

GUEST OPINION

Bring back librarians

They're key in helping kids find their way in the information revolution

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While most of Spokane was digging out of the snow two weeks ago, a grass-roots Spokane group, FundOurFutureWashington.org, was building support in Olympia and across the state to restore funding for professional librarians in Spokane District 81 schools.

Last summer the district was unable to find resources to restore the position cuts, which affect hundreds of Spokane schoolchildren this year. Since November, momentum has grown for restoring school librarians and enhancing information literacy through passage in Olympia of Senate Bill 6380 and House Bill 2773, which may come up for a vote this week. We should support them by joining Fund Our Future's online petition drive (FundOurFutureWashington.org) or by e-mailing our state senators and representatives now.

Funding school libraries is about promoting imagination, reading and information literacy. It is as important for personal growth as for gaining specific skills in finding and evaluating information. Librarians enhance learning across all subject fields and they play a crucial role in sparking the interests that our children pursue in their personal and career choices.

The educational opportunities open to our high school graduates are already shaped by the investment we make during the K-12 years. In my work as a college professor, I teach some of the incoming freshmen at Gonzaga our first philosophy course, Critical Thinking, which helps with the transition to college-level work.

This is one of the "front lines" in the information revolution. Here, on a year-by-year basis, my colleagues and I see the combined effects of K-12 preparation and the information revolution itself. We need to understand that information technology does not automatically make us good consumers of information. With the benefits of the greater availability of information comes a greater challenge in assessing and critically using information.

The ability to find and evaluate information and to assess the rationales for different points of view is as important for college students as it is for the average citizen, especially in a democracy. But without these skills, our students cannot progress as far in their studies. Among our college graduates are the next leaders in the community, business and government. They will face complex challenges that demand their best thinking, creativity and information skills. My effectiveness in preparing them for those challenges depends upon the work of primary and secondary school teachers, including qualified teaching librarians.

Stimulating interests in learning and making progress in information literacy skills are both central goals of certified K-12 librarians. The complexity of this mission has grown, not diminished, with the growth of information technology. This is exactly the time we should be increasing resources to promote these critical goals.

In the end, poor information literacy is a lot like being stuck in the snow. You spin your wheels trying to create, solve problems and make decisions, but you don't go anywhere. If we want our kids to be able get around competitively on the information highway, we need real librarians in our schools to teach them how to navigate.