What Do Stakeholders Know about School Library Programs? Results of a Focus Group Evaluation

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Abstract

Supporting the Infrastructure Needs of 21st Century School Library Programs, *also known as the Pennsylvania School Library Project, was a one-year project conducted in Pennsylvania to better identify and understand what stakeholders—teachers, administrators, parents, school and community leaders, and education associations—expect from school library programs to educate tomorrow's citizens. The project team gave presentations to four focus groups throughout the Commonwealth; during the focus group sessions stakeholders engaged with research and data about the impact of school library programs in Pennsylvania. The focus group members' feedback was sought to build awareness and support, and, through consensus-building activities, clarify which components of the school library program infrastructure they valued most. A formal external evaluation of the focus groups found that reaching out to stakeholders in an organized, purposeful way, and not in a crisis mode, garnered substantial support for school libraries and school librarians. Inviting stakeholders to learn about the research of the profession in a professional and inclusive environment allowed them to thoughtfully reflect on school libraries' value and become school library champions.*

Introduction

The profession of school librarianship has bolstered itself on a foundation of impact studies that have linked strong school library programs and the existence of a certified school librarian to student achievement (Scholastic Research and Results 2008). However, that research has never

been well disseminated beyond the profession, and when it has been, administrators, policy makers, parents, and the general public have often ignored or dismissed the results (Kachel 2013).

Lack of knowledge and concern for the impact of a school librarian is critical because this lack has led to disappearance of jobs and denied students' access to the skills that school librarians bring to 21st-century learners. Of 875 school administrators surveyed in 49 states, 89% considered cuts to school libraries in 2011 (Ellerson 2010). In addition, 58% reported that they were unable to save school librarian positions for 2010 (Ellerson and McCord 2009) and about 31% more of the same group reported that they intended to cut school librarians in their districts by the end of 2012 (Ellerson 2010). Key policy battles over retention of school librarians have been fought and won in Washington, lost in Arizona, and continue in numerous other states. The professional outlook for many school librarians is grim at a time when their fostering of information and technology skills and multiple literacies is increasingly viewed as an essential aspect of quality education (Johnson, Smith, Willis, Levine, and Haywood 2011).

With cuts looming, school librarians are often relegated to reacting in a crisis mode to convince administrators and school boards of the value of school librarians. Advocacy, in the form of presentations, social-media campaigns, press releases, and sharing of research results, frequently takes place at the end of the school year as school librarians and their supporters try to thwart imminent elimination of positions. This phenomenon has spurred a variety of guides (e.g., Levitov 2012; DelGuidice and Luna 2012; see list of additional resources) and even a Crisis Toolkit from the American Association of School Librarians (2013). Although these resources provide the means for gaining advocates when jobs are in jeopardy, the guides also advise school librarians and other interested people to plan ahead and not be reactionary:

> True advocacy is when stakeholders stand up and speak out for you on behalf of a cause, idea, program or organization…. As librarians, we need to plan ahead and focus our efforts on building support from stakeholder groups. Ideally, you want students, parents, teachers and other stakeholders to carry the message that school libraries make a difference to students. But this won't happen without careful planning and action. We need to educate and mobilize our stakeholders to advocate for school libraries. The voices of school librarians are most effective when we join our voices with others to advocate for students and student learning. (AASL 2013)

In an attempt to better identify and understand what stakeholders—teachers, administrators, parents, school and community leaders, and education associations—expect from school library programs to educate tomorrow's citizens, an interdisciplinary group of researchers and practitioners in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania planned and implemented a project funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), *Supporting the Infrastructure Needs of 21st Century School Library Programs*. This project, also known as the Pennsylvania School Library Project, included focus group outreach to non-library audiences through packaging and presenting school library research in more understandable and meaningful ways for other educators and the general public at a time when a funding or staffing crisis was not imminent. The Pennsylvania School Library Project's leaders reasoned that to advocate for school library programs and school librarians, stakeholders needed to be educated about them. In this paper, we describe the project's focus group process and report the results of an external evaluation of the project's focus groups. This external evaluation included focus group participant interviews conducted in fall 2012.

Methodology

The project team designed a focus group methodology that included presentation of school library research findings and group discussion. Specific goals for the focus groups were:

1. Participants will gain information about the status of school libraries in Pennsylvania and key research findings about school library programs' impact on student learning and academic achievement.

2. Through consensus-building activities, participants will clarify which components of the school library program infrastructure they value most.

3. Participants will disseminate information learned to their constituencies.

Focus Group Program Development

A steering committee from the project developed the program and schedule for the four focus group meetings. Each meeting lasted approximately two hours and was comprised of the activities in table 1.

Table 1. Focus group activities.

Time	Activity
30 minutes before start of meetings	Refreshments, registration, completion of forms; projector set-up, greet participants
10 minutes	Welcome participants; introductions
5 minutes	Provide overview of IMLS grant
15 minutes	Provide overview of status of school libraries in PA and key research findings
45 minutes	Lead structured discussion of what components of the school library program participants value most
30 minutes	Reach consensus on priorities for components of school library infrastructure
15 minutes	Discuss next steps

Site Selection

Three agencies and one hotel, recommended by project members, were selected as the focus group sites because of their geographic distribution throughout the state (one urban area in the west, one urban area in the east, and two suburban areas in central Pennsylvania) as well as their proximity to major highways and access to population centers. Additional consideration was given to sites where meeting rooms could be obtained free due to previous working relationships. Manageable parking or site access via public transportation were also factors.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were invited based on (1) recommendation from the project advisory board; (2) recommendation from librarians engaged in an initial professional judgment panel; (3) recommendation from collaborative groups partnering in the project; (4) working relationships statewide on other education-related issues; (5) contacts who showed initial interest after a Pennsylvania State Board of Education Study in 2011 and asked to be involved more; (6) those who emerged from groups/presentations/coalitions where this project had been discussed and a "call" made for interested individuals; and (7) project leaders' determining who might be willing to support the project in the future and be very important new partners.

Considerable effort was given to selecting participants who would be diverse and ensure rich conversation with multiple viewpoints of school library stakeholders. To further the end goal of improving school libraries in Pennsylvania, we reviewed the qualifications of each potential participant from the perspective of participants' ultimate role in being champions for improvement. Many of the participants were those serving as "opinion leaders" of groups or in communities—those who had a proven track record of having made a difference on a variety of issues. This list included participants who govern schools, administratively lead schools, devise school budgets, influence lifelong learners through reading, impact curriculum, and review policy. Direct "consumers" of the schools were included; these consumers included students, parent advocates, and parents representing students with disabilities and those labeled as gifted. To bring a variety of opinions to the group, invitations were likewise extended to those managing community/public libraries. An attempt was made to reach out to unknown individuals from groups that could be a positive influence in school library improvement (for example, representatives of reading associations and United Way education subcommittees).

Each participant was sent an e-mail invitation for which the Received and Read options had been enabled to guarantee delivery. If no response to the e-mail was received, the invitation was followed up with phone calls. Subsequently, an e-mail confirmation with all details and the opportunity for dialogue with the focus group planners was sent. Prior to the focus group sessions, participants were also provided with background information on school libraries via the Pennsylvania School Library Project's website <http://paschoollibraryproject.org>.

Program organizers had a goal of eighteen participants for each site. Three sites met that goal, and the other site had seventeen for a total of seventy-one participants. As each group was finalized, an additional individual or two was added to allow for the inevitable cancellations. Very few people initially refused to participate, but, subsequently, many could not attend because of scheduling conflicts with other commitments, such as school budget meetings, out-of-town commitments, or family responsibilities. In those cases, organizers asked for another individual to represent that constituency (in the case of an organization); most groups did send another representative. Many individuals who were issued an invitation but were unable to accept have asked to be kept informed as the project progresses.

Facilitation

At each session, welcoming and introductory remarks by conveners set the tone for the meeting and helped participants realize the diversity of experience and wealth of knowledge in the room where everyone had come to focus on listening, learning, and placing values on components of school libraries. To further emphasize the diversity of experience and wealth of knowledge, participants' introductions provided by staff included information on each participant's

background. Participants had been selected to represent different constituencies; at each meeting, participants listened respectfully to others. In small- and large-group discussions, participants were encouraged to share and clarify their opinions and views. Even when perspectives were not the same, no participant questioned the validity of another member's perspective. Project coordinators were sensitive to any issues raised during the dialogue, especially if anyone seemed to have additional comments or thoughts.

In addition to a print copy of a PowerPoint presentation of the findings of the 2011 Pennsylvania State Board Study (Pennsylvania Board of Education 2011; see list of additional resources), participants received several booklets, including the four American Association of School Librarians advocacy brochures and a copy of AASL's 2007 *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* (see list of additional resources). Participants also received a brief overview of the grant project and an introduction to the Pennsylvania School Library Project website <http://paschoollibraryproject.org>. Participants were actively encouraged to ask questions and pose ideas throughout the presentation and the large- and small-group discussions.

After the PowerPoint presentation, each participant was asked to silently generate his/her list of valued components of school library infrastructure. Participants were then divided into four groups to discuss, clarify, and amplify valued components of that infrastructure. Groups were brought back together and a master list of valued components (with no duplication) was generated and posted on the wall. Using a modified nominal group technique, each participant voted by placing three different-colored stickers on first-, second-, and third-most valued components. Voting patterns were discussed to come to consensus.

Results of Discussions

Table 2 presents the results of the voting for each of the sites as well as selected comments made by focus group members and taken from notes provided by the conveners. Table 2 presents the comments with the most frequently mentioned important component listed first.

Table 2. Focus group participants' most important components of school library infrastructure

Most-important components of school library infrastructure	Select comments from focus group participants
Site 1	
Resources	All the components connect.
Staffing	There is a perception problem of librarians that they just check out books.
	School libraries should do orientation sessions with parents so they understand.
Site 2	
Staffing	Collaboration with public libraries benefits the community.
Resources	If you have a good librarian it creates a snowball effect that grows into a love of learning in everything.
Collaboration	Need digital citizenship.

Site 3	
Staffing	Need to get teachers thinking, "How did I live without library collaboration?"
Collaboration	It is the responsibility of the librarian to teach students how to use the Internet and information.
	Need to not focus on test data. Caution you not build everything around that.
Site 4	
Technology	It's important to have librarians who can do many things.
Staffing	For immigrant/refugee families where English is not spoken in the homes, the library is the only place where kids are reading in English.
	I am profoundly concerned about the inequity of the relationships in the classroom. I hope the library can be a place where we can move away from these inequities.

Focus Group Evaluation

To determine the success of the focus groups, project directors contracted with a university research center to conduct an independent evaluation consisting of follow-up interviews with willing focus group participants. The research center staff developed interview questions based on the project's needs and goals and interviewed ten participants by telephone for approximately forty-five minutes each. It was agreed that in-depth interviews were an appropriate methodology as the interviewer can probe the responses people give (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), particularly when the interviewers have a background in the subject. This familiarity was the case here as the research center staff members have extensive proficiency in school library research as well as professional experience as school librarians.

However, it should be noted that the interviewees exhibited a pre-existing interest in school libraries as demonstrated by their participation in the focus groups. Although this interest may be construed as bias, it is also a powerful indicator in interpreting results. If potential advocates have concerns and issues regarding school libraries, these can be extrapolated to a more general population.

Results of Interviews

1. How interested were you in the topics presented prior to attending the focus group?

The interviewees provided responses that suggested that their interest in the focus group topics ranged from significant to somewhat interested. Those who had experience with more than one school library commented on the inconsistencies from school to school of the school library programs and the school librarians themselves. One interviewee commented that a school librarian has influenced her decision to become an educator and mentored her "personal

journey." Another commented, "I am always concerned that libraries should remain funded and give the public access to information."

2. *How interested were you in the topics presented after attending the focus group?*

All participants expressed affirming or increasing their interest in school libraries based on the data and research that were presented. They noted that there was potential for getting the education community and legislature involved and for raising awareness among stakeholders like Parent-Teacher Associations. As one person commented, "I was both encouraged and concerned. It was good to know that people would be advocating for school library resources, but disheartening to see evidence of such need." Many other participants mentioned that they had not been aware of the extent to which school libraries had been cut and appreciated learning about the issues. One participant, whose daughter is a school librarian in another state, used the information she obtained at the meeting to begin a dialogue and find out more about the challenges her daughter faced at work.

3. *Are there aspects of the discussion that you would like the facilitators to know now that were not expressed?*

This question generated many responses from interviewees. Most felt that the facilitation was skillful because they had an opportunity to bring things up to the group, particularly during breakout groups as well as in large discussions and that the facilitators were good at getting participants to share. Interviewees lauded the writing activities as providing important opportunities to distill thoughts and ideas.

Some participants raised minor concerns in response to this question, too. One interviewee was adamant that information about students with special needs should have been addressed and that there was too much emphasis on access to books when some of these students can't turn the page of a book. Access to other types of media should have been discussed. A participant expressed a desire to have heard about the school librarians' role in fostering Internet safety and etiquette. Interest in learning more about statewide plans to provide information access to English Language Learners in schools was mentioned as well.

However, these responses reflected more of an expanded awareness of the role of school librarians rather than a need for the facilitators to have acted differently. One woman noted that as a result of the session she "couldn't stop thinking about the plight of school libraries." She pointed to an article that she had just read in the (then) most current *American Educator* magazine[1] about the socioeconomic differences in library access and its affect on children's learning. She said that the information she gained in the focus group process helped her to understand that it's not just about access to library books: "The person is the cart [i.e., book cart]. The librarian is the real asset. I mean, who else helps kids find good things to read and can help them with computers?"

4. *Are there aspects of the discussion that you would like to learn more about?*

Since it had been several months since the focus group sessions, participants said they would like to have an update on what is happening in Pennsylvania school libraries this school year. They would like an update on the numbers of positions eliminated and school libraries closed in well-to-do districts as well as distressed ones. Several had checked the project website since attending

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[1] The interviewee referred to the article "Worlds Apart: One City, Two Libraries, and Ten Years of Watching Inequality Grow" by Susan B. Neuman and Donna C. Celano in the Fall 2012 issue of *American Educator* on pages 13–23. This article is available online at <www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall2012/Neuman.pdf>.

one of the focus groups and also wondered if the materials received could be used with groups such as legislators and principals' groups.

Participants expressed a desire to understand how state funding for school libraries works as well as how school administrators make building-level decisions about how and how much to fund their school libraries. As a participant echoed, "Funding is depressing, but it needs to be discussed more."

5. *Was anything said during the discussion that surprised you?*

Almost all of the interviewees mentioned that they were surprised at the extent of the cuts to library programs and the inequality of programs throughout the state. Some did not realize that school libraries were closing or that volunteers were running some that remained open. Interviewees wondered what was happening to the facilities where librarians had been eliminated. Participants expressed surprise that this is not a topic more at the forefront when discussing education policy and, particularly, policy in the context of low-performing schools. One participant shared, "Our expectations are lower than I would have thought."

Participants from each site expressed surprise and dismay at the idea that some school administrators felt that parent volunteers, clerical staff, or teachers would be adequate stand-ins for school librarians or that some policy makers had resorted to creative means to supply library services. "I am shocked to hear that some school libraries are also being used as public libraries," one person noted. "How do you collect the materials from people? Is that safe for our kids?" Another was incredulous that technology solutions were deemed adequate: "I don't understand principals and teachers who feel that spending money on technology instead of a person is savings. It just seems to me that you get more bang for your buck with someone who helps the kids learn."

6. *Is there anything that you feel should have been discussed but wasn't?*

Overall, participants felt that their focus group experiences were comprehensive and thorough. They reported that, if anything, they would have appreciated more time for networking in their small groups. Some participants did express an interest in learning more about how to engage their communities better in what is happening to school libraries.

7. *What knowledge have you gained about school library programs in Pennsylvania?*

The predominant theme emerging from the interviews was the importance of having learned more about the connections between learning and the school library and having discovered that the school librarian's instructional role is vital. Librarians are a valuable resource for the entire school and teach faculty as well as students. "Understanding school librarians' situations is like universal enlightening," an interviewee noted. She said, "It's a wonder how they stay relevant and functioning."

While the larger issues were of interest, many participants were interested to learn about the breadth of school librarians' work. One participant was fascinated to learn from the breakout discussion how school librarians are using tech tools such as Pinterest to reach more people and provide support to teachers for their lessons.

Overall, many participants appreciated learning more about the challenges school librarians face despite the overwhelming evidence that they can dramatically affect student learning. "It's really sad that there are so few full-time school librarians anymore," one person said. Another participant from that urban site agreed, "I was a bit alarmed to learn about how fragile school

libraries are. I mean, it's one thing to kind of hear about it, but when a real person tells you they're vulnerable, it really means something!"

8. *What additional information might you need in order to better understand school libraries in Pennsylvania?*

Participants again expressed a desire to be updated on what is currently happening. Several participants mentioned that they would like to see a list of the number of school librarians in the state and the areas they service. This interest in learning about the policy-level structures that govern school librarians in Pennsylvania was mentioned by a few participants. Their comments included: "How is it that the schools in my city can ignore school libraries when we are state run?" "What does the Pennsylvania school code say about school libraries?" "How does funding get from the state to school libraries?" "How are school librarians prepared to fight these battles and stick up for themselves?"

9. *Could you comment on the strengths of this event?*

All noted it was very interesting and provided useful information. Several participants mentioned valuing the diverse mix of people in the focus groups. Interviewees described the event as "well organized," "beneficial," "inspiring," "balanced," and "important."

10. *Do you have any suggestions for improvement of future events?*

Participants appreciated that this was not a full-day event. The length of the event allowed them to keep their focus and leave wanting more. While a participant wondered if perhaps more people could speak to the large group in the beginning, a few interviewees suggested that there be representation among the speakers and participants from groups outside of education. To pique the interest of parent and educator participants, some interviewees suggested that data should be presented that demonstrates how school librarians can be key to implementing the Common Core State Standards. One participant enthusiastically noted, "Keep giving me information to advocate!"

11. *What have you done with the printed materials you received?*

One person asked for a second packet, which was distributed to her local middle school librarian and the public librarian. A copy was also given to the local Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO). This participant was surprised that neither of the school librarians was familiar with the achievement research. She noted, "People in my community are not very interested. We have good libraries, and [people] aren't concerned about inner-city kids." Another participant scanned all the materials and sent them to the participant's local board of education members and members of the Pennsylvania Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (PASCD), while another made copies for all of the reading specialists she works with.

Conclusions Relating to Research Goals

This paper reports the results of an external evaluation of focus groups that were part of the IMLS-funded *Supporting the Infrastructure Needs of 21st Century School Library Programs* project, also known as the Pennsylvania School Library Project. Ten focus group participants volunteered to participate in interviews about their focus group experience.

The focus group phase of the Pennsylvania School Library Project had three goals, and the focus group evaluators drew conclusions from the interview results in terms of these goals:

1. Participants will gain information about the status of school libraries in Pennsylvania and key research findings about school library programs' impact on student learning and academic achievement.

Interviews with the selected participants revealed that they gained important knowledge about school libraries in Pennsylvania. Before attending the focus groups most were unaware of the findings presented, and participants were both surprised and moved by the presentation. In particular, they expressed that they learned about the influence of the instructional role of the school librarian—a role they had previously been unfamiliar with. They also found the information about the impact of the school librarian on student achievement to be enlightening. Participants exited the focus groups seeing school librarians in the roles prescribed in *Empowering Learners:* leader, instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, and program administrator (AASL 2009).

2. Through consensus-building activities, participants will clarify which components of the school library program infrastructure they value most.

Common themes with all four groups concerning program infrastructure were staffing and resources. The participants came to realize that a quality school library program could not exist without a certified full-time school librarian. And while resources were important, they were substantially less effective if not promoted and integrated by a qualified school librarian. Some differences between the four groups did exist, however. Interviewees from urban areas emphasized the school library as a center of information access for all learners, regardless of socioeconomic status, learners' ability, and English language facility. In suburban areas the emphasis leaned toward the contribution of instructional partnering and technology leadership.

3. Participants will disseminate information learned to their constituencies.

Several participants reported using the materials received as starting points for conversations with colleagues and members outside their immediate circles. To express their concerns about failure to maintain funding and staffing for effective school library programs, interviewees proactively sought out educators with whom they had not interacted previously. One person shared the materials with her child's school librarian and her public librarian and was surprised to learn they were unaware of the research surrounding school libraries. While some packets are awaiting further re-distribution, no participant mentioned not valuing the material or discarding it after the focus group. This willingness to retain the information suggests that some participants require time to digest the contents and think about how best to apply their new knowledge.

Additional Conclusions

The focus groups that were conducted presented an opportunity to comprehend the ways in which valued stakeholders in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania view school libraries and school librarians and respond to research about them. Although these groups were not representative of all Pennsylvania citizens, the opinions solicited provide a foundation for the development of a campaign that successfully meets the needs of Pennsylvania communities. The information obtained from the focus groups is critical to the development of further messages to the public because the information considers various perspectives and provides insight into those concepts that are not well understood and how individual experiences color perceptions of school libraries. These findings may also be of value to library advisory groups.

Overall, these focus groups were well received by the participants. Many participants expressed their appreciation for having the opportunity to learn about school libraries. They also were glad to be able to vocalize their opinion on this subject and engage in the activities at each site. Various members volunteered to be interviewed. The sessions reinforced the notion that individuals are willing to participate when they know their opinions are valued and can make a difference. It was also clear that many people with diverse positions and perspectives value school libraries.

Recommendations

The findings indicate the participants' willingness to become library "champions" who will take actions to support school libraries—the next logical phase of this endeavor. Their enthusiasm should be embraced, and active participation by members of these focus groups should be encouraged in further advocacy efforts. It is in that context that the following recommendations are made.

1. **Develop a toolkit for stakeholders**. Participants pointed to a desire to have an outreach and advocacy toolkit available online for download as a way to help all interested parties continue to have means to raise awareness among policy makers. This toolkit can be an extension of the existing Pennsylvania School Library Project website, and it should be easy to access prepared materials for different audiences. Links to existing toolkits, like AASL's Parent Advocacy Toolkit (2012; see list of additional resources), could also be incorporated.

2. **Expand the outreach.** The success of the focus groups should be expanded to other audiences. Although the four sessions were spread throughout the Commonwealth to some degree, they took place in urban and suburban areas. An attempt should be made to have the opinions of rural residents heard. It was also noted by an interviewee that as a parent of a child with disabilities, she would have liked to see information about their needs addressed in the presentation. Parents of children with disabilities are often a vocal and organized group and may prove to be one of the other audiences targeted for participation in the future.

3. **Train the trainers.** A train the trainers approach that includes specific strategies on how to engage various diverse groups of stakeholders may prove beneficial in cultivating library champions and mobilizing grassroots advocacy. Administrators, PTO presidents, civic groups, and other groups each have a different perspective but could speak with a unified voice to their constituents on behalf of school library programs.

4. **Focus on policy makers.** Efforts to engage the public to support school library programs will go much further if the emphasis is on policy makers. Some of those interviewed noted that in the small-group discussions individuals who already have good school libraries in their local schools are satisfied with the status quo and are not interested in being involved in advocacy for others. Participants who held higher-level administrative offices at a state-wide level expressed more of an obligation to ensure that all residents in Pennsylvania could boost their students' outcomes with an effective, dynamic school library program that has the support of the community.

5. **Follow up with participants.** Although the evaluators spoke to participants several months after the focus group sessions, these stakeholder advocates should be contacted at

future intervals to measure how their behavior goes beyond their verbalization of their new perceptions and understandings.

The outcomes of *Supporting the Infrastructure Needs of 21st Century School Library Programs* focus groups in Pennsylvania led to conclusions and recommendations that reach beyond this targeted population and have advocacy implications for the profession as a whole. Reaching out to stakeholders in an organized, purposeful way has the potential to garner substantial support for school libraries and school librarians. These presentations were geographically dispersed, inclusive, and well facilitated, which added to their credibility. The fact that stakeholders were invited to learn about the research of the profession when it was not in a crisis mode—as when positions or programs are being cut—allowed for thoughtful reflection and the creation of school library champions.

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