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New PA Study Shows Full-time School Librarian Boosts Student Achievement

Reading and Writing Scores Raised on PSSA Tests for All Student Groups

Having access to a full-time, certified school librarian means better outcomes for Pennsylvania’s public school students, according to a new research report from the Colorado-based RSL Research Group.

The report examined the 2010-11 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) tests in Reading and Writing for students in grades three through 11, and tracked outcomes for students based on five factors: staffing, collections, digital resources and technology infrastructure, library access, and funding.

Overall, the greatest impact on student test scores was seen from having a full-time, certified librarian.

- 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.

- 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 student attend a school with a librarian and library support staff, according to the research. In fact, they benefit more proportionally than the general student population.

“This research shows us how crucial a well-resourced school library and a full-time, certified school librarian are to achievement for the most vulnerable students,” said Sandra Zelno, Education Law Center School Reform Associate.

The new research was part of a one-year project lead by the Education Law Center, the Health Sciences Library Consortium and Pennsylvania School Librarians Association.
This was the first comprehensive school library research conducted in Pennsylvania in more than a decade, and the first time student writing tests have been examined. The results are telling. Access to a full-time, certified librarian dramatically impacted student scores on the PSSA Writing Tests, particularly 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, according to the report.

- 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.

“The overall findings fit with research we’ve seen in other states—access to a full-time, certified school librarian significantly impacts students achievement in reading,” said Debra Kachel, Pennsylvania School Librarians Association Legislation Committee Co-Chairperson. “What stands out to me is the impact on writing scores,” she said. “We haven’t seen that data before, and it underscores the larger impact having a full-time, certified school librarian has on skills, such as writing, that prepare students for college and the workforce.”

Eliminating or diminishing school library resources and access to a full-time, certified library has extreme consequences for Pennsylvania’s public school students, especially the most vulnerable students, said Nancy Potter, Education Law Center Attorney.

“We can’t neglect our public school libraries,” said Potter. “Well-resourced and staffed school libraries represent vital opportunities to learn for Pennsylvania’s most vulnerable students.”

The research report and related qualitative surveys of school administrators, teachers, and librarians can be found at the project website: paschoollibraryproject.org.

Dr. Keith Curry Lance and the RSL Research Group, with assistance from Dr. Mary K. Biagini, Associate Professor and Director, School Library Certification Program in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh, analyzed data and conducted the research.

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