

Testimony of
Sean Gregory
(2012 graduate of Danville High School, enrolled at Penn State University)

Presented to
Pennsylvania House of Representatives
House Education Committee
on
School Libraries in Pennsylvania
August 22, 2012

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. My name is Sean Gregory, and I am currently enrolled as a freshman at Pennsylvania State University and am a 2012 graduate of Danville High School. Thank you for listening to what two recent graduates of Pennsylvania schools have to say about school libraries.

I'd like to begin with a quote from psychologist Dr. Michael Shermer's 2011 book *The Believing Brain*, "The idealized process of sitting down before a table of facts and weighing all decisions through cold, hard logic before drawing a rational conclusion is wrong. In reality, our beliefs stand in the courtroom of our minds, and lawyer the facts as we take them in" The main point of Shermer's book is simple: We need to understand the role that facts and research and understanding play in people's lives -- across many ethnic, economic and social divides. Undoubtedly, Dr. Shermer's insight into modern human psychology and what he called "motivated reasoning" served as one of the most enduring lessons I learned during high school. Fortunately for me, I had the opportunity to find this idea and this book as a result of being in my school's library and through participating in our school library program. The librarian believed it would help introduce me to a different way of thinking about some of the most prominent issues in today's society. And this commitment to promoting different ways of thinking and the importance of pursuing research in all areas of a subject really is the central idea I have for you. My school library program changed the way I think and the way I learn.

Entering as a 9th grader at Danville High School, I had the good fortune of having both a full-time librarian as well as a full-time instructional aide in our school library. This set-up served lots of students in a convenient, organized manner. As my years at Danville progressed, our library lost the instructional aide completely and the full-time librarian is soon to be replaced by an English teacher with no training as a librarian. It goes without saying that the environment that was offered by our library -- the electronic databases, row after row of texts, dozens of computers for student use -- fostered the type of learning that made many students, myself

included, excited to come to the library for its wealth of information to complete virtually any assignment.

But perhaps most importantly, the ease of access to these resources, either by themselves or with the help of the librarian, made nearly every student an expert in the research field by year's end. This didn't happen magically -- a school library program needs planting and tending. As my years at Danville progressed and my needs for sources of information to fulfill my AP classes, specifically English and Writing, grew, I noticed a subtle but steady decrease in that trademark ease of access that I came to take for granted in the library. At first, the instructional aide had been forced to take only a part-time post behind the circulation desk, and the librarian struggled to keep up with the demands of the students as he once did. This really struck a chord in me: How could a system that had, at one time, been the pinnacle of knowledge and convenience in the school, the system that introduced me to the life-changing prospect of motivated reasoning be so affected in such a short period of time? The answer lies in the details that Dr. Shermer continually harped on in his book: how those on the other side of this issue felt. They didn't see it as a particularly important place. For me, the library time and time again provided me with the resources I so desperately needed to comprehend, for example, the persuasive devices contained in Antony's famous speech in *Julius Caesar*, or the complex calculus behind Newton's Method for derivatives. OK, so I don't think even the wealth of information the library offered could help me understand some parts of calculus, but rarely, if ever, was that the case for any other class in school.

My school library always, *always*, held the answer to my questions. And perhaps one of the most overlooked aspects in the library environment is the librarian. If there wasn't a book or resource available in the school, the librarian would make a concerted effort to track down whatever was needed to accomplish the task I laid out for him. And almost as important was just his presence in the library, always ready to answer any question a student could ask, and always with a smile.

For me, the opportunity to learn about and explore previously unknown worlds and ways of thinking is something I will always remember about my high school library. Thank you for taking this time today to explore the important role that school libraries play in the learning of Pennsylvania students. I hope that you will increase your support of school library programs through policy and through funding.