

THE MASSACHUSETTS SCHOOL LIBRARY STUDY: EQUITY AND ACCESS FOR STUDENTS IN THE COMMONWEALTH

The Role of the School Library

The Legislative Special Commission on School Library Services in Massachusetts was created by the Massachusetts Legislature in July 2014 to look at equity of access to school library programs in our public schools. In forming this Commission, there was an understanding that there are many factors that need to be considered in evaluating a school library program, including:

- Access to technology
- Staffing (licensing, quality and number of staff members)
- Access to the physical library
- Access to digital resources [online resources, as well as access to technology devices, (e.g., computers and tablets)]
- Amount of library instruction delivered
- Amount and quality of print and digital materials
- Funding

As we will show in our report, the Commission supports a series of recommendations backed by data from an extensive survey of school library programs that we believe will:

- Guarantee access to school libraries and school librarians
- Ensure access to information resources in school libraries
- Ensure access to information technology
- Ensure access to library instruction and support
- Guarantee access to funding

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) states that an effective school library program “focuses on accessing and evaluating information, providing digital training and experiences, and developing a culture of reading” (1). AASL goes on to report that “robust school libraries have high-quality, openly licensed digital and print resources, technology tools and broadband access. This environment is essential to providing equitable learning opportunities for all students. Over 60 studies in twenty-two states show that the levels of library funding, staffing levels, collection size and range, and the instructional role of a school librarian all have a direct impact on student achievement” (2). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), adopted by the Federal Government in 2015, includes language for funding “effective school library programs” in the provisions of Title I, Title II and Title IV (3). In Massachusetts, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has recently revised its educational frameworks in ways that indicate the importance of the skills and resources that are provided by a strong school library program. These standards focus on the need for strong print literacy skills for all students beginning in the early grades, as well as building technology capacity for all students (4, 5, 6). Information literacy skills, the ability to find, assess and critically think about information, are now included explicitly in the new Digital Literacy and Computer Science Frameworks (6).

The Commission appreciates the opportunity to give the Legislature its input, and to add to the body of research and best practices that is already in place. We are aware that prior to the formation of this Commission, there have been no comprehensive data regarding school library programs in Massachusetts’ public schools. The Commission includes a broad range of stakeholders, including those with extensive knowledge of school library programs. Members of the Commission representing the Massachusetts School Library Association (MSLA), Massachusetts Library Association (MLA), Massachusetts Library System (MLS), and Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (MBLC) were

able to draw upon a wealth of expertise in the library community to guide our work. Members of the commission representing the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the charter school community were able to provide context and expertise regarding current educational standards and expectations. All Commission members understood that our work required a comprehensive academic study to accurately collect data from public schools and to analyze these data effectively.

The Massachusetts School Library Study: Equity and Access for Students in the Commonwealth includes five major recommendations. We urge the Legislature to accept these recommendations and work with DESE to ensure their implementation. We believe they have significant implications for the students in our public schools. In the Executive Summary, the researchers have included suggested long-range plans for achieving the goals recommended. Extensive data that provide support for the long-range plans are provided in the accompanying study.

Work of the Commission

The Commission's primary purpose was to study the public school library programs in the Commonwealth, and evaluate whether they were adequately serving the needs of students. The charge of the Commission included:

- Soliciting information from the public
- Collaborating to design a survey instrument and collect data on the eleven items outlined in the statute
- Soliciting participation in the survey by reaching out to public school districts throughout the Commonwealth
- Developing a summary report of the Commission's findings with recommendations for school library facilities, budget, staffing, collection development and curriculum standards for school library programs
- Sharing our report and recommendations with the Joint Legislative Committee on Education and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

The Commission was charged with using findings from this survey to provide recommendations and long-range plans for public school library programs, and guidelines for school library facilities, budget, staffing, collection development and curriculum standards. Early in our work, we contacted two respected academic research experts in the field: Dr. Carol Gordon and Dr. Robin Cicchetti. Our principal researcher, Dr. Gordon, served at Rutgers

University as Associate Professor in the Department of Library and Information Science School of Communication and Information and as the Co-Director of the Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries. Dr. Cicchetti is the Head Librarian at Concord-Carlisle Regional High School, where she is nationally recognized for expertise in developing a "learning commons" model of school libraries. Using the Commission's charge, Drs. Gordon and Cicchetti developed study questions, which they tested in a pilot at Westborough High School in 2015, and then refined further in conjunction with the research team at DESE. In developing the study, researchers included questions that were designed to get at equity of access to the program and resources in each school. In addition, they used the baseline data collected from the survey and analyzed those data by district type to determine statistically significant differences that point to lack of equity.

DESE was instrumental in distributing the survey to school districts throughout Massachusetts. The survey was announced through the Commissioner of Education's weekly report in the spring of 2016, and members of the library community used a variety of channels to communicate with the school library community to encourage a strong response. Dr. Gordon arranged for the study data analysis to be conducted with assistance from the Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries at Rutgers University. Data analysis was completed late in 2016 and forms the basis of the report included here.

Findings and Implications:

The Massachusetts School Library Study: Equity and Access for Students in the Commonwealth provides a comprehensive report of the survey findings. Commission members are confident that the research conducted by Drs. Gordon and Cicchetti, with the assistance of DESE researchers and CISSL is of the highest quality and reflects the rigor and depth required to make effective recommendations. Based on the research and conclusions drawn by Drs. Gordon and Cicchetti, the Commission can report that the data indicate equity issues for Massachusetts students, and these include:

- Equity of access to professional staff
- Equity of access to the school library
- Equity of access to information digital resources
- Equity of access to information technology
- Equity of access to funding and subsidized resources
- Equity of access to library instruction and help

The specific data that demonstrate these findings are provided in the study that is included here and summarized in the Executive Summary. Based on the data and significant findings they reveal regarding lack of equity, especially for students from urban and rural districts, the Commission members urge the Legislature to work with DESE toward the development of equitable and effective school library programs. Library programs that align with national standards can provide public schools with a cost-effective means to provide all students with significant digital learning support. School librarians are trained to address the information literacy standards in the Digital Literacy and Computer Science framework. Access to digital resources through an effective school library program provides a measure that can close the technology gap between high-income, high-performing students, and low-income, low-performing students. In addition, ESSA recognizes that school libraries provide schools with meaningful literacy support, and federal grants are now available to fund them. Effective school library programs also provide schools with an instructional leader to help coordinate curricular work. School librarians are experts in project-based learning. They are trained to provide appropriate resources to meet the needs of all students. To achieve equitable access to strong library programs across the Commonwealth, the Commission approves the recommendations of the researchers, who suggest specific actions that can be taken to achieve this end.

These recommendations, include:

Recommendation 1: Guarantee Access to School Libraries and School Librarians

- 1A: Ensure that every public school in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has a school library and a certified school librarian.
- 1B: Establish the position and responsibilities of School Library Specialist at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
- 1C. Support a culture of inquiry in schools that sustains inquiry and resource-based learning, collaborative teaching, and the integration of digital technology to improve access for all students.

Recommendation 2: Ensure Access to Information Resources in School Libraries

- 2A. Increase access to print resources in school libraries
- 2B. Increase access to electronic resources in school libraries.

Recommendation 3. Ensure Access to Information Technology

- 3A. Improve access to internet and digital devices in school libraries.
- 3B. Increase access to Information Technology through staffing

Recommendation 4. Ensure Access to Library Instruction and Support

- 4A. Promote best school library practices in instruction in the school library.

Recommendation 5. Guarantee Access to Funding: Recommended Guidelines for Budget Allocation and Expenditure to Support Recommendations

The action plan to support achievement of these recommendations is outlined in both the Executive Summary and Study Report for The Massachusetts School Library Study: Equity and Access for Students in the Commonwealth. The Commission looks forward to seeing the Legislature adopt these recommendations and collaborate with the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to ensure that every student in our public schools has access to an effective school library program.

References:

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