

A Three-Minute Testimony for a School Board Meeting

I am....., parent to ...children in theschools.

I am here to talk about the elimination of the school library programs in this district. Some people say we don't need school libraries because we have the Internet—that libraries are archaic. What is archaic is the stereotypical view that school libraries are simply places where kids check out books. However, if we eliminate school librarians, that is exactly what we are likely to have. When you remove the professional, you eliminate the skills that school librarians teach—skills that cut across every curriculum and prepare students to think and make decisions based on the information they find and evaluate.

Let's take an example where middle or high school students are studying a current topic like Marcellus shale drilling. What is fracking? What are the environmental impacts of fracking? Should Pennsylvania tax the gas companies drilling in our state? Yes, students will find hundreds of thousands of references on the Internet and that's the problem. How will they figure out which is the most recent information? How will they know if the source is biased or written to persuade the reader? How will they know if the information is written by an authority on the subject or someone who knows nothing? School librarians teach these skills. They guide students to reliable, quality sources, whether they are books, subscription databases, or sites on the Internet. School librarians teach students how to recognize opinion, bias, outdated, or simply erroneous information. When you think about it, we need school librarians more than ever. It's not about pushing keys on a keypad and copying and pasting text from the first site that Google finds. That does not constitute learning. It's about being able to select and choose, recognize and interpret credible and useful information from the glut of opinions, facts, and misinformation available to students today. School librarians train students to evaluate sources and think critically about the information they find.

So, are these skills relevant? Are these skills needed to learn? Research from over 20 statewide studies that correlated standardized test scores to qualities of school library programs showed that students in better-staffed programs scored as much as 22 percent higher on standardized reading tests compared to students in schools where library programs had less staff and fewer hours.

Are these information skills that school librarians teach essential to the kind of student our district wants to graduate and send out into the world? Businesses and corporations tell schools that they need a workforce that can think, solve problems, work in groups, and communicate ideas clearly and effectively. If you understand what school librarians teach then you know we can't afford to eliminate them. School librarians teach our kids to think, problem solve, and share and communicate the information they find and the

ideas they develop. This constitutes learning. And no other educator specifically focuses on these skills utilizing a vast array of print and digital resources that libraries provide.

Research also shows that a child who is unable to read on grade level by 3rd grade is four times less likely to graduate by age 19 than a child who can read proficiently by that time. Add poverty to the mix, and a student is 13 times less likely to graduate on time. We also know how effective early literacy programs have been in helping children reach that 3rd grade benchmark. The research tells us:

- Children will read more if they have access to books,
- Students learn to read by reading, especially if they can self-select what interests them, and
- By reading widely, students increase skills in comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, and writing.

School librarians carefully select the best books and guide and motivate students to read. In fact, books that are read over and over and shared by hundreds of students over time may be the most economical use of taxpayer dollars, in addition to being a proven strategy to improve reading test scores.

So in conclusion, I know we need to make deep budget cuts and I don't envy those that have to make those tough decisions. However, I am requesting that we share those cuts more evenly across the board and not choose one area to decimate. School libraries are the bedrock of reading and learning. They provide an equitable, fiscally responsible strategy for sharing resources across grade levels and the curriculum. School librarians are not custodians of books, they are teachers of critical information skills, administrators of essential learning resources that the whole school uses, and motivators of student reading. Eliminating school librarian positions is detrimental, counter-productive, and maybe even catastrophic to educating our students. Let's try to find a better solution to the budget cuts that need to be made.