The Right to School Libraries

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Watching the sprawling PBS documentary, *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History,* convinced me of how much 20th-century history I still have to learn. I have always been intrigued by the idea of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I knew it was a part of the early history of the United Nations. But what I did not know is how instrumental Eleanor Roosevelt was in the crafting of this international document. She was, of course, a prolific writer. But I never realized how committed she was to insuring rights for all people.

“One's philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes,” Mrs. Roosevelt noted. It seems like we as taxpayers in Pennsylvania are allowing choices to be made on our behalf – with some unfortunate results for our kids. Do you know that as of our survey during the 2013-14 school year there are 15 school districts in Pennsylvania serving 16,366 students who have not one school librarian on staff? 4 more school districts have only part-time librarians and 71 school districts have only one school librarian serving all the grades K-12. This lack of school library programs is shocking to some who assume that all our students have access to a library. But even more shocking, I believe, is inequality of opportunity that we provide to Pennsylvania’s children. On one side of the street, children attend X school where there is a well-maintained collection of great books – and programs to go with them provided by a certified school library. On the other side of the very same street, children attend Y school where their school library is open for only one or two hours per week or does not exist at all.

The American Association of School Librarians last year asked parents to partner with school libraries across the country and urge that every student has the right to expect a great school library. We drafted our own “Declaration for the Right to School Libraries” which says, in part, “Many children learn to read at their school libraries via storytimes, research projects, summer reading, tutoring and other opportunities. Others come to the library to learn the technology and information skills that help them answer their questions, discover new interests and share their ideas with others.” How can we deny Pennsylvania’s children a right to that access?

Celebrate Universal Human Rights Day with your children this December 10. A great resource for beginning discussions can be found at www. youthforhumanrights.org. The authors have a simplified summary of the original document that makes it understandable to children of a wide variety of ages and abilities. Educate your children about Eleanor Roosevelt, a pioneering American of the 20th century. Finally, make them aware in some small way that not every human being around the world enjoys the human rights that we do in this country. Happy Universal Human Rights Day!