

19 April 2010

Justin Baker
The Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training
PO Box 6021
Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Baker

Re: Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians in Australian Schools

Thank you for your letter dated 18 March 2010 inviting ACER's input to the Parliamentary Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians in Australian Schools.

As an organisation dedicated to educational research we have a deep understanding of educational theory and school-based reality. ACER has undertaken research of direct relevance to the present inquiry, most notably through the work of Dr Michele Lonsdale. This research concluded that student outcomes are enhanced when school libraries are adequately staffed, resourced and funded, and are supported by a strong computer network that makes resources available throughout the school's learning spaces (Lonsdale 2003). Earlier research also identified extensive use of school libraries as a significant variable associated with literacy achievement (Masters and Forster, 1997).

The impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians

Through the *Digital Education Revolution* initiative, the Government has made a clear commitment to the digital learning environment for school communities. What is less clear, however, is where the expertise and capacity are expected to reside within schools that will drive the organisational and cultural change required to ensure all staff and students are able to utilise and fully benefit from this new technology. Currently, IT staff are predominantly occupied with hardware maintenance, school management staff have multiple commitments on and off site, and teaching staff have limited time available outside their subject areas.

Given the time and forum, Teacher Librarians are in a strong position to take a leadership role in building a digitally literate school community. Libraries create a physical and virtual hub for current information and archives. They build relationships with their users to tailor resources to cater for specific subject, support cross-curricular teaching, and meet individual interests and needs.

Teacher Librarians are well placed to inform school leaders about usage guidelines and cyber-safety policy. They are able to offer in-house expertise and training in information literacy for students, teachers, other staff and parents and will have a key role to play in

supporting the Government's upcoming *ICT Proficiency Project* focus on ICT skills assessment.

However, where Teacher Librarians are required to take on increasing teaching allotments, or where semi-skilled staff are engaged to deliver library services, this potential is unlikely to be realised (Bonanno, 2008).

Library education has recognised the need to better understand end user needs, to focus more on service delivery user support, and to fully utilise technology in proactive and sustainable ways to ensure access for all users. New graduates enter the teacher-librarian profession having developed skills and experience in selecting, evaluating and organising digital and print media. Existing staff utilise their networks to update their repertoire of skills and to share best practices. Having dedicated, trained staff within school libraries helps to provide equal opportunity for all students to develop the skills and access the information they need.

Library staff are connected to and supported by online learning communities and have a key role to play in supporting students and teachers to access relevant networks and to become independent and efficient information seekers and contributors. A forthcoming research publication by Lonsdale for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations investigated the enablers and inhibitors of evidence sharing by literacy and numeracy practitioners. The research highlighted that, although online networks offer valuable information and support for teachers, time constraints and variable ICT skill levels were inhibitors to widespread ICT uptake by teachers. There is clearly a role for Teacher-Librarians in bridging this skills gap as part of a whole-school approach to information literacy.

Further local research, including outcomes focused and evidence-based studies, will provide greater insight into existing and future learning needs within school communities. Such studies will raise critical awareness of the contribution, value and potential of school libraries and teacher librarians in anticipating and responding to these needs in building information literate school communities. The need for Teacher Librarians and school libraries is greater in today's information age than previously because teacher-librarians are information specialists.

Yours sincerely

Professor Geoff Masters
Chief Executive Officer

References:

Bonanno, K 2008, 'Managing and servicing the information needs of a digital school', *Leading a digital school: principles and practice*, M Lee and M Gaffney (eds), ACER Press, Melbourne, pp 132-145.

Lonsdale, M 2010, 'Scoping Study to Investigate Online Learning Environments to Facilitate Evidence Sharing by Literacy and Numeracy Practitioners (LNET project)', DEEWR, forthcoming.

Lonsdale, M 2003, *Impact of school libraries on student achievement: a review of the research*, ALIA,

Masters, G and Forster, M 1997, *Mapping Literacy Achievement: Results of the 1996 National School English Literacy Survey*, ACER. Melbourne.