

Testimony to: House Committee on Education

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Date: April 8, 2021

I want to thank the House Education Committee and Representative Brady for inviting me to speak to you today about this important bill. I would also like to thank our State Librarian, Jason Broughton and Assistant State Librarians Tom McMurdo and Janette Shaffer for their advocacy for libraries, and their work in bringing this bill forward. Through my testimony today, I hope to illustrate some of the ways in which our current system contributes to deep inequities in library services for our students throughout the state, and to highlight the potential this bill has to help move the state toward providing all of our students with equitable access to dynamic and thriving school library programs.

It's important to understand first of all, that study after study shows a direct correlation between strong and well-supported school libraries and higher student achievement (See this [2019 informational brief](#) from the New York State Library). Thriving school libraries provide school communities with quality information literacy instruction and a full range of print and digital informational resources and technology. They also provide our students with an array of opportunities for experiential learning and critical thinking, and of course diverse and vibrant collections of literature which serves to expand our students' perspectives and allows them to see and understand themselves and others in a larger context. In short, school librarians and thriving library programs support the learning and growth of all of our diverse students. Knowing that school libraries are such an important component of our students' education and development, it is next important to consider how we can ensure equitable access to these programs and services for all of our Vermont students. Currently, we can't.

The challenge:

As part of the school system, staffed by library professionals and licensed educators, school libraries and librarians fall under the jurisdiction of the Agency of Education. However, since 2003 school librarians have had no formal liaison at the AOE. This lack of representation at the Agency has made the efforts of librarians and the Vermont School Library Association to improve equity and access for our students difficult. Some initiatives which librarians have been struggling to move forward include:

- formalizing state learning standards in concert with the [National School Library Standards](#) of the American Association of School Librarians
- supporting statewide trainings, and professional development for school librarians
- providing formal guidance and assessment criteria in accordance with the Education Quality Standards for school library programs (including staffing levels, and collection and physical space needs) as part of the [Integrated Field Review](#) process

One of the most fundamental equity gaps that exists in our current system has to do with how school libraries are staffed. Under Secretary Holcombe, the language and guidance in our Education Quality Standards was updated to read, in part:

The services of a certified library media specialist shall be made available to students and staff. Schools with over 300 students shall have at least one full-time library media specialist and sufficient staff to implement a program that supports literacy, information and technology standards.

Frustratingly, many schools choose to read only the first part of that requirement and ignore the segment that begins, "and sufficient staff." Because of this many school libraries are woefully understaffed, making it difficult and/or impossible for our state's incredibly talented and dedicated school librarians to fulfill their missions of maintaining what the AASL calls the "[five roles](#)" of a school librarian (*instructional partner, teacher, leader, information specialist, and program administrator*). Proper oversight and guidance could ensure that school

librarians could perform their duties in a fully-staffed library thus allowing them to provide the full range of library services to their students and school communities. Similar guidelines and oversight would also be beneficial in closing the gaps around collections and physical spaces. In my time as a school librarian in Vermont I've witnessed everything from librarians working in pristine, spacious, state of the art, fully-staffed libraries filled with natural light and abuzz with activity, to librarians valiantly struggling to serve their population from a set of bookshelves in a windowless closet which a school dared to call "the library." Surely we can all agree that this is not what equitable access to resources and library services for our students looks like.

Closing the gaps:

Our State Librarian, Jason Broughton, and the Department of Libraries have been very supportive and open to partnering with school libraries. They have included school libraries in consortia for databases and other digital resources, and invited us to participate fully in the interlibrary loan system, to name just two examples of how their support is helping to close some of these equity gaps. Partnerships between public libraries and school libraries are strong as well, with many local school and public libraries collaborating on programming and events. Public and school librarians alike are a generous, talented, innovative, and dedicated group of professionals who believe in the importance and value of this work. The collaborative spirit between school and public libraries is alive and well. While the DOL's commitment to school libraries is clear, as evidenced by their inclusion of school librarians in this proposal for a working group, the reality is that their mission really calls for their focus to be primarily on public libraries. Therefore there is a limit to the amount of support and oversight they can provide. Furthermore, they do not, under our current system, hold any real agency to make policy decisions or provide the kinds of oversight needed to hold schools accountable for their library programs.

And so this all brings me to the proposed bill at hand. I wholeheartedly support the passage of this bill. While it will not solve these issues in and of itself, it will provide an opportunity to take a closer look at our current school library realities, and possibly offer some new ideas for closing the gaps and working toward greater equity. It's important to recognize that this bill is not a cure-all for the existing inequities. Funding and budgeting for libraries, for instance, is connected to the fundamentally unfair [pupil weighting system](#), which I know is something this Committee is also looking into. But as the saying goes, "sunlight is the best disinfectant," and in this case, I believe that this proposed working group could potentially shed some much needed sunlight on these issues. Given the history that I've tried to provide for you with regards to a lack of voice and representation on the state level, I would like to recommend a slight change in the language of the bill. Where the bill currently calls for the inclusion in the working group of "two representatives of public school libraries, who shall be from schools of different sizes and from different regions of the State, appointed by the Secretary of Education," I would strongly advocate to change this language to the following: "two representatives of public school libraries, who shall be from schools of different sizes and from different regions of the State, appointed by the Secretary of Education **in collaboration with the board of the Vermont School Library Association;**"

I thank you for the time you've allowed me today, and I thank you for your service and your consideration of this important bill.

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