School Librarians: An Essential Partner in the Push to Increase

Reading Proficiency on Standardized Tests

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Rationale

In an educational environment where testing and test scores dictate a school’s viability and a student’s preparedness for the future, districts are investing in programs that will assist in boosting their reading and math scores.

According to a 2019 study conducted by Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) and data collected from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) “… to be the nation’s fastest improving urban school district.” (DCPS, 2019).Students in grades 4 and 8 have made consistent gains in reading. Furthermore, as can be seen in the graph below, the most consistent gains in reading occurred between 2013-2019. This is the time period in which school library programs were fully funded and staffed with certified librarians.

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**Image from** [**https://dcps.dc.gov/release/dc-public-schools-continues-be-fastest-improving-urban-school-district**](https://dcps.dc.gov/release/dc-public-schools-continues-be-fastest-improving-urban-school-district)

The purpose of my research is to explore how school librarians contribute to the increased reading proficiency seen throughout DC Public Schools.

Literature Review

Librarians are a key component in the academic success of countless students. Multiple studies have shown that certified librarians and a fully-funded program play a significant factor in reducing the literacy achievement gap.

A 2011 study conducted by NAEP in conjunction with the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), found that reading scores of 4th grade students decreased in schools that were without librarians. On the other hand, scores increased in schools that were staffed with librarians. (Lance & Hofschire, 2011a). This supports the idea that students who receive regular support from certified librarians have greater gains in reading than students with no such assistance.

This is not limited to affluent schools and districts. Researchers have found the “benefits associated with good library programs are strongest for the most vulnerable and at-risk learners, including students of color, low-income students, and students with disabilities.” (Lance & Kachel, 2018). In the District of Columbia, according to 2017-2018 demographic information available on the District of Columbia Public Schools website, 80% of the population are students of color, while 77% are considered economically disadvantaged and 14% are in special education.

“Reading and writing scores tend to be higher for all students who have a full-time certified librarian, and when it comes to reading, students in at-risk subgroups tend to benefit more than all students combined.” (Lance & Kachel, 2018). According to a Pennsylvania study (Lance & Schwarz, 2012) 1.6% fewer students tested at a Below Basic level in reading when they had full-time librarians than those who did not, and the difference was even greater for Black students (5.5%), Hispanic Students (5.2%) and students with disabilities (4.6%).

Finally, according to NAEP reading data, in 2004-2005 and 2008-2009, states that hired and/or retained certified librarians saw an increase in reading scores for economically disadvantaged, Black and Hispanic students; more so than in states where librarians were lost. (Lance & Kachel, 2018).

**Data Methodology**

I distributed a survey to DCPS school librarians. The school librarian survey, which garnered 35 responses, asked respondents various questions about their roles in the school, their access to students, the school’s standardized test results and the expectation the school community had of them.

Survey respondents represented schools from every ward in DC.

49% of respondents worked as elementary school librarians

11% worked in either an education campus or middle school

29% worked in a high school

Data Analysis

* 63% of respondents taught classes or assisted teachers with instruction
* 91% of respondents said their school saw gains in the literacy based component of standardized tests while they have been the librarian
* 69% of respondents said they have regular access to students
* 57% believe that having more access to students would further increase literacy gains
* Over 80% of respondents believe their additional support via through book clubs, author visits, reading challenges, and providing unrestricted access to books for pleasure reading have contributed to the literacy gains their schools have seen by fostering a love of reading
* 100% of respondents acknowledge with even more funding and support they could do even more to help boost literacy

Recommendations

Since 2013, there has been a commitment to staff DCPS school libraries with certified librarians. However, this progress did not occur without challenges. In 2012, Chancellor Kaya Henderson, came very close to eliminating the school librarian positions. Perhaps she would have been successful were it not for the advocacy of the Capitol Hill Parents School Organization (CHPSPO), according to the testimony of DC Schools Advocate, Pete MacPherson. (Jablow, 2017). Due to this organization's campaign, not only were librarian positions saved but systemwide there was a further push to staff all school libraries with certified librarians. A further benefit was that for the first time, schools received an additional allotment in their budget to purchase books that allowed librarians to bring their collections up to date.

School librarians have worked diligently to increase literacy in every school over the past several years. Unfortunately, those gains may soon be in decline. For the upcoming school year 20-21, principals have been given the right to eliminate the school librarian position. According to a source within DCPS’ Central Office, by early March 2020, over 25 principals had submitted petitions to get rid of their school librarian position.

It is clear, the role librarians play in supporting school-wide literacy gains has been overlooked by principals as well as the Central Office. Data that speaks to increased reading scores within the district do not address the correlation between fully-staffed school libraries. However, this fact should not be ignored, especially since there is over, “…50 years of research, and more than 60 studies showing that students attending schools with well-stocked libraries, staffed by a credentialed librarian do consistently better academically and have higher standardized test scores. (Jablow, 2017).

Based on the survey results and research it is recommended that DCPS should continue to invest in their library programs. So many gains have been made in reading and writing by students who have been supported by librarians. My fear is, with the elimination of librarian positions in schools, DCPS will lose its momentum and experience a decline in literacy proficiency across the board. Programs, such as Stari, Lexia, and Read 180, are respected but they cannot replace the unparalleled love of reading librarians foster in students and this should not be ignored.

Finally, further study is recommended on this subject.

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