


# IGNORING THE EVIDENCE: ANOTHER DECADE OF DECLINE FOR SCHOOL LIBRARIES

**WHY DOESN'T THE RESEARCH ON SCHOOL LIBRARIES** resonate with educational policymakers and funding allocators?

Four decades of research from Canada, the U.S., and Australia indicates that well-staffed, well-stocked, and well-used school libraries are correlated with increases in student achievement on the order of 4 percent to 20 percent, as measured on student performance on standardized tests, overall school performance, and student performance in reading comprehension and in academic subjects.<sup>1</sup> Other studies have shown improvements in students' attitudes towards reading and in the collaborative nature of school culture.<sup>2</sup>



**OTHER COUNTRIES ARE UNDERTAKING LIBRARY-BASED INITIATIVES IN RESPONSE TO THE NEED TO EDUCATE YOUNG PEOPLE FOR THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY. THEY ARE BUILDING ON THE POTENTIAL OF SCHOOL LIBRARIES TO ENABLE STUDENTS TO BECOME INFORMED AND ENGAGED CITIZENS.**

Is the research on school libraries like the research on healthy living? Is it that we are more likely to pay attention to research that suggests we drink a glass of red wine every day than to research that suggests we exercise every day?<sup>3</sup> We say we want our students to learn how to learn, to become critical users of information, to become knowledge creators, but somehow the complexities of the school library – specially trained staff, multiple information sources, and changes in school culture and pedagogy – are too much for most of us in the K-12 education sector in Canada.

Not every teacher or principal has had the opportunity to experience an excellent school library, but those who have don't want to do without one. A recent study of school libraries in New Jersey revealed that educators valued school libraries and teacher-librarians because they:

- place learning of all kinds, not just information literacy, as central to their mission;
- help teachers to push the boundaries, to take risks and innovate;
- shape school culture (e.g., enhance collaboration);
- offer choice of resources in a diversity of textual formats (e.g., support reading education and inquiry projects for diverse students);
- offer access to technology and digital resources (e.g., support 24/7 learning);
- bring people together, colleague-to-colleague and student-to-student.<sup>4</sup>

#### **WELL-STAFFED, WELL-STOCKED, WELL-USED**

In and of itself, a school library is not sufficient for supporting and bringing about improvements in teaching and learning. Collaboration is crucial for sustaining educational change and improvement in schools, and the modern school library functions as both a catalyst and a support for change. Excellent school libraries feature planned programs, collaboratively designed to provide stimulating intellectual inquiry and engaging cultural experiences for students and teachers, and implementing those programs requires knowledgeable, innovative staff, and ready access to diverse resources.

*Well-staffed* school libraries have qualified teacher-librarians – accredited teachers with additional graduate level qualifications in librarianship, digital technologies, and inquiry-based pedagogies. They also have trained support staff and volunteers. Paid library staff provides leadership, administration, instruction, and information support. Principals, classroom teachers, and other specialists within the school have a role to play as well; in fact, the school library cannot fulfil its mission without their involvement.

*Well-stocked* school libraries include local holdings in multiple formats and access to digital resources through the Internet. Adequate funding allows resources to be current and relevant to the school's curriculum and to the school's specific instructional focus.

*Well-used* school libraries are integrated into the intellectual and cultural life of the school and community. Teachers and teacher-librarians work together to design and implement learning activities. Individuals and groups of students pay both scheduled and unscheduled visits to the library frequently. The library is accessible outside school hours, allowing visits by teachers and students, as well as electronic access to resources 24/7.

#### **SUSTAINING THE VISION**

Every person in today's world needs to be an "information literate" lifelong learner, able to use information to reason and to think critically, to make decisions, to solve problems creatively, to use information responsibly and ethically. Here in Canada, we seem to have difficulties in sustaining that vision, in recognizing that information literacy is not just a library issue – it is an educational issue. When the results of provincial, national, or international learning assessments are analyzed, the areas of concern that emerge are frequently library-related, particularly in the realm of information literacy practices: formulating questions, identifying appropriate sources of information, locating information, distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information, interpreting information, and using reading strategies appropriate to different kinds of texts.

For a few weeks in June 2011, there was extensive media coverage on the declining number of teacher-librarians in Canada, beginning with the announcement that Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board in Ontario was going to eliminate school library staffing and make serious cuts to school library services and resources. The flurry of concern was short-lived.

**EN BREF** Quatre décennies de recherches indiquent une corrélation entre la réussite des élèves et les bibliothèques d'école bien pourvues, bien dotées en personnel et bien utilisées. Les bibliothèques d'école *bien dotées en personnel* ont des bibliothécaires scolaires qualifiés en bibliothéconomie, en technologies numériques et en pédagogie axée sur l'enquête. Les bibliothèques d'école *bien pourvues* offrent des collections sur place et l'accès à des ressources numériques par Internet. Les bibliothèques d'école *bien utilisées* sont intégrées à la vie intellectuelle et culturelle scolaire et communautaire. Lorsque les évaluations provinciales, nationales et internationales des apprentissages sont analysées, les préoccupations soulevées concernent souvent les bibliothèques, particulièrement sur le plan des pratiques de littératie informationnelle : formuler des questions, identifier les sources appropriées d'information, trouver l'information, distinguer entre les informations pertinentes ou non. Bien que certaines régions du Canada affectent des compressions aux bibliothèques scolaires, certaines parties de l'Europe les soutiennent comme une force de réforme éducationnelle.

While in parts of Canada we are cutting back on school libraries and teacher-librarians, in parts of Europe they are being supported as a force for educational reform, for improving reading education, and for developing students' abilities in information handling and knowledge creation.

Both teachers and students need to reconceptualize teaching and learning, to go beyond the "how" of learning to the "why" of learning, to realize that learning is for life, not just for meeting specified learning objectives or getting high scores on external assessments. The school library – or in its newer iterations, the "Learning Commons" or the "iCentre" – plays a key role in this reconceptualization. It is a place for students to deepen understanding, to go beyond the knowledge that can be delivered to them by others, to learn who they are as learners, and to develop the skills of inquiry that will be critical for them all their lives.

Other countries are undertaking library-based initiatives in response to the need to educate young people for the challenges of the 21st century. They are building on the potential of school libraries to enable students to become informed and engaged citizens and effective contributors to our society and our economy, through the acquisition of life skills, of information literacy strategies, and of dispositions for flexibility, creativity, and innovation.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Portugal**

In 1996, the Government of Portugal established a School Library Network to ensure that every school and every student in the K-12 sector would have access to school library services. The Network provides services to 2,400 school libraries, publishes national school library guidelines, and promotes teamwork through a national coordination body with fulltime school library network advisors. Today, all elementary students and 92 percent of secondary students benefit from a school library operating according to Network guidelines. Recently, the Network began implementing its School Libraries Self-Evaluation Model in order to measure the value and impact of school libraries and to improve the quality of school library services through action planning and continuous improvement cycles.

#### **Sweden**

Since 2000, the Swedish government has funded research and development projects on improving the learning environment and on developing the pedagogical role of the school library. In 2006-2007, the government funded three new projects designed to strengthen

co-operation between teachers and librarians, increase their competence in information literacy, and support principals in their responsibility for the role of the school library in school development. Based on the outcomes of the projects, a law making school libraries mandatory in all schools was passed in 2011.

#### **Norway**

In 2009, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training initiated a national four-year program to develop school libraries in primary and secondary schools. The central concepts of the program are that school libraries are pedagogical tools and should be included in curricula, and that schools should have a common approach to providing programs in reading education and information literacy. At the school level, teachers and teacher-librarians are working together to define learning aims and content, and principals serve as project managers for the program. In 2014, a comprehensive assessment of Norwegian school libraries will be carried out to ascertain whether they are being more actively used after school professionals have increased their competencies in reading education and information literacy. Preliminary progress reports give the impression that schools are including libraries more systematically in their pedagogical work and that the knowledge acquired through the program is being spread to other schools and professional networks.

#### **Finland**

In Finland, school libraries are not mandatory, but several municipalities have created projects to establish them and to investigate their impact on student learning. The City of Oulu focused on establishing school libraries to change teaching and learning methods in 11 schools. Research findings indicated that the project had a significant impact on collaborative pedagogical practices among the teachers, among the pupils, within and between the schools and the city library, and with the Education Department of the City of Oulu.

The school library project in the City of Espoo focused on the role of the school library in providing information literacy instruction and enhancing computer and Internet use in teaching in 26 schools. This long-term, well-planned and well-funded project emphasized a collaborative multifaceted approach: centralized funding, a joint library system, guidance from the consulting teacher in acquiring collections, and the two-year training of 21 teacher-librarians. An important result of the project was the development of a local information literacy curriculum.

## Croatia

In 2008, the government of Croatia mandated that every school must have a school library staffed by a librarian with a university library degree, formalizing the long-time practice in Croatia. However, because professional staffing does not guarantee that a school community has a substantial and sustained commitment to the library or, vice versa, that a school library operates as an educational centre of the school community, a pilot project was developed to promote information literacy practices among school librarians and also to help the wider school community to think about information literacy as a tool for the realization of educational reforms. A series of workshops was developed for teacher-librarians, teachers, and principals to identify obstacles and develop action plans to integrate information literacy practices into the school. The outcomes included greater understanding of how information literacy practices facilitate learning success and of how collaborative work enhances educational communities.

## SCHOOL LIBRARIES AND LEARNING: THEMES

The earlier-cited research from Australia, Canada, and the U.S. is now being supported by research and development work in European nations. Here are some of the themes emerging from research and practice around the world:

1. Improved schools are collaborative in their thinking and practices. The school library as a silo, as a stand-alone entity, is emblematic of impoverished learning places as the closed classroom door.
2. Improving schools is more possible where other sectors of the education community actively contribute to the effort – especially government ministries and universities.
3. Teachers, teacher-librarians, and principals – learning and working together – support and facilitate improvements in teaching and learning.
4. Sustained improvements in schools are facilitated by policy development, but policy development has to be followed by implementation supports.
5. School library and ICT staff and resources are being merged and integrated to support digital age learning, e.g., iCentres in Australia and Learning Commons in Canada.

School libraries could support the changes in K-12 schooling that are needed for schools to be centres of 21st century learning. Many

provincial curricula espouse this, but few provinces fund school libraries or even mention school libraries as a force for improving teaching and learning or for responding to the demands of a knowledge-based society. One Finnish teacher involved in a school library project explained the situation in these words: “The National Board of Education arouses a need for school library development through new curricula, without any financial support. School library activity is not like playing an Air Guitar.” How long will Canadian education policymakers and funders keep playing Air Guitars? ●

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## NOTES

- 1 For syntheses of this research, consult: Ken Haycock, *The Crisis in Canada’s School Libraries: The Case for Reform and Re-Investment* (Toronto: Canadian Association of Publishers, 2003); Keith Curry Lance and David V. Lortscher, *Powering Achievement: School Library Media Programs Make a Difference: The Evidence* (San Jose, CA: Hi Willow Research and Publishing, 2003); M. Lonsdale, *Impact of School Libraries on Achievement: A Review of the Research: Report for the Australian School Library Association* (Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research, 2003).
- 2 See, for example: D. A. Klinger, E. A. Lee, G. Stephenson, and K. Luu, *Exemplary School Libraries in Ontario* (Toronto: Ontario Library Association, 2009); Jody K. Howard, “The Relationship between School Culture and an Effective School Library Program” (Ph.D. dissertation, Emporia State University, 2008).
- 3 The author acknowledges, with thanks, colleagues Ken Haycock and Ray Doiron for their insightful and provocative questions.
- 4 Brian Kenney, “What Does Excellence Look Like? A New Study That Shows the Role of School Libraries” in *Learning, School Library Journal* 58, no. 2 (2011). Accessed October 11, 2011, from [www.schoollibraryjournal.com/slj/printissue/currentissue/891938-427/what\\_does\\_excellence\\_look\\_like.html.csp?mid=4](http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/slj/printissue/currentissue/891938-427/what_does_excellence_look_like.html.csp?mid=4)
- 5 For more information on school library developments in Portugal, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Croatia, and other countries, see Luisa Marquardt and Dianne Oberg, *Global Perspectives on School Libraries: Projects and Practices* (The Hague: DeGruyter Saur, 2011). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9783110232219>



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