

# The Intelligencer

## Libraries remain a cornerstone of schools

By State Rep. Thomas P. Murt  
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*“Whatever the cost of our libraries, the price is cheap compared to that of an ignorant nation.”*

— Walter Cronkite

Whether you grew up a bookworm or a child who avoided reading, everybody had a favorite book. These books stretched our imaginations, taught us valuable lessons, and helped us to grow in many ways.

Today, the children in the School District of Philadelphia face a crisis. Thousands of these children are being denied the learning opportunities offered through library studies. This is due to the closing and unavailability of school libraries throughout city schools. Most schools have closed their libraries and furloughed their librarians.

How can we expect to build a future for our children while denying them something as fundamental as access to quality reading?

In a school, the library is the heart and soul of the learning process. In the library, students have the freedom to learn about whatever they desire. Students who enjoy social studies find shelves full of historical narratives. Art students read how-to books that take their talents to the next level. Creative minds are transported by otherworldly fantasy novels. Any information not found on the shelves can be researched on a library computer. In an era of standardized testing, the library remains a place where children are free to pursue their passions and interests. As a result, students develop essential skills in all areas, especially in literacy and in writing.

These skills are particularly important for at-risk youth. In fact, according to research performed by the Begin to Read Organization, two-thirds of students who do not develop proficient reading skills by fourth grade will end up in jail or on welfare.

How can we expect children in Philadelphia to become successful when we don't fund one of the most important facets of their education? While cuts to these schools may save taxpayers money, the "savings" are negated when we eventually find ourselves paying for these children's food stamps or prison stays. More importantly, however, by removing libraries we are squandering the potential these children have to truly thrive in

their education.

Libraries are not simply just about books anymore. Libraries allow children to explore new technology safely and effectively. Children learn keyboarding skills, various software programs, research, and internet proficiency. In today's digital age, these skills are not optional. But with the closure of school libraries, this is another valuable skill set being neglected.

Of course, libraries do not run themselves. Professional librarians are essential in utilizing what the shelves have to offer. The sharp decrease in working librarians in Philadelphia schools is disturbing.

In 1991, there were 176 certified librarians in Philadelphia schools. According to The Philadelphia Inquirer a few weeks back, only eight full-time librarians are serving in Philadelphia schools, with six of them for an entire city full of young schoolchildren. Philadelphia is the fifth most populous city in the United States; that we have fewer than a dozen school librarians is completely unacceptable.

Librarians are not simply the symbolic figureheads in the library. Their work with students is essential to learning outcomes. From reading aloud to younger children to assisting the self-guided education of older students, librarians play a vital role in all stages of a child's education.

As an educator, a parent, and a state representative, I find this issue deeply concerning. I have begun work on a bill that dedicates a portion of state budget funding for schools to school libraries and library staff. I am doing this because libraries are not just a luxury for wealthy schools in the suburbs; they are a necessity for all schools. By funding and staffing libraries, we will ensure the right to learn for every student. This is a necessary investment of our tax money that will pay for itself when these children become productive, working, tax-paying members of society.

Despite being vital to a child's education, libraries and librarians are in dangerous short supply in the School District of Philadelphia. Students are missing out on fundamental skills learned through reading and self-guided education. These habits have been proven to greatly increase a child's chance of becoming a successful adult.

President Harry Truman told us: "Education is our first line of defense. In the conflict of principle and policy which divides the world today, America's hope, our hope, the hope of the world, is in education." Let us bring back hope. Let us bring back libraries to the School District of Philadelphia.

Republican state Rep. **Thomas P. Murt** represents the 152nd Legislative District, comprising parts of eastern Montgomery County and northeast Philadelphia.