

Protecting the school library genome

While public and state libraries play a vital role in supporting and improving literacy and reading, Georgia Phillips says school libraries are fundamental – and their contribution needs to shine and be showcased in this National Year of Reading.

In the 1960s, the Library Association of Australia (LAA, now ALIA) led the political lobbying to establish school libraries. It commissioned the Fenwick Report, and published standards and objectives. A plan of action presented to the Prime Minister in 1967 by the LAA included the establishment of a relevant federal body and advisory committee, recruitment of an overseas advisor, establishment of demonstration school libraries, teacher librarian training, and then a grants program to all schools.

At the same time, the Australian Library Promotion Council (ALPC) commissioned Margaret Trask's school libraries report, which highlighted how shocking school library funding was in Australia. In 1968, the then Federal Minister for Education and Science, Malcolm Fraser, implemented Commonwealth grants of \$57 million for buildings, furniture, equipment and resource materials relating to secondary school libraries from 1969-1974.

While the 70s were halcyon days for school libraries here in Australia, little did we realise the rise of Thatcherism in England would predicate a movement toward self-managed schools here – and this would spell their downfall. For almost three decades, since the Kennett government in Victoria started the move to school autonomy in 1993, well-staffed school libraries have suffered the attrition of qualified teacher librarians. Principals forced to run schools on ever-decreasing, "devolved" budgets have had to rationalise staffing, sacrificing specialist teachers.

Fifteen teacher librarian (TL) training courses shrank to three. Central school library services were dismantled. TL staffing dwindled to 13% of primary schools in Victoria, 23% in Tasmania, and 8.6% in the Northern Territory. School library budgets shrank to \$1000 in many secondary schools or to nothing in many primary schools.

In 2008 the Australian School Libraries Research Project (a joint project of ALIA and the Australian School Libraries Association) revealed the extent of the demise of school libraries nationally and the wide gaps created between sectors. In 2010, the House Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians, initiated by a petition of 1800 librarians and school library supporters, highlighted the full effects of the devolution epidemic.

But the rallying cry of local empowerment drowns out the fact that no evidence exists that the School-Based Management (SBM) approach improves

student outcomes. Queensland academic Bob Lingard found in 2002 that there is no convincing evidence to justify SBM on the basis of improved educational outcomes. Scott Fitzgerald and Al Rainnie in WA concurred in 2011.

"What is staggering," says Ballarat Education Professor John Smyth, "is the absence of any evidence showing that dismantling public schools, actually produces any better learning for students." He goes on to say measures such as choice, school selection, baseline assessment, league tables, naming and shaming, national assessment, and others are needed to marketise education but are also resulting in social polarisation as some schools attract bright students and funding, and the rest are "left behind in struggling circumstances".

Meanwhile, the real and plentiful evidence that school libraries, when well-staffed and resourced, do improve literacy and learning has been ignored. Lonsdale's literature survey in 2003, the Scholastic Research Foundation paper *School libraries work!* updated in 2008, and the impact study done just last year at Mansfield University provide excellent summaries of this evidence.

We know that libraries improve literacy. Teacher librarians improve literacy. They promote the love of reading and build the literacy skills (including spelling, grammar, vocabulary and writing skills) which are a key to the digital age. Softlink Australia has found "a significant positive relationship between a school's National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) reading literacy score, the budget and staffing allocated to the school library".

Recently in the US, the American Library Association President has launched a Special Presidential Task Force on School Libraries, saying "This task force will lead a campaign addressing the urgent need for advocacy for school libraries, as well as the impact of the de-professionalisation and curtailment of school library instructional programs on students and student achievement."

It is time for the entire library profession in Australia to do likewise and to engage in the struggle to save school libraries. Let's ensure that once again Australia's school libraries are the best in the world.

Georgia Phillips

co-founder, The Hub: Campaign for Quality School Libraries in Australia
gphillip@bigpond.net.au

Note: to read ALIA's submission to the 2010 House Inquiry or other submissions by ALIA, visit www.alia.org.au/advocacy/submissions/