



Public Libraries
New South Wales -
Country

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SUBMISSION FROM PUBLIC LIBRARIES NSW – COUNTRY TO THE INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL LIBRARIES AND TEACHER LIBRARIANS IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

Introduction

Public Libraries NSW – Country (PLNSWC) represents the interests of public libraries and their users in regional and rural New South Wales. It has 116 members comprising local government authorities and regional library services from across country NSW. The Association has a vital interest in improving library services and access to information resources for all people living in regional areas through a range of initiatives, joint ventures and partnerships.

Committee members may find it strange that a submission to an inquiry into school libraries and teacher-librarians should be received from a peak body representing public libraries.

However, in rural and regional communities across NSW, and indeed the rest of the nation, the relationship between schools, their libraries and teacher-librarians, and the public library network is a significant contributor to educational outcomes for Australian children.

The School Environment

In country New South Wales, all public schools have a library, however small, and an allocation of teacher-librarian time, be it as short as 2 hours per week. This is not necessarily the case for diocesan or other independent schools, who may call upon the local public library for their information needs in the absence of a library and a teacher-librarian.

In public schools, while a staff member may be appointed to the position of teacher-librarian, that staff member may not be qualified in the field, since fractional appointments may be combined to allow for the appointment of a teacher for a longer period across the school week. These staff members often undertake further study at their own expense in order to upskill themselves to undertake the specialist role.

That role of teacher-librarian is essential within a modern school. With the demands of interpreting information which are being placed upon students across the spectrum, information literacy instruction is essential. Such instruction provides students with skills to:

- Search out information sources;
- Critically evaluate those sources for accuracy and authoritative status;
- Search within the sources for relevant data;
- Extract and synthesise that data in response to an assessment task or other project; and
- Prepare and publish the data in the form of an information report or similar document, either in print or electronic form.

These skills apply whether the student is working with a printed document or an electronic information source.

The teacher-librarian is the person within the school who has the knowledge and skills to undertake the specialist instruction which is required in these areas. While many generalist teachers are aware of the skills required, the pressures of a broad curriculum in primary schools and the heavy subject demands in secondary schools do not permit those teachers to adequately teach the information skills required. In those schools which do not possess a teacher-librarian, the skills are likely to be imperfectly taught.

The influence of the teaching, or not, of these skills flows over into the public library network. Students who are given some instruction in information skills can navigate the resources of the public library network with some ease, whereas students who have not had the benefit of such instruction require intensive support from public library staff, who do not possess the necessary training in teaching skills effectively to provide that instructional support.

The teacher-librarian's other principal role within a school is collection-building to support the educational curriculum. This specialist role calls upon the teacher-librarian to evaluate and select resources appropriate to the age and ability level of the students, and, in conjunction with the classroom teacher to design educational programs which will use those resources to their best effect. The teacher-librarian may also be the information technology coordinator for the school, responsible for the management of the school's computer network, and for the provision of electronic resources, whether in the form of networked software or of web-based data. This latter role requires particularly careful selection and management to ensure that the materials provided are appropriate to the developmental stage of the students, that the cultural and educational background of the resources is suitable for Australian schools and is safe for students at appropriate stages of development to view.

In schools without libraries or teacher-librarians, these resource demands fall upon the public library network, and local government is called upon to provide resources which more appropriately should be funded by education systems. In many country communities around New South Wales, public libraries have purchased resources such as sets of graded or remedial readers in order to support the literacy programs of their local schools. In other places, public library staff visit local schools to provide briefing sessions to teachers on the availability of information databases, for which schools do not have the funds to subscribe. Throughout the public library network, through liaison with their teacher-librarian colleagues, public library network staff are involved in the selection and delivery of resources which may not be available within the school but are essential to the educational program of the school.

The Public Library Environment

The retention of appropriately qualified and skilled teacher-librarians in the school system is critical to the ongoing ability of public libraries to continue fulfilling their important out-of-school educative role. All public libraries have high levels of use for education and training, to the extent of functioning as an additional arm of the compulsory and post-compulsory educational infrastructure. This is an unfunded mandate.

Public libraries also have a strong history of delivering of pre-school literacy programs to establish the foundations of reading and learning. These growing expectations of public libraries as secondary education support agencies continues to place the sector under pressure – particularly given that public libraries receive no funding from the education sector to undertake this role. To reduce the skill-development that school teacher-librarians provide to students would place public libraries in the untenable position of becoming research educators. There is simply no capacity available in the public library network to undertake this role, meaning that students may never have access to the all-important lifelong skill of “research”.

School students are significant users of public libraries, major consumers of information technology, and hold social attitudes that are often different from other groups in our community. Education approaches have changed and the NSW Board of Studies now promotes cooperative learning, research and group interaction. This has had a marked effect on public libraries, with many libraries filled each afternoon with school students undertaking research projects, working on joint projects with fellow students, and discussing project approaches and outcomes.

Students use public libraries to access information when their schools are closed or when school library resources do not meet their needs. To meet this demand many libraries have developed homework help services for students K-12 including dedicated staff and access to online databases.

Some libraries subscribe to Your Tutor, an online, interactive homework help service, in order to provide a high level of assistance to these clients. Such innovative, virtual projects are particularly important to country students living outside the major centres whose access to the physical library is limited by the necessity to catch the school bus home. Even if they live in smaller, satellite communities the limited opening hours of many branch libraries restricts access. For example:

- Riverina Regional Library (Wagga Wagga) launched Your Tutor, in July 2007. Your Tutor can be accessed at all 12 branches of the Riverina Regional Library which cover 9 Councils in a 25,000 sq km footprint with 105,000 residents. This service has been well received which is good news; however the demand does place a strain on staff at small branches – especially single staff libraries. The Library's ability to maintain this service (annual subscription of \$6,000) in future years will be directly related to funding that is available to support demand. The service offers rural and remote students access to expert homework support that would not otherwise be available in small and isolated communities

Still other libraries offer special programs for HSC students.

- Monaro Regional Library and Information Service (Cooma) visits schools across the region and teaches students how to search on-line subscription databases available free to library members. This is particularly important for students who live on remote properties and therefore do not have the opportunity to visit the library after school.

The public library network is, by default, an essential component of initiatives such as the Premier's Reading Challenge. The Challenge has impacted on public libraries without any recognition for the critical role that they play in supporting this high profile state-wide program and with no government funding. Without public libraries the effectiveness of the Challenge would be greatly compromised. In 2006 40% of all books borrowed by children completing the Challenge were borrowed from public libraries. When taking the borrowings of those children who did not complete the Challenge into account this percentage would be significantly increased.

In order to meet demand many libraries have been forced to allocate funds to buying books on the Challenge reading list, to the exclusion of purchasing other more appropriate resources for the community. In addition, considerable staff time is spent in cataloguing, processing and affixing special labels to identify books from the Challenge book list. This scenario is repeated to varying degrees (depending on the size of the library) in all public libraries across the state. Although fewer books may be processed in small rural libraries, the impact on resource consumption may be greater when only one or two staff members are available to run the library.

The public library provides the initial pre-school building block of introduction to reading and books for teachers to build on once the child reaches school. In addition to the traditional storytime sessions offered by libraries there is a growing focus on early childhood reading programs for 0-5 year olds. Baby Rhyme and Read programs for new-borns are common across the state, giving new parents the skills to read and learn with their children. This is enhanced by activities such as the "Little Big Day Out" at Wagga Wagga, a festival of storytelling, literacy activities, etc or the annual town wide Reading Day at Parkes which reinforces the importance of literacy in building a smart community.

Baby Bounce programs reinforce Families First, the NSW Government's prevention and early intervention strategy, to help parents give their children a good start in life. In particular these programs address the Families First aims of helping parents to build their skills and confidence in their parenting.

As well as playing a part in the formal education process public libraries are increasingly finding themselves caught up in the growth of lifelong learning. This philosophy recognises that people continue to learn and want to learn throughout their lives. Our libraries support this through the provision of non fiction material accessible to the layperson, facilities for classes and support material and services for book clubs.

The many and varied services that public libraries provide to students from all ages – from pre-school to HSC and beyond – are complemented and supported by a strong school library system that depends on the retention of qualified and skilled teacher-librarians. Any dilution of the quality and availability of the skills that students acquire through the school library promises to initiate a slippery slope for the capacity of public libraries to fulfil their current role as secondary research educators. There is simply no more juice in the lemon.

Conclusion

Thus, the provision of an adequate school library network is essential to a balanced system of information delivery to Australian country schools, and to ensuring that local government is not burdened by the necessity to provide resources which should be funded by other government instrumentalities.

The school library network should be staffed by appropriately-trained professionals. Already the role of the teacher-librarian is under threat, with principals in some schools across Australia being given the authority to "trade-in" a teacher-librarian's position for that of a library technician in order to provide for the appointment of a teacher in another area of the curriculum. The most recent example of this has been in a workplace trial within New South Wales, which has until now been the model for effective school library service. While this is a salary saving, it takes away the instructional element of the position along with the professional knowledge of the selection process which is essential to collection-building. The absence of these skills may lead to deterioration in the provision of library services within schools, and increased pressure on the public library network.

Teacher-librarianship is a post-graduate qualification, with personnel needing to demonstrate effective teaching skills for a period prior to enrolling in training for the librarianship component. This has provided many highly competent teachers with an interesting career path, retaining them in the profession when child-rearing or other pressures may have led them to leave. However, like many other professions, the workforce is ageing, and the number of opportunities to retrain is declining, with many courses closing down over recent years. There is a need to provide more retraining opportunities, either through tertiary education or through in-service training by education systems.

Given the Australian Government's focus on literacy as a key target for improvement in the outcomes for Australian students, the provision of a quality school library network, staffed by professionals trained in both teaching and librarianship, is an essential element in the nationwide improvement process within school education. Public libraries can provide some support to students, but teacher-librarianship and the availability of quality school information resources are essential to the development of well-informed, information-literate, critically astute citizens for 21st-century Australia.

Councillor Graham Smith

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