

The Spokesman-Review, Spokane, Wash., Jamie Tobias Neely Column: Moms Can Write Own Next Chapter

By Jamie Tobias Neely, The Spokesman-Review, Spokane, Wash.

Jul. 29--The fiery, young, professional mother stood up at school board podium to pour out her heart.

Lisa Layera Brunkan had gathered a group of parents, as well as more than 800 signatures on a petition, to ask the Spokane School Board not to cut full-time hours for elementary librarians next year. "Fundamentally," she said to the board gathered in the band room at Lewis and Clark High School on Wednesday afternoon, "we're here today because we feel it's still not too late."

A former headhunter who loves the children's book "The Secret Garden," Brunkan was joined in the fight by a Ph.D. in linguistics ("Stuart Little") and an inactive CPA ("Harriet the Spy.") They made impassioned arguments, explained spreadsheets and implored the board for more time. They were joined by librarians who explained that asking them to split their time between two schools would mean a responsibility for teaching and grading between 600 and 700 students, decreased collaboration with teachers planning units on dinosaurs or China and far less supervision. Wide-open libraries, they warned, provide kids chances for walking off with books or slipping into the wilds of the Internet.

After nearly an hour, they begged for more time, and more than once the school board president, Christie Querna, a "Black Beauty" fan herself, firmly cut them off. A glint of impatience shone in her eye.

It was a fascinating glimpse of a clash between the latest generation of powerhouse moms and a board that included a couple of the megawatt moms I remember from my own generation. One group wielded the power while the other railed against it. And in those moments, I recognized the passage of time.

I remember when I was a young reporter. I grew up loving "Charlotte's Web," which demonstrated for me the power of language, and my very first beat was education. I would trudge to evening school board meetings and watch those board members, who struck me as old and obtuse, wrangle their way to decisions. Sometimes I took copious notes just to stay awake.

Now I'm in my 50s, and I watched this school board meeting with different eyes. I now could see the trajectory from impassioned advocate to established powerholder. These school board members ("Pippi Longstocking" and "The Borrowers") face a \$10.8 million budget shortfall. They've listened, perhaps sometimes with weary eyes, to arguments about school cuts for nearly a year. In April, they made the wrenching decision to close an entire elementary school.

I couldn't read their minds, but I suspected that for them, the \$350,000 decision to reduce elementary librarian hours would not loom as daunting.

Angry parents, Querna told me later, should swim upstream and talk to the state legislators who make school funding decisions. The problem isn't a matter of misplaced school board priorities, but state and federal laws with expensive requirements such as special education and endless testing but without the money to pay for them.

Still, the young parents' arguments were compelling. They read aloud a letter from Don Barbieri, chairman of the board of Red Lion Hotels Corp. ("Tom Swift"), about the importance of excellent schools to economic development. "What I leave with you is 'Near Perfect' in our schools is not part-time librarians," he wrote. "Raise my taxes, do a special levy, find the dollars, but please don't cut our future."

The parents gave me the name of a Holmes Elementary School parent, Heather McDougall ("The Velveteen Rabbit") who works at Pizza Pipeline and values not only the books, but the computer training her son's librarian provides. McDougall still lacks the computer skills she wishes she'd learned in school. "I'm just a pizza lady," she says, comparing herself to her second-grade son. "If he goes into any higher education, he's going to need computer skills."

The arguments were fine ones, the cause certainly righteous. If any Spokane children, as a result of these cuts, wind up missing out on Pippi or Stuart or that spider named Charlotte, it will be a crying shame.

But if the school district can harness the talent, passion and energy of this next generation of powerhouse moms, regardless of the outcome of this battle, all will not be lost. In a decade or two, they'll be the ones sitting on the board, still with some fire in their eyes, a passion for children and books in their hearts, and those oh-so-difficult votes to cast.