



Responding to School Library Cuts

My 2010–2011 Presidential Initiative





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“Union Objects to Cutting Librarians” – *Wichita Eagle* (KS), May 26, 2011

“Librarians Protest Beaverton School District Cuts” – *Associated Press* (OR), March 22, 2011

“100 Librarians Are Eliminated” – *NBC News, Las Vegas* (NV), March 3, 2011

“Bridgewater - Raynham Backs Decision to Cut Librarians - School Libraries Remain Open, Staff Won’t Return” – *Taunton Daily Gazette* (MA), September 7, 2010

These are just some of the headlines that appeared during my 2010–2011 term as AASL President. It’s not like I wasn’t prepared for the harsh reality facing school librarians—and the students they serve. During the previous year, the American Association of School Administrators said library staff were cut by 10 percent and another 19 percent cut was coming. Responding to school library closings, layoffs, and reassignments of school librarians took a great deal of my time during that school year.

Because I knew more cuts were coming, I developed a plan to showcase what an excellent school library program *looks like* so that school libraries and school librarians could escape the cuts. I asked each AASL state affiliate organization to provide the name of an outstanding school library in the state that I could visit and we could celebrate. Out of fifty states, thirty-five participated in what was named the “Vision Tour,” providing the general public with a vision of outstanding school libraries. Why didn’t every state participate? Some state leaders maintained they couldn’t choose only one school in their state. A number of sparsely populated states in the west didn’t have a full-time certified school librarian who was an AASL member (a requirement). And,

unfortunately, some lost communications caused several more to miss out on the process.

When the school was chosen and the visit scheduled, the hosts arranged a program designed to let people know what school libraries are all about—and to show them what kids without school libraries are missing. Often these occasions included student performances of the Vision Tour theme song, appropriately titled “Check It Out.” I met with hundreds of librarians from all types of libraries, library educators, school administrators, government officials, and thousands of students. School libraries from across the country were celebrated with songs, skits, poems, videos, testimonials, and even racing sausages! These rallies, receptions, programs, and assemblies dedicated to celebrating school library programs gave the school librarians a good reason to invite people in. And in they came. Parents, principals, superintendents, school board members, area school and public librarians, state library personnel, mayors, state representatives, and other government officials. In honor of Portage Northern High School, Rep. Fred Upton (R–MI) had a commendation read into the *Congressional Record*. Some celebs participated in other ways; Robin Roberts, host of ABC-TV’s *Good Morning America*, sent video congratulations to Byrd Middle

School in Richmond, Virginia—a tribute that was screened during a school-wide assembly. The attention seemed to work. In one instance, a school librarian who had her job reduced was reinstated to full time. In another district, school board members left the Vision Tour celebration noting that cuts they had been contemplating were not going to happen—and they’ve stuck to their position. I heard over and over again, “This is the first time my superintendent has been in my library.”

Intermingled with these inspiring visits were media interviews asking for official responses to what was going on throughout the country: elimination of school librarian positions. This purge was at its height when I was in Wisconsin in March 2011, just a few days after teachers had a sit-in and rally in the state capitol. I walked around the capitol building and downtown Madison with Wisconsin AASL members and observed the many passionate individuals and groups who organized a protest march to fight to keep what



Governor Scott Walker was threatening to eliminate. I even saw a librarian marching with a sign that read: "Please don't shush me! Librarians won't be silenced." In conjunction with ALA President Roberta Stevens, I released a statement in Madison that said, in part, that school librarians, as educators, are being impacted along with teachers by sweeping policy changes. Despite this challenge, they are continuing to provide an excellent level of service and empower their students to be learners for life. In the statement we also highlighted the positive contributions school librarians make in their schools, particularly in the areas of reading and technology.

Observing what went on in all these great school libraries got me thinking. What if there weren't school librarians and school libraries? By the time I reached the last stop on the Vision Tour in Merrimack, New Hampshire, I had a list of "100 Things Kids Will Miss If They Don't Have a School Librarian in Their School." Met there by the most recent president-elect, New

Hampshirite Susan Ballard, we released the list, which was soon made into a colorful poster distributed by AASL and Florida State University. (You can view and download the poster at www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org/aasl/files/content/aaslissues/advocacy/100_Things_Poster.pdf.)

Because I financed the Vision Tour mostly from my own funds, I wanted to leave a legacy for future AASL presidents to have the chance to implement a project of their own, even if their personal budgets couldn't support the project. The AASL Board agreed to institute the AASL Presidential Initiative Fund of \$5,000 annually to support future presidents in their efforts to champion a cause important to them. Two task forces I appointed, Retirees and Leadership Development, have gone on to become a Retiree Special Interest Group and the Leadership Development Committee, providing opportunities for AASL members at both ends of the age spectrum.

Through it all, I especially enjoyed hearing what students had to say. Three of the phrases students uttered that stood out and stuck with me were that they went to the library to "solve problems," "have fun," and "use my imagination." In the midst of what was surely the definition of "interesting times," students were telling us what school libraries are for: to solve problems and to have fun, while stimulating students' imaginations along the way. What a wonderful message for all of us. Yes, we have to solve problems. And they seem to change daily. But those of us in the school library world also have to remember the joy of childhood, the joy of exploration—whether it's through the written word or the world of technology. And school librarians are the hope that springs eternal for today's students. School librarians are the people who can help solve problems and show how to have fun along the way. Remember, too, to use your information skills to take care of yourself, solve your own problems, and have fun along the way.

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2015 Teacher Librarian article she coau-
thored (with Amelia Anderson), and "Culture
and Context in the Mandated Implementation of
Digital Textbooks in Florida and South Korea,"
a 2014 School Libraries Worldwide
article she coauthored (with Ji Hei Kang).