

FEATURE



Students **NEED** Libraries

**in HISD and
Every School District**

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Catalyst: Another newspaper article (“Ranks of School Librarians Dwindle in HISD, Statewide” in the October 7, 2013, *Houston Chronicle*) detailing another decision by a Houston Independent School District (HISD) campus principal to eliminate the librarian (Mellon 2013).

Reader: Me, an experienced school librarian not employed by the district.

Reaction: These librarians are strong practitioners who are losing their jobs because a new principal has been told this will be the easiest way to balance the budget. This principal needs a better understanding! We learned from other sources within the community that she had previously staffed a library with a clerk. However, we know those particular librarians to be strong practitioners who deserve to remain working with students. There is no reason to eliminate their positions. Time to rabble-rouse!

My Plan: Find like-minded folks to work with.

Timeline: Eight to ten months before any visible progress. It took that long to find the right people to move forward. In August 2014, I finally met Debbie Hall, and we went to work.

SNL (Students Need Libraries) Leadership:

Debbie is a retired HISD librarian who also worked at the district level in the HISD Department of Library Services. She understands the workings of HISD, the largest school district in Texas and the seventh-largest district in the U.S. (Niche 2017). She still knows people across the district, as well as in the neighborhoods. She remains active in the Texas Library Association (TLA), Texas Association of School Librarians (TASL), American Association of School Librarians (AASL), and American Library Association (ALA), and volunteers in local schools.

I am also a retired school librarian, but not in HISD. I, too, remain active in TLA, TASL, AASL, and ALA, and focus on advocacy for the profession.

Our Plan: Identify the root causes of the elimination of so many school librarians in HISD, and work for change.

Beginning:

To begin our work we:

- invited HISD librarians Debbie knew to gather and brainstorm several times over the 2014–2015 school year;

- attended school board meetings, introducing ourselves to board members, and providing them with information about school libraries’ impact on student achievement;
- set up a comprehensive website www.studentsneedlibrariesin-hisd.org to make available to the public all the information we provided to the school board www.studentsneedlibrariesin-hisd.org/hisd-board-representatives.html, and to feature advocacy resources for all school library stakeholders www.studentsneedlibrariesin-hisd.org/advocacy.html;
- started a Facebook page for SNL www.facebook.com/groups/studentsneedlibraries;
- talked to parents and community members, as well as administrators and HISD Department of Library Services staffers to understand the full situation, and begin to see how to move forward; and
- worked to build positive relationships with HISD Department of Library Services staff members to ensure we could support and magnify their work to the benefit of students, district campus librarians, and nonprofessional staff.

The L-word was never even mentioned before we began...

Progress

Our conversational research method yielded general indications of root causes of the library staffing problems; these causes include high-stakes testing, funding shortfalls, site-based decision-making, lack of vision/understanding within district and campus leadership about the role of school librarians. Additionally, the perceived lack of librarians' job security makes recruitment and retention difficult. This list matches commonly cited reasons for school library concerns in other districts, but we are working to buck the trend going forward. Additionally, there is significant pushback from principals who do not want to be told what positions to staff; HISD's site-based management policies are deeply held at all levels.

Our first indication of traction was the new conversation at school board meetings about libraries. The L-word was never even mentioned before we began, but we noted that members began to raise school libraries as a point of equity, and questions came up about how school libraries might be affected by new policies. And that is a change we can directly trace to our discussion of equity in materials and staffing sent to school board members.

In fall 2016 HISD welcomed a new superintendent, Richard A. Carranza. On arrival, he set up a series of listen-and-learn meetings around the district to which the community was invited. SNL made a concerted effort to have library spokespersons present at several sessions—different faces asking different questions—to be sure he understood the state of HISD libraries and to demonstrate that it was a broad-based concern. While he did not immediately change course, he did take notice as has been indicated in subtle policy changes and statements since.

Strategic Directions

Data and Equity

As we realized the beginnings of impact, we began to look at data. How many school librarians are still working in the district? How many school libraries have been closed? How many are staffed with para-professionals? What data might we already have that could support our further impact? Here, our relationship with district personnel became important; we requested staffing information and circulation data for each campus. Debbie compiled the circulation statistics and overlaid them onto the nine school board district maps, a set of images that makes it very clear where there are, in effect, "book deserts" (www.studentsneedlibrariesinhisd.org/hisd-board-representatives.html). The equity card came into full play here and inspired some internal board politics that located specific funding and staff for three schools in challenged neighborhoods. These two middle schools and one high school had small, dated book collections and minimal staffing but now have dramatically improved collections and staffing for which the district "found" money (George 2017). We fully recognize that equity is a very complicated topic affected by funding, failing test scores, high-stakes testing, and politics (local and broader). There can be no easy solutions, but we use the concept to raise awareness of school library contributions to improved literacy and academic achievement as consistently demonstrated in research (Falkenberg et al. 2017).

In collaboration with district library services leadership, we look to the future in hopes of better educating principals on what a strong school librarian should do to support best student progress—and this despite a climate that allows minimal direct

communication to principals from library services staff. It will always remain true that school librarians who don't measure up are our profession's own worst enemy. Campus principals know librarianship only from the librarians they have worked with. Showing your A-game every day is how principals will know what they should expect in all future certified librarians and not to accept less. In addition to having strong librarian examples within the district, we hope to find ways to support library services in providing a consistent information stream to principals about:

- state library standards that, as we write this in August 2017, are working their way through the approval process (School Library Programs 2017),
- how to hire well (e.g., Texas Association of School Library Administrators n.d.), and
- other useful information that points to better support of student literacy and research needs.

Houston ISD is the seventh-largest district in the country with 76 percent of students eligible for free/reduced lunch—even before Hurricane Harvey hit (Houston ISD 2016). We are currently caught in a financial maelstrom caused largely by state funding practices. The school board and superintendent are trying to implement better library staffing at the same time that the district faces a dramatic budget shortfall. In January 2016 the school board got as far as a motion to mandate a librarian, a nurse, and a counselor for every campus—but that motion could get no further because of inadequate funding. However, the motion itself has stimulated conversation among principals at every level about why and how this provision of a librarian, nurse, and counselor might be possible. The motion

inspired SNL to request a letter from ALA/AASL, which was published in the *Houston Chronicle* March 7, 2016 (Feldman and Preddy 2016).

As we write this in September, a major focus of SNL is the local election. In a highly unusual situation, we have six of nine school

Every school librarian should be **CLOSELY** with the **INVOLVED** campus parent-teacher group.

District Leadership (Both Elected and in District Headquarters)

Unfortunately, HISD is facing state censure over thirty-three so-called “failing schools,” which means HISD has only one year to solve a problem that has been many years in the making or the state could take over those schools. Our new superintendent established the Achieve I80 program to address this crisis, and announced that staffing at these thirty-three schools must include a librarian, a nurse, and a counselor. SNL believes that school librarians are included in this turnaround strategy as a direct result of our presence at those listen-and-learn meetings in fall 2016 and our contact with the school board. Neither campus principals nor library services staffers know if district funds are available for the additional staff. We do know that of the thirty-three campuses, only four had not advertised the librarian’s position as of August 2017. SNL fully recognizes we have far to go, but our efforts have certainly begun to catalyze change.

board seats up for grabs. Typically, three seats are contested for a three-year term; this year will see three more seats on the ballot for new members to serve the remainder of terms not completed. SNL has compiled a tip sheet for all the candidates (Hall and Hand 2017), sent out in early August; the cover letter was personalized for each board district, 1 through 9. We sent the same tip sheet to all continuing board members as well—and to district administrative leadership—to be sure everyone is working from the same accurate, up-to-date information. We hope this effort and our document will amplify the conversation throughout the campaign and beyond. We will also attend campaign events to ask questions and to keep the library conversation active, as well as to raise awareness among voters. While in the future we may endorse specific candidates, our group is not yet widely known beyond local school library circles; at this point endorsement might not have much effect. Our visible attendance at meet-and-greet sessions, however, will definitely spread awareness.

Broad-Based Support

To get our message out, we continue to actively seek partners like Community Voices for Public Education <www.houstoncvpe.org> and Houstonians for Great Public Schools <www.houstongps.org>, which are both groups that recognize the importance of school libraries for *all* students.

In further support for advocacy coalition building, for several years the TLA/TASL alliance with the TPTA (Texas PTA) has been an important collaboration. As part of that effort, I have attended two state PTA conferences to staff a TASL booth. Standing in a booth means talking to attendees. We noticed that active PTA members who attend the state conference generally work at schools that have good or even great school libraries with strong PTA support. When I mention to these folks the high percentage of Texas schools without *any* library, they are shocked. How can a school not offer its students a strong library with a great librarian?

We bring up this point only to remind readers that school librarians’ efforts to raise awareness of school library impact on student learning must be broadly focused on all stakeholders, including the general public. This would be a parallel effort to building parent interest on specific campuses and advocating to principals and district leadership and elected officials. Every school librarian should be closely involved with the campus parent-teacher group. If none exists, work to start one. Volunteer energy is only one benefit; the bigger potential effect is a choir of supportive voices to the principal and beyond to ensure the strongest possible support for the library.

The Future

As we look at 2017–2018 and beyond, we hope to:

- continue building support with and for current HISD librarians amongst all stakeholders;
- continue raising awareness with school board members and candidates, as well as other local elected officials and their staff; we have a strong connection with the City of Houston's Director of Education, a recent HISD School Board member, who is charged to "work... with parents, administrators, business, law enforcement and neighborhoods [to] help achieve [the mayor's] goal of moving this city forward and reducing the income inequality that is so often the result of deficiencies in the education system";
- push forward our efforts to provide useful, frequently updated data in support of library needs and progress;

- maintain our website to be easily useful to school board members and also to all interested advocates and stakeholders; and

- participate actively in state and national awareness campaigns that can magnify our work and support other communities as well.



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for ALA President Julie Todaro's presidential initiative "Libraries Transform: The Expert in the Library." She is the author of "School Librarians Are Professional School Educational Leaders," published in the November 2017 issue of *Teacher Librarian*. She served as chair of the professionalism subcommittee of the 2017 Texas Standards effort.



Debbie Hall is retired from the Houston Independent School District where she worked most recently in the HISD Department of Library Services. Prior to joining the Department of Library Services, she was a school librarian in HISD and was named by the Houston Association of School Librarians as Librarian of the Year in 1988. In addition to advocating for school

libraries as cofounder of Students Need Libraries in HISD, she serves on the board of the Friends of the Houston Public Library and is organizing a history of HISD for the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, an archival branch of the Houston Public Library.

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