# Building
# Advocacy
# before a Crisis

Lessons from the Pennsylvania school library study

By Nancy Everhart and Marcia A. Mardis

**M**ore than 60 studies have shown that strong school library programs led by certified school librarians are linked with higher student achievement levels. However, that research has rarely been well disseminated beyond the profession. When it has, administrators, policymakers, parents, and the general public have often ignored or dismissed the results.

This lack of knowledge about (or concern for) the impact of school librarians is critical because as those jobs disappear, students are denied access to the 21st-century skills required for college and career readiness. The professional outlook for many school librarians is grim at a time when their efforts to foster information and technology competencies and multiple literacies are increasingly viewed as an essential aspect of quality education.

School library cuts are often announced at the end of the school year. That can thrust school librarians into a crisis mode to persuade administrators and school boards to protect their positions. When it happens, advocacy—in the form of presentations, social media campaigns, press releases, and research sharing—must be hastily executed with time running out and when stakeholders are difficult to reach and unreceptive.

Advance planning, instead of simply reacting, can be the key to building support. As the American Association of School Librarians' School Library Crisis Toolkit says:

> True advocacy is when stakeholders stand up and speak out for you on behalf of a cause, idea, program, or organization…. As librarians, we need to plan ahead and focus our efforts on building support from stakeholder groups. Ideally, you want students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders to carry the message that school libraries make a difference to stu-

dents. But this won't happen without careful planning and action. We need to educate and mobilize our stakeholders to advocate for school libraries. The voices of school librarians are most effective when we join our voices with others to advocate for students and student learning.

To enable school librarians to be prepared to advocate, an interdisciplinary group of researchers (including us) and practitioners in Pennsylvania planned and implemented a project called "Supporting the Infrastructure Needs of 21st Century School Library Programs," funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The goal was to identify and understand what stakeholders—teachers, administrators, parents, school and community leaders, and other education associations—expect from school library programs to educate tomorrow's citizens. In order to advocate for school library programs and school librarians, the project team educated nonlibrary stakeholders by holding four disparate focus groups in which participants reacted to school library research presented in understandable and meaningful ways. The project team wanted to determine the effect of building stakeholder support at times when there was not an imminent funding or staffing crisis. Several months after these outreach sessions, we followed up with 10 of the focus group participants who volunteered to reflect on

> When budget cuts happen, advocacy must be hastily executed. Advance planning—instead of reacting—can be the key to building support.

what they valued about school librarians and libraries. Their comments appear in the table below.

## Perspectives gained

Most of the interviewees were unaware of the information discussed at the focus groups and were both surprised and moved by the presentation. In particular, they said they learned about the instructional role of the school librarian—a role with which they had previously been unfamiliar. They also found the information about the impact of a school librarian on student achievement to be enlightening. Participants exited the focus groups seeing school librarians in the roles prescribed in AASL's *Empowering Learners* professional guidelines—as leaders, instructional partners, information specialists, teachers, and program administrators.

Common themes among all four focus groups concerning program infrastructure were staffing and resources. The participants came to realize that a quality school library program could not exist without a certified full-time school librarian. And while resources were important, participants discovered they were substantially less effective if not promoted and integrated into the curriculum by a qualified school librarian.

Some differences among the four focus groups did exist, however. Participants from urban areas emphasized the school library as a center of information access for all learners regardless of socioeconomic status, learners' abilities, and English-language ability. In suburban areas the emphasis leaned toward the contribution of instructional partnering and technology leadership.

Focus group participants also received print materials, including a copy of PowerPoint slides, summary findings from the 2011 Pennsylvania School Library Study conducted by the Pennsylvania state board of education, the four versions (for parents, administrators, policymakers, and teachers) of the advocacy brochure School Library Programs Improve Student Learning from AASL, and a copy of AASL's 2007 *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner*. Several participants used these materials as starting points for conversations with colleagues and members outside their immediate circles. They proactively sought out educators with whom they had not interacted before about school libraries. One person shared the materials with her child's school librarian and her public librarian and was surprised to learn they were unaware of the research surrounding school libraries. None of the participants mentioned not valuing the material or discarding it after the focus group. This willingness to retain the information

| COMPONENT | SUPPORTING PARTICIPANT COMMENTS |
|---|---|
| **Focus group participants' most valued school library program components** | |
| Resources | All the components connect.<br>If you have a good librarian, it creates a snowball effect that grows into a love of learning in everything. |
| Staffing | There is a perception problem of librarians that they just check out books.<br>School librarians should do orientation sessions with parents so they understand.<br>For immigrant or refugee families where English is not spoken in the homes, the library is the only place where kids are reading in English.<br>I am profoundly concerned about the inequity of the relationships in the classroom. I hope the library can be a place where we can move away from these inequities. |
| Collaboration | [We] need digital citizenship.<br>It is the responsibility of the librarian to teach students how to use the internet and information.<br>[We] need to get teachers thinking, "How did I live without library collaboration?"<br>Collaboration with public libraries benefits the community.<br>[We] need to not focus on test data. [I] caution you not to build everything around that. |
| Technology | It's important to have librarians who can do many things. |

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suggests that some participants require time to digest the contents and think about how best to apply their new knowledge.

## Building your own advocates

Although this project took place at the state level, the results can be applied to school library programs nationwide. Our interviews were conversations with library "champions" who, as a result of the focus group activities, are now willing to take action to support school libraries. Their enthusiasm included a number of recommendations that school librarians can use to build an army of local advocates in any state:

**1. Utilize toolkits.** AASL's Parent Advocacy Toolkit is a useful advocacy resource that can be employed by stakeholders. Participants in this group also pointed to a desire to have outreach and advocacy materials available online for download as a continuing resource to raise awareness among policymakers and other audiences.

**2. Expand the outreach.** School library advocates can come from any of a school library's many audiences. For example, one interviewee stressed the importance of school libraries for children with disabilities and said that she would have liked to see information about their needs addressed in the presentation. Parents of children with disabilities are often a vocal and organized group and may be another audience that can be approached for future participation in follow-ups to this study. This type of outreach should be expanded to include the full range of a school library's audiences.

**3. Train the trainers.** A "train the trainers" approach that includes specific strategies on how to engage various diverse groups of stakeholders may prove beneficial in cultivating library champions and mobilizing grassroots advocacy. Administrators, Parent Teacher Organization presidents, civic group leaders, and other groups each

have a different perspective but could speak with a unified voice on behalf of school library programs to their constituents.

**4. Focus on policymakers.** Efforts to engage the public to support school library programs will go much further if policymakers such as superintendents and department of education officials are included. Some of those interviewed noted that in the small-group discussions individuals who already have good libraries in their local schools are satisfied with the status quo and are not interested in being involved in advocacy for others. Participants who held higher-level administrative offices at a statewide level expressed more of an obligation to ensure that all Pennsylvania students have access to an effective, dynamic school library program that has the support of the community.

**5. Follow up with participants.** Advocacy is an ongoing effort. The evaluators in this study spoke to participants several months after the focus group sessions and found that they remembered and were still persuaded by the information presented. Turning that understanding into regular advocacy activity, however, requires follow-up to encourage them to apply their new perceptions and understanding.

Our interviews with the focus group participants from the Supporting the Infrastructure Needs of 21st Century School Library Programs project have led us to conclude that reaching out to stakeholders in an organized, purposeful way has great potential to garner substantial support for school libraries and school librarians. The fact that stakeholders were invited to learn about the profession when it was not in a crisis-mode—such as when positions or programs are being cut—allowed for thoughtful reflection and the creation of school library champions. ∎

NANCY EVERHART *(left)* is a professor at Florida State University's School of Information in Tallahassee. Her research focuses on the leadership role of school librarians in technology integration. Everhart served as president of the American Association of School Librarians in 2010–2011. MARCIA A. MARDIS, *(right)* an associate professor, works primarily with school library and LIS students at Florida State University's School of Information. Her research intersects learning resources, high-speed networking, and digital libraries with particular emphases in K–12 education informatics, curation, STEM learning, and education data mining.