

Guest Opinion: **Librarians a must in Information Age**

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“Good Lord! What can you be thinking?!!!”

The question, posed to our school board, comes from one of the more than 800 Spokane citizens that have signed a petition that asks the board to reject a proposal that would reduce librarians to half-time in 10 elementary schools. If these positions go half-time it would be the third cut in four years to library programs. “If you think technology, collaboration with the teachers, the collection, teaching critical thinking and research skills aren't going to suffer seriously, you must be kidding.” Peggy Anderson recently scoffed, a Redmond ‘Technology Leader’ (that’s what Lake Washington School District calls their librarians) who is moving to Spokane but refused to apply to District 81 because she’d heard of the proposed cut. Spokane lost out. But we stand to lose out on a whole lot more.

Reducing our library capacity to part time service sends the wrong message to our children, our parents, our targeted companies and “family friendly” future employers. They will simply choose to relocate elsewhere. The excellence of District 81 has long been a recruitment calling card that we can’t afford to tarnish.

Everyone is sympathetic to the fact that the District is facing a large budget deficit; however, of the students that would be affected, this cut comes out to \$87 per student per year. We are on the verge of one of the most short sighted cut backs in our city’s memory, the dollars are small- \$350,000, out of a nearly 3 million dollar budget, but the impact is huge on our community and its efforts to educate our children and grandchildren for the new world they will be entering. At Wednesday’s school board meeting, the District comforted the Board by reminding them that the proposal actually returns them to a policy that used to be in place back in the ‘90’s. Most people in Spokane remember that the ‘90’s was the decade the internet came into the world. Times have changed. The librarian is the key to technology training and information literacy. Dr. Linda Pierce from Gonzaga wrote the school board to say, “High levels of information literacy require the active intervention of a school librarian not only in the library but in his or her involvement with the teaching faculty, the curriculum and in the daily lives of the students.”

What about the kids that don’t have computers at home or haven’t ever nor ever will be taken to the library? Four Title-One schools are slated to be affected by this proposal. These are the poorest schools in the District; one has been described as the poorest school in the state. Many of the librarians were ‘involuntarily transferred,’ at the end of this past school year as if the board were expected to rubber stamp the proposal. A Holmes elementary school parent pleaded with the school board recently explaining that, “The fact is that many of our students are living below poverty, they have lost homes, and some have been ripped from their parents. Now a steady positive influence is being taken from them... This undermines the emphasis we are trying to put on literacy and learning as a whole. It reinforces that feeling that they can count on nothing and no one.”

What can we count on if not scientific research that has been published in professional journals and even presented at the White House that cites that over the past decade,

research conducted in at least 15 states and by at least five different research teams has documented the critical relationships that exist between the presence of professional school library media specialists (or librarians) and academic achievement? The research results are unequivocal, in state after state, studies indicate that school librarians exert a measurable positive impact on student achievement, even when other powerful factors such as community poverty, per pupil school spending, and pupil-teacher ratio are taken into account. This body of research was called into question at Wednesday's board meeting by the District; our hope is that the Board will exercise its due diligence and carefully review these studies before making a decision.

Lucky for Spokane, it's not too late. While some communities only turn out in force to protest cuts in athletics (which happened a couple of months ago, the proposed cuts to athletics were later removed), Spokane has turned out for its librarians and by extension for its children and their future as well as the future economic development of the city. The school board is set to vote on August 8th to adopt the budget.