

The Great School Libraries Campaign

By Anne Thompson

Although the United Kingdom has for many years viewed school libraries as a recognised part of school life they are not a statutory requirement. This has resulted in school library provision being patchy and varied in quality across the country. Without direction or funding from government it is only with the support of a head teacher who has a commitment to providing suitable funding and staffing that a school will have a successful library at its heart. School libraries, if they exist at all, can often be an underused resource when in fact they should be a central part of the education strategy.

Over the last few years there have been a number of campaigns in both England and Wales to make school libraries and librarians a statutory element of school provision. In 2010 the author Alan Gibbons led the 'Campaign for the Book' protesting against library cuts and closures and the reduction in reading for pleasure in schools. The following year a petition in favour of school libraries and school librarians was discussed in the Welsh Assembly. Although neither of these resulted in a change in the status of school libraries it did have the effect of raising their profile and prompting both discussion and further research. The National Literacy Trust (NLT) set up the School Library Commission which resulted in the publication of *School Libraries: A Plan for Improvement*, in September of 2010.

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In 2011 the School Library Association (SLA) in conjunction with the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL) ran the 'Shout about School Libraries' campaign. This campaign aimed to raise awareness of the value of school libraries and Schools Library Services to their communities (at both primary and secondary school level) amongst key stakeholders including government, head teachers, governors and parents. At the time supporters wrote to their members of Parliament and marched to the Houses of Parliament to register their concern over the lack of school libraries across the country. This campaign ran until the end of 2012 and once again although there were no official changes made by those in power the response in the media and the support received was encouraging.

In 2016 a survey conducted by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers found that 32% of those who responded said their school does not have a designated librarian to manage the library, just under a quarter (23%) said a teacher or member of support staff looks after the library, and nearly a tenth (9%) said no one looks after it. Over a fifth (22%) said their school library budget has been cut by at least 40% since 2010.

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In November 2017, Dawn Finch, past president of CILIP, wrote to the then Secretary of State for Education, Justine Greening MP, asking her to halt the shocking decline of library provision and the numbers of qualified librarians in state-funded schools and colleges in England. The letter was supported by over 150 authors, poets and members of organisations such as the National Literacy Trust. Although there are no official government figures regarding the provision of school libraries and librarians, and any previous research has had to rely on partial statistical analysis and reports provided by agencies that support school libraries, it is known that the provision has declined since 2008 as indicated by the survey mentioned above.

Dawn Finch's letter and the response to it prompted further discussion among librarians and their representatives and advocates about the situation and the need for a formal initiative to promote and safeguard school libraries in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. A major step forward was taken at this year's CILIP School Libraries Group Conference. In his opening speech, CEO Nick Poole announced that a brand new campaign was to be launched in June of this year. The Great School Libraries Campaign sees CILIP

team up with SLA to campaign for the end of school library closures across the UK. They are also stating that they believe that every secondary school should have a professionally staffed, fully funded library.

This is wonderful news and all school librarians in the country are being encouraged to provide their full support. With a background in primary school libraries I firmly believe that a well-stocked and properly funded library managed by a professional librarian is equally important in primary schools. The organisers have already voiced their support for a librarian in all schools eventually but initially the focus is to be on libraries in secondary education.

Great School Libraries is to be a three-year evidence-based campaign using research, lobbying and public campaigning to build towards greater recognition and support for school libraries. The main aims and objectives of the campaign are:

- Recognition of School Libraries/Librarians in the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) Inspection Framework
- Creation of a School Library Strategy for England, Wales and Northern Ireland
- Specific investment into School Library development.

The campaign will create strong evidence-based advocacy messages tailored to the different stakeholders including politicians, the Department of Education, Ofsted and schools – with a focus on teachers, parents, governors and senior leadership teams. It is hoped that by engaging with school librarians, supporters, previous library campaigners and other allies it will be possible to promote the message that: 'Every Child Deserves a Great School Library' to all.

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Great School Libraries

Welcome to the online hub for **Great School Libraries**, the joint School Library Association and CILIP School Libraries Group campaign supported by CILIP to ensure that every child has access to a great school library.

There will also be media based and public focused awareness campaigns that will help to demonstrate the importance of school libraries in supporting the curriculum and achievements of pupils of all ages. The organisers hope to be able to use quantitative data together with evidence of impact supported by individual case studies. This will require large numbers of school librarians to provide information regarding their successes and the use of the library by their pupils and teachers.

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At present in the UK libraries are statutory in prisons but not in schools, a source of frustration to supporters of school libraries. Both CILIP and the SLA believe that school libraries should be a statutory requirement and

be an important part of the government's educational strategies and this is a vital part of this new campaign. However a requirement for libraries to be part of the Ofsted inspection process could cause further problems for schools already facing cuts to their budgets so the campaign will also be pressing for ring-fenced budgets to be made available to enable schools to improve their library provision.

At present school library development is part of schools' overall budget which frequently results in libraries missing out on the necessary funding to enable them to function properly. The campaign hopes to build on the lessons learned from a similar campaign that took place in Scotland which resulted in a **National Strategy for School Libraries** being implemented there this August. There will also be School Library Improvement Fund, which will encourage innovative projects to enhance the services that the libraries are able to offer, and The Annual Survey, a benchmarking exercise for primary and secondary schools. This success is something the organisers of the campaign hope to replicate across the rest of the UK.

Earlier this year a **report** commissioned by the Oxford University Press detailed the results of a survey of 1,300 primary and secondary school teachers across the UK which found that more than 60% saw increasing incidents of underdeveloped vocabulary among pupils of all ages, leading to lower self-esteem, negative behaviour and in some cases greater difficulties in making friends. The majority of teachers surveyed attributed this underdeveloped vocabulary to a decline in reading for pleasure.

As a former primary school librarian I believe that we should be prioritising reading for pleasure in schools as a matter of urgency and particularly in primary schools where patterns and habits for a lifetime can be set. If schools are given adequate resources, then great school libraries could make all the difference. Properly funded, stocked and staffed school libraries lead to higher student achievement regardless of students' economic backgrounds.

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Research carried out into the provision of school libraries supports the view that access to a good school library and professional librarian input is vital at this primary stage of a child's education.

Access to library space and School Library Services will have an impact on attainment at a pivotal point in a child's educational life. Studies have shown that children who read for pleasure from a young age are much more likely to do well throughout their academic life. (The All Party Parliamentary Group report, 2014)

Seventeen years as a primary school librarian has taught me that a well-stocked library managed by a librarian is hugely important. Why try to play catch-up from 11+ when a library and librarian can sow the seeds from early years on? The formative stage has a lasting impact on reading progress and pleasure. The transfer to secondary education can often be a tricky time for children as they adapt to new routines and expectations. Even the best librarians and teachers will find it difficult to instil a love of reading from scratch at this stage. If the groundwork has been done and a reading for pleasure habit developed at the primary stage then at secondary school the huge range of quality literature suitable for teens is available to them.

The primary and secondary schools visited emphasised the school library as contributing markedly to improving literacy skills... The enthusiasm and responsiveness of the librarian generally had a direct impact on the attitudes of the students towards the library and reading. (Ofsted, 2011)

A librarian is vital in ensuring that reading habit is nurtured from early on in a child's reading journey. Ideally this would be a librarian in each primary school, however funding makes that unlikely in the near future but with the closure of many county School Library Services it appears to me that some sort of local librarian team shared between a small group of primaries is needed sooner rather than later. I am hopeful that this possibility may be incorporated into the finer details of the campaign at some point in the future.

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An aspect of the librarian role not often mentioned is that of nurturing teachers as readers. It is possible for librarians to make a vital impact here. Running staff book clubs, book swap boxes in the staffroom and email recommendations of new books for both children and adults all raise the profile of reading for pleasure and are initiatives I have had success with. A librarian is able to keep time pressed teachers up to date with new authors and titles that they may want to share in the classroom.

Teresa Cremin and the **Open University** have done a great deal of research work on the importance of teachers as readers and reading role models. Librarians have training and expertise in the areas that will

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enable, support and encourage this in primary and secondary schools. They are ideally placed and qualified to organise reading groups for teachers in their own schools or cluster groups of local schools.

The campaign will highlight the fact that a great school library needs a librarian to manage and promote it. There are schools in the UK that may have a library but no professional librarian to run it. Without a school librarian the library is simply a room full of books, with a librarian it can become 'the heart of the school', the wonderful description first used by Caroline Roche of the School Library group of CILIP, for both pupils and staff. We live in an age when much in education has to be assessed, measured and counted. These things that can be counted appear to matter most to those who are making the decisions. So much of what librarians do cannot be assessed or counted. That does not mean that what they do does not matter. Nor does it mean that they are not having a positive impact on the children they serve.

In addition to the academic role of the school library and librarian the library provides a safe haven for vulnerable children. Every school librarian can tell you of a child that has been 'rescued' by the library. The new pupil anxious about the hurly-burly of the playground, the worried child who needs some time alone and a quiet space to simply 'be'. If for any reason a child feels out of place the school library can provide security and a place where they feel valued.

The school library offers comfort to many. Although this cannot be measured it matters enormously and is a vital element of great school libraries. During the campaign it is hoped that by sharing evidence of good practice and success stories from individual librarians this aspect of school library life can be highlighted and included in the reasons why a library is an essential part of a child's education.

If the Department of Education were to officially recognise and endorse the role of school libraries then school librarians, teachers and school governors would be in a better position to effect change and improvement in the provision of school libraries across the country. Over the last few years school libraries have not featured in major education strategies which has resulted in their importance being reduced in the views of many. It is hoped that the Great School Libraries campaign will promote an understanding of how important they are in raising standards and results within schools.

The organisers of the Great School Libraries UK campaign have set up a dedicated [website](#) providing full details and more information about the campaign. Although the evidence gathered will be UK based it would be greatly appreciated if school librarians across the world could also spread the word and support the campaign in any way possible. It is hoped that one day every child in the UK will get the Great School Library that they deserve.

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