

Testimony: Vermont Senate Committee on Education

S. 220, An act relating to Vermont's public libraries

Charles Dabritz & Rebecca Sofferman

Co-Presidents

Vermont School Library Association

Good morning Chairperson Champion, Vice Chair Gulick and members of the Senate Committee on Education. We are grateful to all of you for the opportunity to be here to share our thoughts support S. 220.

My name is Charles Dabritz and I'm a middle school librarian in Burlington. This is my 9th year as a school librarian and my 22nd as an educator. It's also my third year serving on the executive board of the Vermont School Library Association (VSLA).

If you are not already aware, the Vermont School Library Association is the professional organization for Vermont school librarians. Its members include current and retired school librarians, as well as affiliated individuals who support Vermont school libraries. The VSLA is a state affiliate of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA). Our current membership is around 200. Often school librarians are the only professionals in that role in their schools or even their districts. The VSLA plays a critical role in mentoring and supporting school librarians in all aspects of their work.

We want to thank Sen. Hardy and others for the work they did in creating the Working Group on Vermont Libraries and for proposing this bill, S.220 in response to the findings and recommendations of the Working Group. We appreciate the opportunity that this has given us to highlight the importance of libraries in our state. We believe that the provisions outlined in this bill will go a long way in helping our Vermont School Libraries.

The first provision relates to ebooks and audiobooks as they are used (Sec 2). The current situation, with no regulation that we are aware of, has made it difficult for many schools to equitably access these products. Prices are often higher for libraries, including school libraries, to purchase these electronic literary products than consumer products or print editions. This makes it difficult for many of our school libraries to access and afford ebooks and audiobooks. The licensing terms vary by publisher and have changed over time. While it was not uncommon for us to see ebooks available for a one-time purchase that we could keep in our collections indefinitely, terms of most newer titles often expire after a set number of checkouts or a time (12/24 months). While publishers indicate these rules were put in place to mimic the wear and tear of physical editions, any school librarian can tell you a story about pulling out the book glue and mending titles so they can circulate many more times. Additionally, when we have physical copies of items, we are easily able to lend and share them between schools.

However, the licensing of electronic products often makes it very difficult, or impossible to lend between libraries. Any help the legislature can provide to alleviate these issues would benefit our students. We are unsure if the provisions as outlined in these sections would apply to school libraries and hope that any solutions you end up with impact all Vermont libraries.

The second area of importance for our Vermont school libraries is the addition of a School Library consultant position in the Agency of Education (Sec 7). This is something that we believe could once again have a tremendous impact on Vermont school libraries. This type of position existed in Vermont for many decades. The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act provided support for establishing school libraries, and as far as we know, that was reflected in Vermont through the Department of Education hiring a School Library Consultant sometime in the late 1960s. From the beginning, the role of the School Library Consultant was coordinated with the Vermont Department of Libraries. They worked closely with the Department of Libraries Children's and Young Adult librarians. They teamed up to provide professional development and supported school librarians in their many different tasks such as creating library programs, developing library collections, and supporting librarians when schools faced book challenges. Having a library advocate within the Department of Education was instrumental in establishing the requirement in the 1999-2000 Education Quality Standards that every Vermont school has a librarian. We are fortunate to live and work in a state that values the importance of school librarians. I'll let VSLA Co-President, Rebecca Sofferman speak more about the importance of our school libraries and how this this new position could assist us.

Rebecca Sofferman

Good morning Chairperson Champion, Vice Chair Gulick and members of the Senate Committee on Education. Thank you so much for the opportunity to be here to show support on behalf of Vermont S.220.

My name is Rebecca Sofferman and I'm the librarian at Colchester Middle School. I have been a school librarian for 15 years, the first seven of which were in the Adirondack region of New York State prior to coming back to Vermont, where I grew up. In New York, they have regional shared systems called Boards of Cooperative Education Services (aka BOCES). Each BOCES represented multiple school districts and provided a means of sharing services, which provided a much-needed cost savings for the rural districts in which I worked. Each BOCES region also had its own Library Services Director. These directors essentially served the same purpose of the School Librarian Consultant that S220 is proposing. As a new librarian, I can't stress enough how critical the BOCES Library Services Director was to helping me not only get up and running in my new library, but also for continued support as I grew into my role. When I moved back to Vermont, it was an aspect of my former job that I really missed.

School librarians serve vital roles in our schools. We not only develop and implement instruction in a wide range of topics, including but not limited to literacy, inquiry, culture and inclusivity, media literacy, research skills, digital citizenship, collaboration, and fair use, but we also manage diverse collections of resources, both print and digital. We maintain a space that is welcoming to all students and staff and that encourages innovation and creativity. We curate resources that both support the curriculum and address learners' diverse interests and needs. Most of us also serve on school and district-wide committees and organize schoolwide events that engage our learners. Our roles have grown and changed over time, but at the heart of it, we are passionate about helping all students to become lifelong learners. We support not only our students but our staff and administrators as well.

School librarians in Vermont are nearly always the only person in our position in our buildings, and sometimes in the entire district. For this reason, it is critical for school librarians to have support from other professionals in the field when we have questions or concerns. This is especially important for brand new librarians. Right now, many districts, especially in the more rural areas of the state, are finding it difficult to fill librarian positions. Often times, teachers or community members without library training are put into those roles, and are expected to begin running the library while they are seeking certification through the UVM School Library Certification sequence or another program. This process typically takes two years so you can imagine how difficult it is for inexperienced librarians to juggle the many hats we wear while they are still learning, and how much support these new librarians need in those first years.

Although many of the provisions in S.220 pertain primarily to public libraries, at VSLA we recognize that having a School Library Consultant position at the AOE (Sec 7) is vital to our mission. The School Library Consultant's role will provide leadership for school libraries and is critical to support Vermont students and school communities. Specifically beneficial duties of this position could include:

- Facilitating the AOE adoption of the *American Association of School Library National School Library [Standards Framework for Learners](#)*, released in 2018. Currently, there isn't a consistent school librarian curriculum in Vermont schools because the AOE has not adopted the School Library Standards. This means Vermont students do not have equitable access to learning information literacy skills.
- Protecting students' freedom to read by making sure all school districts have updated library selection policies and reconsideration of materials procedures guided by intellectual freedom, the American Library Association Freedom to Read and the Vermont Freedom to Read.
- Adopting a common school library assessment, to measure the effectiveness of school library programs, including equitable access to resources, library staff, and the implementation of standards.
- Negotiating and facilitating license agreements to provide a consortium of school library resources that includes ebooks, audiobooks, video streaming subscriptions, academic databases, news sources, and library catalog systems for all Vermont schools. This saves all schools money and creates equitable access to library resources, especially for students in

rural schools. A current example of this is the public performance license, which allows schools to show movies and documentaries in schools without violating copyright, an important protection for school districts. In the past, the Vermont Department of Libraries has negotiated contracts with SWANK for this license but this year they are no longer able to do so, so we are faced with potential cost increases that are unsustainable for many schools.

- Ensuring schools' adherence to the Education Quality Standards in regards to library staffing and safety.
- Collaborating with the UVM school library graduate program to facilitate the AOE school library licensing and certification process. The UVM graduate sequence has seen a major surge in enrollment of Vermont educators intending to become certified school librarians (currently over 40 in the cohort). We are hopeful that these students will help to fill empty positions in the state, but all these new librarians will need assistance and additional training.
- Coordinating our School Librarian Mentoring program and planning and promoting professional development opportunities for school librarians. Currently, there are very few professional development opportunities available to school librarians that are content-specific, which is a requirement for our licensure.
- Supporting school librarians who might be undergoing book challenges in their districts, and assisting librarians with general collection development in order to avoid self-censorship.

Finally, the Library Consultant position at the AOE is necessary to support school librarians, because they are governed under the Agency of Education, unlike public librarians. While the Department of Libraries certainly provides a resource for all types of librarians in Vermont, it doesn't serve an advocacy role the way a position in the AOE could.

Thank you very much for your time. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.