

Submission to:
**Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools
by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and
Employment**

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the *Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools* by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment. The Inquiry addresses important issues that are central to the long-term improvement of Australian education.

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) represents 7,200 Government, Catholic and Independent principals.

1. What is a high quality school library?

The Australian Primary Principals Association believes that all schools, including primary schools should have a functioning library. Consistent with recent practice, that library should include hard-copy books, audio and video resources, digital resources, and online access to a wider range of resources than can be housed in every school. The school should determine accessions to the school library with local control over resource issues.

This commitment does not, however, determine what is meant by a functioning library. It is important to note the role now played by the library (or resource centre) in many schools. The library is often the learning hub in a school as well as the key teacher resource centre. It should operate in partnership with class teachers, drawing on specialist skills (library, research, inquiry, ICT and pedagogical). It is the centre of student research in some schools, and is often closely involved in the development of information skills using web technologies as well as books and other resources. In many school libraries, information and communication technologies (ICTs) form a key element of the role of the library.

Good libraries are closely involved in supporting and helping shape the kind of learning that occurs in the classroom. Library personnel work with teachers to encourage and support innovative and engaging teaching. A good library will have an attachment to the lives of children: it will be a place where children can be inspired, and can lose themselves in an imaginative world. It will provide a key entry-point to the world of books and literature for some children.

School libraries can also be an important resource for the parent community and the broader community. In rural and remote communities, the school and its library constitute a key local resource. This role will be enhanced by the construction through the Building the Education Revolution program of new libraries, which local communities will expect to use.

While APPA's own data show that virtually all primary schools have a library of some sort, not all schools have a library of the kind described here (Angus et al, 2007: 62). APPA's research shows that some schools have texts and other

resources bar-coded to enable on-line catalogue searches. Other schools have class sets of computers in their libraries and focus on research skills to develop students' ICT skills as well as skills in printed text-based research and literacy (ibid: 53).

In some schools, and elsewhere in the educational community, however, conceptions of school libraries have not kept pace with best practice. There is no point in a school library with 10,000 books if they are not used in ways that enhance the educational experience of children and the capacity of teachers.

There is a need for work to be undertaken on the nature of a contemporary school library, what is required to provide a properly functioning library, and what role it can play in the life of a school.

The Inquiry should undertake or recommend the establishment of a project to redefine the nature of the high quality, contemporary school library and to expand the definition to include those elements that are present in best practice school libraries. The project should also address adequate levels of staffing and funding to meet the expectations raised by the enhanced definition of the role of the school library.

APPA is concerned that, while an enhanced definition of the nature of a high quality library is valuable, it will not in itself ensure that school libraries are adequately equipped, resourced and staffed to enact the definition. A further step involves the establishment of a national agreement to implement such a definition in all schools, so far as possible. While there are special difficulties in providing support for some schools (see below) the starting principle should be the entitlement of all young Australians to receive the benefits offered by a high quality school library in the course of their primary school education.

2. How should school libraries be staffed?

APPA notes the support expressed by the Chair of the Inquiry for the value of teacher librarians. APPA endorses this view. The Association regards it as essential that all schools have access to trained and qualified staff to undertake both the broad educational roles of the library and to deliver administrative and management functions.

APPA's research provides important data about the staffing of libraries in primary schools. The research, published as *In the Balance*, involved detailed analysis of data from a structured random sample of 160 Australian primary schools. The work was conducted by researchers from Edith Cowan University and the Australian Council for Educational Research and published in 2007.

This work showed that 61% of primary schools had a teacher librarian. This was the most common specialist position in schools, but was on average allocated only two days per week (0.41 FTE). The greatest allocation for teacher librarians across all the surveyed primary schools was 1.4 FTE. The research also shows that:

In some systems, policies that promote more local decision making allow the position of teacher librarian to be downgraded to a non-teacher-trained library assistant position. There is an incentive to do this if the salary savings can be utilised elsewhere in the school. There was evidence that some of the schools in the study had made this choice (ibid: 53).

Schools have a limited number of specialist staff, and often these are allocated on a part-time basis. It should be noted that allocation of a specialist position to the library will usually mean that a school forgoes other specialist positions such as curriculum leadership, subject specialists, special needs support, ICT support, music or languages. APPA's data shows that many schools, as indicated in other submissions received by the Inquiry, are making do with library technicians, teacher aides or library officers. Some schools have no professional staffing in their libraries. This situation is likely to be exacerbated by the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, which will require many primary schools to take on new or expanded subject responsibilities in areas such as languages, history, geography and science. These areas will be regarded as having priority for the allocation of the limited pool of specialists in some schools. There is a reasonable probability that library staffing is likely to suffer in the reallocation process.

A further limitation on the appointment of staff to school libraries concerns the difficulty in recruiting qualified teacher librarians. There is a limited availability of qualified staff, especially in outer metropolitan, rural and remote schools and, as noted below, in schools experiencing educational disadvantage. In such schools, the determination of the specialist staffing profile can be affected by the knowledge that even if a teacher librarian position is allocated, it is likely to be difficult to fill.

APPA's starting point, however, is that if all schools have (or ought to have) a functioning library, then all schools need qualified staff to ensure that the library performs the educational and social roles for which it is established. This should not be subject to staffing negotiation or trade-offs, any more than an allocation of literacy specialists would be traded off against other needs. A functioning library is at the heart of a school's core business.

The Association does not, however, argue that this necessarily means schools can only operate with a fully-qualified a teacher librarian. Though this may be the most effective model, the key is to identify the important functions for which specialist staffing is needed. We take the view that there are, in broad terms, three kinds of function the library should serve:

- General educational support, including advice on the use of resources, linking resources to classroom teaching, supporting inquiry approaches, assisting with teacher research, literacy support, working closely with classroom personnel to improve and expand the range of teaching and resource use and engaging children with books, resources and ideas.
- Provision of leadership in the implementation and effective use of 21st century information and communication technologies, including the

development of information, research and inquiry skills among staff and children.

- Technical and administrative support, including such elements as cataloguing, shelving, accessioning, managing loans, budget management and stock control.

Contemporary teacher librarians would claim expertise in each of these areas, and in larger schools with well-established libraries, would be responsible for managing staff undertaking some or all of these roles. In other schools, and especially smaller and less well-resourced schools, the roles might be split, though with some overlap in responsibilities. The general educational roles (eg linking resources with teaching and supporting classroom-based inquiry) are suitable for an outstanding inquiry-based teacher with contemporary literacy leadership skills and literary knowledge. A specialist teacher in the use of ICT in education could undertake the second category. A library technician could undertake most of the third category. This model offers additional flexibility which can assist schools in overcoming recruitment difficulties for experienced and qualified teacher librarians, and in the allocation of scarce specialist resources.

A central element is the need for a key member of staff who understands the broad contemporary role of the school library and can ensure that to the extent possible this is delivered in the school. This should usually be a teacher librarian.

The Inquiry should support the proposition that every school library, if it is to be effective, requires adequate staffing covering the range of education, ICT and technical roles.

3. How should school libraries be funded?

There is considerable evidence that schools provide widely differing levels of funding to their libraries. A survey by the Children's Book Council of Australia of 127 schools receiving substantial funding for libraries through the Building the Education Revolution program showed that 66% of schools with a new BER library have an annual library budget below \$10,000, 30% were below \$5000 and 3% under \$1000. These are schools with new library facilities, so they might be expected to have invested additional resources. The submission to the Inquiry from The Hub: Campaign for Quality School Libraries in Australia showed that one in six schools have an annual budget of under \$1000 for library resources. The likelihood is that these are virtually all primary schools given the relative sizes of primary and secondary schools. There is also a report of a survey showing that library funding in primary schools ranges from \$1 per child to \$71 per child.

In part, this wide range is due to the lack of discretionary resources available to many schools and competing demands for the use of those resources. Schools do not usually receive dedicated funding for library resources (or for staffing: see above). As a result, library funding depends on local allocations between those different demands. In schools without qualified staff in their libraries, there is likely to be an equivalent weakness in funding. There may also be some lack of

comparability in what counts as library funding, since some schools provide ICT funding as part of a library budget, whereas others have separate budgets for the two areas. The Inquiry could usefully (possibly as part of the project proposed in 1 above) collect accurate data about the funding of school libraries, identifying both the range of funding and its sources.

These data suggest that there are serious disparities in the quantum of resources available for library resources in different schools. APPA is not aware of an agreed public criterion for per-child funding, or for the minimum level of funding required to sustain a library in any school. These matters should be addressed in the project proposed under 1 above.

The Inquiry should investigate the current situation with regard to the funding of school libraries through the project proposed in 1 above. It should also propose minimum funding levels required to sustain a school library, and per-child funding levels required to deliver on the range of expectations for the contemporary school library.

4. The need for nationally-agreed guidelines

If all Australian primary schools had access to the kind of library described above, staffed by qualified personnel able to provide the range of services discussed, there would be a substantial improvement in the educational experience of many young Australians. This improvement will not occur, however, unless governments and system and sector authorities and agencies accept responsibility for working with schools to enact the definition of a high quality school library and to provide adequate staffing to enable it to be delivered in each school. State and territory government agencies have mostly sharply reduced the level and range of central support provided to school libraries over the past two decades. There have been reductions in the numbers of school library advisory staff, the range of library support services provided, and in commitments to dedicated cataloguing services.

APPA believes that the Inquiry should address this issue directly by supporting the development of nationally agreed guidelines on the provision of school libraries. These guidelines should be developed with the participation of relevant educational authorities and agencies, and should determine provision, resourcing and staffing criteria that need to be met if all schools are to have effectively functioning libraries.

The Inquiry should support the development of nationally-agreed guidelines for the adequacy of school libraries. These guidelines should include criteria for the level and kinds of resources needed in libraries, budget and staffing requirements, the roles libraries can play in schools and the levels and kinds of support needed by school libraries from external sources. The Commonwealth Government should seek the support of state and territory agencies and sector authorities for the development and endorsement of these guidelines.

5. Special issues affecting small, remote and hard-to-staff schools

Even the flexible staffing model outlined above and a set of nationally-agreed guidelines, however, will not overcome the challenges facing many small and remote primary schools. Some schools have only one teacher, others have in effect no discretionary specialist teaching resources to allocate to library services and no incentive to use discretionary resources in this way. They may also not have the financial flexibility to engage a library technician, even if such staff were available in small and remote communities.

Schools in this situation, which make up a significant proportion of Australia's primary schools, will never be able to make effective provision for a functioning library entirely within their own resources. *In the Balance* noted that '...governments fund primary schools on a pragmatic basis without reference to resource standards...' (ibid: 105), and small and remote primary schools are affected most seriously by this approach. There is no doubt that these schools, if they are to offer their children the kinds of opportunities that are routinely available in larger and metropolitan schools, need differential funding dedicated to such hard-to-provide services as school libraries.

In the interim, there are measures the Inquiry could consider. Increasingly, communications technologies are available which could enable the provision of external support for the provision of some library services to small and remote schools. Support can be provided to staff in these schools online and via video-conferencing, for example. Schools can be clustered to share resources. Smaller schools can be partnered with larger, better-resourced schools. Library aides, who might be available where teacher librarians and trained technicians are not available, could be supported and provided with training to enable them to improve the quality of library services provided in such schools. While these measures will not solve the problem, they could help ameliorate it.

Some of these services will only be feasible if education authorities and agencies reinstate and maintain central support capacity for school libraries. The dramatic reductions in numbers of centrally-employed library support staff in the past two decades has meant that even if there were the will to provide more substantial support to small and remote schools, the capacity no longer exists. It is APPA's view that the responsibility of education authorities to provide such support at realistic levels should be a part of the nationally-agreed guidelines referred to above.

It is not APPA's position that all schools would be able to offer their children exactly the same form of library services. We recognize the need for a realistic approach to provision in remote locations and to small institutions. Our view is, however, that all children are entitled to access to an adequate library and in some form to the kinds of services provided by a good school library, including access to educational resources and technologies, research opportunities and the chance to gain information management and inquiry skills. The issue is how these services can be realistically provided in the range of Australian primary school settings.

There is a separate set of issues, though sometimes overlapping, affecting disadvantaged and hard-to-staff schools. These include many schools that are large and located in metropolitan and regional centres but which, for demographic and other reasons find it difficult to attract teacher librarians, library technicians and other staff. Students in these schools are entitled to support to ensure that they have access to the same level and kind of library services as their peers in more advantaged schools.

In this case, the issue is largely one of equity. A disproportionate number of children in disadvantaged schools come from homes where books are not easily and freely available, where reading for pleasure is not automatically part of the environment. For these children, school libraries and schools may be the only real opportunity they have to gain access to a rich literary culture. Governments and education systems have a particular obligation to ensure that children in these schools gain effective access to school libraries. In these schools, wherever it is feasible, mechanisms should be put in place, including additional resourcing, to ensure the availability of teacher librarian and other specialist library support. The school library is a key mechanism for ‘closing the gap’ for these children.

The Inquiry should take note of the particular difficulties experienced by small and remote primary schools, and support the provision of enhanced resources dedicated to library services for these schools and a range of additional support mechanisms of the kind described above.

In addition, the nationally-agreed guidelines proposed above should include the provision of adequate resources to small and remote schools, and of additional support to disadvantaged and hard-to-staff schools to enable them to provide adequate library services.

6. National support for school libraries

On the basis of the work this submission proposes to the Inquiry, APPA suggests a further step. School libraries should now play a substantially enhanced role in delivering on the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*. It is timely to establish a national program to support all schools to strengthen and broaden the work of their libraries, to build on the outstanding contribution made by the Building the Education Revolution program through the construction of about 3000 school libraries.

Nimon, writing in *The Australian Library Journal* in 2003, noted that Commonwealth interventions to develop school libraries led to the expenditure of about \$200 million between 1969 and 1980, matched approximately equally by spending at the state and local levels. This period took Australia from a condition in the 1960s which, according to Nimon, showed ‘a parlous gap between the actual and the desirable in Australian school libraries’ to one in which virtually all Australian schools had a library (Nimon, 2003).

It is arguable that there is now an equivalent requirement. It is no longer enough for all schools to have a library. The greatly enhanced role of the best practice

library in acting as the learning hub within the school (see 1 above) is not yet reflected in the practice of a significant proportion of Australian schools. The role of the school library in integrating literacy, literature, inquiry, information management and information skills means that it is at the heart of 21st century education. Unless Australian school libraries are able to play this range of roles effectively, a generation of children in some schools will fail to gain the maximum benefit from their education.

The building of school libraries through the BER has raised the profile of libraries in schools, but it will also raise questions about staffing and resourcing. The new libraries are very different from old libraries established with Commonwealth funding in 1970s: they have small teaching spaces and ICT facilities, but less space for books. This will require a significant change in the way schools plan for and use their libraries. It is not yet clear that schools are well equipped to undertake this transformation.

The requirement for changed practice will be further emphasised by the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. In primary schools, the curriculum will require access to new resources to support the teaching of additional and expanded courses and subjects. Primary schools have traditionally had a strong focus on literacy and numeracy. The new curriculum requires the maintenance of this focus along with the incorporation of more dedicated attention to history, science, geography, the arts and languages. If teachers are to meet the expectations of the curriculum, they will need good quality resource support and professional advice from trained teacher librarians or other expert library staff

Change is also implied in the enhanced role of school libraries in the roll-out of ICTs in schools. Good libraries now have a key role in ICT access and support. They are integrated with staff across the school and work in partnership to enhance the use of ICTs in the curriculum. Libraries need integrated resources, an emphasis on information skills and web search skills, good connectivity, access to online resources, Intranet capacity and an ability to support cross-school and remote (even international) interaction. The progressive rollout of the National Broadband Network (NBN) will also require schools with the capacity to harness the additional capacity and functionality for educational purposes. These needs will all place significant new demands on many school libraries.

APPA urges the Inquiry to support a further major Commonwealth intervention aimed at strengthening and enhancing the capacity of Australian school libraries. This could occur through National Partnerships or as a dedicated funding program. Building on the development, and supporting the implementation of nationally-agreed guidelines (see 4 above), the Commonwealth Government should establish a program, working with states and territories and education system and sector agencies, to ensure that school libraries in Australia are the best in the world, and that they can meet the range of challenges they now face. This should include attention to enhanced training opportunities for teacher librarians and other library staff, and to the development of enhanced library software management systems that are in many cases outdated.

The Inquiry should recommend the establishment of a further major Commonwealth initiative to enhance and strengthen Australian school libraries to ensure that they can play their proper role in the implementation of 21st century education.

7. Other issues

APPA supports a strong focus in primary schools on raising standards of literacy, and there is no doubt that an effective school library is a key element in school-based literacy initiatives. There are concerns amongst primary school principals, however, that the current focus on lifting literacy standards could have an unintended negative consequence on student engagement with literature. This engagement, including storytelling and reading to and with children, has a strong place in the primary school classroom and library personnel including teacher librarians have played a key role in the establishment of reading and literature at the heart of primary education. It is important to ensure that the focus on raising literacy standards does not mean a loss of the richer literary experiences for which schools are also responsible, and for which libraries are a key resource.

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