

School Library Advocacy: Enhancing Opportunities For all Learners

L'advocacy per la biblioteche scolastiche: migliorare le opportunità per tutti gli studenti

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Abstract

There is a lack of consistency in how school librarians understand and engage in advocacy for their programs and the profession (Burns, 2015; Lance & Kachel, 2018). It is important that school librarians demonstrate the positive impact they contribute to improving instruction for student learners and advancing access so that all learners have equal opportunities. The school library and school librarian should be available to each student (Kachel, 2021).

The *School Library Manifesto* (2021) includes language to support a strong school library with a qualified school librarian. Advocacy goals can be highlighted throughout this critical set of school library guidelines. Each section of the manifesto provides entry points for advocacy. Through exploration and analysis of the manifesto, this paper explores pathways to advocacy for a school librarian. Ideas suggested in the *School Library Manifesto* related to new resources and technologies, curriculum, and instructional strategies promote opportunities to overcome the digital divide and other forms of exclusion and provide additional opportunities of critical support for all learners. Effective advocacy of school libraries, supported by the goals of *School Library Manifesto* organically presents a clear and consistent path strengthening learning in schools.

Keywords: advocacy – school library – manifesto

Introduction

Across the global landscape, school libraries are seeing a critical shortage of qualified librarian positions and a decrease in funding and support of school library programs. This comes at a time when knowledgeable information professionals are needed to ensure access to information and carefully curated and selected collections within schools. In some instances, only the top 10% can afford to give their children an education with a quality school library (IFLA, nd). In today's

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educational climate, is important that school librarians demonstrate the positive impact they contribute to the instruction of student learners. However, there remains a lack of consistency in how school librarians engage in advocacy for their programs and the profession (Burns, 2015; Lance, Kachel, 2018).

Exploration of the state of school libraries (Burns, 2023) shows a decline in resources and support of school libraries. A community scan of countries represented within the IFLA community was conducted to include use of the IFLA School Library Map and research articles relating to the state of school libraries. This evaluation showed that there has been a recent decline in school library staffing, as well as a need for more consistent access to school libraries to meet the growing digital divide in many countries in the IFLA community. Two thirds of the world's school-age children, or 1.3 billion children aged 3 to 17 years old, do not have internet connection in their homes, according to a report from UNICEF (2020). This international condition is mirrored in the United States. Over 10,000 public schools across the U.S. don't have a school library, much less a school librarian, and this number continues to grow. Additionally, more than 22,000 public schools with a school library have neither a full- nor part-time certified school librarian (Kachel, 2013; 2021).

However, studies show that despite the lack of resources provided to many school libraries, those schools that do prioritize the school library see results. Correlational studies, such as the Impact Studies (Kachel, 2021; Lance, Maniotes, 2020; Lance, Kachel 2018) and the SLIDE (Kachel, Lance 2021) studies have shown the positive impact a school library has on students and student learning. Having a certified, highly qualified school library professional has repeatedly correlated to increased student achievement through decades of studies. Schools with school librarians were more likely than those without to incorporate specialized technology applications into teaching practices (Kachel, Lance, 2021). School libraries help close the achievement gap for poor children, minority children, and children with disabilities – and in countries with deep gender gaps, for girls (IFLA, nd). Students in schools with qualified librarians are also more likely to have access to locally produced materials in their home or mother tongue languages and to current materials (IFLA, nd).

Advocating for support of school libraries benefits the school community and all learners. For the purposes of this study, the American Library Association's (ALA) definition of advocacy was used. The ALA defines advocacy as, "The deliberate and sustained effort to foster understanding of the library program while influencing the attitudes of key stakeholders" (ALA, 2007). Advocacy includes raising awareness, increasing knowledge, and gaining influence for the position of the school librarian. Burns (2016) suggests that many school librarians do not know this definition of advocacy and fewer know to engage in positive actions of advocacy to build support.

Advocacy conversations can be framed globally by understanding the current



situation of school librarians at an international level, as well as looking across international documents and guidelines to demonstrate identify opportunities for school librarian advocacy. The goals of school library advocacy can be explored in international documents and guidelines, such as the international IFLA adopted *School Library Manifesto*. Through exploration and analysis of the manifesto, pathways toward establishing a building-level advocacy plan can be identified for a school librarian.

With planned, targeted actions, the *Manifesto* provides a pathway to advocacy. These actions typically highlight the activities taking place in the school library that emphasize community relationships and support and strengthen student learning. Advocacy goals and initiatives can be highlighted throughout this critical set of school library guidelines. The IFLA *School Library Manifesto's mission statement* reads "To improve everyone's lives, the benefit of a quality school library needs to be extended to all" (IFLA 2021). This ideal can only be achieved when we advocate for school libraries that align with the ideals set forth in the *Manifesto*. Potential pathways to advocacy actions are found when analyzing the text of the Manifesto for language that promotes and encourages activities of support for the school library. Through this type of exploration, opportunities for effective advocacy practice are identified. The following question guides this work: In what ways can the language of the IFLA *School Library Manifesto* confirm and highlight advocacy actions of school librarians?

Findings & Discussion

To analyze the Manifesto, a content analysis was conducted (Patton, 2002). The ALA Advocacy definition, along with the roles of the school librarian, as established in the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) *National School Library Standards* (2018, p. 18), were used to establish a priori codes. The text of the *Manifesto* was examined to identify the emergent coding categories (Patton, 2002). The Goals of the *Manifesto* were considered as units of text when coding. A second coder explored the role of instruction to ensure inter-rater reliability (Cohen 1960). Finally, the community scan of research was used to validate the findings.

Findings of this analysis show that each section of the manifesto provides entry points for advocacy. Advocacy is not something that is done part time or just once, however. It is sustained, continuous effort. Therefore, the findings of this analysis are developed around four essential themes: advocacy is an expectation; access is an expectation; instructional impact must be highlighted; Strategic Policy and Community Relations are Essential. They are discussed with to demonstrate the many ways the goals of the *Manifesto* present opportunities to build educated support for the library.



Advocacy is an Expectation

School librarians advocate because it is part of their job. The *School Library Manifesto* (2021) includes language to support a strong school library with a qualified school librarian. It states,

The school library program is essential to every long-term education strategy, including literacies, information provision and creation, and economic, social, and cultural development. It is the responsibility of local, regional, and national authorities to support school library programs through specific legislation and policies which ensure adequate and sustained funding for qualified school library professionals, materials, technologies, facilities, and life-long professional learning. School library programs must be free of charge to students and school staff.

The Manifesto states that schools should have school libraries and these libraries should be staffed with qualified staff.

Professional librarians are aware that they must advocate for their library, their program, and ensuring student learners have access to ideas and information. This is a key component within several guiding documents of the profession. Advocacy is part of our professional agenda and continues to be written in the ALA Strategic plan (2005, 2013, 2017). The AASL *School Library Preparation Standards* highlight advocacy as one Component for preparing future school librarians (AASL/ALA/CAEP, 2019). Therefore, emerging school library professionals are prepared to build support for their future library program. Advocacy is also part of the ALA Core Competences of Librarianship (2023) that guide the practice of all librarians.

Within the Manifesto, the development of an advocacy plan is outlined. One of the primary objectives of an advocacy plan is to redefine the perception of the school library program among others outside the school library. This can be achieved when school librarians engage stakeholder groups in library activities and demonstrate how school libraries have evolved. Pathways to achieving this present in the *Manifesto* include suggestions to collaborate with teachers, senior school management, administrators, parents, other librarians and information professionals, and community groups as well as establishing accountability when data are discussed and shared with the school and local community members and stakeholders. Finally, being visible in the school prospectus and webpages provides school librarians the opportunity to build awareness for the library program with multiple stakeholders and demonstrate the value a library program brings to the school community.



Access to Resources and Services

Likewise, the school library and school librarian should be available to each student (Kachel, 2021). Just as the *School Library Manifesto* (2021) includes language to support a strong school library with a qualified school librarian, the *Manifesto* suggests that students have access to instruction, materials, and technology provided by a thriving and effective school library program. Several statements put forward in the *Manifesto* serve as an entry point to advocating for learner access within the school library. Additionally, prior to the goals, the *Manifesto* explicitly emphasizes the need for equitable access stating, “a focus on student growth by providing equitable access for learning experiences, resources, and learning spaces.” This statement allows school librarians to request and then showcase access to the library space and resources for all learners.

Several goals within the manifesto serve as pathways to build support for school libraries and the access they provide student learners including the idea that the school library provides services and activities throughout and beyond the entire school day, as well as a connection to other libraries and resources such as the public library. When school librarians show they are available to students and staff at the time of need for information and that they bridge this need with other types of libraries, the value of having a certified school librarian working in a school library is demonstrated. This access helps to overcome the barriers created by the digital divide and other forms of exclusion. Support of the school library makes information accessible to all members of the school community and allows all learners to operate within the context of the greater global community. All members of the school community have equitable access to information when a school library is present and learners gain the literacy skills necessary to access, evaluate, and use information critically and ethically.

Highlight Instructional Impact

The school librarian teaches and works collaboratively with the school community to ensure expert instruction and guidance for all learners. The *Manifesto* states the school librarian should support and enhance educational goals as outlined in the school’s mission and curriculum. Goals within the *Manifesto* reinforce the instructional role of the school librarian and emphasize how the school library integrates with other educators to support student success.

School librarians must demonstrate how they support the academic goals of students as a teacher and an instructional partner. Pathways to advancing support and building relationships with others present in the *School Library Manifesto* include the school librarian providing “expert instruction and guidance for all



learners as a qualified school library professional through a curated broad range of relevant and responsive learning resources and instructional strategies that meet all learners needs and abilities while exposing learners to diverse ideas, experiences, and opinions.” Demonstrating the unique expertise of the school librarian and the ways in which they support reading and align resources and instruction with other educational curricula demonstrates the library’s value to others in the education community.

These ideas are further highlighted in the goal that the school librarian will “co-design active inquiry and discovery learning experiences in physical and virtual spaces, fosters independent reading for knowledge, understanding, imagination and enjoyment; and stimulates and enhance reading literacy and enjoyment through a wide range of resources and strategies, including reading aloud at all ages.” Understanding good information literacy practices is a pedagogy best situated in the school library. School librarians instruct learners to become ethical users and creators of information and knowledge who are able to use information for a purpose.

Each of these goals reinforce the teaching role of the school librarian and reinforce how the teacher librarian works with other educators to support student success. School librarians demonstrate something unique or innovative within the school library program. Support is then given to programs of value.

School librarians provide library experiences that are relevant to today’s learners. This should be showcased and highlighted through learning activities that are implemented using multiple literacies. School librarians develop and design lessons focusing on real world situations that use authentic information sources. They develop inquiry tasks that prepare students to engage with information for future academic tasks as well as authentic life experiences. Showcasing these opportunities allows others in the school community to appreciate and value to role school library plays in learner preparation for postsecondary education and the world of work.

Strategic Policy and Community Relations

Ideas suggested in the School Library Manifesto ensure the school librarian facilitates professional learning opportunities for teachers and staff, especially related to new resources and technologies, curriculum, and instructional strategies. This builds relationships and support among professional peers. One path to these activities is through leadership opportunities for the school librarian. These opportunities provide the school librarian the means to engage in continuous review and renewal of all school library program goals and activities and engage in conversations about the library with others in the educational community.

Considering effective operation and management of the school library is criti-



cal. Advocating for the essential conditions of an effective school library then becomes a central mission for all student learners. Ideas suggested in the *School Library Manifesto* that provide pathways for establishing this role and building community relations include the ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and accountability process, in which data are discussed and shared with the school and local community members and stakeholders and engaging in continuous review and renewal of all school library program goals and activities.

Finally, promoting and involving the whole school community and beyond in the work of the school library is critical. Advocacy efforts are successful when there is administrative support for the role of a school library. This helps realize the full benefit of a school library program. Having administration-endorsed policies regarding learning resources development and preventing censorship is a critical step to achieving this goal. By taking a leadership role and being active in school and community committees and actions, the school librarian can be the voice for the school library. Relationship and support can be created to ensure that others outside the school library understand and support the mission of the library program.

Conclusion

This study aimed to identify pathways for creating awareness and support for strong, effective school libraries presented through the guiding principles of the published documents such as the *School Library Manifesto*. This exploration reveals opportunities presented in the goals of the *School Library Manifesto*, creating a clear and consistent path to advocacy for the school library field. This analysis helps identify entry points to advocacy available to all school librarians.

Advocacy begins when school librarians build relationships where others recognize the value of the school library and are willing to become educated supporters on behalf of the library and the school librarian. School librarians should challenge themselves to consider the many pathways the *School Library Manifesto* offers as guidance for how to advocate to build relationships and support for school libraries and the learning lives of all students. Through an intentional plan and active advocacy initiatives, others will become active supporters of school libraries. With use of the *Manifesto* to guiding their work, school librarians will begin to make an impact with their advocacy efforts and others will recognize the value of an effective school library program for all students.

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