

Guest Opinion

Librarians a must in Information Age

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Good Lord! What can you be thinking?!"

This question, posed to our school board, comes from one of the more than 800 Spokane citizens that have signed a petition asking the board to reject a proposal that would reduce librarians to half-time in 10 elementary schools. If these positions go half-time, it will be the third cut in four years to library programs in Spokane schools.

"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. Anderson, a Redmond "Technology Leader" (that's what Lake Washington School District calls their librarians), is moving to Spokane, but refused to apply to Spokane Public Schools because she'd heard of the proposed cut and felt that it signified an undervaluing of librarians that is detrimental to all.

Spokane has 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 Spokane Public Schools has long been a recruitment calling card – one that we can't afford to tarnish.

Everyone is sympathetic to the fact that the district is facing a large budget deficit; however, for the 4,000 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 shortsighted cutbacks in our city's memory; the dollars are small (\$350,000, out of a nearly \$300 million budget) but the impact will be significant on our community and its efforts to educate our children and grandchildren for the new and challenging world they will be entering.

At last Wednesday's school board meeting, the district comforted the board by reminding it that this proposed reduction to half-time librarians actually returns them to a policy that used to be in place back in the 1990s. Most people in Spokane remember that the 1990s was the decade the Internet came into the world and into our schools.

Times have changed. Librarians are the key to technology training and information literacy. Gonzaga's Dr. Linda Pierce 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 been (or ever will be) taken to the library? Four Title I schools are slated to be affected by this proposal. These are the poorest schools in the district; one has even been described as the poorest school in the state. A Holmes Elementary School parent pleaded with the school board recently, stating, "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."

Column guidelines

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What can we count on if not scientific research to help us understand the importance of full-time librarians? Research conducted in at least 15 states and by at least five 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 (published in professional journals and even presented at the White House) 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.

Much to our dismay, this body of research was called into question by the district at last Wednesday's board meeting. Our hope is that the board will exercise its due diligence and carefully review these studies before making a decision.

Luckily for Spokane, it's not too late. While some communities only turn out in force to protest cuts in athletics (this happened here a few months ago, and 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 Aug. 8 to adopt the budget.