

Defunding threatens school libraries throughout US

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Steep budget cuts accompanied by the damaging impact of high-stakes standardized testing are undermining one of the most reliable and proven means of improving academic performance: well stocked, up-to-date school libraries staffed by professionally certified school librarians.

Since 2005-2006, there has been a 4.27 percent reduction in the number of school librarians across the United States. Virtually no other school staff position has suffered such a reduction in numbers—and salaries are contracting as well, with a 2 percent decline in wages since 2011. During this same period, states more than doubled spending on standardized testing, to an annual rate of \$1.1 billion in 2008, which continues to increase under the Obama administration.

The American Library Association (ALA) has reported, “school library funding is declining and ... is most severe in places where [they] ... are needed most—in high-poverty areas. Overall, school expenditures on information resources from 2009-2010 decreased 9.4 percent, but in high-poverty areas, the decrease was *25 percent*.” [Emphasis added.] This staggering decrease at the expense of the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the population is an indictment of governments at every level in the US.

This decline involves books, periodicals, databases and, most importantly, staffing. According to the National School Boards Association, sequestration will have an even more devastating effect on school libraries.

Children in poverty have insufficient access to books at home and in their communities, where there are few if any bookstores, and budget cuts have forced the closure or reduced the hours of public libraries. Numerous studies have shown this lack of access to books represents one of the fundamental causes of low test scores among poor children.

According to the National Council of Teachers of

English (NCTE), recent studies indicate that “access to books not only has a positive effect on reading achievement, but also that the positive impact of access is as large as the impact of poverty. ... This suggests that a good library can offset the effects of poverty on reading achievement.” While their conclusion regarding the importance of books in overcoming poverty may be overstated, the fact remains that stripping children in poverty of books is academically and culturally detrimental (as well as morally shameful).

Research has also shown that school libraries and librarians play a major role in the development of literacy skills among early learners, as well as supporting at-risk students, both of which lead to increased graduation rates. More than 60 such studies, known as the “school library impact studies,” conducted in states across the country, have produced clear evidence that school library programs staffed by professionally certified school librarians have a strong and positive impact on student academic achievement. In fact, the overriding conclusion of these studies is that the presence of a full-time professional librarian is the most important factor in improved educational outcomes.

According to the impact studies, students with adequately staffed library programs scored as much as 22 percent higher on standardized English tests and 17 percent higher on standardized reading tests compared to students in schools where library programs had less staff and fewer hours. There is a direct correlation between improved academic performance and the number of hours the library was staffed by a certified librarian, the number of hours students spent in the library with professional staff and the amount of current resources and technology available in the library.

Despite the well-publicized research, many states are cutting funds to school libraries. In 2011, 56 percent of all public schools in Pennsylvania did not have a full-time

librarian. California ranks 51st in the nation (behind Puerto Rico) in librarian-to-pupil ratio, with one librarian for every 5,124 students. In 2010, only 24 percent of California schools had credentialed librarians, and this figure is expected to drop further. Meanwhile, Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown's most recent budget includes over \$1 billion for Common Core-related school and testing materials.

The Common Core Curriculum (CCC), a federal educational initiative promoted by the Obama administration, tests children as young as five years old to determine whether they are "college or career ready." Children who score well are placed in a college track while the remaining students are channeled into low-wage trade skill tracks. Implementation of the CCC is costing states billions of dollars, further cutting into funds available for school libraries.

In 2009, one California district eliminated four librarians, leaving only two to serve in its six schools. By 2011, only one librarian was left to serve 14,000 students. In an interview with the *School Library Journal*, the librarian commented that she would not be able to make much of a dent in the reading skills of so many students.

This situation faces thousands of education professionals, as the Obama administration demands that evaluations and job security be tied directly to student test scores, while class sizes increase dramatically. The two major teachers unions, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, have agreed to all of these dictates in direct opposition to their members' interests.

Federal funding for school libraries has also deteriorated significantly in the past few years. In 2011, the Obama administration eliminated funding for the *Improving Literacy Through School Libraries* (LSL) program, which was established under Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, a reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

LSL's purpose was to improve literacy skills and academic achievement by providing students with increased access to current school library materials, well equipped, technologically advanced school libraries and professionally certified school librarians. School districts with 20 percent or more of their students living below the federal poverty level were eligible for these dedicated funds. Between 2002 and 2010, LSL was the primary source for federal funding of school libraries.

In response to this cut, the executive director of ALA's Washington office, Emily Sheketoff, stated, "This

decision shows that school libraries have been abandoned by President Obama and the Department of Education. ... Withdrawing support from this crucial area of education is an astounding misstep by an administration that purports to be a champion of education reform."

Far from being a misstep, the decision to eliminate school library funding is entirely in line with the Obama administration's reactionary "reform" agenda, which includes tailoring school curricula to the demands of corporations and expanding for-profit charter schools while closing public schools. Since Obama has taken office, 330,000 teachers and other school staff have lost their jobs and more than 4,000 public schools have closed, including mass shutdowns in New York City, Chicago, Detroit and Washington DC.

Parents, students and teachers are angered by the cuts to school libraries. In a recent post on the education blog Schools Matter, for example, one parent commented, "I just found out that there will no longer be a librarian at Sam's middle school due to budget cuts. Really??? Not acceptable. It appears my tax dollars will be used to further fund testing ... which do not improve student achievement, yet a staffed library, which DOES improve student achievement, will not be available to my eighth grader. So Pearson [a multi-national corporation that produces standardized testing materials] fills its pockets and my son is fed tests and denied a librarian? Again, not acceptable."

In an earlier period, public education was supported and expanded by the powers that be in the US, both to create a skilled workforce and because there was a belief that an educated population was vital to a democratic society. In the present period of American capitalism's decay, the ruling elite seeks to slash public education and divert the funds into its own pockets, at the same time creating a low-wage workforce and assaulting democratic rights.



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