

In addition to the myriad jobs that comprise the role of school librarian, advocacy must be an integral component of every school librarian's practice. The future of the profession depends on it.

Coordinate and Advocate to Elevate Our Profession

By Beth Thomas

There aren't many school staff members who support every student and staff member, provide a collection of professionally vetted resources accessible to the entire school community, and maintain an inviting facility that is not only the largest classroom in the school, but also a safe space for many students. Certified school librarians do all of this and so much more. This educator should be valued as highly as math, science, and language arts teachers are, but in my home state of New Jersey, and across the country, an alarming number of districts are cutting this vital position. In addition to the myriad jobs that comprise the role of school librarian, advocacy must be an integral component of every school librarian's practice. The future of the profession depends on it.

Join the Ranks

Membership in professional organizations is a must: an organization of 1,000 members makes more of an impact with decisionmakers than an organization of 500 members. Every school librarian should at least be a member of their state organization—dues typically cost less than a weekly coffee run and membership can be as active or as passive as a person

prefers. Membership in our state organization, the New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL), includes access to our listserv and ensures that members receive important email announcements. NJASL has created templates for members (and their friends and family) to use when the New Jersey Department of Education or the New Jersey State Board of Education accepts open public comment. We have also provided sample statements to send to legislators to ask them to co-sponsor our information literacy curriculum and school librarian-to-student ratio bills. Advocacy cannot get any easier than copying and pasting messages to send to stakeholders.

I have encountered many librarians who feel they are not capable of volunteering for their organization, and this is simply not true. Everyone brings something to the table, and if you had the wherewithal to complete a graduate program and work in a school setting, you have something to offer to your fellow school librarians. State organizations often serve as the first responders when there is a need for advocacy. NJASL has supported librarians facing job cuts and censorship challenges and we frequently share information and resources so our members can be proactive and not reactive.

In order to form relationships with the many different stakeholders across our states and beyond, we need a reliable group of volunteers to step up and serve our state organizations. Everyone has an expertise in something, whether it is social media, standards and curriculum, advocacy and PR, or professional development. Do not be hesitant to step into a leadership role—if there is a committee chair vacancy, contact the organization’s executive board to throw your hat into the ring. Seeking out new people for these positions can sometimes be a challenge, and I know board members would be delighted if interested members stepped forward to help out. If committee chair positions are already filled, ask if they need team members. NJASL’s own advocacy chair has built a team of over fifteen people to assist NJASL with our advocacy efforts. Many hands make light work, and this team has been invaluable when it has come time to speak out at board of education meetings and to meet with legislators, the department of education, and the state board of education.

Although more expensive, membership in national organizations can be invaluable as they provide a vast network of pre-service students and professionals already in the field. Most state organizations are led by an all-volunteer crew who are also working full-time and this can limit what they are able to offer. Organizations at the national level often employ experts for their different offices and, as a result, are able to consistently offer access to professional development opportunities and resources to help support the profession. And, just like the state organizations, they will assist librarians who face job cuts or materials challenges.

School librarians can also serve their organizations, and their colleagues, by presenting at professional development events, such as conferences. There is no better way to promote the great things you are doing and, if you do present, make your administration aware of this professional accomplishment. Don’t stop at your state-level conference—submit proposals to national organizations. When a colleague and I learned that the national Association for Middle Level Education was going to be held locally in Philadelphia, we submitted proposals on how we incorporated coding and maker activities into our program and, to our surprise, our proposals were accepted. It was great PR for us and for our district.

As EveryLibrary executive director John Chrastka recently mentioned in his article “School Librarians Must Treat the Fight for Their Future Like the Political Campaign It Is,” librarians who are members of their education union are just as vital to the association as classroom teachers. K.C. Boyd and Christopher Stewart, school librarian activists in Washington, D.C., enlisted the help of the Washington Teachers’ Union and when they organized, they were able to exhort the city council to not only reverse proposed cuts but also to promise to hire more school librarians. It’s important to foster partnerships with their local association leaders as well as the state level organization. These organizations are among the most powerful unions in many states and they have a seat at the table with policy makers and legislators. The support of state education associations can spread the word about the status of school library programs and influence the passage of related legislation. School librarian participation in New Jersey Education Association’s meetings and professional development opportunities led to the production and broadcasting of a commercial about the importance of school librarians and a social media campaign during School Library Month.

Start Local

At the district level, librarians can advocate for their program in multiple ways. Having a presence on social media platforms enables school librarians to showcase their programs to their colleagues, administrators, and perhaps most importantly, families and members of the community. If your district has a PR person, reach out and ask if they will post about your program. If you provide the content, many will be happy to share it via the district’s social media channels. Follow administrators, colleagues, and the PTO/PTA if they are on social media, and make sure to tag them when posting yourself.

Some state organizations have run campaigns encouraging members to post pictures and videos of their programs. The New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL) has run a #firstfriday campaign where librarians post content on the first Friday of the month. It is important folks are given enough of a heads-up so they can plan what they would like to post and, most importantly, remind members the picture does not have to be from that day! Many organizations have a hashtag for posters to use and tagging stakeholders can bring even more attention to your library program. In New Jersey, our advocacy team created a spreadsheet of stakeholders from the department of education, legislators, and other organizations that support education. We have found that many tagged groups will like and retweet, further amplifying your posts.

Librarians also need to get on the radar of their administrators. Become familiar with your district’s goals and strategic plan and share how your program supports these priorities. If your library program is not addressing these focus areas, start to incorporate aspects that do. Many districts will invite staff members to help draft these goals and school librarians should volunteer to serve on these committees. Since they work with every student in their building and, hopefully, most staff members, school librarians can be impactful contributors to these conversations. When the time comes to plan for the next cycle, ask your principal or supervisor if you can be a part of the planning committee. Whenever there is a curriculum rewrite, ask to be part of the team who works on it. In New Jersey, there have been many new education mandates rolled out in the last few years that school librarians have been able to directly support with resources and instruction on topics like social-emotional learning, civics, LGBTQIA+ issues, climate change, and computer science.

If your building administration seems unaware of what the work of a school librarian entails, it would be helpful to share AASL’s job description. This description covers all of the facets of the job, from front-facing instruction to all of the behind-the-scenes responsibilities that keep a school library program running smoothly. NJASL used AASL’s job description as a basis for its own model job description. We encouraged members to share it with their administrators and we shared it with administrator professional organizations, the department of education, the state board of education, and other stakeholders. The description could be used by administrators for hiring purposes as well as evaluation, and we have encouraged members to use it as a guide to ensure they are running a strong school library program.

School librarians who do not live in the district where they work should be aware of the landscape of their own hometown. NJASL has been notified of schools where volunteers or paraprofessionals manage the library facility and are being listed as the school’s librarian. School librarians who live in districts that have cut or

are planning to cut school library programs need to gather groups of concerned parents and community members to attend board of education (BOE) meetings and speak out against these cuts. In my hometown, cuts over the years have left the district with one certified school librarian, who is at the high school. A concerned parent reached out to NJASL to help advocate for reinstatement of the positions. This meant having a sustained presence at BOE meetings and it had an impact. Over \$50,000 was allocated to update the collections at the K-8 schools and there are plans to renovate the middle school media center. We continue to advocate for these spaces to be run by certified school librarians, and we will continue to speak out until all of the students in our town have consistent access to a strong school library program.

Speaking Truth to Power

NJASL has reached out to professional organizations for school administrators and school boards to communicate the importance of having a certified school librarian available to every student. NJASL members have also submitted proposals to administrator and school board conferences so that we are not just preaching to the choir. We have also had a presence at the New Jersey Parent Teacher Association conference, the annual New Jersey Education Association convention and when the New Jersey Department of Education held an equity conference this summer, school librarians hosted the session "School Libraries: Equity Happens Here."

We also recognize that administrators are busy and that sometimes an eye-catching infographic is the best way to spread the word about how school librarians can support their mission and goals. After meeting with the executive director of the New Jersey Principal and Supervisors Association, we learned that three priorities for New Jersey's administrators this school year would be accelerated learning, social emotional learning, and equity, diversity and inclusion. That evening, I created an infographic using Canva that explained the ways school librarians can help administrators address these focus areas (<https://njasl.org/resources/Documents/NJPSA%20Infographic.pdf>). →

Our organization recognizes that reaching out to legislators or education leaders can be daunting. To that end, whenever public comment is solicited from these stakeholders, NJASL creates template letters for members (and their family and friends) to customize and send to these groups. Although it might seem like a small gesture, when large numbers of these messages are sent they get noticed.

NJASL's advocacy team has ramped up its legislative efforts in the past two years. When everything went virtual in 2020, NJASL grasped the opportunity to schedule meetings with legislators across the state to ask for their sponsorship of our information literacy curriculum bill and school library media specialist-to-student ratio bill. We reached out to members who lived in specific legislative districts to join us in sharing their school library story. These personal stories are what interest legislators. We began by meeting with legislators individually and then over the summer of 2021, we organized two open-house information sessions and invited every senator and assembly member to attend. These visits paid off—after meeting with State Senator Mike Testa he introduced a senate version of the information literacy

SCHOOL LIBRARY MEDIA SPECIALISTS: A NECESSITY NOT A LUXURY

HOW YOUR SLMS CAN SUPPORT YOUR DISTRICT & BUILDING GOALS



ACCELERATED LEARNING

SLMSs cultivate and nurture a love of reading, a key skill that will help address learning deficits created by COVID. SLMSs work with every student every year that student is in the school. This fosters personalized learning - SLMSs put the right book in the right hands at the right time and they know which digital resources can best support student learning. They provide resource access to the entire school community. With a strong budget, they are able to purchase materials to build a collection that is current, diverse, and addresses a range of abilities. They also have access to a network of libraries from around the country to provide even more resources for students and staff.



EQUITY, DIVERSITY, & INCLUSION

SLMSs support equity, diversity, and inclusion in myriad ways. They analyze their collection to ensure there are materials that represent marginalized groups. SLMSs ensure that students are able to see themselves reflected in books, they promote books written by authors who have lived the experiences of the characters in their books, and they ensure that the nonfiction collection contains materials that cover a variety of perspectives and experiences. EDI is a strategic priority for NJASL and SLMSs have the opportunity to participate in EDI professional development through the state organization and its affiliates.



SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

For many students, the school library is a safe space - a judgment-free zone where they can select any book they want regardless of their reading level. School libraries provide access to books about mental health, physical and emotional development, and sensitive topics. SLMSs are able to provide bibliotherapy- "a therapeutic approach employing books and other forms of literature, typically alongside more traditional therapy modalities, to support a patient's mental health, to struggling students." (Psychology Today)

Many SLMSs have added makerspaces to their library programs. Maker activities encourage collaboration, critical thinking, perseverance, problem-solving, and creativity. They provide opportunities for students to experiment and explore in a low-stress environment.



PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP

Is your SLMS a member of NJASL? NJASL's mission is to provide members with educational opportunities and access to current information aligned with state and national learning standards. Membership provides ongoing professional development opportunities and support for New Jersey's SLMSs. Encourage your SLMS to [become a member](#).

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BETH THOMAS, 2021



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curriculum bill. After the open-house sessions, we were able to get even more legislators to co-sponsor the bills, and we are thrilled they have bi-partisan support. NJASL has also partnered with EveryLibrary to bolster our advocacy efforts, and they have created easy one-click emails that enable citizens to ask their legislators to co-sponsor the bills. As of press time, for the first time since these bills have been introduced over five years ago, the senate version of the information literacy curriculum bill was unanimously approved by the education committee to move forward for a vote.

School librarians can make their advocacy personal by inviting their district's legislators to visit their library and observe what a dynamic library program looks like. Unfortunately, many legislators we have spoken to are unaware of how school libraries have evolved over the years and the decades since they themselves have been in school. Some are even unaware of the differences between public and school libraries. Having the opportunity to see a school librarian in action and what students are able to experience in a school library can have much more of an impact than an email or a phone call.

Finally, be proactive in engaging journalists to amplify your message that every student deserves access to a strong school library program that is run by a certified school librarian. Op-eds were published in *NJ Spotlight News* and the *NJEA Review*, and journalists at *Politico* and the *New Jersey Herald* have covered the issue of school librarian cuts. These articles came to fruition because we simply engaged with the journalists. Education is always a hot topic, and it has been covered even more since the pandemic. Reach out to local and state editors with a proposal for an op-ed or a feature article.

Conclusion

Since the Spring of 2020, our society has grappled with the devastating effects of misinformation and disinformation. It has impacted public health, our democracy, and personal relationships. As many of us heard our elected leaders lament about the digital divide in schools, the falsehoods about COVID-19 being spread like wildfire via social media, and an insurrection spurred on by reports of a fraudulent election, we thought this could be the moment that school leaders recognized the value of a certified school librarian. The unprecedented federal funding, which will last for three years and can be used for staffing, continues to provide hope. However, in order for decisionmakers to connect the dots, we need to be the guides reminding them of the big picture.

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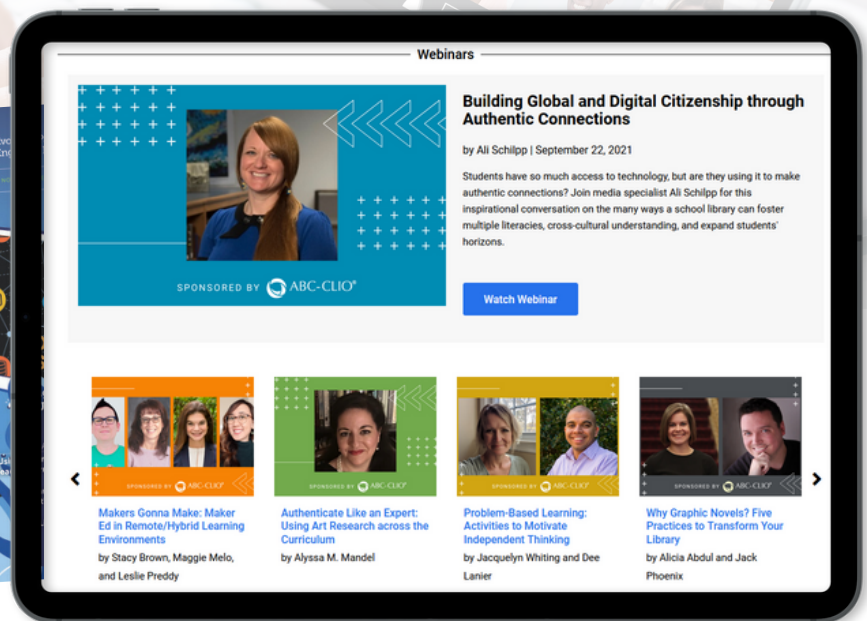
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