

Testimony of Jamie Greene

Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions

ESEA Reauthorization: Meeting the Needs of the Whole Student

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee – thank you for the opportunity to tell you about the wonderful things happening in our nation’s school libraries. Let me also say a special thank you to Senator Jack Reed, our state’s senior Senator and, may I also add, the favorite Senator of librarians across the nation. I ask that my full remarks be made part of the record.

Since I only have a short time, I’d like to get right to the point. School libraries serve as a hub for all literacies and learning in our nation’s schools. Research proves a well-funded and fully staffed school library with a state-licensed school librarian is crucial to preparing graduates for college, career and life, educating the “whole student” to read, succeed and achieve in any 21st century school.

Working collaboratively to provide cost-effective, data-driven educational solutions, Rhode Island Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education highlights the vital role of school librarians in the following quote: “Tomorrow’s graduates must be able to solve problems, think for themselves, learn independently, and find accurate and reliable information from among the millions of sources available to them at the click of a mouse. Students learn these valuable skills in school libraries and through effective library-media programs. We must continue to support these programs, which play a vital role in education today.”

To thrive in our global society, students need to be effective users of ideas and information. They must be able to access high-quality, multi-perspective information, make sense of it, draw conclusions or create new knowledge, and share their knowledge with others. These are precisely the learning opportunities provided by licensed school librarians.

Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that our school libraries are being used now more than ever. In 2009, the American Association of School Librarians found that for each licensed school librarian, the average number of individual student visits per week to the school library was over 300 and groups visited nearly 30 times each week.

For countless students, school libraries are the only place where they have access to quality books, electronic resources, to the Internet, and to technology programs. School librarians provide the only instruction in multiple literacies, including digital, visual, textual and technological. School librarians teach the skills and foster the attitudes and responsibilities learners need for critical and creative thinking, communication and problem solving.

The simple fact is that children in schools need libraries, both school and public, and they need licensed librarians to provide access and instruction to evaluate information and resources.

A Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation study, "Primary Sources: America's Teachers on America's Schools" released in 2010, reported that 83 percent of K-12 teachers say the number one place students get books for their independent reading is at the school library.

To most Americans, the importance of school libraries seems to be something that almost goes without saying. In fact, I have yet to come across *anyone, anywhere* who actually opposes school libraries – or for that matter, libraries of any type. In a January 2009 a telephone survey by KRC Research, 97 percent of Americans agree school library programs are an essential part of the education experience because they provide resources to students and teachers. Ninety-two percent agreed that school libraries are a good value for their tax dollar.

Yet, with increasing frequency, we seem to be "left behind" in funding and policy debates at the national, state, and local levels. Our school libraries are unable to update their collections or provide expanded access to resources because many licensed school librarians have been laid off and some schools have even closed their libraries. Sadly, the schools in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods are the most affected.

The NCES School and Staffing Survey Report shows that the number of full-time licensed school librarians significantly decreased since 2003. The American Association of School Administrators is reporting that 10 percent of Administrators had to cut school librarians in 2009-2010, and that an additional 19 percent would be cutting librarians in 2010-2011. For example, Iowa has lost 23 school librarian positions in this past year alone.

We find ourselves in this predicament not because of outright opposition, but more as a result of pre-occupation with other, perceived to be more pressing, issues. But the fact remains that all students need equal access to the books, technology and instruction available through well funded, fully staffed school libraries. To help ensure this equal access, libraries must be specifically included in new education programs such as the Race to the Top, and critical, dedicated funding must be maintained in programs like Improving Literacy Through School Libraries.

I think researcher Douglas Achterman put it best in a 2008 California study on school libraries, "It is more than ironic that school districts are willing to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on reading programs and staff development which have had limited success in boosting test scores, but are unwilling to invest in school library programs that show such direct correlations to student success."

Simply put, children need equal access to school libraries, and they need state licensed librarians.

I asked my students to be the voice of students throughout the country. One of my fifth grade students, Pearse Adams had this to say about why school libraries are essential:

“The library is a place of not only books, but opportunities. The library contains not only shelves, but imagination. Many researchers use books from a library to create wonderful writings, speeches or programs. Without the libraries in our nation, there would be no Harry Potter, there would be no adventure, no genre, no splash of color in the world of humans. Without librarians that dedicate their precious time, there would be no guidance to help you find a good book. Libraries can serve as a place for books, or much more! The library is a battery with many circuits connected to it. These circuits are people, places or things in a town. The library powers these circuits and keeps the town, city, or even country running. The library is like a support pole, without it the town will fall over. The library keeps the town steady, running and peaceful. Without libraries our lives would be a puzzle with pieces missing, a riddle unsolved.”

America’s school librarians understand these are tough economic times, but we believe there are four concrete steps you can take now to ensure that all students have access to school library programs:

1. First, amend Title I and the Race to the Top Fund to establish a state goal of having a school library staffed by a state-licensed school librarian in each public school. To make sure this happens, ensure that this goal is validated through accountability performance measures that include baseline data and annual reporting on progress in each of these programs.
2. Second, maintain dedicated funding for the Improving Literacy through School Libraries program. This program works (but in 2009, there were 450 qualified applications and only enough funding for 57 grants). It helps to improve student learning by providing up-to-date school library materials; well-equipped, technologically advanced school library media centers; and well-trained, certified school librarians to provide access and instruction to these resources.
3. Third, allow state and local professional development funds to be used for recruiting and training school librarians who are essential personnel to improve student academic achievement.
4. Finally, please include libraries in any legislation you consider dealing with education, training, or jobs.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting me here today. And remember: To ensure that all children read, succeed and achieve, and to educate the “whole student,” children need school libraries and licensed school librarians.