

FEATURE

# The Many “LEGS” of School Library Legislative Advocacy

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Over the past decade Washington state legislators have passed—through the House and the Senate, and signed by two governors—eight legislative bills that impact and/or address school libraries. Some of these bills help protect school librarian positions, others clarify, define, or address requirements of librarians' time, skill requirements, curriculum, and schedule as well as collaborative practices and technology content delivery. Each bill is the direct result of multiple partners working to meet the needs of the one million school children in Washington state.

Beginning in 2008, the state's school librarians' understanding of both the legislative process and the importance of building relationships with legislators exponentially increased when three moms from Spokane, led by Lisa Layera Brunken, and the Washington Library Media Association (WLMA) forged strong ties with state legislators and encouraged school librarian colleagues to participate in legislative processes to preserve strong school libraries in Washington. This effort launched a decade of school librarian-legislator relationships that continue today.

## Washington's School Library Advocacy

For the past decade, the state's school library organization—previously WLMA, now a division of the Washington Library Association (WLA)—has hired a powerhouse lobbyist, Carolyn Logue, whose savvy, whip-smart actions have managed to tweak laws, convince politicians of the importance of school libraries, and urge school librarians to get involved. A constant presence in the capitol, Logue keeps a pulse on legislative activities, including any

that could impact school libraries and school library positions. An example of Logue's quick-response school library legislative actions came recently when the state passed the Basic Education reform bill. At the last minute before it was passed, Logue convinced lawmakers to pull funding from the more general line item of "Materials, Supplies, and Operating Costs (MSOC)" and designate it *exclusively* for a school library budget line.

"In 2018, as part of the final education reform bill (SB 6362), the Washington State Legislature separated 'library materials' from the general 'other supplies' category and created a separate line item for 'library materials' that starts at \$20 [per student] and will rise as allocated funding for schools rises" (Logue 2019).

The importance of the "one line in the budget" was first stated to me by Dr. Larry Nesbit, founder of the Mansfield University School Library and Information Technology graduate program, who shared his strategies for soliciting funding for libraries. "Getting a line in the budget is the most important first step for funding... Once that budget line exists, the next steps are filling that line with dollar amounts and continually increasing it. That budget line is a recognition of need" (2019). This too was Logue's accomplishment in the 2018 education reform bill.

Once the budget line is there, the next step is strengthening legislative language of support.

## Understanding the Legislative Process of "Loose Language"

One must understand the nuanced strength of any legislative bill's language and legislators' need to

please ALL their constituents. Each school district has unique needs and circumstances for proposed individual legislation. Bills may likely have loose language simply in order to pass.

Such is the case with some of Washington's laws; however, passage of initial bills is a launchpad for starting down the long legislative road to ensuring continued state legislative support for school libraries. For example, Washington's law currently states, "Every board of directors shall provide resources and materials for the operation of school library information and technology programs as the board deems necessary for the proper education of the district's students or as otherwise required by law..." Next, it is the intended goal of library advocates to tighten that language, hopefully removing, "as the board deems necessary."

Below is an overview of the language included in the legislative bills passed in Washington state that impact school libraries.

In 2009 **Substitute House Bill 2261** modified the state's basic education law. Significantly, it was the first time school libraries were individually identified and addressed: "Teacher librarians, a function that includes information literacy, technology, and media to support school library media programs." The bill created the "prototype school" model for establishing funding allocations. It included technology and school library materials and specifically included school librarians in the staffing formula upon which state funding is allocated.

**Substitute House Bill 2776**, passed in 2010, further modified the Basic Education law to include specific

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individual funding formulas: "Other materials including library \$259.39 per student." In order to pass, it had to be included in the MSOC budget line, but the fact that it stated "including library" was significant.

**RCW 28A.150.210** was modified in 2011 as part of the **Substitute Senate Bill 5392** with the support of the state's school librarians to include technology literacy and fluency in the state's basic education goals for all school programs. Technology literacy and fluency are mainstays in school libraries.

**RCW 28A.300.803. Substitute House Bill 2337** (2012) established a library of openly licensed education resources to grant school districts access to more affordable, modifiable resources using technology/Internet-based offerings. In developing this resource, the state's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction was directed to elicit input from Washington school librarians.

**RCW 28A.320.240. Substitute House Bill 1331** (2015) identifies quality criteria for school library information and technology programs in which the school library, staffed by a certificated school librarian, will provide a broad, flexible array of services, resources,

and instruction that support student mastery of the state standards in all subject areas. Language in this bill changed the previous legislative term "school library media program" to "school library information and technology program," and "library media specialist" to "teacher librarian."

**Senate Bill 5294** (2015) describes the role of the school librarian and importance of the school library to student success. This bill is brief (two pages) but important as it is the only bill passed that is exclusively about school librarians and the school library.

**House Bill 2695** (2018), which uses Washington's "prototype school" to determine funding, begins with, "An act relating to supporting student achievement through public school libraries." This bill hosts the critical school funding formula that in 2018 included a landmark separation of school librarians from other school itinerants and provided reduced student-to-librarian ratio because the position of school librarian was defined as holding "a function that includes information literacy, technology, and media to support school library media programs."

**Senate Bill 6362**, passed in 2018, is the Education Reform Bill that designated school district funding. Critical from this bill was the separation of state monies, \$20 per student, from the broader Materials, Supplies, and Operating Costs (or MSOC) to be exclusively designated for school libraries.

## Participatory Advocacy

Oftentimes, WLA school library chairpersons or other hard-working, advocacy-participatory members of WLA receive an e-mail from a librarian asking why their school or district isn't "getting their money" (e.g., \$20 per student for library budget). This is frustrating for those activist WLA members on several levels. Just as school librarians in the trenches may not have the time or energy to participate or contribute to their state organization beyond membership, so too WLA executive board members do not have the bandwidth to participate in local advocacy to ensure districts comply with loosely worded state laws. This means it is up to school librarians in their own hometowns, districts, and schools to self-advocate for compliance. It is difficult to tell this to a school librarian in a small rural school district who may be the only

# INCLUDE ADVOCACY WORK SUPPORTING SCHOOL LIBRARIES AT MULTIPLE TIMES, NOT JUST AT THE POINT OF THERE BEING AN “ASK,” OR WORSE, WHEN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY IS THREATENED.

school librarian in town. Naomi Giles’s story (on page 22) is not unique. From her first day on the job as a new librarian, Giles began her advocacy work while extending her core advocates beyond her individual voice, reaching important stakeholders, using one of the cornerstones of school librarianship: collaboration.

That collaborative disposition must include advocacy work supporting school libraries at multiple times, not just at the point of there being an “ask,” or worse, when the school library is threatened. To be effective, legislative advocacy must be ongoing and a part of the school librarian’s day.

## Conclusion: Advocacy Broadband

It’s helpful to have a state advocacy practitioner-spokesperson (or team), but there should also be champions besides school librarians. Strategically, a spokesperson can volunteer to be contacted by media outlets when it comes to school library advocacy. That spokesperson-advocate must be armed with data, responding to reporters’ and legislators’ questions.

Whether it’s detailing hard facts, reporting on school library impact studies, or sharing a poignant story, the advocate must hone advocacy skills and tools to a fine point and be ready at any time to respond to reporters’ and legislators’ questions.

No advocacy strategy, singly, will likely make an impact on support for school library legislation. It takes a collaborative team of school library leaders across the state and years of work, sometimes starting with a simple inclusion in larger education legislative bills.

## Fundamentals of School Library Legislative Advocacy

**Top Topic:** Focus on student learning first and foremost.

**Know Your Legislators:** Study their websites, voting histories, and personal information.

**Be Proactive:** Don’t wait until cuts are being considered.

**Be Vigilant:** Assume support can be pulled during education funding decision-making.

**Expect Change:** Keep new legislators up-to-date and/or informed.

**Offer Help:** Use, share, and offer those library research skills.

**Post “Boastables” on Multiple Formats, Particularly Social Media:** Include legislators!

**Gather an Advocacy Team:** It takes a village.



## State School Librarian Leaders' Strategic Advocacy

In addition to an iconic lobbyist, Washington has strong school librarian leaders who advocate for school libraries and share their stories, including unique programs and successful library research projects, with the school library community at large and with stakeholders and legislators. Each of these leaders has impacted the profile of the school library in Washington and together make a strong case for continued legislative support.

School library practitioners across Washington conduct action research, partner with public libraries and local organizations, and share these projects and stories through WLA, local news media, and nationally published journals, as well as with their legislators.

On any given day, Dearborn Park Elementary School librarian Craig Seasholes, past president of the Washington Library Media Association (WLMA), is likely to be networking with renown kid-lit authors, public library administrators and board members, community organizations/partners, school board members, Seattle School District administrators (including the superintendent), and state and federal legislators. In addition, Seasholes's tireless work provides mentorship to librarians-in-training, an important advocacy strategy for every state to embrace.

In 2017, Jeffrey Treistman, librarian at Denny International Middle School, worked with classroom educators to turn self-identified non-readers into readers and avid library visitors (Treistman 2017). In 2018, Treistman, procured thousands of dollars in grants, including an ALA Inspire

Grant, and new book donations to fulfill his professional dream of sending every sixth grader in his school home for the summer with a twelve-volume library of new books.

Kent School District technology integration-teacher librarian Mia Roberts collaborates with math teacher Leslie Marshall on an ongoing math and art action research study at Mattson Middle School. Roberts introduces a picture book a day to students in two of Marshall's math classes, which has resulted in positive changes in student behavior and attitudes toward math, as well as increased library patronage (Roberts 2019).

In 2012 Vancouver School District's Mark Ray, the first school librarian to be named Washington State Teacher of the Year, was asked to lead VSD's educational technology work in an administrator role. Over the next seven years, Ray held several district technology leadership roles including chief digital officer. His work with librarians in Vancouver earned national recognition and helped inspire the Future Ready Librarians initiative at the Alliance for Excellent Education.

Recruited from Virginia, Lilead fellow Suzanna Panter heads the Tacoma School District's librarians. Panter applies advocacy skills daily, reaching out to stakeholders throughout the city to build support for Tacoma's school libraries, from the city's public library director to the school superintendent and beyond. (See Panter's article, page 8.)

Several Washington librarians have left library positions to become administrators and now serve as strong advocates for school libraries. As newly minted Spanaway Middle School Associate Administrator, Carina Pierce, previous WLMA officer, stated:

I am still a school library advocate; I just have a bigger bull horn. The teacher librarian and school library program are critical to student learning. The importance of literacy hasn't gone away with increased technology and access; more important than ever, it simply has a broader definition. We need qualified, trained, certificated librarians leading the way when we talk about the power of words, digital citizenship, media literacy, and global access. My firsthand knowledge and experience help provide me with the agency to keep school libraries and librarians on the agenda and at the table, supporting the workings of the library and its programs daily. (Pierce 2019)

Washington is not unique in library leadership; every state has school library leaders. But, from practitioner to administrator, researcher to innovator, Washington library leaders take additional strategic advocacy steps to highlight their work and share their stories, research, and impact, including with their legislators. Most have invited legislators to visit their libraries to talk to kids and see their work in action, and all have visited their legislators at the capital on Library Legislation Day and beyond.

## What Do Legislators Want to Hear?

Do the homework before reaching out to legislators. Find out what he/she has voted on, or more importantly, bills they have sponsored. Sponsorship indicates a legislator's true passion. The following examples provide individual topics of legislator interests, some with responses that librarians can use and expand on when seeking support for library legislation.

### *Environmental Concerns*

School libraries are the quintessential recyclers of books, resources, and information, providing 20–50 uses across the life of one book. "A single popular title for which the library distributes 10 copies each, read by 30 readers, can save paper equal to 100,000 pages of print. Multiply this by one library's collection and savings mount to over \$100,000 in printed material; multiplied by the number of school district libraries and savings mount to the millions" (Kaland 2011).

### *Net Neutrality*

School librarians don't just teach how to find information, they teach why it is important for everyone to be able to find the right information.

### *Reading at Grade Level*

Librarians can connect the dots for legislators between students' desire to read and bringing all students' reading scores up to grade level. Share Stephen Krashen's decades of research (<[www.sdkrashen.com/articles.php](http://www.sdkrashen.com/articles.php)>) on the impact of school library's access on literacy development.

### *Digital/Online Safety*

"The Internet is the first thing humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand, the largest experiment in anarchy that we

have ever had" (David Bray, quoting Google CEO Eric Schmidt). Share how school librarians don't just teach how to find information, but why it is important for everyone to be able to find the right information.

With increased pressure for ensuring students' online safety, librarians can share with legislators specific anecdotes and stories, unique lessons, and examples of how they deliver digital safety content and contribute to students' safety online.

### *Equitable Access*

By its very nature, a school library's collection of reading material and access to databases and other online resources provides a level of equitable access for all children that exists in no other location in the school.

### *Budget Balancing*

Some fiscally conservative legislators view legislation primarily from a budgetary perspective. Sharing significant ways school librarians help schools and school districts save money is a strategy that works (e.g., the average annual cost of cyberattacks is \$150 million; share ways in which the library teaches cyber security).



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For more ideas on how to meet legislators' priorities, see "School Library Language for Legislators" (Kaland 2011), where fifteen additional areas of legislators' interest are described.