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## **School library advocacy, evidence and actions in the USA: Principles for planning and implementing advocacy initiatives**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper presents a systematic review of 10 years of research undertaken by scholars in the Center for International Scholarship in School Librarianship (CiSSL) at Rutgers University. It situates this analysis in an overview of advocacy initiatives across the USA, the research foundations for this, and the core advocacy principles. The CiSSL research has been conducted within the USA and thus primarily reflects this country's perspective. This review elucidates some additional principles to guide the design, planning and implementation of evidence-based advocacy initiatives for use by schools, districts and professional associations. These principles focus on help-as-outcome, rather than predominant advocacy descriptions of help-as-input. They provide an additional layer of depth in articulating the value of the school library aligned to emerging discourses in education and library science.*

**Keywords:** Advocacy, School Libraries, Inquiry Learning, Social Justice, Knowledge Construction

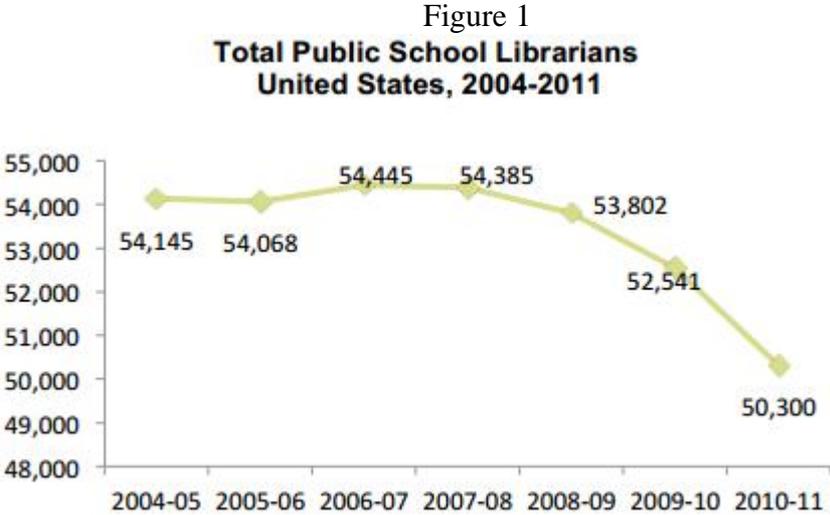
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## **School library advocacy, evidence and actions in the USA: Principles for planning and implementing advocacy initiatives**

### **Introduction and context**

The school librarianship profession has invested considerable energy and resources over several decades in the development, rollout and ongoing promotion of advocacy initiatives. The American Association of School Librarians defines advocacy as the “On-going process of building partnerships so that others will act for and with you, turning passive support into educated action for the library program. It begins with a vision and a plan for the library program that is then matched to the agenda and priorities of stakeholders” (<http://www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/definitions>). The advocacy program has intensified over

the last 5 years, given the down turn on employment of school librarians, when measured against the increase in student numbers across public schools in the USA, as shown in Figure 1.



(Source: [http://lrs.org/documents/fastfacts/308\\_School\\_Librarian\\_Numbers\\_2004\\_2011.pdf](http://lrs.org/documents/fastfacts/308_School_Librarian_Numbers_2004_2011.pdf))

Ellerson (2010,10), reporting on a study of 692 school administrators from 44 states conducted by the American Association of School Administrators on the impact of the economic downturn on schools, found that school librarians were part of across-the-board cuts and were also part of planned cuts for the 2011-2012 academic year.

Table 1

Personnel	2010-11	2011-12
	Percent	Percent
Core subject classroom teachers	45.7%	40.9%
Art/music/phys education teachers	23.8%	25.3%
Foreign language teachers	11.3%	12.7%
Special education teachers	15.3%	12.0%
Teacher aides/assistants	49.1%	51.0%
School secretaries	18.2%	18.6%
School librarians	16.8%	14.3%
School nurses	8.4%	9.8%
Maintenance, cafeteria, transportation staff	37.3%	33.4%
Central office/administration	31.9%	27.0%
Other	14.9%	15.6%

Across the USA, there has been growth of advocacy initiatives by national and state professional associations. Given the downward trend identified in Figure 1, and ongoing reports about the impact of the de-professionalization and curtailment of school library programs, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) initiated a Special Presidential Task Force on School Libraries in 2012 in a bid to create a national campaign

addressing “address the urgent need for active support and advocacy for school libraries to ensure the best learning experience for the children they help to educate” (<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/advleg/schoollibrarytaskforce>). Accordingly, websites have been developed to support these advocacy initiatives. The American Library Association has developed the “Advocacy University” (<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy-university>), a comprehensive clearinghouse of advocacy resources and tools for all types of libraries, and a library advocate’s handbook. A large number of state school library organizations have “advocacy” as a major topic from the landing page of the Association. For example:

- New Jersey Association of School Librarians: <http://njasl.org/Advocacy>
- School Library Association of New York: <http://www.slsa-nys.org/advocacy.cfm>
- Ohio Educational Library Media Association:  
<http://www.oelma.org/advocate/oelma-advocacy>

These websites typically provide links to strategies, tools, resources, and state-based and national research on school libraries.

### **Empirical basis for advocacy**

At the heart of this advocacy agenda is the foundational assumption that school librarians are critical to educational success. All advocacy websites draw explicit attention and link to the body of national research conducted in the USA and Canada that provides evidence of the value of a strong school library led by a credentialed school librarian, with particular emphasis on students’ academic development through information literacy instruction, and the development of reading and literacy. Multiple summaries of this research have been developed, and intended to answer the question: "Do school libraries make a difference?" The summary variously put forward by ALA, AASL and state associations typically identifies the following library-centric factors which contribute to higher levels of student achievement:

- Increased hours of access for both individual student visits and group visits by classes;
- Larger collections of print and electronic resources with access at school and from home;
- Up-to-date technology with connectivity to databases and automated collection;
- Information literacy instruction implemented in collaboration with teachers that is integrated with classroom curriculum;
- Higher total library expenditures;
- Leadership activities by the librarian in providing professional development for teachers, serving on key committees, and meeting regularly with the principal. (Scholastic, 2008)

The empirical evidence is largely built on research studies that examine the presence of school library infrastructure, personnel and library services & processes and their correlation to achievement as measured by standardized test scores, particularly reading and literacy tests, and with other school and community conditions controlled for such as adult educational attainment; minority enrollment; per pupil spending; and teacher-student ratio (Scholastic, 2008). These studies provide a complex and rich picture of what school libraries need to have. While much of the rhetoric centers on student achievement, student outcomes and “success,” the basis for advocacy centers on necessary inputs, rather than “success”.

On this basis, this paper examines the research that CiSSL has undertaken from its establishment in 2003, and in which I have been principal investigator and collaborator. These studies center on both state studies that examine the nature and dynamics of the helps provided by what are deemed to be “effective” school libraries, and the outcomes they enable, but also studies examining the dynamics of instructional processes and professional dimensions that shape these outcomes.

### **CiSSL Research and Advocacy**

The Center for International Scholarship in school Libraries (CiSSL) exists as a research center in the School of Communication & Information at Rutgers University. Its mission is to advance knowledge about building a sustainable future for children and youth as they engage in utilizing information for learning through PreK-Grade 12 education and as they prepare for living, working and civic engagement in a complex, technology-centered and networked information world, becoming informed, active citizens. Since its foundation in 2003 by Dr. Carol Kuhlthau, CiSSL has undertaken a substantive number of large state studies that focus on: (1) how effective school libraries help students learn, (2) the complex dynamics of student learning and knowledge construction in the information age school; (3) how inquiry learning in an information age school is enabled and demonstrated by school library instructional programs; and (5) the reading and literacy context of school and the role of school libraries.

These studies include large scale studies: Student Learning through Ohio School Libraries (13,123 students, 879 teachers) (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005a, b); Student Learning through Delaware School Libraries (5,733 students, 408 teachers) (Todd, 2005a, 2005b, 2009); New Jersey IMLS: Impact of School Libraries on Student Learning (574 students, 27 teachers and school librarians) (Todd, 2006; Kuhlthau, Heinstrom, & Todd, 2008); Ohio School Librarian-Teacher Collaboration Study (Todd, 2008); New Jersey One Common Goal: Student Learning Phase 1 (765 school librarians) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2010; Todd, 2012); NJ One Common Goal: Student Learning Phase 2 (100 school educators – principals, classroom teachers and curriculum coordinators) (Todd, Gordon & Lu, 2012). In addition, a number of small-scale studies have been undertaken that have focused on reading and literacy development in a range of contexts: summer reading, reading in digital environments, and reading for personal enrichment; everyday life information seeking of children and youth, and most recently, an ongoing study focusing on collaborative learning in digital environments (Todd & Dadlani, 2013). An overview of these studies is available at [www.cissl.rutgers.edu](http://www.cissl.rutgers.edu).

Collectively these studies across diverse research goals, samples, and data collection methods provide rich data and insights that form the basis for the elucidation of further evidence-based principles to guide the planning and implementation of advocacy initiatives. Central to many of these studies (for example, Ohio, New Jersey, Delaware) is the notion of an effective school library, and the criteria that have underpinned the selection of the school libraries over the years have centered on:

- The building library program is managed by a full time, certified school librarian
- The school librarian and the library program are instrumental partners in a systematic information literacy instruction program taught within the school.
- A physical school library exists within the building.
- Effective school library media programs support the mission and continuous improvement plan of the school district.
- Effective school library media programs support and enhance the curriculum and are an integral part of collaborative teaching and learning.

- Effective school library media programs provide information literacy skills instruction.
- Effective school library media programs promote and encourage reading for academic achievement and life-long learning.
- Effective school library media programs provide, integrate, and utilize a technology rich environment to support teaching and learning.

These criteria form the baseline for the CiSSL research agenda, which seeks to identify core dynamics and outcomes when these are in place. Accordingly, this paper elucidates a further set of principles for advocacy initiatives based on a systematic review procedure of the findings of these studies. In essence, an evidence-synthesis was carried out in order to understand how the profession might make the best use of the available evidence. This review can be viewed as an observational study of the evidence, comparing and contrasting the finding to identify some common patterns across the data sets. And a work in progress!

In the studies reviewed here, the central concept is “help,” and it is embedded in the pervasive question implicit or explicit in the research studies: “how do school libraries help students with their learning in and away from school?” Over the years, we have conceptualized help as both the institutional involvement through advice and assistance in the information experiences of people (helps-as-inputs) and the effect of this involvement on the people it serves (helps-as-outcomes/impacts). In this collective review, a “culture of help” emerges as a core conceptualization of the value of school libraries. “Help” is a critically important word in education today, particularly as schools across the USA seek to address budget and staffing shortfalls, increased school numbers, and to implement the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Advocacy initiatives need to carefully articulate “helps” as key mechanisms to address these current school challenges. School leaders in New Jersey study identified the following “helps” of school libraries:

- The school library is a multi-disciplinary learning space where all subjects are represented and helped;
- The school library’s mosaic of knowledge and global access creates an environment where learning is respected and pursued, helped and nurtured in safe and critical ways through curriculum-centered instruction;
- Learning in the school library is viewed as process of discovery, developing research and inquiry capabilities. The school library is defined and distinguished as a place that helps them to learn how to learn;
- The school library is seen as key to the school’s mission to produce engaged readers and informed learners who can thrive in a digital, knowledge based world;
- The school librarian is central to learning because s/he is viewed as a partner teacher enabling the information-to-knowledge journey of students;
- The learning-centered work of the school librarian helps define the school library as a pedagogical center;
- The school library offers a learning environment that is not based on “the right answer” prompted by rote learning, but on a more complex model of teaching and learning that is inquiry-driven;
- Students want to be in the library. They view it as their information home and value the expert guidance and help they receive. (Todd, Gordon, & Lu, 2012)

The challenge for advocacy is to articulate a “culture of help” in the context of individual schools and needs. These “helps” should be connected positively to the pressures that exist in

a school, particularly in relation to curriculum reform. And, they need to be supported with evidence and examples from local evidence based practice initiatives.

At the center of many advocacy initiatives is the role of the school librarian in developing information literacy capabilities. Collectively our CiSSL research moves beyond the generic information literacy label, and elaborates in a deeper way to identify specific outcomes enabled through the school library. In particular, these are:

- *Mastery of Resource-Based Competencies.* competencies related to seeking, accessing and evaluating resources in a variety of formats, including people and cultural artifacts as sources, and libraries. They include using technology tools to seek, access and evaluate these sources.
- *Mastery of Research Processes and Learning Management Competencies:* competencies that enable students to prepare for, plan and successfully undertake a curriculum-based research unit, including research plans and frameworks.
- *Development of Thinking-Based Competencies and Knowledge-Based Outcomes:* abilities and dispositions that focus on substantive engagement with data and information, the processes of higher order thinking and critical analysis that lead to the creation of representations / products that demonstrate deep knowledge and deep understanding; it also includes outcomes related to the creation of knowledge.
- *Development of Affective, Personal and Interpersonal Competencies:* competencies and dispositions related to the social and personal aspects of learning: about self as a learner, and the social and cultural participation of inquiry
- *Outcomes Related to Reading To Learn and Reading For Enjoyment:* competencies dispositions and attitudes related to the transformation, communication and dissemination of text in its multiple forms and modes and the development of meaning and understanding, supporting both deep reading for curriculum goals and reading for personal enjoyment and enrichment.

In review of the studies, it is apparent that key to these outcomes is students learning to be good researchers, and engaged in an active process of building their own understanding and knowledge through deep reading and meaning making. For the USA context, these competences, going beyond broad umbrella labels such as “information literacy” are important to elaborate in any advocacy initiative, because they form the competencies that are explicitly stated in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative being implemented across the country.

The heart of CCSS is the information-to-knowledge journey of students, a focus on developing deep knowledge and understanding through engagement with diverse informational texts. CCSS gives emphasis to students’ ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, to conduct original research in order to answer questions or solve problems. It explicitly emphasizes both short, focused research tasks such as those commonly required in the workplace, and longer term in-depth research. Through these research tasks, the CCSS require that students gain, evaluate, and present increasingly complex information, ideas, and evidence through listening and speaking as well as through media. From the earliest grades, they are expected to write logical arguments based on substantive claims, sound reasoning, and utilizing relevant evidence to support analysis. They are expected to integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information and synthesize multiple interpretations, identify and address conflicting information, and create clear and coherent knowledge representations that demonstrate their knowledge-building and research capabilities. Fundamentally, advocacy initiatives challenge us to explicate the role of the school library in knowledge development. Accordingly, a

key principle for advocacy is articulating the development of intellectual agency for knowledge production, enabled through becoming competent researchers. This agency goes beyond promotion of reading and literacy development through the school library; rather it puts emphasis on deep reading for comprehension and meaning making – the foundation for the personal construction of knowledge.

In the analysis of the 20,000 student stories collected in the Ohio and Delaware studies, it is clearly evident that the role of the school librarian as an instructional partner was highly valued by the students. In the New Jersey Phase 2 study in particular, the team-based instructional role positioned the school librarian as a co-teacher enabling curriculum standards to be met. A common pattern here is the consistent portrayal of the school library as a whole-school pedagogical center, and a common instructional zone where students learn to learn through information. Resource-based inquiry defines the current CCSS initiative. Given this emphasis, and CiSSL's long involvement in resource-based inquiry through the 30 year research career of Professor Emerita Carol Kuhlthau and the articulation of Guided Inquiry as a research-developed and validated instructional framework (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2007, 2012), it is essential that advocacy initiatives focus on school librarians implementing an authentic and powerful inquiry-centered pedagogy empowering learners to become expert consumers of information and producers of knowledge. This goes beyond teaching a schema of skills. Rather, it is developing knowledge building capabilities: activating prior knowledge, building excitement, interest and motivation for learning, building background knowledge, generating meaningful questions to research, developing research capabilities, producing knowledge through engage information analysis and synthesis, and reflecting on process and outcomes.

One of the emerging concepts from the New Jersey studies (Todd, Gordon, & Lu, 2010, 2012) and CiSSL's current study examining collaborative inquiry in digital environments is that of social justice (Todd & Dadlani, 2013). Considerable attention is currently being given to this concept in library arenas, as well as a broader focus on empowerment for social, cultural & personal agency, diversity, and participatory communities. In light of this, it seems timely to center some advocacy focus on how school libraries constitute and advance social justice. This approach situates school libraries not merely as entities in the school, but as part of broader information and education functions in the community. While there are multiple interpretations of social justice, at its heart is the belief that all people deserve equal social, political and economic rights, treatment and opportunities and that even at the cost of broader social welfare, such rights should not be foregone (Rawls, 1971). Concepts such as freedom of information and access to resources have long been central to professional practice of libraries. Given the substantive discourse surrounding the future of libraries and their perceived value in society (for example, the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) conference in 2015 is titled: "Mirrors and Windows: Reflections on Social Justice and Reimagining LIS Education.")

We examined the extent to which social justice concepts and principles were embedded in the narratives surrounding effective high school libraries that were part of the New Jersey Phase 2 study (Dadlani & Todd, 2013). The analysis revealed the predominance of four social justice categories embedded in the broader social justice scholarship:

- (1) Utilitarianism: This category refers to strategies which support the greatest good for the greatest number. For example, teachers made decisions to use collaboration between the teacher and librarian to provide equitable access to information, instructional expertise and personal attention through a division of labor.

- (2) Equity of Resources: In this category, teachers spoke about how time and the variety and quantity of technological resources (including both individual experts as well as physical equipment) either helped them in achieving more equal treatment of their students (in the cases where these resources were available) or hindered them (where the resources were “wished” for).
- (3) Equity of Access to Advantage: This category centered on creating opportunities for lifelong learning. Teachers saw the school library, its leadership and its resources as lifelong and welfare-based, and as such, would enable their students, and indeed themselves, to deal with 21<sup>st</sup> century information and technology complexities beyond the school environment
- (4) Equality of Capabilities: This category focused on school libraries providing equal opportunities to those who are disadvantaged through not having access to resources outside of school as well as providing a comfortable and safe environment in which one could elicit the particular help required on an individual level

Essentially the social justice dimension of advocacy highlights the vital interconnection between school libraries society, learning, living and working. The school library provides equitable access to resources, technology, and information / instructional services that are at times not available in homes, creating an equitable information environment for all. It is a place where students can explore diverse topics, even controversial topics, in privacy and without interruption, knowing that the information they access is trustworthy. It is a place where they can retreat and work without interruption and intervention by other students without any kind of threat, and a place where they can obtain individual mentoring as needed, and special needs addressed, without any kind of judgment. This is social justice at work.

## **Conclusion**

A review of these research findings provides us with opportunities to calibrate and refine the traditional basis for school library advocacy initiatives. Guiding this are five ideas that emerge from this review. First, articulate a culture of help, in the context of particular school needs that addresses the complexities of real school challenges especially in relation to curriculum reform initiatives, such as the CCSS in the USA. Second, elaborate, with specific evidence, the outcomes enabled through the school library, using language of the school’s curriculum initiatives. Target these to the research and knowledge building capacities that demonstrate sustained engagement with information to build deep knowledge. Third, given the complex discourses, at least in the USA, around quality teaching, document, with detailed examples, the instructional agenda of the school librarian implementing an inquiry-based pedagogy that articulates knowledge-building processes. Fourth, highlight school libraries as pedagogical and information centers that enact and enable social justice through the provision of an equitable information environment for all. It was Harold Howe, former U.S. Commissioner of Education who said: “What a school thinks about its library is a measure of what it feels about education” (<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/library>).

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