

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into the progress and future direction of life-long learning

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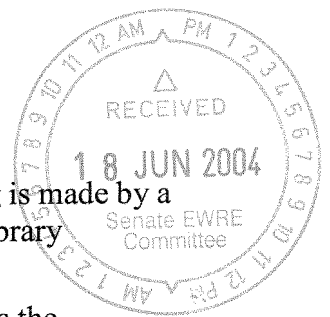
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This submission regarding the progress and future direction of life-long learning is made by a professional association well-placed to comment on such matters: the School Library Association of South Australia.

We believe it is the work of schools, and teacher librarians in particular, that lays the foundation for life-long learning. Teacher librarians not only play a vital role in developing the learning to learn skills before students leave school, they also work effectively with other teachers and adults in the local community to develop and maintain their learning skills as well. Indeed in some country areas, where the teacher librarians provide services and support in the school-community library, their influence can almost literally be from cradle to grave.

As the 2003 Senate Inquiry into the impact of libraries in the online environment¹ said,

"A common refrain was the lack of recognition library services receive for the valuable role they play in the community. Libraries are merely taken for granted, not valued. Sadly, the Committee has to concur that this is the case. Amongst some sections of the populace, there remains the perception that all libraries do is lend books. The reality is far different. Particularly in rural and regional Australia, the library is in some cases the one remaining piece of infrastructure so it takes on the role of technology access centre, meeting place, social support system."(Commonwealth of Australia, 2003)

There is no shortage of policies espousing the importance of school libraries and teacher librarians in developing life-long learning skills, for example:

- The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century² states that students leaving Australian schools should:

"be confident, creative and productive users of new technologies, particularly information and communication technologies, and understand the impact of those technologies on society" (Goal 1.6). (MCEETYA, 1999)

- Policy Statement - Teacher librarians in Australia³. Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and Australian School Library Association (ASLA) 2003

"Lifelong learning for all citizens is one of the stated aims of Australian education authorities. It is acknowledged that to participate fully in an information society, students need to be information literate.

Teacher librarians support and implement the vision of their school communities through advocating and building effective library and information services and programs that contribute to the development of lifelong learners."
(ALIA / ASLA, 2003)

¹ Commonwealth of Australia (2003) Libraries in the online environment.

http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita_ctte/online_libraries/report/index.htm

² The Adelaide Declaration (1999) MCEETYA <http://www.curriculum.edu.au/mceetya/nationalgoals>

³ Policy Statement - Teacher librarians in Australia. (2003) Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and Australian School Library Association (ASLA)
http://www.asla.org.au/policy/p_tlaust.htm

While policies are in place, their implementation is more problematic. As a case in point, the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accessibility framework (SACSA) reflected those National Goals for Schooling when it introduced the concept of *Essential Learnings*⁴ that:

“...form an integral part of children’s and students’ learning from Birth to Year 12 and beyond. They are resources which are drawn upon throughout life and enable people to productively engage with changing times as thoughtful, active, responsive and committed local, national and global citizens.” (DECS, 2001)

South Australian government schools receive a specific staffing allocation for teacher librarians to support and collaborate with classroom teachers in the explicit teaching of these skills. Reality falls far short of that ideal for the following reasons:

- Ageing workforce and shortage of qualified teacher librarians in some areas
- Employment of library paraprofessionals in place of teacher librarians in schools
- Cutting back of university courses offering a teacher librarianship specialisation
- Lack of systemic support for training/professional development of teacher librarians

An Australian Education Union survey⁵ of South Australian government school library staffing in 2001 found that:

“Of 303 work sites that responded, 107 had school libraries that were staffed below the formula, and 109 had staff without teacher librarian qualifications. Apart from those very small schools with no teacher librarian entitlement, a third of school libraries around the state are understaffed and/or staffed with unqualified personnel.” (Spence, 2002)

World wide research⁶ has provided evidence of how much difference school libraries, staffed with qualified teacher librarians who collaborate with teachers, can make to student achievement and their development of life-long learning skills. Our own Education Minister in South Australia referred to this research⁷ when she stated:

“...school libraries can help improve student achievement, and test scores are higher when there is higher usage of the school library. It also found that libraries can make a positive difference to students’ self-esteem, confidence, independence and sense of responsibility in regards to their own learning.” (Lomax-Smith, 2004)

There is an urgent need to improve this situation – where school libraries are understaffed or staffed with unqualified people - which is by no means confined to South Australia. The lack of university courses or government supported training and development also requires consideration. In South Australia there is no university course in teacher librarianship. It would seem entirely appropriate that this Inquiry address the life-long learning and training of

⁴ DECS. South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accessibility framework – Essential Learnings (2001) http://www.sacsa.sa.edu.au/index_fsrc.asp?t=EL

⁵ Spence, Sue (2002), “Survey highlights major problems with library staffing” AEU Journal, SA branch, December 2002. Available online:

<http://www.teachers.ash.org.au/rblonline/Library/aeusurveyarticle.pdf>

⁶ Report on the Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement – References (2003)

<http://www.asla.org.au/research/references.htm>

⁷ Lomax-Smith, J. http://www.ministers.sa.gov.au/Media_frame.asp?choice=News

teacher librarians who can then play their part in developing the life-long learning of many, many others – a cost-effective ‘train the trainer’ strategy.

The lack of regional support is another barrier to school libraries and teacher librarians to effectively carry out their role in developing life-long learners. In South Australia regional advisers and district resource centres, that directly supported small country communities with resources and expertise, were dismantled in 1990. This has greatly disadvantaged our country communities and placed an even greater burden on the remaining school-community libraries. The re-introduction of such regional support services would be a positive move for the life-long learning of the rural population of Australia.

*Learning for the Future: developing information services in schools*⁸ describes the pivotal role of school libraries in attainment of this (and other) goals for all students, staff and local community.

"Well-resourced information services centres and ICT infrastructures are critical to developing information-literate students and lifelong learners."
(ASLA/ALIA, 2001)

The impact of the Internet and multimedia has been to place additional demands on the teacher to ensure that students not only have the mechanical skills to use these tools, but also the higher order thinking skills to select and evaluate information from electronic sources. While Information Technology can make locating information easier and quicker, the skills of finding the right information have become even more important – these are life-long learning skills as opposed to computer skills.

SLASA highlighted the impact of technologies such as the internet in our Role Statement⁹ for teacher librarians:

"As society moves into the age of information the skill of learning how to learn, and becoming critical consumers of information is increasingly important."(SLASA, 2003)

It is clear that technological developments, particularly the Internet, have made it both more viable and more vital that people develop the life-long learning skills of information literacy. It is also clear that teacher librarians and school libraries, when fully supported, can make a key contribution in laying the firm foundations for life-long learning within and beyond school.

The changing information needs of Australian schools and new modes of delivery of information services have had some negative impacts on school libraries, principally in the area of resourcing. Software and hardware are a major capital and maintenance cost to schools. The DECStech project in South Australia was instrumental in making it possible for many schools, who otherwise could not have afforded it, to go on-line. That was further facilitated by the department becoming the ISP for state schools (via SINA), even though schools continue to pay according to download volume. DECS has also been able to pass on the advantage of bulk software discounts to individual schools e.g. with Microsoft products. Class sizes are consistent across the majority of Australian schools, and thus the overall size of the school is largely irrelevant to the minimum number of access workstations required

⁸ Learning for the Future: developing information services in schools. 2nd ed (2001) Curriculum Corporation, p.55

⁹ SLASA.(2003) Teacher Librarian Role Statement. <http://www.slasa.asn.au/rolestatement.html>

when a class is using the school library. For small schools the ongoing costs to maintain computer networks can represent a significant proportion of their budget.

Whatever assistance the education authority provides in setting up the infrastructure, in every case the on-going costs of repairing, replacing and updating this equipment and software is borne by schools – a major impost to them. IT technicians have not been part of the staffing structure for many schools and the salaries demanded to provide the wide range of network, security, operating system, remote access and hardware support required by schools are beyond the budgets of many. There has thus been an expectation that existing Library support staff such as School Services Officers and Library Technicians will provide much of the technical and practical assistance to staff and students in the use of online technology and resources. The additional technical skills and knowledge required of these positions has not been accompanied by any reclassification or upgraded recognition.

Again the technology is available to improve and enhance the life-long learning skills of staff, students and local community alike. Teacher librarians are often ICT leaders in their communities and offer training and support to teaching colleagues and their local community, as well as students. Greater support for such teacher librarians, in the form of realistic staffing levels and improved recognition of skills and workloads, would be of benefit to all.

For further information and comment, we refer you to a previous submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Role of Libraries in the Online Environment:

http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/ecita_ctte/online_libraries/submissions/sub70.rtf .

Despite our submission, that Senate Inquiry omitted any reference to school libraries in its report and recommendations. We sincerely hope that this Inquiry will not dismiss or ignore school libraries, which provide information and learning services to such a large sector of the Australian community (students, their families and staff). Australia is in fact recognised as a world leader in the field of teacher librarianship and we would do well to build on that.