

Beginning a dialogue about how teacher-librarians advocate for the profession: Implications of a national survey

By Ann Ewbank

As a result of drastic eliminations in teacher-librarian positions and funding reductions in libraries in recent years, school library advocacy continues to be a hot topic. These eliminations have prompted library associations to take action in unprecedented ways. In 2005, the American Library Association (ALA) appointed a special Task Force on the Status of School Libraries. After the adoption of the Task Force's report in 2006, the ALA launched several initiatives to advocate for a teacher-librarian in every public school in the United States. ALA's policy-making Council also adopted several resolutions on various aspects of school library funding. The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) created multiple [Advocacy Toolkits](#) and developed responses to position and funding elimination.

ALA and AASL's most ambitious school library advocacy activity to date is the promotion of the Strengthening Kids* Interest in Learning and Libraries (SKILLS) Act, which would amend the No Child Left Behind Act to require school districts, to the extent feasible, to employ one certified teacher-librarian in every school library. The bill died at a committee level of the United States House of representatives in 2008, but has been reintroduced in 2009 by Representatives Raul Grijalva (D-AZ) and Vern Ehlers (R-MI). Despite initiatives attracting much needed attention to school libraries, positions and funding across the country continue to be reduced or eliminated, and little is understood about how teacher-librarians advocate for school library positions and programs.

A review of the professional literature on teacher-librarian advocacy consists primarily of strategies and techniques for advocacy such as Sandy Schuckett's book *Political Advocacy for School Librarians: YOU Have the Power!* (2004), and reports of successful advocacy initiatives such as the work of the Spokane Moms (Kalich, 2008; Kenney, 2008).

In August 2008, I conducted an electronic survey to discover how teacher-librarians advocate for the profession, and how they might advocate more successfully. I adapted the survey from a similar study of advocacy in the counselling profession (Myers H Sweeney, 2004). I distributed the survey to two national teacher-librarian email discussion lists: AASL Forum, with 638 subscribers; and LM_NET, with over 14,000 subscribers.

The survey reveals some of the issues that as a profession, we need to address with regard to advocacy. In particular, issues raised include:

- Do teacher-librarians agree on the definition of advocacy?
- Are teacher-librarian attempts at advocacy working?
- Is advocacy something that teacher-librarians understand and accept as a fundamental aspect of the profession?

The survey results

Three hundred and eighty-one teacher-librarians completed the survey. Over three-quarters of the respondents (77%) were practicing teacher-librarians and the others were teacher-librarian educators, supervisors, consultants, or retired. Ninety percent of the respondents replied that they held a state credential. The majority (70%) had six or more years experience in the profession. I asked whether the respondents were, in the past three years, in a situation where school library funding or positions was

threatened, reduced, or eliminated. Over half (52%) said they had, indeed, experienced a threat to positions or funding.

Teacher-librarians also reported their methods of advocacy. Over half (53%) provided comments to decision-makers. Similarly, 51% read or distributed information on school library advocacy. Many respondents (44%) participated in their library association, among other methods of advocating (see table). I also asked participants to identify current obstacles to school library advocacy. Many respondents (62%) indicated a lack of time for advocacy. Other responses are described in the table.

The survey results reveal interesting relationships between the perceived importance of school library advocacy, engagement in advocacy, and successful attempts at advocacy. While all but one participant acknowledged the importance of advocacy to the future of the profession, 25% did not engage in advocacy activities in the last three years. And only 6% reported excellent levels of success when they *did* advocate. Almost 1 in 5 (18%) were unsuccessful in their advocacy efforts.

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Beginning a dialogue about advocacy

The results of this survey raise questions about the nature of advocacy among teacher-librarians. I propose that we begin a dialogue about advocacy and the future of the profession. The following questions can guide this dialogue. First, what is advocacy? One respondent stated, *'I consider advocacy to take many forms! . . . I feel I'm an advocate in promoting my program to my customers, students, teachers, and administrators . . .'*

Is advocacy the act of a teacher-librarian doing his or her job well, as the respondent claims? Or is it something more?

Is advocacy the act of a teacher-librarian doing his or her job well, as the respondent claims? Or is it something more? The AASL Special Committee on Advocacy defines advocacy as more than doing the job well. The committee states advocacy is the 'on-going process of

building partnerships so others will act for and with you, turning passive support into educated action for the library media program. It begins with a vision and a plan for the library media program that is then matched to the agenda and priorities of stakeholders' (see [AASL Advocacy Committee](#)). Does it include taking time away from school to participate in legislative days? What about contact with decision makers such as school board members and legislators, or other participation in political processes? How do we come to a common definition and understanding of advocacy?

Second, are our attempts at advocacy working? And if not, what can we do differently? Although over 50% experienced a threat to funding or positions, and over 50% reported engaging in some type of advocacy, only 6% reported high success in their advocacy efforts. What accounts for the discrepancy? Why are more attempts at school library advocacy not successful? What advocacy strategies are we *not* employing, and what are we doing that is not working? If it is not working, what can we do to change this?

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Finally, is advocacy something teacher-librarians understand and accept as a fundamental part of their profession? Should it be? If not, why not? Over 60% of participants noted the lack of time for advocacy is an obstacle, and one quarter responded they had not advocated in the past three years. For example, one survey respondent stated, *I have over 800 students. No aide and a budget of \$3,000 annually. Do you really think I have time for advocacy?*

As teacher-librarians, we make time for collaboration, for lesson planning, for readers' advisory, and a myriad of other responsibilities. Should we prioritise advocacy as something we do because it is simply part of our job? Only 16% of survey respondents reported participating in library legislative days. For those who do not

have assistants or access to library substitutes, is it more important to keep the library open, or to close the library to participate in a legislative day?

The results of this survey demonstrate that teacher-librarian advocacy for the profession warrants continued study. The details of this particular study will be published in the near future; in addition to study is the need for action. Gary Hartzell (2003), a former school administrator and professor of educational administration, states, 'if you elect not to engage, you'll probably lose your opportunity to significantly impact the decision-making process (p. 9).' I challenge our profession to engage through dialogue, and to address these very difficult and complex questions, before it's too late.

References

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