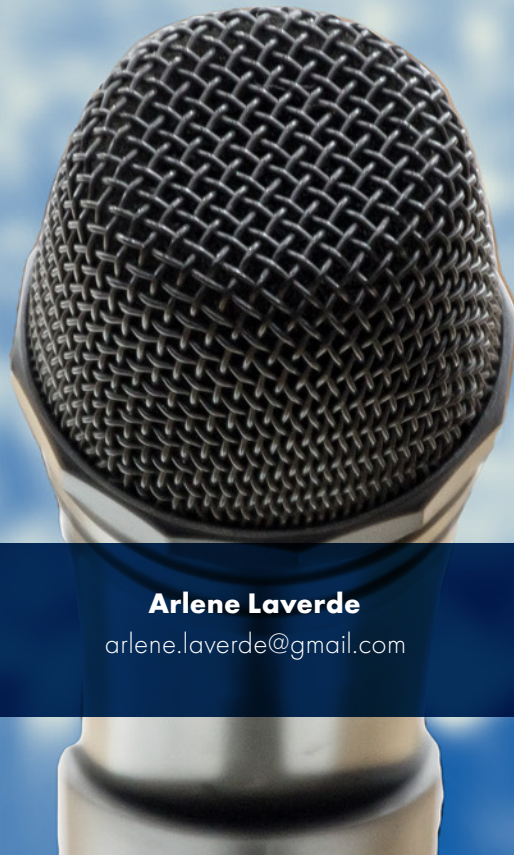


Testifying In Front of the NYS Committee on “The Future of NYS Libraries”



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My Path

Almost twenty years ago I thought I took one of the most courageous steps in my professional career. After sixteen years as an educator and achieving tenure, I decided to go back to school and get my MLS. It is a step that I have never regretted, but it is a step that opened up a side of me that I didn't know existed.

Prior to library school, I am embarrassed to admit that my knowledge of school librarians was the tired stereotype. They were shush-ers, keepers of books, and spinster cat ladies. As I was a married mother of two and the owner of a large rottweiler, you might ask why I went to library school? I had been an elementary school teacher for fourteen years before my administration put me in the library as the "teacher assigned." I was curious about my new position, but no direction was provided, so I did what I thought school librarians were supposed to do: story time and book circulation.

I was fortunate enough to have professional development through the New York City Department of Education's Office of Library Services, and it was there that I learned that an MLS could take me on my next great adventure. There was more to being a librarian: information literacy

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skills to be taught, programs to be put together, and collections that needed developing.

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Bravery is the ability to be courageous and fearless in the face of danger, fear, or intimidation. It is a quality that all humans have, but not everyone has had reason to use it. There are different types of bravery such as physical, moral, and emotional, just to name a few. Each one has its own definition and characteristics, but they all share one

thing in common, which is being able to face your fears.

Twenty years ago, if you would have asked if it takes courage to be a librarian, I probably would have chuckled. Many people outside of librarianship and education do not know the tremendous amount of mental, emotional, and moral fortitude it takes to be in this profession. It is without a doubt a scary time to be a librarian in the United States. Across the country, school and public libraries are under attack. Librarians have been vilified. Their careers and even their lives have been threatened. Books are being challenged and removed from schools at an alarming rate. But librarians persevere. We understand the importance of standing up and speaking out for what is right. Now more than ever school librarians need to be advocates.

My foray into library advocacy followed a similar path to my library career and began quite accidentally. A school librarian I was mentoring through the intricacies of the New York City Department of Education was heavily involved in AASL. While I mentored her through bureaucracy, she mentored me in our professional organization.

She encouraged me to run in 2019 for the position of New York City School Librarians' Association (NYCSLA) president. I thought it would be a great opportunity to help librarians. I helped take our small organization and built it up to offer professional development and networking possibilities throughout New York City. While advocacy was discussed, it wasn't really my focus.

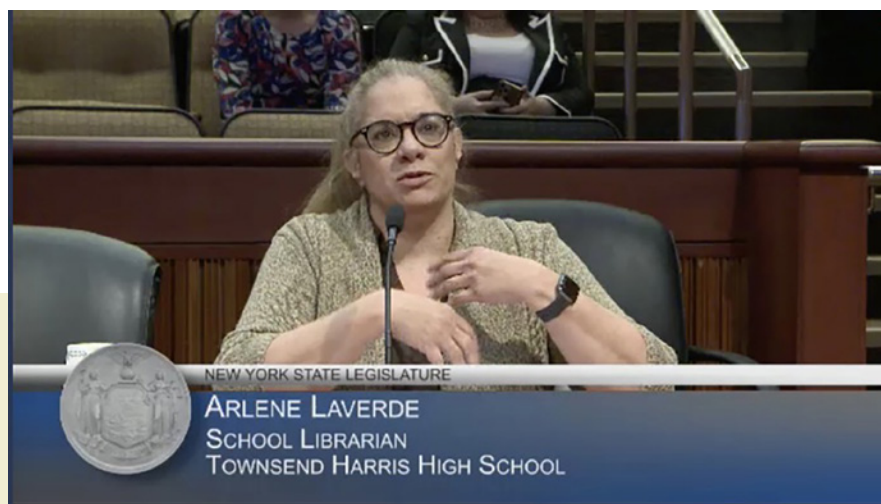
Then COVID happened. COVID brought to light so many things that are wrong with the education system around the country. We learned that, although we talk about

equity and access for our students, we are not even close to equity and access being a reality for all. In New York City we learned that Michael Mulgrew, the president of one of the biggest teachers' unions, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), had no idea what school librarians did nor that they were teachers when he stated that school librarians wouldn't be able to apply for remote summer school jobs because they required "brick and mortar buildings" to work. This was the tipping point. NYCSLA was able to create an e-mail and social media campaign that illustrated exactly what school librarians do, and how effective the librarians are. This campaign lasted until Mulgrew apologized to school librarians and walked back his statement. In June 2020 the UFT passed a Resolution of Support for School Librarians. (Read it at <http://bit.ly/3DZPmD6>.) This was the start of my fight for school libraries and librarians. I now never miss an opportunity to share my passion and speak up for our profession.

My Testimony

On December 15, 2022, I faced one of my biggest fears: public speaking. The irony is that I am a teacher librarian who speaks publicly all of the time. I speak to large groups of teenagers when I teach. I speak to large groups of educators when I present. And I will speak to anyone about my favorite topic: school libraries. As the president of the New York Library Association (NYLA), I was invited to give testimony at the New York State Assembly's Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology's public hearing on the future of New York State's libraries. The specific purpose? "The Committee seeks testimony about the issues and challenges libraries are facing in providing resources, programs, and services to their communities" (Jean-Pierre n.d.). This was a type of public speaking that I never imagined I would be asked to do.

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My knowledge about giving testimony was limited to what I had seen on C-SPAN and in the movies. Needless to say, it wasn't very much, and it was certainly intimidating. I had about two weeks to prepare a written statement. My focus: school libraries. I must have started composing my statement a dozen times. I wanted to be compelling and intelligent and, if possible, funny. I didn't want to be scared, but I was.

That morning I drove up to Albany, a little over three hours away from where I live. On the ride up, trying to ease my nerves, I gave myself a pep talk and sang along with the radio. Then I arrived, and before I knew it, I was in Hearing Room C, the "Roosevelt" hearing room, of the Legislative Office Building. Stadium seating, vaulted ceilings, a semicircle of seats for committee members, and a table with three chairs and microphones front and center for testimonials—I was here, and it was happening. Everyone in the room was here because of libraries and how important they are. Everyone who would be testifying felt as passionately as I did. My fear began to subside.

I was fourth on the agenda (see <http://bit.ly/31Jn5a>). As I walked down the stairs to begin, my heart started racing and my hands trembled. I took a deep breath and said to the panel, "Sorry, I am a little nervous." I then began my testimony. I spoke about how school libraries are crucial to equity in education, how our libraries are safe places for everyone in our communities, and how libraries are places that promote reading, teach information literacy, and foster social-emotional learning. Most importantly, I stressed that schools need a state-certified librarian in every school to ensure that our students have robust library programs. I spoke for five minutes. I spoke passionately and from the

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heart. And then I was done. When I walked out of Hearing Room C, I left with my head high and a smile on my face. I faced my fear and lived to talk about it.

When I began my journey in 2003, I thought that being a school librarian would mean reading stories and circulating books, but now I know that being a school librarian means learning how to effectively raise and magnify not just my voice but the voice of other school librarians in service of students and learning communities. Sometimes, we must face our fears to do just that.



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academic advisor for the Graduate School of Library and Information Studies at Queens College. A member of AASL, she is a program co-chair for the 2023 AASL National Conference Committee. Arlene is the current president of the New York Library Association and past president of the New York City School Librarians' Association.

Work Cited:

Jean-Pierre, Kimberly. n.d. "Assembly Standing Committee on Libraries and Education Technology, Notice of Public Hearing." <<https://nyassembly.gov/comm/?id=26&sec=story&story=103957>> (accessed March 27, 2023).