

Testimony – School Library Funding

Meeting of the Joint Task Force on Basic Education Finance
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Susan McBurney, Ph.D.

Co-Chair, Washington Coalition for School Libraries and Information Technology (WCS-Lit)

Good afternoon Chairman Grimm and members of the Joint Task Force.

I would first like to thank you for your public service and for your dedication to the children and schools of Washington State. As a group, you've committed to developing a stable education funding system that will bring world-class education to every school in the state. We appreciate all your efforts, and look forward to your final recommendations.

My name is Susan McBurney, and I am one of the three Spokane moms who founded the Washington Coalition for School Libraries and Information Technology two months ago. This grass-roots coalition grew out of a deep concern that the three of us had about what we saw happening to school library media programs in our own school district.

It didn't take long for us to discover that the cutbacks in teacher librarians in Spokane were related to larger state budget issues. The Washington State education budget, for instance, has never included a line item for K-12 school library media programs. In fact, school library media programs are not considered part of basic education.

In the past several years, school districts across the state have been reducing school library media services in order to balance their budgets. This has resulted in a variety of program cuts, including the elimination of teacher librarian positions, reductions of full-time positions to part-time, replacement of certified teacher librarians with aides, and deep cuts to funding for library materials. While this change has taken place over time, and while there are districts that continue to use local money to fully fund strong library media programs, the trend toward reducing library media programs is both clear and alarming.

In November we launched a state-wide petition to see if people in other communities shared our concerns. The response has been overwhelming – to date, over 3,500 Washington residents, from over 200 towns, have signed the petition asking for our state leadership to provide adequate and sustained funding for school library media programs.

Strong school libraries play an absolutely essential role in 21st century education. They provide quality materials and an environment that supports the individual, educational, and recreational reading needs of students and staff. Teacher librarians initiate and sustain collaborative planning and teaching which integrates information literacy into the curriculum. And teacher librarians foster a love of reading and life-long learning in children of all ages.

Fluency in reading, communicating, information processing and using technologies are the mainstay of the new economy. In schools, the teacher librarian is the *only* teaching professional who is fully dedicated to seeing that our children acquire these important 21st century skills.

Research has shown that in schools with strong library media programs, student achievement is higher, regardless of whether the communities are affluent or poor, whether the adults in the communities are well educated or not. By providing the technology, materials and training that will decrease the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', between the information rich and the information poor, school library media programs are an incredibly effective way of providing a more equitable education to all students.

Coalition members believe that Washington's public schools must graduate students who are information literate, technologically savvy, and impassioned skillful readers. We also believe that this can not be achieved if our school libraries continue to languish.

Fortunately, we are at a juncture of change here in Washington. Governor Gregoire has made education reform a priority; the Washington Learns Committee has developed a plan for transforming our education system in order to better prepare our children for the new economy; and you, the members of the Joint Task Force, are working to develop a new definition of basic education and a revised funding structure that will make world-class education a reality in Washington. Everyone knows this is going to cost money. Nevertheless, we believe that all parties involved are deeply and genuinely committed to redesigning and re-investing in education.

As you move forward in redefining what constitutes basic education, we ask that you include well-resourced and staffed libraries and full access to current technology as basic education rights for all children in the state.

Furthermore, we ask that adequate and sustained funding for school library media programs be included in your recommended funding formula.

Governor Gregoire has stated that the best way to grow our economy and secure a bright future for all students is to make smart, strategic, responsible and accountable investments in education. It is our belief that school library media programs are precisely this kind of investment. It's an investment that pays off for every person in a schoolhouse; it provides a CIO (Chief Information Officer) for the school, a collaborative partner for the teacher and principal, and a dedicated teacher who reaches every student in the school and provides one-on-one intervention for those children most in need as well as those most gifted. Indeed, school library funding is a down payment for quality education that our students, our communities, our state, and our businesses can not afford to miss.

On behalf of the Coalition for School Libraries and Information Technology, I thank you for your time, and for your service to the citizens of Washington.

Respectfully submitted,

Susan McBurney, Ph.D.

Co-Chair, Washington Coalition for School Libraries and Information Technology (WCS-Lit)

2308 South Manito Boulevard
Spokane, Washington 99203
509-747-0866

susan@fundourfuturewashington.org