

## Reasons to Join PSLA – The Impact of a Professional Organization and the Importance of Legislative Advocacy

By Deb Kachel, PSLA Legislative Liaison, 2018

The Pennsylvania School Librarians Association (PSLA) represents the interests of its members through collegial networking, professional development, and intensive advocacy efforts to ensure that all Pennsylvania students and teachers have access to an effective school library program with appropriately trained staff as stated in the [American Association of School Librarians' position statements](#). To that end, PSLA recently [endorsed the library staffing certification guidelines established by the Pennsylvania Department of Education](#) (PDE) that state that school districts “must employ at least one certified Library Science educator when providing a school library program.”

Using nationally required data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Keith Curry Lance (2018, March) found that between 2009-10 and 2015-16, Pennsylvania ranked 6<sup>th</sup> among the states that lost the largest numbers of school librarians (p. 37). Although PDE publishes [staffing guidelines](#), staffing decisions are controlled by local school districts and their boards. Local control, unfortunately, has caused vast inequities across the 500 Pennsylvania school districts in terms of access to effective school library programs with certified librarians. According to [PSLA's 2017-18 staffing survey](#), 22 districts in Pennsylvania no longer employ school librarians and 115 district have only one librarian for the entire district. These districts represent 27% of all Pennsylvania school districts—a statistic that increases each year as librarian positions are eliminated.

Since the recession, PSLA has intensified its engagement and prioritized legislative advocacy to staunch the loss of school libraries and librarians. The PA General Assembly is the largest, full-time state legislature in the nation with 203 Representatives and 50 Senators. Therefore, educating these decision makers is an enormous and ongoing job, especially as legislators change with elections and redistricting.

Large, professional organizations that care about education, such as PSEA and PaPTA, carry a great deal of influence due to the size of their membership, particularly with state legislators who control school funding. It is critical that PSLA maintains a robust membership in order to advocate for school library programs. It is understandable, however, that school librarians want to be sure that their PSLA dues are making a difference and they are getting a return for their membership dollars. The following outlines PSLA accomplishments and the many resources it provides. Member participation and dues enable this work.

### Legislative Advocacy

- Currently working to move [HB 740](#) forward in the PA House of Representatives (HB 740 would mandate a certified school librarian in every public school.)
- Presented two dedicated PA House Education Committee hearings on school libraries in [2011](#) and [2016](#)
- Testified at several state legislative hearings on school library staffing and needs
- Frequently meet with legislators in Harrisburg and their district offices
- Developed and shared [legislative resources](#) and a [blog](#) to educate and inform members

- Created the Legislator@Your Library Campaign and enables legislator [visits](#) to school libraries
- Organized two postcard campaigns to ask for passage of library staffing and funding legislation
- Presented several times at the Pa PTA and [Keystone State Reading Assn.](#) Conferences to solicit support
- Collaborated with [PSEA](#) and [PaPTA](#) to have them pass resolutions endorsing school library staffing
- Employed the part-time services of Quantum Communications, a lobbying firm in Harrisburg, to work with legislative issues and legislators
- Frequently inform and update librarians via the PSLA listserv and the [Schools Listserv](#) regarding “[calls to action](#)” on state and federal legislative issues
- Worked to include school libraries in the [PDE's ESSA Plan](#)

#### Professional Development Resources

- [K-12 Model Information Literacy Curriculum Aligned with the Common Core Standards](#)
- [The School Librarian's Guide to Success in the PDE Educator Effectiveness System](#)
- [PA Guidelines for School Library Programs](#) (2011, currently being revised)
- [Five leadership academies](#) to train over 100 school librarians (2014- present)
- [PA Communicators Network](#) to reach all school librarians with monthly [e-newsletters](#)
- Annual [spring conference](#) and a summer leadership [summit](#)
- [PA Young Reader's Choice Award](#) annual program
- [Teaching & Learning Lit Review](#)
- [Regional trainings](#) on AASL's new *National School Library Standards* (summer and fall 2018)

#### Reports, Studies, and Publications to Support School Librarianship

- [PA School Library Project](#) and website funded by a federal IMLS grant
- 2012 [PA school library impact study](#) by Keith Curry Lance and cited as a significant research report in *School Libraries Work!* (2016 ed.)
- [School Library Study](#) (2010) conducted by PA State Board of Education (data collected by PSLA that informed the 2012 PA school library impact study)
- [Publications](#), 3 [briefings](#), 1 talk show, numerous articles in school library and education journals sharing school library research
- [Annual Staffing Surveys](#) conducted since 2012
- Letters to Superintendents and school board members in districts deciding to eliminate school librarian positions
- Quarterly [newsletter](#)
- Pennsylvania school libraries featured in PSEA's [July 2017 Voice Journal](#)

None of these accomplishments and resources are achieved by a small group of people or done quickly. It takes time and many members who educate themselves, attend professional development and conferences, and actively participate in leadership and advocacy activities. Particularly with legislators, numbers count, and the more members that PSLA has, the more weight its voice carries in Harrisburg and elsewhere.

At some point in our profession, we need to reflect on our legacies. What will we have contributed when we retire? Will we leave school librarianship in a better place than when we started this journey? Kennedy's inaugural address inspired people to see the importance of civic action and

public service. His historic words, “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country,” challenged every American to contribute in some way to the public good. Our profession desperately needs advocates and strong voices if we are to continue to be an essential component of a student’s education. Your membership and participation in PSLA is critical to ensure that all Pennsylvania’s schools provide students and teachers with a quality school library programs and certified school librarians.

#### REFERENCES

Lance, K. L. (2018, March). School librarian, where art thou? *School Library Journal* 64(3), 36-44.