

## Collaboration for school library legislation and school library development in Sweden

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### Abstract:

*The importance of school libraries in Sweden has varied. For a long time, they were mentioned in the Library Act, but they were not mandatory. Over the last decade, important stakeholders collaborated in the effort to change the legislation. In 2011, the Swedish Education Act made access to school libraries mandatory for all types of schools. Advocacy engagement led to this change in legislation. Advocacy is still needed, for defining development and refining the legislation. The Education Act is a ground to build on. Many different strategies for advocacy action are on the agenda.*

*One network stands out, maybe unique in its structure, with stakeholders interested in school library development: the National School Library Group, founded in the 1990s. This network and lobby group selects the Swedish School Library of the Year, publishes leaflets, organizes conferences and is an important reference group for policy and law. The group consists of more than 20 associations, some of them being NGOs, trade unions, regional associations, as well as the Swedish Library Association. Government departments are also represented and lately the National Library.*

*The National Schools Inspectorate controls the standards for schools, and it plays an important role in implementing the new legislation. New to Sweden is that recently some schools have not been allowed to start because of the lack of an adequate plan for school libraries. The Swedish National Agency of Education and many other stakeholders engage in developing school libraries. Universities are planning school library education suited for librarians and teachers. Municipal and/or regional coordinators of school libraries help with advocating for and enhancing the quality of school libraries. The time has come now to take on the responsibility of meeting the requirements of the 2011 law.*

**Keywords:** School libraries, Legislation, Advocacy, Stakeholders, Sweden

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## Collaboration for school library legislation and school library development in Sweden

### Introduction

Since 2011, students' access to school libraries has been made mandatory for all types of schools according to the Swedish Education Act. Over the last decade, important stakeholders

have collaborated in the effort to change legislation. Advocacy engagement led to this change in legislation. Advocacy is still needed, however, for raising awareness, increasing knowledge and defining development. What has the change in legislation led to? School libraries have become more visible. Many different strategies for action are on the agenda, involving collaboration between associations -- in regions, in central authorities and in the municipalities – e.g., lobbying and expert work, coordination with school administration and/or in cooperation with public libraries. There are ongoing plans for changing the legal text of the legislation to include instructions for staffing of school libraries. Propositions in this direction have been mentioned in parliamentary bills from several political parties.

## **Background**

Sweden (9,7 million people; [sweden.se/quick-facts/](http://sweden.se/quick-facts/)) has 290 municipalities, 290 public library systems, and about 4 000 school libraries. Public libraries and school libraries are financed by local authorities. The municipal council makes decisions in matters concerning libraries, compulsory school, upper secondary school and preschool. Sweden has a long tradition of local self-determination. Local authorities are independent bodies, which are free to make their own decisions within certain limits. Compulsory schooling in Sweden is from first to ninth grade. A preschool year from 6 years of age is a part of Swedish schools, but not compulsory for children.

The importance of school libraries in Sweden has varied over time. For a long time, they were mentioned in the Library Act, but they were not mandatory. Statistics from 2012 showed that almost half of the students in schools in Sweden did not have access to a school library. Secondary schools are often, but not always, better equipped with school libraries than are primary schools.

“When local authorities are given new tasks, their right to self-determination must be taken into account. This sort of situation may arise when an area in which local authorities have previously provided services on a voluntary basis, such as libraries, is brought under regulation”, the government says. This is why legislation often is not detailed. School directors and principals are the ones who have mandate from the local authorities to decide how the money is spent and how the schools are going to follow the law. The Swedish schools, principals and municipalities must now manage school libraries.

The Swedish National Library has the responsibility to coordinate support for all libraries. Within the public library sector, there are 20 county and regional libraries with the assignment to encourage cooperation and development through projects such as reading promotion, development of library service for different target groups, and lifelong learning. According to the Library Act, regional libraries do not have mandate to provide for school libraries, but they can cooperate with school libraries in their regions. They have a representative in the NSG network (the National School Library Group).

## **Advocating for changing legislation**

What can be regarded as a good quality school library? The text of the Education Act has been criticised for not mentioning staffing. The fact that good training programmes and the financing of school libraries are not dealt with in the Education Act must be the most important advocacy issues now.

Many schools do not have a professional school librarian. Sometimes, teachers or other persons without any library and information studies (LIS) training are managing school libraries, often with very limited hours. In other school, there are teacher librarians with some library training or cooperating with librarians. Advocacy is needed to get more equity of student access to professionally equipped and staffed school libraries.

Sweden lacks specific training programmes for school librarians. Universities are planning school library education suited for librarians and teachers. At present, school librarians have the same educational background as all librarians--bachelor or master studies in Library and Information Studies. There are five universities in Sweden offering shorter courses suited for those who want to work in school libraries.

## **Stakeholders**

In this paper I want to look at how different stakeholders and associations work with advocacy in relation to school library development and legislation. The needs of many different groups of stakeholders are dealt with by a number of different associations. In Sweden one network stands out, maybe unique in its structure, consisting of stakeholders interested in school library development:

**The National School Library Group (NSG)** was founded in the 1990s by authors (writers of books). The authors reacted to municipalities cutting down libraries, often situated in schools. The curriculum left the responsibility of libraries to the head of each school. The authors wrote debate articles in newspapers and supported work for defending libraries. Eventually the NSG group grew and became an expert group fighting for and encouraging the development of school libraries for the benefit of student achievement and interest in reading.

Today, the group has more than 20 member associations, collaborating to achieve strong outcomes across the school library sector as a whole. Some of them are NGOs, trade unions, regional associations, as well as The Swedish Library Association. Government departments are also represented and lately also The Swedish National Library. NSG acts to alert responsible officers and politicians of the role and mission of the school library in the school's educational work. The target groups for NSG advocacy work may be principals, teacher training institutions, universities, government agencies and other stakeholders.

One important advocacy task for NSG is to select the Swedish School Library of the Year. The award consists of a work of art and an author visit for the students. In the year when the school gets the award, the school librarian often gives lectures and receives visits from other schools.

NSG, like many of its members, also publish leaflets, organizes conferences (e.g., yearly at School Fair and Book & Library Fair) and constitutes an important reference group for policy and law. Arranging appointments with politicians and important national officials with connection to education is another way that NSG works. Over the years, the group members have called on several ministers of education and met with politicians who have shown special interest in culture and libraries. The different associations within NSG eventually understood the school library advocacy problems better and maybe understood each other better. They learnt how to talk to officials, and they had an influence on the school library issue becoming known and discussed in parliament and in the education department of government.

When the new Education Act was passed in 2011, NSG and the Swedish Library Association conducted a massive information campaign to make the regulations known to all principals in Sweden. The campaign content was taken from the criteria developed by **The National Schools Inspectorate** for their coming inspections. The Inspectorate states that the following requirements must be met for students to be considered to have access to school libraries:

1. Students have access to a school library on their own school unit's premises or at a reasonable distance from the school that makes it possible to continuously use the library as a part of students' education in order to contribute to achieving the objectives.
2. The library includes books, non-fiction and fiction, information technology and other media.
3. The library is adapted to the pupils' needs in terms of promoting language development and stimulating reading. (Translated in Jensinger, 2013)

**The Swedish National Agency for Education** has a valuable department working with school library issues. The Agency has a reference group for school library matters. An Agency officer manages a discussion list for school libraries, provides informative journalistic web articles on school library best practice, and a website called *Check the source* about information literacy, critical awareness, use of social media and web tools for daily school work. In the guidelines from the National Schools Inspectorate, a definition of school library from the Agency is quoted:

A shared and well-regulated resource comprised of media and information which is put at the disposal of the pupils and teachers with the help of competent staff. The school library is a part of the school's teaching activities with the task of supporting the pupils' learning. The school library can therefore be regarded partly as a material resource which is part of a school's teaching aids and other tools and partly as a function which actively contributes to the development of knowledge and is responsible for certain services. (Translated in Jensinger, 2013)

The National Schools Inspectorate controls the standards for schools. It plays an important role in implementing the new school library legislation within a framework of inspections, quality checks and processing of licence applications. Some schools have not been allowed to start because of the lack of plans for school libraries according to the new law. This is new to Sweden. Since the Act came into force in 2011, 10% of the audited schools received complaints concerning the school library (many of them, independent secondary schools).

**Svensk biblioteksörening** (Swedish Library Association, SLA) – networking, advocating, producing material and inspiring research - has about 3 700 members. The association has an important role as pressure group, and has taken an active part in the promotion of library legislation and in paving the way for a comprehensive library system. The association has a continuous dialogue with politicians and other decision makers. Lately SLA has recreated a network for school library experts – members of the association who are specially engaged in SL development. The networks within the association hold meetings for discussing important current issues.

SLA has published an overview and history of school library policy (in Swedish) written by former senior advisor at the National Library of Sweden, Barbro Thomas (2013). She found that since the 1940s there has been an agreement in Sweden about the value of school libraries and their vital role in teaching and promoting student interest in reading. But weaknesses in the school library standards have been criticized. Suggestions for improvements have been added, often with poor results. Progress has not been in proportion to the interest of school libraries showed in writing and speech. Since the 1960s there has not been government funding directed to school libraries. Municipalities and principals could freely use the school funding in other fields. (About Swedish school funding see Ministry of Education and Research, 2008).

Now when the school libraries are mandatory it is time to live up to the equivalent school that the Education Act aims at. To achieve equivalent school libraries within a reasonable time requires extra efforts. Barbo Thomas recommends some action:

1. Set clear goals (e.g., UNESCO School Library Manifesto)
2. Incentives are needed, for example, through targeted grants
3. Sufficient staff with adequate training are needed.

The most important task for The Swedish Library Association is now to increase efforts to make the function and role of the school library visible. More people need to understand that school libraries are relevant and urgent. What is needed is more advocacy.

SLA has cooperated with the association DIK in initiating the concept of World Class School Library, another honorary award that a school can get.

**DIK** association (Documents, Information, Culture) is a trade union for LIS graduates and other academic professions. The association has enhanced its engagement in recent years and plays an active role in the library debate and as advocates for libraries. For a couple of years DIK has been selecting quality school libraries for the title “World Class School Library.” The winnings school can show a badge on their website, and they get publicity in a lot of media, special interest is showed by local press.

Awards generate a lot of articles and interest in “what they do in the school library” and sometimes also envy from parents who do not see a good library in their children's school. For example, a mother who is also a library student started a blog and a Facebook group to try to influence her municipality to ensure that there will be school libraries in all schools.

### **Disseminating research and professional projects**

In their IASL/IFLA paper from 2013, *A Government Mandate for School Libraries in Sweden*, Helle Barrett and Bibi Eriksson give a comprehensive view of Swedish school library development, especially from the perspective of a number of government funded studies and projects. They show that research, conducted by Dr. Louise Limberg and others, contributed to a deeper understanding of the role of the school library in school development. Research showed that what was lacking was cooperation between teachers and school librarians and also the engagement of principals.

In the 1990s Louise Limberg wrote about new tasks for school librarians:

- to teach critical use of information
- to offer many sources for school work

- to cooperate with teachers to develop teaching towards analysing knowledge content instead of mediating sources

Several international experts, including Dr Carol Kuhlthau and Dr Ross Todd, have been invited to talk about their research and professional experiences, which has had a great impact. Advocacy and doing research known takes time.

## Conferences

Over a long period, knowledge from research and professional projects has been spread through conferences in many parts of Sweden, and many of them are still available in written reports and digital recordings. Through cooperation with **UR** (Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company, now also a member of NSG), speakers can be seen on the web for a long time afterwards. This is a very effective and often used way of continuing education, spread ~~in~~ through social media including hash tags for conference reporting.

Principals and politicians sometimes take part in conferences about school libraries. They play a vital role for advocating understanding of the advantages of school library involvement in education (see, for example, a recent article by a principal in *Scandinavian Library Quarterly*. Jensinger, 2013) The success of engaging politicians finally led to informed propositions and a new Education act.

A recent conference was in March 2014, called School Library 2014. One speaker was the president of **The Swedish Association of School Principals and Directors of Education**, previously director of education in Malmö. He talked about “*How to reassure a school working with the school library to enhance literacy?*“, from his experiences of inequality in education. He stated that he was influenced by Louise Limberg’s studies, which had led him to understand things that he previously could not define by himself. As stated in the Government report from 2013, *The Culture of Reading*, he thinks that school librarians also must be included in the law on school libraries.

He stressed that responsibility for the PISA results, statistics showing declining reading skills and reading comprehension in Sweden from 2000 and forward, lies with everyone in the school. All must work together, leveraging each other's expertise to help students come to an approach that learning is vital and is a process that continues throughout life. In schools that succeed in improving their performance, the principal interacts with all staff, including the school librarian. When he was involved in designating libraries for the award School Library of the Year in NSG, it was evident to him that awarded schools had principals who inspired teachers and school librarian and they all had confidence in each other's skills.

The school library has to challenge the traditional school culture, to strengthen its educational role with more advanced tasks. We need more library elements in the training of teachers and librarians, and more research is needed. Like other one-person professions in schools, school librarians must be able to organize the work since they can not be everywhere. All school resources must be integrated and interact with each other.

## Statistics as a part of advocacy

The National Schools Inspectorate undertook a minor, not publicly known, study initiated by the Minister of Education of that time, targeting a number of schools and their school

libraries. The results were sad and catastrophic and influenced some people in the school library world to try to reach out and show the inequality of standards. Official school library statistics were scarce and had not been very useful.

From the Arts Council, The National Library (KB) overtook responsibility for cooperation, coordination and statistics concerning libraries financed by public funds in 2011. To secure a dialogue within the library sector, KB has created a structure of influence with an advisory committee and expert groups. One of the priority issues is to improve school libraries. A special department is established to carry out school library investigations and to collect school library statistics.

The officer of KB wrote an article about Swedish school libraries in *Scandinavian Library Quarterly*. Support material for school library development is being produced together with other members of the library sector, e.g., a leaflet with advice for cooperation between public libraries and schools emphasizing that conscientious and formalized agreements are essential. Another important issue is measurement of quality – discussing how school library programmes help students achieve their learning goals.

### **Coordination organized by local school authorities**

Some municipalities have School Library and Media Centres, working with the school libraries and the local school authorities. The centers focus on training, disseminating information and new ways of working, projects about reading, reading comprehension and work with integrating school library, ICT and media and information literacy in all education. Some have pedagogical blogs for all interested in school libraries. In positive and analysing articles and by links to schools you find best practice school library work and development projects.

The Lund municipality's School Library Centre coordinates through Lund Public Library. In the smaller Våxjö municipality, school libraries are coordinated by two school librarians partly working in schools, partly with coordination, school library training and development, advocating their work through websites and blogs, where they inspire with ideas of using ICT and promoting student involvement. The former school director in Våxjö, who saw the school libraries as important parts of teaching and learning, moved to another city, Linköping, where he continues in his new position as director of education there. Linköping municipality has a holistic and longterm approach to developing school libraries through starting many of what they call focus libraries in the schools. In the focus library schools, a school librarian and a library teacher cooperate using their different roles and perspectives. The teachers, who have ten percent of their job in the library, have the assignment to support the library programme and to be ambassadors for the school library. All involved get special training.

Now that the new Education Act has been passed it is time for responsible stakeholders to work to ensure that the requirements of the law are met.

### **Key aspects of advocacy**

1. Training programmes and funding are important advocacy issues
2. Many stakeholders acting together in a network, learning from each other, is an effective way of working

3. In advocacy work you should be aware of political, governmental and other levels
4. Statistics about school libraries are important to know and disseminate
5. Awards and conferences are ways to spread knowledge about school libraries

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Maud Hell worked as a school and public librarian in Lund, Sweden for many years (now retired). She has written two books about school library development and one about author visits in schools. She served as chair of School Library South, a regional school library association. She is a member of The Swedish Library Association (also its school library network and IFLA network), of IASL, and of the e-mail listserv of the European network ENSIL. Her special interests include school library projects, communication for development, and southern Africa.