

# Advocating for school libraries in Italy

By *Dr Luisa Marquardt*

## Snapshot

Dr Luisa Marquardt reflects on the importance of effective school library advocacy and provides an updated presentation of the current situation in Italy. After a brief introduction, the content of the article is arranged around the following four questions:

- What is advocacy?
- Why is advocating for school libraries important?
- What are the main actions taken in the field?
- What are their outcomes?

## Introduction

School libraries must constantly strive to be considered legitimate, even in countries where they already have a legal status. The situation becomes more complex where there is no legal, pedagogical and funding framework for them. Furthermore, school libraries have recently been challenged in many countries for many reasons (e.g. budget constraints, the pandemic, conflicts etc.). Where the school library was closed or changed to gain more space for classrooms during the pandemic emergency, those closures often meant, for the school library, not reopening. Many school librarians / teacher-librarians/ school library information specialists (and the many more nuances and definitions of the school library profession) have been experiencing frustration in seeing their ongoing efforts to develop quality school library programs simply vanishing.

It is apparent that more effective communication and advocacy strategies could contribute to a call for less superficial attention, and more consideration, of the educational role of school libraries and their contribution to the enhancement of the overall quality of education and, ultimately, better student learning outcomes.

This article is based on the following questions:

- What is advocacy?
- What is school library advocacy and why is it important?
- Why advocating for school libraries in Italy in the 21st Century?
- What are the main actions of school library advocacy and their outcomes?

## What is advocacy?

Advocacy is a term etymologically linked to 'advocate', that is rooted in the past both as a noun (mid-14th Century) and as a **verb (16th Century)**. The current concept of advocacy was formulated in the 1960s by Paul Davidoff (1930-1984), a city planner and planning educator,

who developed the idea of having groups of citizens from the lower socioeconomic income status involved or represented in the planning process, as this would lead to better city planning through a democratic and pluralistic debate (1965).

Advocacy is defined as the 'public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy' (Oxford Languages), 'the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal, the act or process of advocating something' or, in the legal meaning, 'the action of advocating, pleading for, or supporting a cause or proposal' (**Merriam-Webster**), the 'public support for an idea, plan, or way of doing something' (**Cambridge**), 'the act of pleading for, supporting, or recommending; active espousal' (**Collins**).

In political terms, advocacy consists of all those activities, carried out by people who try to support an idea, a specific conduct or initiative of a political or social nature, in order to influence decisions about the lives of citizens. Such commitment and efforts can result in a new law or funding plan, a change in better policies, organization and management (e.g. in general, in the public health or school instruction, or, more specifically, for targeted groups).

Advocacy is 'a planned, sustained effort to develop understanding and support incrementally, over time. Advocacy is related to but different from promotion and marketing. (...) Advocacy is about building relationships. Advocacy is about influencing others.' (IFLA SL, 2015: 50). Effective advocacy, as research points out, must be based on the six persuasion principles needed to have others influenced: 'reciprocity, liking, authority, social proof, consistency/commitment, and scarcity.' (IFLA SL, 2015, p. 50).

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## **Why is school library advocacy important?**

Getting decision-makers on board can be very hard when speaking of school libraries, especially in the current challenging times. Advocating for school libraries means getting decision-makers to appreciate the added value of a well-functioning school library in improving student learning outcomes, improving the well-being of the school community as a whole, and enhancing access to information, reading and culture for all. Informed, aware, and engaged decision-makers (and/or the people who can influence them) can pay more attention to the school library requests and needs, and provide them with actual support. (IFLA SL, 2015, p. 50-51).

The school culture affects how the school library is positioned in its context. Therefore, there is often the need for changing the school culture from a toxic to a positive one and consequently its dispositions regarding the school library. Sedley Abercrombie, the district digital learning and library media programs specialist for Davidson County Schools in North Carolina, points this out. She underlines the school librarian's power to change the school culture and suggests eight useful tips (Abercrombie, 2017).

Of course, since it is an ongoing process (AASL, 2007; IFLA, 2015), advocacy cannot be extemporized; it requires time and careful planning, that varies according to type (e.g., self, individual and systems - see, for instance, [the CED of West Virginia University \(2022\)](#) of advocacy.

The systematic acquisition and processing of data (such as the numbers and percentage of book loans, number, types and impact of activities delivered, the numbers of participants and their satisfaction rate, etc.) should provide a clear picture of the library's strengths and weaknesses, and help school librarian(s), the professionals and the team in charge of the school library, understand what area, services or activities need to be improved. This data can also show what is working and can be used as a valid proof of the impact of the school library on a specific area (e.g., learning outcomes, soft skills, collaboration, success stories, etc.). Effective school library advocacy is also based on the school librarian's competence in this field, and, as Elizabeth Burns argues, according to her research findings, specific education and training are needed (Burns, 2016), and more research and studies should be carried out in this area (Burns, Kimmel & Dickinson, 2016).

## Why are we advocating for school libraries in Italy in the 21st Century?

A wealth of research and impact studies prove the close relationship (if not a real correlation) between quality school library programs and quality education. Nevertheless, school libraries and school librarians have no legal status in Italy, except in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano/Bozen, in South-Tyrol, the German speaking region, where school libraries and librarians have been mandatory since 1990. Specific school librarianship education and training is generally missing at tertiary level both from academic courses in education (for instance, primary education) and those in library and information science.

This means that kindergarten and primary school teachers-to-be will be unlikely to acquire basic information on the educational role of a school library, and how it can help in the curriculum implementation and the acquisition of skills and competences in many fields (reading, information literacy etc.). Those teachers will be unlikely to include the school library in their programming, in their curriculum planning, or to encourage their pupils to visit the library (both school and public). On the other hand, librarians-to-be may not learn the cultural and social role of a school library, which, when well-functioning, can be linked to the public library system to promote and share services and activities.

Furthermore, school autonomy (stated by L. n. 59/1997, art. 21; L. n. 440/1997; L. n. 3/2001, art. 117; L. 107/2015) means that the situation can consistently vary from school to school, within the same district. The curricular, extra-curricular, educational offerings, and organisational planning are formulated in the TYPS, the Three-Year Program of Studies (i.e., PTOF - *Piano Triennale dell'Offerta Formativa*), introduced by the L. 17/2015. The TYPS should be based on principles such as flexibility, responsibility, and inclusiveness. Nevertheless, a by-default inclusive and stimulating learning environment, as a functioning school library should be, might be missing from the TYPS, or, if present, be more a wish than an actual situation.

**They must guarantee pupils' rights to education and information, and their educational success, and the teacher's right to academic freedom.**

The role of the school headmasters has particularly increased after the Legislative decree 165/2001 (par. 25) and L. 107/2015 (par. 78). They have responsibilities in school management (including human, professional, financial, and instrumental resources) and legal representation. They must guarantee pupils' rights to education and information, and their educational success, and the teacher's right to academic freedom. Among their many responsibilities and duties, school headmasters must draw the needed guidelines for creating the Three-Year Program of Studies (TYPs).

It is apparent that making the decision of investing (or not) in the school library development is up to each school and more often up to each school headmaster, who plays a crucial role in 'making an excellent school library' (Bustari, 2019), or simply ...killing it (as unfortunately happened in some Italian schools in 2021).

This may result in a dramatic difference in the quality of a school library program from school to school, and reinforce inequalities where a school library program is of poor quality or non-existent.

## **What are the main recent actions of school library advocacy and their outcomes?**

Although there are many advocacy initiatives carried out by individuals, informal groups, and associations, the following section will describe the joint efforts by the *Associazione Forum del Libro* (i.e., **Book Forum Association**), and the experience of the *Associazione italiana biblioteche - AIB* (i.e., **Italian Library Association**), and its *Commissione nazionale Biblioteche scolastiche - AIB CNBS* (i.e., **National Commission on School Libraries**), chaired by the author (2020-2023).

The AIB CNBS has been working very hard, in cooperation with other Associations and Groups (Forum del Libro, CRBS etc.), to speak out on school libraries, enhance the status of Italian school libraries, and promote new concepts and practices in school libraries. The current Commission, formally established in October 2020, designed a 3-year action plan, including an advocacy strategy, aimed at different targets, and many collaborative efforts have been consequently made in several directions. Connections, partnerships, and communications are a fundamental part of advocacy, and they are rather easy, given that the AIB CNBS members also members of other associations or representatives of different institutions or groups, and are constantly in touch with them: information and idea sharing, and joint efforts are carried on a regular basis and luckily lead to some positive outcomes.

## Step by step, ...plea by plea: Forum del Libro with AIB and others advocating school libraries

Italian school libraries were highly challenged by the pandemic at the beginning, and the anti-pandemic measures that led to many closures or changes in their function. For instance, the implementation of the measures regarding social distancing meant turning library spaces into classrooms or storage rooms to store desks and chairs.

The Forum del Libro (i.e., Book Forum), an association that gathers different book and reading experts and professionals (e.g., publishers, booksellers, school teachers, researchers, librarians etc.) played a relevant role in the formulation of the recent Law 15/2020 on book and reading support and promotion. This forum addressed a plea to the former Minister of Education, Lucia Azzolina, and to school headmasters, teachers, students, and their parents, on the 27th of June 2020 ([Un appello per la salvaguardia della biblioteca scolastica](#)), asking for the school libraries be reopened in September for the academic year 2020/2021. The Italian Library Association, along with other associations, contributed to the plea, signed, and shared it (Forum del Libro, 2020).

A year later, a further plea was addressed on the 6th of June 2021, by AIB, Forum del Libro, CRBS and other associations, to Minister Bianchi asking for the unvaccinated school teachers (with no preparation, interest or motivation) not to be employed (or temporarily “parked”) in the school library (Forum del Libro, 2021a).

One more focused plea was addressed by the [Forum del Libro](#) in collaboration with associations (See, for instance, [AIB press-release No. 161/2021 of the 18th of June 2021](#)) and organizations to the new Minister of Education, Patrizio Bianchi. Five basic (yet specific and vital) actions were suggested in the plea, as follows:

1. establishment at the Ministry of Education of a unit dedicated to school libraries and reading.
2. using the available budget of € 2,000,000.00 budget (€ 1 million in 2020, € 1 million in 2021) for the education and training of school library referees (see #5).
3. establishing and funding ‘hub’ schools in charge of coordinating (at regional level) school libraries and their networks, the implementation of the art. 5, comma 2 of L. 15/2020.
4. setting up a new action in the National Digital School Plan (i.e., Piano nazionale scuola digitale) to develop innovative school libraries, as in the former Action #24.
5. recognition of role of the school library ‘referee’ (a co-ordinator similar to the ‘digital animator’ or the ‘civic engagement’ referee).

## Some outcomes

The joint actions and the debate, including meetings with the Minister of Education, led to:

a) the implementation of the Sistema integrato Biblioteche innovative scolastiche – SiBiS (i.e., **Integrated system of innovative school libraries**), a national school library portal that was officially launched in the International Book Fair of Turin (October 2021).

b) the establishment of a school library unit, when a specific team on school libraries was established by the Minister of Education (November 2021).

c) the designation of the regional referees of school library networks (November 2021).

d) an area dedicated to school libraries was opened on the 25th of March 2022 in the **Ministry (or Department) for Education website**, linking to the SiBiS portal.



Figure 1 - SiBiS Web Portal (Sept. 2022)



Figure 2- Ministry of Education - School Libraries Area (Sept. 2022)

e) a 'model' school library was shown at two important events - the International Book Fair in Turin (May 19-23) and the **Didacta Fair** in Florence (May 20-22) - to inspire visitors (especially school librarians, school teachers and principals, but also parents, students, etc.); in those areas, workshops, activities, etc. took place during the Book Fair.



Figure 3 - The "model" school library area at Turin Book Fair (Credits: Luisa Marquardt, May 2022)

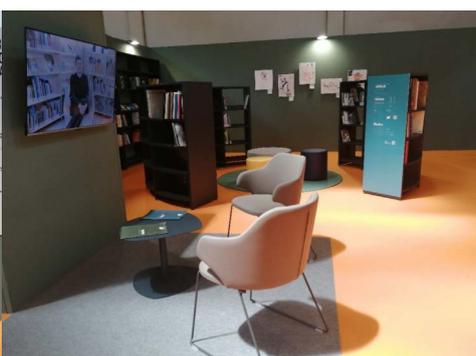


Figure 4 - The "model" school library area at Turin Book Fair (Credits: Luisa Marquardt, May 2022)



Figure 5 - The "model" school library area at Turin Book Fair (Credits: Luisa Marquardt, May 2022)



Figure 6 - The “model” school library area at Turin Book Fair (Credits: Luisa Marquardt, May 2022)



Figure 7 - The “model” school library area at Turin Book Fair (Credits: Luisa Marquardt, May 2022)



Figure 8 - Min. Bianchi interviewed by pupils in the “model” school library area at Turin Book Fair (Credits: Luisa Marquardt, May 2022)

f) A number of national meetings were held at important book fairs (e.g., in Turin, October 2021; Bologna Children’s Book Fair 2022) with the aim of raising awareness of school libraries; one opened the Turin Book Fair on the 19th of May 2022 with the participation of the Minister of Education.

g) the implementation of a new national education and training plan addressed to school principals, teachers and librarians (launched on the 29th of April 2022, to be delivered starting next September-October 2022) via the e-learning platform Moodle, in collaboration with Roma Tre University.

h) a practical school library handbook – *Contrastare la povertà educativa: una biblioteca in ogni scuola* (i.e., Fighting educational poverty: a library in every school) written by the author within the joint project *Futuro Prossimo* (i.e., Next Future) by Forum del Libro and Save the Children NGO, carried out in hybrid mode in 2021, was published in 2022 and distributed in digital format, free of charge, to all schools (Marquardt, 2022)

i) Education and training on advocacy was included in the PD programme, this was designed and delivered remotely at national level, by the AIB CNBS. The 1st edition of the PD course – ‘La biblioteca scolastica e il suo programma per le competenze del 21° secolo’ (i.e., The school library and its programme for the 21st Century competences) – was delivered in June-July 2021

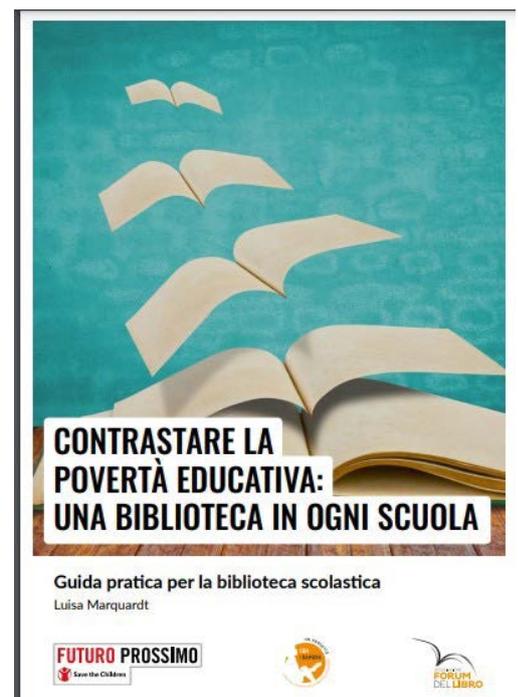


Figure 9 - The cover of the school library practical guide (2022)

(AIB CNBS, 2021); the 2nd one in April-July 2022 (Fig. 10) (AIB CNBS, 2022); the 3rd one is planned for 2023.



Figure 10 - The AIB PD Course on the SL and its programme (2nd Ed.) (Graphics: courtesy by Paola Pistone, 2021).

## A bottom-up approach in advocacy: 'The School Library Introduces Itself' Online Meeting Series

The AIB CNBS felt that online PD meetings might be useful to professionals new to school librarianship or those who aimed at relaunching their school library. A school library advocacy action was designed with the aim of attracting new stakeholders, stimulating interest and engagement, spreading the word, and making people more aware of the value of a functioning school library.

The school library advocacy initiative is called *La biblioteca scolastica si presenta* (i.e., The School Library Introduces Itself), a series of online PD meetings, free of charge, where innovative aspects and practices of school libraries are presented and discussed. (AIB CNBS, 2022). Some of the peculiar features are the joint design and collaboration within the Italian library association itself (AIB Friuli Venezia Giulia and AIB Puglia Regional Sections, their school library SIGs, the Education Observatory and, of course, the CNBS); the collaboration at international level, under the patronage of *IASL* and IFLA, and national level with many Institutional partners (e.g., *INDIRE - the National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research of the Italian Ministry of Education, Forum del Libro, CRBS* - the coordination of school library networks, etc.).

There are two modes of online participation:

1. attendee - the attendance as a PD meeting
2. speaker; two online registration forms allow the two types of participation.



Figure 11 - The poster of "The School Library Introduces Itself" (AIB, 2022)

The second mode, as potential speaker, facilitates the emergence and sharing of interesting practices. The project was very well received: with hundreds of attendees, and many practices and projects.

A program (April-October 2022) was then arranged, with thematic meetings on different topics. The series, that ideally would have started on the 23rd of April, the Unesco World Book Day, actually commenced on the 26th of April, with many addresses, including presentations from the former IASL President Katy Manck, and the current IFLA SL Chair Valérie Glass. It will continue until the end of October 2022, the traditional **International School Libraries Month** (ISLM) and the **UNESCO Global Media and Information Literacy Week** (24-31), after crossing the *Maggio dei Libri* (i.e., May of Books - a national reading campaign promoted by Cepell, the National Book and Reading Centre) and the *Bibliopride* (in September) - a national library advocacy campaign promoted by AIB (AIB, 2022).

As soon as the advocacy campaign ends, a report, with detailed information, figures and feedback from the attendees will be published. In the meantime, a second edition is to be designed and planned for 2023.



Figure 12 - the kick-off meeting (screenshot by LM - April 26, 2022)

Schedule and main topics			
Meeting	Date (2022)	Content	Framework event
1	April 26	kick-off meeting	Unesco World Book Day
2	May 4	The educational and instructional function of the school library	Il Maggio dei Libri (May of Books)
3	May 25	The school library between the school and the local community	
4	May 28	Lifelong learning for school teachers and librarians	
5	May 30	Reading promotion through the school library	
6	September 27	The school library: accessibility and inclusiveness	BiblioPride
7	October 11	Innovative and inclusive school library spaces	ISLM
8	October 25	Media, information and digital literacy education in/with the school library.	ISLM & Unesco Global MIL Week

## All fun and games? Not exactly...

Despite achieving impressive goals, there are many concerns in the school library field (and in general, in education and culture) due to the political crisis and the next Italian elections (on the 25th of September 2022). To what extent are education, culture, health, welfare etc. present in the candidates' programs? And, what space, what recognition, what idea do candidates have about school libraries? To what extent are candidates aware of the school library 'power' in transforming and improving education, culture and well-being? Will the elected candidates position the school library in the *Piano nazionale di ripresa e resilienza* (i.e., the National Recovery and Resiliency Plan - PNRR) (Italia, 2021)?

Once more, thanks to the [Forum del Libro](#), a new plea, shared with AIB and other partners, was addressed on the 5th of September 2022, asking for their commitment and efforts on the following points and having the school library included in the big picture:

1. Paying a more specific attention to innovative school libraries in the PNRR school plans;
2. Funding a specific action on school libraries;
3. Seeking the best ways to facilitate and recognize school library professionals;
4. Creating a unit on school libraries at ministerial level (Dept. of Education) to provide school libraries with effective ongoing support. (Forum del Libro, 2022)

In fact, October, the International School Library Month, is rapidly approaching. It represents a good opportunity to promote school libraries, attract new stakeholders and reinforce relationships at many levels: in the school and local community, at administrative and political level.

The 2022 theme proposed by IASL, for International School Library Month is Reading for Global Peace and Harmony, this can be linked to the UN 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development Goals and, more specifically, to its 16th Goal - Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Such a choice was made by AIB Lombardia (one of the regional sections of the Italian Library Association) for their study day organized in collaboration with the Regional School Library Network of Lombardy and the National Commission on School Libraries (AIB CNBS), to be held in Milan on the 1st of October 2022, a kick-off event of the ISLM 2022 (AIB Lombardia, 2022).

Let's keep our fingers crossed and continue advocating school libraries!

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