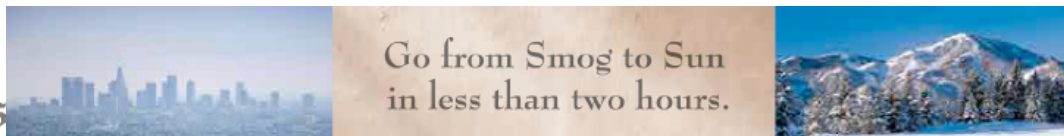


Los Angeles Times



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 From the Los Angeles Times

In parents' book, librarian cuts go too far

Families in Spokane launch what has grown into a statewide effort to protect schools' guardians of the shelves.

By Stuart Glascock
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December 23, 2007

SEATTLE — As has happened in other states, cash-strapped schools in Washington are dropping librarians to save money: This year, Federal Way cut 20 librarian positions. Spokane reduced 10 librarians to half-time. Darrington cut two librarians. A school in Marysville eliminated its half-time librarian.

Libraries are open less, their programs minimized, jobs combined. In many cases, part-timers with little formal library training are replacing skilled veterans. In rural Pomeroy, a school now employs a combination custodian-librarian: She opens the library after cleaning the locker rooms.

One school's parents said: Enough is enough.

Convinced that children and education suffers when librarians disappear, a loose-knit band of Spokane families launched what has become a statewide campaign to bring school librarians back from the brink.

The parents blasted e-mails about an online petition to everyone they knew. They posted fliers at coffee shops, bookstores and public libraries. They began an e-mail newsletter and advertised the campaign on social networking websites. They gave presentations to education professionals and camped out at school board meetings.

As their expenses grew, they sold T-shirts to raise money to fund trips to the state capital in Olympia, where they've become fixtures at hearings on school finances.

This month, they hand-delivered 2,500 signatures to a state government committee examining Washington's arcane school-funding system. "We did it to find out if anybody cared," said Layera Brunkan, who started the petition drive with Susan McBurney. Their children's elementary school was affected by the cuts.

"We realized that the school libraries are hemorrhaging, and it was far worse than we ever imagined," said Layera Brunkan.

State legislators, accustomed to professional lobbyists and official representatives of public education's many special interest groups, embraced the parents-turned-activists.

GOP state Rep. Skip Priest was buttonholed by the Spokane parents. He sits on the Basic Education Finance Joint Task Force, which will recommend education funding changes to the Legislature next year.

The district Priest represents, Federal Way, axed 20 school librarians this year.

"Librarians embody what is important for education," Priest said. "Lisa is reminding us all how important it is to fund K-12 adequately at the state level."

The Spokane parents "gave people around the state an opportunity to say, 'Yes, this is important,' " Priest said. "That is special -- not unique, but it's unusual, because here's a couple of concerned parents who are doing more than writing or e-mailing. They're expressing views clearly and forcefully and providing a website so that others who agree can express their views as well."

Nationally, statistics on school library staffing are elusive, said Nicolle Steffen, director of Library Research Service, a Denver-based agency that collects research about libraries. However, she said unequivocally that schools across the country struggle with library funding.

In Colorado, educators are trying to demonstrate a connection between student achievement and librarians in schools. One achievement test score there notes whether the school has a librarian, Steffen said.

"It seems pretty clear to us that librarians matter," she said. "Having a library with somebody in it is important. When you have a trained librarian who works with teachers, that's when you make a huge difference."

The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science urged Congress this year to support certified school librarians under the No Child Left Behind Act. School library media programs and student achievement are critically linked, the commission said.

The number of school library media specialists varies widely from state to state and district to district, said Julie A. Walker, executive director of American Assn. of School Librarians. School library funding tends to track overall education funding, she said. South Carolina and Arkansas have the highest percentage of librarians in schools, nearly one per school, because of statewide legislative mandates, and California has the lowest because of the lingering impact of Proposition 13, Walker said.

Despite budget pressures, some schools have maintained and expanded their libraries.

At Auburn Riverside High School in a growing suburb about 25 miles south of Seattle, Lisa Gallinatti manages a collection of 21,000 books and runs a computer lab with about 50 workstations.

She teaches students about the research process, helping students determine the best sources of information. She teaches students the difference between a search engine and a database.

("When you search the Web, you don't always find quality," she said. "Databases are more accurate." Internet searches churn out results based on popularity or paid placement.)

Each day hundreds of students use the library; teachers collaborate with her and her two assistants.

Educators call it a shining example of a school library that works.

But Gallinatti knows that hers is an endangered species.

"It's disheartening. Every school year, there's a new school district that is making cuts," Gallinatti said.

To stem the loss, the parent group in Spokane hopes to change the way schools value and pay for librarians. In general, the group wants the education code to designate school librarians an essential part of every child's basic education. Local school districts, then, would have fewer options when it came to making cuts.

Studies across 19 states tie healthy school libraries to student performance, said Marianne Hunter, past president of the Washington Library Assn. She credits the "fired-up" parents for the issue's traction in the state.

Layera Brunkan and McBurney, who started the petition drive, both say they feel passionately about the issue. They are active on behalf of their children -- each has two -- and as role models for them.

But more pressingly, they believe it is a unique time to stand for a worthwhile cause -- to get school librarians off the endangered list.

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