

ADVOCACY



CACY

It's a
Marathon,
Not a *Sprint*

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Editor's Note: The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offered a significant opportunity for school librarians; it also created opportunities to partner with school librarians on their efforts to be included in their states' educational plans. This three-part article explores the development and rollout of AASL's ESSA State Workshops; how these workshops spurred additional state advocacy efforts from the California School Library Association (CSLA); and the AASL Vision for Implementing ESSA Task Force's continuing efforts to track state ESSA plans and provide advocacy tools and resources for school librarians.

Anyone who has prepared to run a marathon knows it takes many steps: Make a plan, visualize your success, set goals. The same is true for advocacy. There is a reason why we use the phrase "It's a marathon, not a sprint" when talking about advocacy. A sprint in advocacy equals a short-term result; a marathon involves a long-lasting result like ensuring every student has access to a fully funded school library with a full-time state-certified school librarian.

Endurance Training

Like marathons, advocacy takes patience and perseverance. More than a decade of steady efforts and strong messaging by the American Library Association (ALA) and AASL resulted in language specifically naming school libraries in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). School librarians and their advocates ensured federal legislation included school libraries.

The Starting Line

Before the marathon even started, AASL needed to provide decision makers in Washington with a clear

definition of an effective school library program to measure against state plans and to support individual efforts to advocate for school library programs. To this end, AASL created new or revised position statements related to the legislation in the first few months after ESSA was signed into law. Language in these position statements was updated from messaging AASL and the ALA Washington Office used to advocate for the proposed Strengthening Kids' Interest in Learning and Libraries (SKILLS) Act in 2007 and 2015. AASL's position statement "Definition of an Effective School Library Program" noted:

AASL supports the position that an effective school library program has a certified school librarian at the helm, provides personalized learning environments, and offers equitable access to resources to ensure a well-rounded education for every student. (AASL 2016)

Having a single definition accepted by federal, state, and district educational stakeholders is critical for advocacy efforts, and as your national professional association, AASL/ALA played a critical role in defining an effective school library program to ensure the first step in a successful journey.

Mile Six

At this point the excitement of being in a marathon, knowing that the preparation worked turns to realization that there are still twenty miles to go! Because school libraries had not been included in the previous version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), AASL recognized the importance of informing school library advocates and all education stakeholders of the new inclusion in ESSA.

As summer 2016 began, the U.S. Department of Education moved rapidly to develop rulemaking and guidance before a new administration took over. The regulations and guidance clearly showed a significant focus on state and local plans and a need to act quickly but thoroughly to ensure school librarians were able advocates at the state and local level. AASL, the ALA Office of Library Advocacy, and the ALA Washington Office decided to launch a series of workshops related to ESSA for AASL affiliates, the school library association in each state. New materials and resources were developed for these workshops to educate members on the legislation. The materials included background information on ESSA, an outline of the specific titles in ESSA in which school librarians could make the most impact to advocate for inclusion in state plans, and an advocacy plan using ALA's Office for Library Advocacy resources and staff expertise.

Half-Marathon Point

This is usually the point in a marathon when you check in with yourself to make sure you're keeping your pace, take in some nourishment, and hydrate to push through the next half. By September, AASL's ESSA Workshops were ready for rollout to states.

As states signed up for the workshops, AASL developed a personalized workbook to connect the dots between a state's education ESSA goals and the language and messages ALA/AASL had developed. AASL knew it was important for each state to be speaking the same language as their educational stakeholders to ensure our message points would connect with administrators, district leaders, and state education departments.

Workshop participants reviewed key messages for ESSA, identified stakeholders, developed coalition plans, and connected messaging to stakeholders and decision makers. Sample one-line messages relevant to school libraries for each ESSA title provided a foundation for small groups to identify stakeholders and develop targeted messaging.

Mile 22

Many marathoners refer to this mile marker as “The Wall.” This is the point in the race in which you’ve come so far and yet you know there is still a lot of race left to run—to many it’s the most challenging part of the race. In the ESSA marathon this was when ALA/AASL rolled out its messaging and advocacy tools to as many states and local-level school librarians as possible. This happened in a very short window as state ESSA plans were being developed.

AASL worked with state affiliate leaders to develop workshops tailored to each state’s planning process and to bring key partners to the table. Developing relationships, knowing the local, political landscape, and understanding the ongoing, continuous nature of advocacy are critical to success. Signing a petition may feel good in the moment and thousands of signatures may briefly highlight a cause, but the development of relationships and the creation and implementation of planned actions before, during, and after are what leads to success.

The state organizations gathered their members and supporters together to hear from AASL leaders, who presented forty-five workshops in total—thirty states were covered in the first sixty days. AASL’s ESSA State Workshops were the culmination of a sustained effort started long before the first workshop in early September 2016.

The Last Mile

The finish line is in sight for a marathoner, and for ALA/AASL, this point was when a sense of accomplishment, pride, and some exhaustion set in. The result of the efforts for all parties has been a pool of school librarians at the local level who are now confident about advocating for their vital role in K–12 schools. Although a change in administration and new guidance have made it necessary to revisit some previous planning and adjust timelines, the impact of finishing this marathon reaches beyond those states who have school librarians specifically noted in their approved ESSA state plans.

The findings from a national survey of state affiliates, completed by the 2017 ALA Emerging Leaders team sponsored by AASL, shows the increased comfort levels and confidence of school librarians to advocate (AASL 2017). Each new advocacy opportunity builds upon the steps taken previously. AASL’s ESSA State Workshops added many strong resources and advocates for school libraries.

Post-Marathon Recovery

Runners take a break after a marathon, and there has definitely been a down time for ESSA, too, when state plans are submitted but not yet approved by the U.S. Department of Education, when districts take their summer break, or legislatures are on recess. However, just like marathoners the training doesn’t stop for long. The advocacy must continue and sustain these efforts. The AASL Vision for Implementing ESSA Task Force continues to scan the environment, monitor and analyze state plans, and provide support for all school librarians and school library advocates.

School librarians continue to advocate for their vital role in education, and for many states these workshops were actually just one part of the marathon training phase as they start advocacy efforts at the state and local level.



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