriculum frameworks whenever they find the time to collaborate with classroom teachers. Despite this Herculean effort to teach and to teach to

the frameworks, only one third of the respondent schools has a space dedicated as an instructional area.

However dismal the status of the collection and the facility, what is most disconcerting about *have* and *have not* students in Massachusetts is survey information that more than three-quarters of all elementary schools reporting do not employ a full-time, certified school library media specialist. In fact, even support staff at the elementary level is among the missing. Only one median hour of clerical or technical support is available to elementary school librarians surveyed in this state. An examination of staffing practices in the elementary school library media centers of Massachusetts reveals that inequity is the order of the day.

Expectations for a School Library Media Program. There is deep understanding within the school library community about what school librarians do and about the value of our profession as an integral component in a multifaceted approach to the education of young people. Lucille Fargo published an articulation of our mission. She spoke of acquiring books in line with the demands of the curriculum, of guiding children in their choice of books, of developing in students the habit of personal investigation as well as a wide range of interests. Ms. Fargo spoke of working cooperatively with teachers and administrative staff. She set as an aim of the school library the encouragement of students toward lifelong education through the use of library resources. She made her statement in 1947.

A commitment to this type of quality program has developed and evolved throughout the last century. In 1988, the following statement of purpose and goals was written for *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* and it

remained word for word as the statement of purpose for *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* in 1998.

Mission and Goals of the School Library Media Program

The Mission of the library media program is to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information. This mission is accomplished:

- by providing intellectual and physical access to materials in all formats
- by providing instruction to foster competence and stimulate interest in reading, viewing and using information and ideas
- by working with other educators to design learning strategies to meet the needs of individual students.

-Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning (1998),

p.6

However, if within the profession we are aware of the contribution we make in education, we seem to be unable to articulate this idea to the educational community as a whole.

This disconnect appears as far back as 1984. At that time, librarians across the country were shouting to be heard as a nation wide debate was held in the wake of a publication called *A Nation at Risk*. Under the leadership of Terrel H. Bell, then U.S. Department of Education Secretary, the librarians' response was recorded in *Alliance for Excellence: Librarians Respond to A Nation at Risk*. At that time, thirteen recommendations were carefully crafted. However, the Simmons' survey documents that

in 1999 most of those recommendations remained as an unfulfilled wish list in most Massachusetts elementary schools.

The American Library Association through its American Association of School Libraries division in conjunction with the Association for Educational Communications and Technology published the following national standards for student learning:

The Nine Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning

Information Literacy

Standard 1: The student who is information literate accesses information efficiently and effectively.

Standard 2: The student who is information literate evaluates information critically and competently.

Standard 3: The student who is information literate uses information accurately and creatively.

Independent Learning

Standard 4: The student who is an independent learner is information literate and pursues information related to personal interests.

Standard 5: The student who is an independent learner is information literate and appreciates literature and other creative expressions of information.

Standard 6: The student who is an independent learner is information literate and strives for excellence in information seeking and knowledge generation.

Social Responsibility

Standard 7: The student who contributes positively to the learning community and to society is information literate and recognizes the importance of information to a democratic society.

Standard 8: The student who contributes positively to the learning community and to society is information literate and practices ethical behavior in regard to information and information technology.

Standard 9: The student who contributes positively to the learning community and to society is information literate and participates effectively in groups to pursue and generate information.

-Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning (1998), p.8-9

These goals seem logical and admirable. Why, therefore, are they absent from so many Massachusetts' elementary schools? Are educators even aware of these building blocks of education for the 21st century?

Perhaps it is a failure of our profession that the school librarians' ability to contribute to the education process remains unseen and under appreciated. If that is the case, then let us state our value clearly with the results of this survey. Only through the efforts of enlightened administrators will viable school library media programs be established and maintained in a manner that maximizes their impact on student achievement.

We offer a simple premise:

That the hiring of a trained and certified school library media specialist who performs the following functions in each of your elementary schools is dollar-for-dollar

an investment in personnel that cannot be beaten if student achievement in the 21st century is your bottom line.

For the cost of one classroom teacher, a school librarian would:

- Acquire quality materials for your school libraries that support and enrich the curriculum.
- Develop in students the habit of personal investigation.
- Teach critical research skills for both print and electronic material formats.
- Teach the importance of research evaluation and documentation.
- Guide students, in developing of a love for reading.
- Help students to establish a wide range of interests.
- Encourage in students a desire for lifelong education.
- Work cooperatively with classroom teachers to advance their curriculum goals.
- Work constructively with administrators to advance the technology and literacy components of the mission of the district.

Dollars allocated to a school library media program will directly benefit every single student and every single faculty member. While the skills taught in a comprehensive school library media program benefit all students, they certainly provide the basis for lifelong learning for those students who will enter the workforce after high school graduation. Those students may never acquire an associate or undergraduate degree, but they will need to access information in order to locate the most appropriate nursing home for their parents. They will need to evaluate the kind of information in found in car insurance policies. They will need to find a way to keep up in the Age of

Information as it continues to emerge as a dominant factor in their lives. Those students may not be able to afford the luxury of higher education, but they will always need to access information. If they possess strong information literacy skills and can visit a local library, they will have the ability to acquire the knowledge they need to succeed.

Dollars expended on school library media programs have immediate impact and remain highly accountable over time. A well-run school library media program will provide a vehicle that will advance school district curriculum goals on a regular basis. That most desirable bump in MCAS scores documented by the Simmons' survey at all grade levels is not the only reason to invest in a school library media program. It is simply one more great reason to do so.

Four Steps Toward Change: A Call to Action. Basic questions about the status of a school district's individual library media program must be asked before any meaningful change can take place.

- Do the school librarians in your system have detailed job descriptions?
- Are librarians evaluated by the exact same assessment tool as the teachers in your school district?
- Are principals expected to meet regularly with their school librarian?
- Do librarians participate in grade-level meetings?
- Are your classroom/academic teachers expected to collaborate with the school librarians?
- Are your school librarians required to produce an annual report for their administrators?
- Are school librarians invited to sit on district wide curriculum committees?

- Do your school librarians make presentations at faculty meetings, in-service, or staff development programs?
- Has your school district developed a five-year plan for improving the situation of your school libraries?

The answers to these questions could provide the basis for an attitude change toward school librarians that would in turn present educators with a positive growth position for Massachusetts. Students, teachers, and administrators can take part in this constructive change if they follow these four steps:

1. Realizing the Need for Change.

It is hoped that the MCAS implications at the elementary level as documented in the Simmons Survey will serve as a springboard to the realization that school library programs benefit all students in our schools, K-12.

2. Becoming Acquainted with State and National Standards.

As a first step toward action, school superintendents should investigate and understand the state and national standards available that outline the contribution of Information Literacy education.

3. Providing District Wide Program Assessment.

Within each district, a systematic assessment rubric is developed and implemented. It will offer specific guidance and direction to the staff responsible for this change.

4. Committing to a Planning and Implementation Process.

Each district will develop a five-year plan based on the district wide assessment that moves all of their schools toward Information Literacy in the 21st century, and that adequate funding for these programs be allocated and maintained.

Your response to the Simmons survey results and the assessment suggestions made today will dictate the future of school library media centers in Massachusetts. Let us hope that those who follow us will not conclude that the concept of fully funded school libraries was an idea that everybody believed in, but that only some chose to provide.

“Between stimulus and response, one has the freedom to choose.”

-- Covey, p.71

Appendix

AIMS of the SCHOOL LIBRARY*

1. To acquire books and other materials in line with the demands of the curriculum and the needs of boys and girls to organize these materials for effective use.
2. To guide pupils in their choice of books and other materials of learning desired both for personal and curricular purposes.
3. To develop in pupils skill and resourcefulness in their use of books and libraries to encourage the habit of personal investigation.
4. To help pupils establish a wide range of significant interests.
5. To provide aesthetic experience and develop appreciation of the arts.
6. To encourage lifelong education throughout the use of library resources.
7. To encourage social attitudes and provide experience in social and democratic living.
8. To work cooperatively and constructively with instruction and administrative staffs of the school.

*From: Lucille F. Fargo, *The Library in the School* (Chicago, Illinois: American Library Association) 1947, p.22.

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