

Spokane's Elementary Schools Face New Wave of Librarian Cutbacks

Joan Oleck -- School Library Journal, 6/27/2007

School librarians in Spokane, WA, are bracing for more bad news: a new round of staffing cuts. The reductions, which are expected to be completed by August 8, will leave 15 elementary schools with only part-time librarians.

In mid-June, the local school board received recommendations from retiring Supt. Brian Benzel to trim librarians' hours in 10 elementary schools. Although the librarians themselves will retain their full-time positions, half will be required to cover two schools—instead of one—or replace full-time librarians who have retired. In 2004 five of Spokane's 34 elementary schools had scaled librarian staffing back to part time.

School Community Relations Director Terren Roloff blames the cutbacks on the state's failure to provide adequate school funding—currently, there's a \$10.8 million budget deficit—and declining student enrollment. "We've had declining enrollment since the year 2000; we've lost 2,000 students. So we've already reduced administrators commensurate with the enrollment decline; but we hadn't done the same with librarians," she says.

That's small comfort to the librarians and community. "The atmosphere is terrible," reports Sacajawea Middle School Librarian Dinah Coble, about the mood surrounding the proposed cutback. The news has spurred strong support among parents, who have collected 250 signatures in favor of retaining full-time librarians in Spokane's elementary schools. "We understand that there is a financial problem, and that the legislation has not come through with funding," Coble says. "But at the same time library services—although not a part of basic education—are so critical; and it seems like something else could go."

For now, the only thing likely to go is full-time library service. "Certainly everything not funded by the state is at risk," says Roloff. "And libraries are not funded by the state."