Would you like to know what it really costs to have a quality school library program that improves the academic achievement of students? This is a major question that Keith Curry Lance and his associates at the RSL Research Group in Colorado will be studying during the 2011-12 school year in a project titled “Supporting the Infrastructure Needs of 21st Century School Library Programs.” Using data from the recently concluded Pennsylvania School Library Study, student test score data from the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) reading and writing tests and other related data, Lance will determine what infrastructure, defined as staffing, budgets, collections, technology, access hours, and professional development for librarians, is currently in place in highly performing Pennsylvania schools. The researchers will then conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the relationships between such inputs and student outcomes. This quantitative work will be validated by a qualitative research phase with input from school librarians, teachers, parents, and school administrators collected via electronic surveys and/or focus groups.

The previous work of Lance and his associates in Pennsylvania in 1999-2000, correlated higher levels of school library staffing with higher academic achievement as indicated by PSSA reading scores. In the final report, Measuring Up to Standards: The Impact of School Library Programs and Information Literacy in Pennsylvania Schools, the researchers found that higher levels of staffing predicted higher expenditures, larger and more varied collections of resources, increased access to technology, and more integrated approaches to information literacy, standards, and curriculum. They also studied various school and community factors to determine their impact on these results, which included: per pupil expenditures, teacher/pupil ratio, and student ethnicity and poverty, as well as community demographics and adult educational attainment. None of these factors could explain away the results-school library staffing was determined to be the decisive component. Lance’s new research will go beyond this work by identifying library infrastructure, values, and practices most strongly related to successful teaching of 21st century skills in Pennsylvania schools and their associated costs.

The grant application was successfully awarded $434,000 by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in the highly competitive National Leadership Grant Program. The project is being implemented by a unique partnership of organizations including the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association (PSLA) led by grant writer and PSLA Legislation Co-Chairperson, Deb Kachel. HSLC, the lead applicant under the direction of Joe Scorza, will provide fiscal management and maintain the project website which will host a communications and advocacy toolkit. The Education Law Center (ELC) of Pennsylvania (www.elc-pa.org) with offices in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia led by Sandy Zeerno and Baruch Kintisch is the third partner. ELC is a child advocate organization with a mission that no child will be denied access to quality public school programs, based on poverty, disability, English language ability, homelessness, and other factors. ELC will use their communications and media staff to publish and disseminate research, develop content for the website and, use their network of advocates to further share information about school libraries and its impact on students. An Advisory Board of influential educators and business people will help advise the project.

Other contributing organizations include the University of Pittsburgh’s School of Information Sciences under the direction of Dr. Mary Kay Biagini, who conducted the data analysis and authored the report and recommendations of the Pennsylvania School Library Study. Dr. Biagini, with the assistance of a doctoral student and graduate assistants will produce a layperson’s summation of school library research which will be prepared for publication by ELC and subsequently posted on the project website and toolkit. Dr. Biagini will also facilitate six focus groups across the state to gather stakeholder input from teachers, administrators, parents, and community leaders. Some focus group sessions will be organized to represent rural communities, inner city communities, and districts with larger numbers of at-risk or special needs populations. Additionally, the project will be evaluated by Drs. Nancy Everhart and Marcia Mardis from Florida State University.

The Role of PSLA Members-How You Can Help

During March and April 2012, Lance and fellow researchers will be administering three electronic surveys for three distinct audiences—school librarians, teachers, and school administrators. Resulting data will be used in the qualitative phase to determine what each group values in terms of best school library practices. For these findings to be useful, a good survey response is needed. School librarians will be asked to nominate teachers and administrators to complete the survey. Once the survey
is opened, librarians will need to remind and encourage their nominees to complete and submit the survey. This step will be critical. However, based on the huge response to the State Board of Education survey in Spring 2010—73 percent of all public schools, Pennsylvania’s school librarians are up to the task.

Why is Research so Important?

Unfortunately, the Pennsylvania Department of Education collects almost no information about public school library programs. This is probably not surprising since school librarians and school library programs are not mandated in the state. However, valid and current data or information is needed to convince lawmakers and other decision makers that students are being unfairly denied equitable opportunities to learn—specifically, that not all students have access to a quality school library collection and a certified school librarian who teaches them critical 21st century information skills.

When members of PSLA’s Legislation Committee meet with legislators, a short overview of the school library impact studies of now 22 states and one Canadian province is presented. This research has never infiltrated the knowledge base of legislators, as well as many school and community leaders. Unfortunately, Pennsylvania’s 1999 study is now dated and legislators care most about two things. First, how many schools in their district no longer have school library programs or full-time librarians, and, secondly, how much would it cost to provide a school library program. At the present, there are no clear answers to these questions. Legislators want to solve problems that their constituencies care about. So, they need to have the facts to support their case, know the costs involved, and then weigh whether their voters value the solution enough to fund it. Legislators are unwilling to support school library programs until they have compelling facts that they can “sell” to their voters.

What is Needed Beyond Research?

The recently completed Pennsylvania School Library Study provides some data on the status of school libraries in the spring of 2011. One of its recommendations is that PDE/Commonwealth Libraries reestablish a leadership role in advising and supporting school library programs which would include data collection and oversight. The research being conducted now by Lance and his associates will fill another piece of the puzzle—what infrastructure contributes most to student achievement, what investments are needed, and what is the gap between what exists in Pennsylvania’s school library programs today and what students need. As the Grant Advisory Board and focus groups meet across the state, it is expected that recognition of school library inequities will spread and support for school library programs will build. Research alone will not change the fact that many students have no school library services or instruction from a certified information specialist. It will take a grassroots advocacy effort to develop champions among stakeholders—influential voices outside the school library profession who will tell Harrisburg what is needed to support quality education. School librarians will be the catalysts for this advocacy because they see and live these inequities every day. Each and every school librarian will need to make this priority one in their jobs because our students deserve no less and the future of school libraries may depend upon it.

Works Cited


Winter 2012