



Testimony before the Joint Committee on the Public Schools

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**By Patricia Tumulty, Executive Director
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On behalf of the members of the New Jersey Library Association I want to thank you for permitting us to provide testimony on the opportunities which the new federal ESSA legislation provides for students in New Jersey.

As we discuss this legislation, I am sure there will be many points of view but I am sure we can all agree that students today live in the information age. No matter what their career aspirations they must know how to use and evaluate information. These will be basic skills for the twenty-first century learning. Fundamental in acquiring these skills must be a highly effective school library program staffed by certified school media specialists.

The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), with proper implementation by the NJ Department of Education, legislators and school boards, can provide financial support to help schools achieve vibrant literacy, information literacy and school library media programs for our state's students.

School libraries are a safe learning environment where all students have equal and equitable access to learning, support, and information for personal and educational purposes. NJLA believes that our schools must serve as an "equalizer" to provide all students with equal and equitable access to the resources, support and instruction necessary to succeed academically and become productive and engaged citizens in a democratic society.

Research on the value of reading, information literacy, school library programs and certified school library media specialists is extensive and clear. Yet, New Jersey schools have been dismantling these proven programs at an alarming rate over the last 8 years. According to a recently published joint NJLA and New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL) study we know now just how serious the problem is. Key findings of this study are:

- 20% fewer School Library Media Specialists (SLMS) in New Jersey than there were in 2007-2008
- 20% of High Schools have no Certified School Library Media Specialist available to students
- Less than 50% of schools in the Former Abbott Districts have the benefits of SLMS
- 150+ School Library Media Specialists cover more than one school. One SLMS covers 7 schools in one district.
- 91 School Districts have no School Library Media Specialists

- 33 districts have no School Library Media Specialists at the Elementary Level
- Over 280 Elementary Level schools are without School Library Media Specialists

These statistics were difficult to find. The Department of Education does not keep a record of how many school media specialists are currently employed as librarians in New Jersey schools. Members of our Association called the 2500 school buildings in New Jersey to obtain this information. This points to a deficiency within the Department of Education. To our knowledge, no staff person is responsible for overseeing the role of school media specialists within our schools or within the Department. For many years the Department did have a dedicated staff person but when she retired the position was not filled. This absence gives little guidance for districts wanting to evaluate school library services and their impact on student achievement.

In a society growing more and more dependent on information literacy we cannot justify failing to educate our children in these critical skills. We cannot produce students able to compete effectively in a modern information and technology based world without the most basic skills in navigating the vast amount of information in our society. Skills in navigating information literacy (which includes digital, visual, media, textual, and technological literacy) are best taught by certified school library media specialists.

Why are many students in New Jersey denied access to a quality school library media program? There are several reasons. One is that former federal legislation (No Child Left Behind) did not acknowledge the vital role of school media specialists and a strong information literacy curriculum for all students. In contrast, ESSA does urge policy makers to pay special attention to school library media programs and school media specialists when designing implementation plans for this new program.

Specifically ESSA provides resources to states to:

Develop effective school library programs to provide students an opportunity to develop digital literacy skills and improve academic achievement,

Provide professional development to support instructional services provided by effective school library programs and develop, administer, and evaluate high-quality comprehensive literacy instruction initiatives,

Provide time for teachers (and other literacy staff, as appropriate, such as school librarians or specialized support personnel) to meet to plan comprehensive literacy instruction,

Promote literacy programs in low income communities. This may include providing professional development for school librarians, books and up-to-date materials to high need schools,

Block grants can be made available to increase “access to school libraries” and provide training to “use technology effectively, including effective integration of technology, to improve instruction and student achievement.

Other states have already made a significant commitment to the development of strong school media programs and the implementation of statewide information literacy standards through state statute or regulations. We have provided examples in your materials from Idaho, Maryland, Nevada, and Montana.

Currently, New Jersey has no specific state requirements for either school media specialist in every school or for comprehensive information literacy standards. Several proposal bills such S436 Media Literacy Skills by

Senators Allen and Ruiz and A3396 Financial Literacy bill by Assemblywoman McKnight recognize the importance of imparting these skills to students. We believe these bills should be incorporated into a comprehensive information literacy curriculum for grades k-12.

It is important to note that although current Department of Education statutes and regulations do not mention information literacy, the regulations by the Secretary of NJ Higher Education do.

NJAC 9A were readopted in December 2015. These regulations provide a specific definition for information literacy. According to the NJ State regulations "information literacy" means a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed, have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information, and observe laws, regulations, and institutional policies related to the access and use of information."

These regulations also specifically discuss the requirement for a library at institutions of higher education. Under NJAC 9A-1.9 (a) the regulations state the library must have

(a) Qualified library professionals, librarians, and support personnel in numbers sufficient to serve the needs of students and faculty shall staff the institution's library. Every institution, regardless of enrollment or number of academic offerings, shall provide access to at least one qualified library professional with the exception of institutions with a specialty mission.

In addition, NJAC 9A-1.9(i) states

"Institutions shall have in place a plan that articulates how students will obtain information literacy skills as they progress through the curriculum. The plan shall identify outcomes for information literacy skill development, and how those outcomes are measured and assessed."

This requirement is under the responsibilities of the academic library.

In addition, NJ colleges and universities seeking accreditation by Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) require that students demonstrate information literacy skills.

A statement by the academic librarian community expresses its frustration that many students from NJ high schools coming into their libraries are not prepared for the demands of academic study. The statement says:

"We see that many college freshmen are poorly prepared to conduct college-level research, requiring professors and libraries to spend more time than they should on basic skills. We live with this cause and effect, frustrated in knowing that many of these students could hit the college ground running with proper training beforehand. All educators comprise a continuum of intervention necessary to help students gain essential career skills. School media specialists have a well-regarded place on this continuum."

It is clear that information literacy skills and the role of librarians in teaching them is a requirement for institutions of higher education both in the NJ Administrative Code and by Middle States requirements, yet there is no foundation in our existing public school laws or regulations which mandates the critical role of school media specialists or information literacy skills in student development in the k-12 curriculum.

Yet it is not just students who are going on to higher education who need access to a strong school media program and information literacy curriculum. Employers, business leaders and vocational career educators all recognize that the ability to do critical thinking and evaluate information resources is an essential workplace readiness skill. The SLMS plays an important role in preparing all students for their future employment goals.

What we are here today to discuss is how we will use the opportunities presented by ESSA to further the goals of every student in New Jersey. The NJ library community has developed a website called “Unlock Student Potential” which highlights some of the wonderful work school media specialists are doing in some of our districts today.

Stories include the work of Christina Cucci, SLMS and Mary DeNunzio, children’s librarian, both who work in Upper Saddle River, who have collaborated on information literacy skills projects for students in grades 1-5.

Or the work of Krista Welz, SLMS in North Bergen High School, who has developed programs that helped build STEM-based skills in her students. Ms. Welz is a Google for Education Certified Trainer and is currently a doctoral student in Educational Technology Leadership at New Jersey City University.

School Media specialists have also been actively involved in the Maker Movement.

We could go on with our successes.

Unfortunately, we can also document some significant setbacks. Recently the Paterson Education Fund announced students reading 50 books or more dropped by 500 after the district cut school media specialists. In 2015 1,923 students read 50 or more books but in 2016 that number dropped to 1,400. The district had 19 librarians last year compared to 31 in the 2014-15 school year. This year they are hiring two additional librarians. Still 10 below the 2014-15 school year.

ESSA is a tremendous opportunity to provide additional resources to school libraries. Currently, only one federal program *Innovative Approaches to Literacy (IAL)* provides funding for school library materials. This program is authorized at \$27 million annually of which half is dedicated to school libraries. Unfortunately, no school district in New Jersey has received this funding for school libraries in several years even though, as demonstrated above, we have great needs. We have provided examples of school libraries throughout the county which have received funding under this initiative. This would be another area where a staff member at the Department of Education working with the school library media community could have a tremendous impact.

ESSA provides a new beginning for all students. As President Obama stated when this legislation was signed, “It upholds the core value that animated the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act signed by President Lyndon Johnson -- the value that says education, the key to economic opportunity, is a civil right. With this bill, we reaffirm that fundamental American ideal that every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make out of their lives what they will.”

The New Jersey Library Association stands ready to work with all stakeholders in support of implementing the elements of ESSA that recognize the need to re-invigorate student’s education in this critical area. We particularly urge decision makers to pay special attention to school library media programs and school library media specialists when designing implementation plans for the following ESSA programs.

In New Jersey, as well as many states, the economic downturn and expanding expectations from schools has forced difficult fiscal decisions for many New Jersey school districts. Prior federal legislation did not emphasize school media programs. However, the research clearly shows that schools with high test scores also have highly effective school library programs which ensure their students will have the best chance to succeed in the 21st century. Now is the time to reverse course and restore the school library programs, so all New Jersey students have access to certified school library media specialists, and a standards based information literacy

curriculum. ESSA presents a critical opportunity to reinvest in school library programs, to unlock the potential in New Jersey students and prepare them for college and the workforce. At its heart of ESSA is providing an educational foundation which will ensure students from all school districts have the skills for career and academic readiness for the decades to come.