



Testimony before the New Jersey State Board of Education

January 3, 2018

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If there is a two word phrase that we heard over and over again in 2017, it was “fake news.” Everyone is talking about it but no one seems to have an answer on how to resolve the issue. I think 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 are basic skills for twenty-first century learning. Fundamental in acquiring these skills must be a highly effective school library program staffed by certified school media specialists.

Sadly many students in New Jersey do not have access to a qualified school media specialist. Nor does New Jersey have a comprehensive information literacy curriculum for students to follow.

Two major research studies demonstrated why this should be such a major educational concern.

The first major study by Stanford University released in November 2016 stated that students have a dismaying inability to tell fake news from real. The study’s author concluded: “What we see is a rash of fake news going on that people pass on without thinking. And we really can’t blame young people because we’ve never taught them to do otherwise.”

October 2017 the Pew Research Center produced a study called *The Future of Truth and Misinformation Online*. Pew interviewed noted experts to forecast the future of online information in the next ten years.

One of the main themes of the report stated: “Tech can’t win the battle. The public must fund and support the production of objective, accurate information. It must also elevate information literacy to be a primary goal of education.” It further concluded “The need for massive efforts to imbue the public with much better information literacy skills, this requires an education effort that reaches out to those of all ages, everywhere.”

We certainly agree with Pew. Information literacy is a critical skill for career and workforce readiness for every student.

The membership of the New Jersey Library Association (NJLA) is comprised mostly of public and academic librarians. You might ask why are we so concerned about the loss of school media specialists in our schools. The answer is very simply- we see the impact on students every day. Students who come into the public and academic library and try to use the resources we have but simply can’t. It is not the job of these librarians to provide this instruction. Students need to be taught how to use these resources in school as part of the curriculum to successfully navigate our challenging information environment.

Digital Citizenship

First, we want to thank the Department for organizing discussions on the critical topic “Digital Citizenship”. Our organization is meeting with members of the Department as well as with colleagues from the NJ Association of School Librarians, NJ State Library and other groups on developing recommendations for potentially revising the current Technology Standard. 8.1 to include Digital Citizenship. These have been very insightful and far ranging discussions regarding the collaboration of school media specialists with other teachers in this area.

We have been reviewing guidance from other professional organizations to assist us in these efforts. The Association of School Librarians, a division of the American Library Association, has recently introduced new *National School Library Standards*. This exciting new document provides a framework for developing curriculum for all students and placing the school library at the center of student learning. In addition, ISTE (the International Society for Technology in Education) also has done excellent work in this area. We are also reviewing their recommendations. Obviously, nothing specific has been recommended but the discussions demonstrate the interest in the Department to this important issue.

Just last week an article entitled “Efforts grow to help student evaluate what they see online” was published online by the Associated Press. The article noted that “state lawmakers throughout the country are pushing to put more emphasis on teaching students how to tell fact from fiction.” The article highlighted successful legislative efforts in several states regarding media literacy. It indicated that more were considering such legislation. They cited advocacy groups such as Media Literacy Now and the Digital Citizenship Institute as models.

As you can see, many educational groups are focusing on this critical area of educational development and efforts here at the Department are encouraging.

Unlock Student Potential

This past year the New Jersey Library Association (NJLA) established our *Unlock Student Potential* campaign to focus on the need for qualified school media specialists in every school and the development of an information literacy curriculum.

We worked with legislators to introduce two pieces of legislation to help us meet the goals of *Unlock Student Potential*

- A4500/S3258 Requires a certain ratios of school media specialists to student populations
- A4858 Would establish an information literacy curriculum in grades k-12.

These bills will be reintroduced in the next session of the NJ Legislature.

Why the need for A4500/S3258

We did a survey two years ago to document the severity of the problem and found that: “Research on the value of reading, information literacy, school library programs and certified school 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 since, currently, the Department of Education does not keep a record of how many school media specialists are currently employed as librarians in New Jersey schools. We have been very pleased to learn that in the next school report card, school media specialists will be counted. This will give the public a better opportunity to understand if their students have the services of a school media specialist in their school. This is a significant step forward to understanding how many schools do not have school media specialists.

Unfortunately, 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. Although the department does have many individuals who recognize the important work of school media specialists, without a dedicated individual to oversee these services, districts have no one to contact when questions or concerns arise.

Why the need for A4858

At present there is no requirement for information literacy in the k-12 level, in contrast NJ Higher Education Regulations under NJAC Title 9A require that all colleges have qualified library professionals and, in addition, require that every institution 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.

It is certainly the position of the New Jersey Library Association that every student must learn information literacy skills **before** they enter higher education.

A statement by the NJ academic library community expresses its frustration that many students from NJ high schools coming into their libraries are not prepared for the demands of academic study. They stated “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 the 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.”

Information Literacy is the Future of Learning

As stated in beginning – we strongly support the findings of Pew and Stanford. Information literacy is essential for all students.

We invite you to learn about some of the outstanding work our school media specialists are doing.

Krista Welz, SLMS in North Bergen High School who has developed programs that helped build STEM-based skills in her students.

Christina Cucci, SLMS and Mary DeNumzio, children’s librarians, both who work in Upper Saddle River, who have collaborated on information literacy skills project for student in grades 1-5.

Amy Schiller Edwards, school media specialist, Manasquan High School who has created the Innovation Lab within her Media Center. In this setting, creative thinking, technical skill, and “learning-by-doing” are encouraged. This cross-curricular space allows Manasquan High School to incorporate 3D printers, robotics, Arduinos, Raspberry Pi, and other emerging technologies into both the curriculum and students’ extra-curricular projects.

Excellent educators such as these, and the skills they bring to our students, should not be a luxury for a school district but a necessity.

We stand ready to work with you and the Department of Education to make that a reality.