Creating 21st-Century Learners:
A Report on Pennsylvania’s Public School Libraries

October 2012

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Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Institute of Museum and Library Services.
Foreword

A school library helps each school meet its mission of every student learning and achieving academic success. A school library helps teachers teach and students learn; it promotes information literacy and digital citizenship; it fosters in students a love of and enthusiasm for reading independently and encourages students to become life-long learners. In the school library, students learn to access resources in many formats, become critical evaluators of information they need, and use information technology effectively and ethically.

A school library inspires students to create new knowledge, pursue their interests, and relax with a good story—in print or e-book format. But in too many Pennsylvania schools this school library is not the reality for students. Years of neglect have weakened many school libraries and diminished opportunities for students to learn. The neglect comes, in part, from misconceptions about the roles school libraries and school librarians play in student learning, especially in the 21st-century.

The school library is much more than a room of resources. Each school library needs a certified school librarian who is an expert at teaching research skills, integrating technology into the teaching-learning process, and encouraging students to read independently across the curriculum. The librarian collaborates closely with classroom teachers in every subject area to teach students everything from making sense of the information they gather to collaborating with other students to create new knowledge as they move from elementary and middle school through high school and into college and the workforce.

Understanding these critical roles of the school librarian and school library program is an important step in reversing this benign neglect. The PA School Library Project challenges these misconceptions by examining the connection between school library infrastructure and student achievement in Pennsylvania and demonstrating the impact of the 21st-century school library and librarian on student achievement.
Using data collected in the Spring of 2011 for the Pennsylvania State Board of Education Study of the state’s public school libraries and examining standardized Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) Reading and Writing test scores for the same year, a team of researchers studied five components of school library infrastructure:

- Staffing
- Collections
- Digital Resources and Technology Infrastructure
- Library Access
- Funding

According to the research findings, students who have access to a quality school library program developed with these building blocks have an academic advantage over students who did not have such access. These differences are not explained away by the socio-economic, racial/ethnic, or disability status of the students. Here are a few highlights:

- Investments in library staff benefit all students. Full-time, certified librarians are associated with better PSSA Reading and Writing scores.
- For several student groups that tend to experience achievement gaps—economically disadvantaged, Hispanic, Black, and those with IEPs (Individualized Education Programs) —Reading and Writing results are markedly better when those students attend a school with a librarian with library support staff. In fact, they benefit more proportionally than the general school population.
- The impact of quality school library programs with these components is even stronger on Writing scores than Reading scores.
- All students—both high-achievers and low-achievers—benefit and schools that leverage school library programs can narrow achievement gaps among their students.
- Generally, the combined impact of these components—staffing, resources, technology, access to the library, and funding—has a steady and consistent effect on student learning and achievement regardless of demographic and economic differences among students.
Researchers examined the impact of a full-time, certified librarian on student achievement by comparing PSSA Reading Test scores across several subgroups of students who have access to a full-time, certified librarian (i.e., 35 or more hours per week) with the scores of students who do not have access to a full-time, certified librarian (i.e., fewer than 35 hours per week). The data show that, consistently, students who have access to a full-time, certified librarian scored higher on the PSSA Reading Test than those students who do not have such access. This finding is true for all students, regardless of their socio-economic, racial/ethnic, and/or disability status.

Researchers also examined PSSA Writing Test scores. Considering all students, those students with access to a full-time, certified librarian are almost three times as likely to have “Advanced” scores on the PSSA Writing Test as those students without access to a full-time, certified librarian.

When examining test score data by grade level, the impact of a full-time, certified librarian on PSSA Writing Test scores is most dramatic for high school students. Nearly twice as many high school students who have access to a full-time, certified librarian scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Writing test as those students without access to a full-time, certified librarian.
The Impact of the Size of the Book Collection on Student Achievement

Even with the addition of information technology in school libraries, there remains a constant: a robust collection of books—physical books—has a great impact on student achievement. The research findings show that students who have access to a library with a robust, current collection of books have higher scores on both the PSSA Reading Test and the PSSA Writing Test. More than half of Pennsylvania’s middle school students who have access to a library with a large collection of current books (i.e., more than 12,000 volumes) scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Reading Test. The impact of a large collection on PSSA Writing Test scores was just as significant. More than a quarter of high school students who have access to a school library with a large collection of books scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Writing Test.

The Impact of Access to Digital Resources on Student Achievement

As computers and portable digital devices become more accessible in schools, the need increases for experts to guide students and teachers through the array of information
technology available and integrate it into their learning. Digital resources—e-books and licensed databases, as well as the ever-growing Web-based tools, applications and social media—are key components needed to develop successful 21st-century learners, and students who have access to these digital resources show dramatically higher academic achievement. The research findings show that twice as many students with access to licensed electronic databases that provide periodical articles, encyclopedias, maps, photos, primary sources and other reference materials scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Writing Test as those students without access to such databases.

Among subgroups of students who are minorities as defined in the PSSA testing program, the numbers of students whose test scores are higher are even more striking: more than three times as many students who are Hispanic and who have access to electronic databases scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Writing Test as those students who are Hispanic and do not have such access. For students who are Black, the outcomes are similar; nearly three times as many students who are Black and who have access to electronic databases scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Writing Test as those students who are Black and who do not have access to such databases.

The research findings show that the benefits of having access to database resources are cumulative for students across the grade levels, with students scoring increasingly higher as they move from elementary school, to middle school and high school. At the high-school level where students begin to conduct research more independently, having access to licensed databases means that nearly twice as many high school students who have such access scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Writing Test as those high school students who do not have access to databases.
The Impact of Library Access on Student Achievement

Although around-the-clock access to the library’s digital resources is critical to 21st-century learners, research suggests that access to a physical school library and its program of instruction is equally as important. Students need to be able to use the library and its resources and to have access to the school librarian throughout the school day as well as before and after school. Most middle and high schools employ a full-time, certified school librarian to provide such flexible access throughout the school day. At the elementary level, however, access to the library is often on a “fixed” schedule, with each teacher assigned a specific day and period for a class visit. This fixed schedule is often required because of district contractual agreements for teachers to have a planning period. Because many elementary libraries cannot seat more than one class at a time, teachers and students are denied access when it would best meet their curricular needs. Access to school library resources throughout the school day is important for students to master the school’s curriculum and has a tremendous impact on their academic achievement.

- Nearly half of all students with flexible access to their school library during the school day scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Reading Test.
• Four times as many students with flexible access to their school library during the school day scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Writing Test as those students without access.

• For students who are minorities the results are even more dramatic. Six times as many students who are Black and have flexible access to their school library during the school day scored “Advanced” on PSSA Writing Tests as those students without such access. Seven times as many students who are Hispanic and who have flexible access to their school library during the school day scored “Advanced” on PSSA Writing Tests.

Opening the school library—either before school or after school or both—also has an impact on student achievement.

• More than twice as many students who are able to use their school library before or after the student school day scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Writing Test as those students without such access.

• Comparing the scores of various sub-groups of students shows similar results. Twice as many students with an IEP who were able to use their school library before or after school scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Writing Test as students without such access. For students who are Hispanic, nearly three times as many scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Writing Test as those Hispanic students who do not have access to the library before or after school.
The Impact of Funding for Library Resources on Student Achievement

School districts throughout Pennsylvania invest varying amounts for the purchase of resources for their libraries. What the research findings show is that as the investment level increases, the rate of student achievement accelerates.

- Half of all middle-school students whose school district invested $21 or more per student annually for library resources scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Reading Test.

- Student scores on the PSSA Writing Test were also higher with higher investments. Nearly twice as many students whose school district invest $21 or more per student annually for library resources scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Writing Test than those students whose districts invest less.

The test score results were even more dramatic for students who are Hispanic in districts that invest $21 or more per student. More than twice as many students who are Hispanic scored “Advanced” on the PSSA Writing Test as those students who are Hispanic in districts that invest less.
Conclusions

Imagine teachers in a school trying to teach their students critical thinking and communication skills without a school library. It’s even harder to imagine creating 21st-century independent learners—students prepared for college and the workplace—without a school library.

Yet throughout Pennsylvania, many students don’t have to imagine learning in a school without a library or librarian; it is their reality. Funding for school libraries and for school librarians can be among the first reductions made when budgets are cut. Many K-12 students do not have the opportunities to learn from a certified school librarian or reap the benefits of access to a well-resourced library with appropriate technologies. As state funding cuts for public schools continue, these inequities grow, in Pennsylvania and throughout the country.

The research findings presented provide clear and consistent evidence of the incredible impact school library resources and personnel have on student achievement, and the findings make a definitive case for building strong libraries in every public school throughout Pennsylvania.
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PA SCHOOL LIBRARY GRANT ADVISORY BOARD:

STAFF

GRANT PROJECT DIRECTOR
Debra E. Kachel
Legislation Co-Chairperson, PA School Librarians Association North Wales

ELC PROJECT DIRECTOR
Sandra L. Zelno
School Reform Associate, Education Law Center Pittsburgh

HSLC PROJECT DIRECTOR
Joseph Scorza
Executive Director, Health Sciences Library Consortium Philadelphia

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Tonya Trembly Karcher
Parent and Community Activist  Shippensburg

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Department of Administrative and Policy Studies,
School of Education, University of Pittsburgh  Pittsburgh

Edward J. Maritz, Ed.D.
Education and Community Activist  McKees Rocks

PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT PANEL MEMBERS—HERSHEY, PA—JANUARY 10, 2012

PROJECT STAFF
Keith Curry Lance
Mary K. Biagini
Debra E. Kachel
Sandra L. Zelno

LIBRARIANS
Kim Brosan, Librarian
Williamsport Area High School
Williamsport Area School District  Williamsport

Allison Burrell, K-12 Librarian
Southern Columbia Area School District  Catawissa

Dotty Delafield, Librarian
Mount Nittany Middle School, State College Area School District  State College
Marg Foster, Retired Middle School Librarian, Dept. Chair, and Former Manager of Academic Technology
North Allegheny School District Pittsburgh

Cathi Fuhrman, Ed.D., PSLA Board Member
Library Department Supervisor
Hempfield School District Landisville

Rich Hollein, Librarian
Quaker Valley High School
Quaker Valley School District Leetsdale

Karen Hornberger, Librarian
Palisades High School
Palisades School District Kintnersville

Eileen Kern
Vice President/President-Elect PSLA
Retired Librarian
Kratzer Elementary, Parkland School District Whitehall

Nancy Smith Latanision, Instructor
Library Science Dept., Kutztown University Allentown

Deb Lowenburg, Librarian
Pleasant Valley High School
Pleasant Valley School District Broadheadsville

Katie Makatche, Librarian
Warrior Run Middle School
Warrior Run School District Turbotville

Janet Malloy, Retired High School Librarian
School District of Philadelphia Cheltenham

Bob McConnell, PSLA Board Member
Retired Librarian
Grove City Area High School, Grove City Area School District Grove City

Katherine Miller, Librarian
CAMS North School
Chambersburg Area School District Chambersburg
Terry Morriston, Librarian
Peters Township High School
Peters Township School District
McMurray

LaVerne Motley, Retired Library Supervisor
Rose Tree Media School District
Glen Mills

Beth Sahd, Director of Library Services and Librarian
Cocalico High School, Cocalico School District
Denver, PA

Mary Schwander, Librarian
New Hope-Solebury High School
New Hope-Solebury School District
New Hope

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS—PITTSBURGH, PA—MARCH 27, 2012

Tom Baker, School Director
North Hills School District
Pittsburgh

Amy Brazill, PTA Member/Dilworth Elementary/Tutor
Pittsburgh School District
Pittsburgh

Christine Buffington, Local Task Force on Right to Education—IU 2
Pittsburgh School District
Pittsburgh

Paula V. Cooper, Seminarian
Pittsburgh Interfaith Impact Network
Pittsburgh

Farrah, Cornick, Student
Urban Pathways Charter School
Pittsburgh

Donora Craighead, Community Activist
Wilkinsburg Borough School District
Wilkinsburg

Elizabeth L. Fleischer, Principal Development Editor
Materials Research Society
Wilkinsburg

Kathy Flynn-Somerville, Ed.D., Teacher
Pittsburgh School District
Pittsburgh

John W. Frombach, Retired School Administrator
Past President PA Assn. of School Business Officials
Pittsburgh
DaVonna Graham, Youth and Community Organizer  
A+ Schools  
Pittsburgh

Harold Grant, Staff Representative  
Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers  
Pittsburgh

Rosanne Javorsky, Assistant Executive Director  
Allegheny Intermediate Unit  
Homestead

Anne McCafferty, Senior Director, Human Resources  
VIVISIMO  
Pittsburgh

Shula Nedley Ph.D., Visiting Professor  
Point Park University  
Pittsburgh

David B. Thornton, Pastor, Grace Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Pittsburgh Interfaith Impact Network  
Pittsburgh

Tia Torres, Student  
A+ Schools Teen Bloc, Pittsburgh School District  
Pittsburgh

Judith Toure, Ed.D., Assistant Professor  
Carlow University  
Pittsburgh

Drew Welsh, 1st Assistant District Attorney  
Clarion Co. District Attorney’s Office  
Clarion

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS—GREENSBURG, PA—MARCH 28, 2012

Sue Akins, Community Activist  
Blairsville-Saltsburg School District  
Blairsville

Jack Boylan, Retired Superintendent  
Norwin School District  
North Huntingdon

Kathryn M. Elder, School Director  
Greater Latrobe School District  
Latrobe

Barbara Flynn, Children’s Librarian  
Norwin Public Library  
Irwin

Janice S. Gebicki, Director of Education  
United Way of Westmoreland County  
Greensburg
Michelle Geissler
Former Library Power Director/1st Gr. Teacher  Irwin

Kelly Gustafson, Elementary Principal
Peters Township School District  McMurray

Matthew J. Hutcheson, Ed.D., Superintendent
Jeannette City School District  Jeannette

Derek Illar, Attorney
Watson Mundorff Brooks & Sepic, LLP  Connellsville

Sharon Nelmes, Early Learning Consultant
Head Start  Saltsburg

Lori Ruffner, Financial Advisor
Morgan Stanley  Manor

Regina Sciullo, Disability Advocate/Parent Co-Chair LTF IU 7
The Arc of Westmoreland/ACHIEVA  Greensburg

Thomas J. Sturm, School Director
Norwin School District  North Huntingdon

Tracy Trotter, Library Director
Adams Memorial Library  Latrobe

Megan Marie Van Fossan, Director of Special Services
McGuffey School District  Claysville

Sharon M. Van Fossan,
Retired High School Librarian  Steubenville, OH

Debra Wohlin, Advocate/Parent Co-Chair LTF IU 7
East Suburban Citizen Advocacy  Delmont

Kate Zingarelli, Education Programs Specialist
Westmoreland Intermediate Unit  Greensburg
FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS—HERSHEY, PA—APRIL 12, 2012

PA Assn. of Rural and Small Schools
Bethel

Jack Belford, Executive Director
Follett Library Resources
McHenry, IL

Donna Benson, Legislative Liaison
PA Association for Gifted Education
Lancaster

Sharon L. Brumbaugh, Dir. /Early Childhood Exec. Leadership Program
National Institute for School Leadership
Washington, DC

Jane D. Carroll, Senior Fellow
Education Policy and Leadership Center
Harrisburg

Winston E. Cleland, Ph.D., Policy Specialist (PASCD)
PA Assn. of Supervision & Curriculum Dev.
Carlisle

Connie Cochran, Ed.D., Education Consultant
English Language Learners
Harrisburg

Michael J. Crossey, President
PA State Education Association
Harrisburg

Deborah Dunstone, President-Elect
PA Congress of Parents and Teachers
Peckville

Cindy Eckerd, Legislative Information Director
PA School Boards Association
Mechanicsburg

Barbara S. Ellis, Director of Library Services
Hershey Public Library and PA Library Assn.
Hershey

Heidi J. Faust
ESL Facilitator and Educational Consultant
Kutztown

Martin J. Hudacs, Ed.D., Superintendent, Solanco School District
PA Assn. of Rural and Small Schools
Quarryville

Louis W. LaBar, Trustee, Public Library
Gov. Advisory Council on Library Development
Honesdale
Larry Nesbit, Ph.D., Rep., Mansfield Univ. School Library Program
Gov. Advisory Council on Library Development
Mansfield

John Pulver, Special Project Consultant
PA Assn. of Career & Technical Administrators
Camp Hill

Tara Purcell, Legislative and Advocacy Chair
PA Congress of Parents and Teachers
Kulpemont

Regina Yeager, Local Account Manager
Follett Library Resources
Moscow

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS—PHILADELPHIA, PA—APRIL 18, 2012

TaiMarie Adams, Co-Director, Education Policy
Public Citizens for Children and Youth
Philadelphia

Brian Armstead, Director of Civic Engagement
Philadelphia Education Fund
Philadelphia

Carol Bangura, CEO
African Ctr. for Education & Sustainability, Inc.
Philadelphia

Sonya Brintnall, Speech Language Pathologist
Member, Parents United for Public Education
Philadelphia

Becca Devine, Special Education Advocate/LTF I.U. 25
TEAM Inclusion, PA-TASH
Ardmore

Deborah Dickason Falk, Instructor
Arcadia Univ., Immaculata Univ., Temple Univ.
Drexel Hill

Cindy Farlino, Principal
School District of Philadelphia
Philadelphia

Callie Hammond, Founder and CEO
Library Build, Inc.
Philadelphia

Jane Hershberger, Ed.D., Supervisor of Programs
Chester County Intermediate Unit
Downingtown

Jurate Krokys, CEO
Independence Charter School
Philadelphia
Janet Lonsdale, Family Advocate, Mental Health Assoc./SEPA
Parents Involved Network
Philadelphia

Rachel Meadows, Policy and Research Analyst
Philadelphia City Councilman Bill Green
Philadelphia

Beth Olanoff, Executive Director
PA League of Urban Schools
New Hope

Jamie Arasz Prioli, Assistive Technology Specialist
PA’s Initiative on Assistive Technology
Philadelphia

Ludy Soderman, Director
Multilingual Family Support Office, School District of Philadelphia
Philadelphia

Nofre P. Vaquer, Director
The Arc of Philadelphia
Philadelphia

Deborah Wei, Director, Office of Multilingual Curriculum & Programs
School District of Philadelphia
Philadelphia
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