



THINKSTOCK



“The moment we persuade a child, any child, to cross that threshold, that magic threshold into a library, we change their lives forever, for the better.”

US PRESIDENT
BARACK OBAMA



A FRIEND IN NEED

In the digital age school librarians are needed as much as ever, but they feel undervalued, professionally isolated and subject to constant pressure to justify their existence, says a House of Representatives committee.

Story: Geoffrey Maslen

The dragons in cardigans have risen up in protest. Starved of resources and derided by their teacher colleagues who think they do little more than check books in and out, the nation's school librarians seized the chance to put their case before the first parliamentary committee ever to investigate their work. In their hundreds, they made submissions and spoke to the House of Representatives Education Committee at a dozen public meetings across Australia.

Committee members were told how stereotypical images of librarians from the past prevailed, how they were seen as "elderly, staid ... a bit of a dragon with cardigan, pearls and a bun". Likewise, teachers tended to think of the librarian's role as a "cushy job where all you do is read books or newspapers or stamp books..."

In contrast to such distortions, the committee was "struck by the passion and enthusiasm teacher librarians had for their profession and the breadth of anecdotal evidence demonstrating the significant contribution to learning outcomes in primary and secondary schools that a fully-resourced school library staffed by a qualified and active teacher librarian can make".

The inquiry started last year following a request to the then House Education and Training Committee by Education Minister Julia Gillard. The committee had almost finished its work when the August election was called and it was not until the new government was installed, under Prime Minister Gillard, that a new Education and Employment Committee was asked to finish the job.

It has and the result is a 160-page report based on an astonishing 387 submissions, 24 exhibits and 13 public hearings – the last held earlier this year. Many of the hundreds of submissions, as well as the librarians and their supporters who went to the meetings, paint a gloomy picture of the state of school libraries, describing them as under-resourced and under-staffed, or even with no staff.

Tabling the report in parliament, committee chair Amanda Rishworth (Kingston, SA) said it was clear, at least anecdotally, that teacher librarians could play a vital role in educating future global citizens, "who



need to be not only technically savvy but also responsible cyber citizens, able to discern the value and merit of the overwhelming amount of information they encounter online”.

Ms Rishworth dismissed the typecast idea of libraries “as stuffy rooms full of never opened books and teacher librarians enforcing silence within their domain” when their real potential was to be a hub of activity, with librarians putting students and staff in touch with the latest resources. Endorsing her comments, the committee’s deputy chair Rowan Ramsey (Grey, SA) quoted a principal as saying: “I always try to put my worst teacher in the library because this is where they do the least damage.” Mr Ramsey thought if that was the attitude in a school, “it is little wonder students do not have a positive experience with their teacher librarian”.

But a shocked Sheree Vertigan, president of the Australian Secondary Principals Association, said she was very concerned by such a response. “Oh! I disagree with that and hope it’s not the general thinking,” she said. “This is the 21st century so we need to be pretty clear about the quality information resources schools need and that should be coming from a person in the library, especially when we are focusing on student literacy and IT literacy.”

In its report of the inquiry, the committee notes while there were many examples of situations where school libraries and teacher librarians were used effectively, the success stories appeared to be exceptions rather than the rule. “Much of the under-valuation of teacher librarians appears to arise from a lack of knowledge among employers and managers of the potential contribution of libraries and qualified staff to improved learning outcomes,” Ms Rishworth said.

The report quotes the findings of one research project that found 44 per cent of Australia’s school libraries were more than 20 years old and 54 per cent of those in government schools had annual budgets of less than \$5,000 to provide curriculum support, reading materials and electronic resources. The Children’s Book Council of Australia told the committee many libraries had budgets below 1975 levels while a council survey last year found the average budget equated to

E-VOLVING ROLE:

Digital challenges for teacher librarians

“What a school thinks about its library is a measure of what it thinks about education.”

HAROLD HOWE, FORMER US COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION

just \$25 per child. Across the whole survey group, 45 per cent of schools received less than \$10,000 for their library’s annual budget and 12.5 per cent had less than \$1,000, although a few large independent schools had budgets of more than \$50,000.

“It is indisputable that the value of teacher librarians’ work has been eroded over the years and undervalued by many in the community, be it by colleagues, principals, parents or those in the wider school community,” the report states. “The profession has unfortunately been subject to the many competing priorities that school principals find themselves contending with in an environment in which education budgets are ever stretched.”

“A vicious cycle” has resulted from the under-resourcing, with school libraries having insufficient numbers of appropriately qualified staff, leading to a poorer quality service, the report says. In turn, this reduces the demand for teacher librarians as well as the attractiveness of the profession to prospective students.

ALTHOUGH Australia has 9,500 primary and secondary schools, the actual number of librarians who work in them is unknown – perhaps because New South Wales is the only state to require each school to have its own librarian. The survey by the Children’s Book Council, however, did reveal the alarming fact that more than half the responding schools had either no professional librarian or less than one full-time equivalent working in their school library.

The committee’s report says there is “a fundamental need to collate some hard data” to ascertain how many teacher librarians are working in schools, to identify where the gaps are and to start to extrapolate the links between literacy – especially digital literacy “which is as important as regular literacy and numeracy skills” – and student achievement and library programs. It says this data should be made more transparent and accountable and recommends the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority include statistical information about the breakdown of all specialist teachers, including teacher librarians, on the My School website in a similar way to the NAPLAN results.

“While the teacher librarians’ role appears to be rapidly changing in an ever evolving digital, online and e-learning environment, it is not always clear exactly what role they should and could play in schools to those outside, and even within, the profession,” the report says. “A situation has also ensued where fewer teacher librarianship courses and places are offered by universities at a time when there is an apparent



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CARTOON: PAT CAMPBELL

BEST FRIEND: Teacher librarians are undervalued

shortage of teacher librarians. This comes when there is a greater need for ensuring that students come out of schools equipped with the appropriate digital and information literacy tools that they need to succeed in the modern world.”

It argues if teacher librarians are expected to assist in major national initiatives, such as the national curriculum and one-to-one computer rollout, there will be a commensurate need for additional resources for their professional development and additional technical and clerical support. In this regard, a core set of online databases should be made available to all schools so students have equitable access to key online educational resources. The committee says the sum of money required to accomplish this goal – less than \$5 million – is relatively small “but the benefits seem manifold”.

Ms Rishworth said the committee believed the report’s 11 recommendations would promote an awareness of the potential of teacher librarians to contribute to the educational outcomes of Australian schools. The recommendations have highlighted the need for an increasing awareness of the role that teacher librarians play through the development of a “discrete national policy statement that defines the importance of digital and information literacy”.

The report says the introduction of a national curriculum provides an opportunity to “revisit the way we support embedding expertise around ICT literacy into our schooling”, noting the support for the important role teacher librarians could play in helping determine and implementing the ICT component of the national curriculum.

A submission from Charles Sturt University and Joint Use Libraries South Australia says the role of the teacher

librarian should be as an integral partner in curriculum design and teaching “and in managing the provision of digital and physical learning resources”. “We feel that adequate and systematic attention to these cross-curriculum capabilities [such as ICT] will definitely be at risk in schools where the teacher librarian, with their cross-curriculum perspective and knowledge, information literacy and ICT expertise, is not there to become an important change agent in these curriculum reforms.”

The report notes that, despite scoring well in literacy rates, Australia is one of only five countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development where the literacy and numeracy performance of its students has declined in the last 10 years. According to the OECD, enjoyment of reading among students tends to have deteriorated in all countries yet it says students who enjoy reading the most perform significantly better than those who enjoy reading the least.

The committee recommends a longitudinal study to establish the links between library programs, literacy (including digital literacy) and student achievement – as well as “a workforce gap analysis of teacher librarians”. But while the committee calls for more support for librarians, it admits it is only empowered to make recommendations to the Commonwealth government when it is the states and territories that have responsibility for school libraries. It says, however, that it is distributing the report to all state and territory education authorities for their reference.

In the report, the committee points out that the ‘primary schools for the 21st century’ component of the government’s Building the Education Revolution program provides \$14.1

Boosting school libraries

The House of Representatives Education and Employment Committee's recommendations on school libraries are:

- 1 The government partner with all education authorities to fund the provision of a core set of online database resources, which are made available to all Australian schools.
- 2 The government work with the states and territories to develop a national policy statement that defines the importance of digital and information literacy for learning in the 21st century which can be used as a guide by teachers and principals.
- 3 The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority include statistical information about the breakdown of all specialist teachers, including teacher librarians, on the My School website.
- 4 The government support additional initiatives to promote reading, such as a National Year of Reading. The Department of Education should collaborate with the Australian School Library Association, Australian Library and Information Association and other education stakeholders in developing these initiatives.
- 5 The government initiate an Australian-based longitudinal study into the links between library programs, literacy (including digital literacy) and student achievement, including their impact on improving outcomes for socioeconomically disadvantaged students.
- 6 The government support promotional activities undertaken by ASLA and ALIA that demonstrate to the school community the valuable work that teacher librarians are doing in respect of e-learning in their schools, including those that highlight their leadership capacity.
- 7 The rollout of the new national curriculum, which is to be made available online, include a component of training for teacher librarians.
- 8 The government commission a thorough workforce gap analysis of teacher librarians across Australian schools.
- 9 The Minister for School Education, through the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, establish a national dialogue, including with tertiary providers, on the role of teacher librarians in schools today and into the future. The dialogue should include an examination of the adequacy of the pathways into the profession and ongoing training requirements.
- 10 The government, through the council, discuss ways to enhance partnerships with state and territory and local levels of government to support school libraries and teacher librarians.
- 11 The government partner with ASLA and ALIA to produce a document that showcases some of the successful partnerships and programs between school libraries and other libraries, and joint-use libraries. The document should be made available to government and non-government education authorities and school principals.

“As a child at school, my number one best friend was the librarian. I actually believed all those books belonged to her.”

ERMA BOMBECK
AMERICAN COLUMNIST

billion for all primary schools, including the primary component of K-12 schools and special schools. Although the money was to be used to build facilities such as libraries, multipurpose halls or classrooms, or to upgrade existing facilities, construction of libraries was identified as a high priority.

Most of the interest groups that made submissions to the inquiry or whose members attended the committee hearings welcomed the report. The Secondary Principals Association's Sheree Vertigan said it was “a very thorough report with complete coverage of all the issues involved with teacher librarians and libraries in schools”. “I thought it captured all the concerns we discussed around our association table about the role of librarians,” she said.

The Australian School Library Association (ASLA) and the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) also commended the committee on presenting “a balanced report that captures a full picture of the state of school libraries and teacher librarianship in schools”. ALIA executive director Sue Hutley said the report's recommendations marked the start of a “new stage of advocacy to improve school libraries and support for teacher librarians”.

Ms Hutley said her association was pleased the committee had recognised so well the passion and enthusiasm teacher librarians had for their work and the increasing need for their skills to equip young Australians with the essential tools in literacy that would help them throughout life. “But now we need real support to ensure they can keep delivering those services,” she said. “Both my association and the ASLA remain concerned and disappointed a stronger position was not adopted for staffing school libraries and the need to address the supply of teacher librarians through re-training programs.”

ASLA executive officer Karen Bonanno said schools were confronting an increasing shortage of qualified people to undertake the specialist tasks facing libraries, adding that the committee's call for a national dialogue to examine the adequacy of pathways into the profession was too late. Ms Bonanno said discussions with the Ministerial Council on Employment and Education should have occurred when the decision was made in the Building the Education Revolution program to roll out 3,000 new and refurbished school libraries. She said the government was now in “catch up mode to address the ‘long tail’ of the capital investment”. ●

The report *School libraries and teacher librarians in 21st century Australia* is available at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/ee/schoollibraries/report.htm and for more information email ee.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4573.