

Fight for librarians on again

November 18, 2007

Last week, Lisa Layera Brunkan watched the dawn rise in the same brown yoga pants she'd been wearing for two days straight.

Night after night, she worked the mom's "swing shift of advocacy" with her friend Susan McBurney, as they prepared to influence members of a state education task force in Olympia tomorrow about the importance of employing a full-time, certified teacher librarian in every school in the state.

Brunkan and McBurney were two of the ringleaders of the group of young South Hill powerhouse moms I wrote about last summer who campaigned against cutting school library positions from the Spokane Schools annual budget.

Undaunted by the odds against them, these well-educated women relied on their previous professional experience – as a headhunter, a Ph.D. linguist and a CPA among others – to drum up at least 900 signatures on a petition and make impassioned arguments in front of the school board.

It was in August, at a computer in a campground in Canada during her family's summer vacation, that Brunkan learned the heartbreaking truth.

A fellow library advocate wrote Brunkan an e-mail with these searing words: "We lost." The school board voted to reduce 10 library positions to part time for this year.

For a month or so, Brunkan decided to lay low.

But in September, she was walking her children home from school when a car pulled over and out popped Spokane School Board President Christie Querna. They had a warm chat. School Superintendent Nancy Stowell made it a point to call, too. And the school board added librarians to its list of legislative priorities.

Brunkan's third-grade daughter, Isabel, reported on how her library at Roosevelt School had changed this year.

Roosevelt replaced a full-time librarian with a part-time one. Some days now the Roosevelt library simply sits dark.

She and her friends began to make calls – to legislators and their aides, to librarians and college faculty, to movers and shakers in Spokane and Olympia. And soon they were on a roll again.

This week they launched an online petition at <http://gopetition.com/online/15285.html>. By late Friday afternoon, after zero publicity, the petition had gathered 153 signatures from around the state.

The issue isn't necessarily an obvious one because many of today's adults remember the skimpy school libraries of their childhood. Yet today, Spokane's elementary and middle schools house well over \$5 million in library collections and technology. Librarians are needed not only to direct students to "Where the Wild Things Are" and "Harriet the Spy," but also to help them prepare to live in an age of unprecedented digital information and technology.

Students need to learn how to discern among the zillions of Google hits they strike on any given subject. Only a few of these sources will actually provide accurate and reliable information. Librarians help students figure out how to research their questions and think critically about the answers.

Brunkan and McBurney have compiled research from around the country that correlates strong school libraries with increased learning and higher test results for students.

Yet at the same time, they're discovering Spokane isn't alone in reducing its librarian staff. It's a distressing trend that's popped up in a variety of districts across the state this year.

Brunkan believes that if Washington can be the world's leader in technology, it can also lead the world in training students to use information technology.

That's just one of the pitches she'll make as she advocates for librarians this week.

Poor kids, especially, who lack computers at home and rides to city libraries, need to find certified librarians in their schools each day.

And for all children, the school library remains a prime location for life's "a-ha" learning moments. In fact, Brunkan believes, it's the key that opens the world.