

The what, why, who and how of advocacy—a layperson's guide



Sharon McGuinness, ASLA (NSW) Vice President Advocacy, and advocate for professional teacher librarians in school libraries, is a recent recipient of a Quality Teaching Award. Sharon is passionate about the connection between well resourced school libraries and improved student learning. Reflected in its goal—advocate on matters relating to the profession—ASLA (NSW) is also serious about actively promoting well-resourced school libraries as key to improved student learning.

Understanding advocacy

Advocacy can be viewed as the dissemination of information intended to influence behaviour, opinion and decisions regarding particular issues. It may also be described as building partnerships, which encourages others to act for and with you, turning quiet support into informed action.

Today, teacher librarians, school libraries and advocacy share a close relationship. As teacher librarians, we advocate for our profession and school libraries. Our message to the community and decision makers must be both clear and consistent:

1. A qualified teacher librarian and a well resourced school library have a positive impact on student literacy and academic achievement.
2. School libraries require adequate funding in order to be well placed to support the curriculum and satisfy the leisure reading needs of its' students.
3. The best learning outcomes occur when the classroom teacher plans and teaches in collaboration with the teacher librarian.

The need to advocate—to influence the behaviour, opinions and decisions of those in power—is even more important to our profession today, as teacher librarians across Australia stand on shaky ground.

While countless studies both in Australia [Lonsdale Report, 2003] and internationally [School Libraries Work, 2008]

where colleagues have been replaced by library technicians due to inadequate staffing budgets.

Indeed, Adelaide High School teacher librarian, Sue Spence [2002], conducted a survey of teacher librarians and school libraries in South Australia and found that of the 303 respondents, 109 did not

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have proven the link between a well resourced school library, a professionally qualified teacher librarian and student academic achievement, school libraries across Australia are being devalued.

Anecdotal evidence tells us that in WA government schools, no teacher librarians are appointed to primary schools. In Victoria and the ACT, school libraries may or may not have a teacher deployed in the library. If teachers are appointed to run school libraries, they do not necessarily need to have the relevant qualification.

Teacher librarians in several states also report instances

employ a professionally qualified teacher librarian.

How much has changed in seven years?

Teacher librarians throughout Australia consistently report, through their regional groups, of the continual need for *in house* advocacy, to inform both executive and teaching staff of the role and value of a teacher librarian to a school's learning and teaching programs.

It has also been reported that there appears to be a lack of understanding within the community about information literacy and its important relationship to lifelong learning.

The focus is not on *why* we should advocate, but on *who* should be advocating for school libraries and teacher librarians?

And the answer is *all* stakeholders—not just teacher librarians! Everyone who has a relationship with the school library can advocate by responding to issues which have an impact on school libraries and the profession of teacher librarianship. While some may argue that it is already recognised that schools need libraries, I would argue that there is little understanding as to *why* they are so important.

There appeared little argument when Kevin Rudd announced that within his \$42 billion stimulus package that he would ensure every primary school within Australia would have a school library building. While this is a positive step, it was a prime opportunity to advocate that a building alone does not make a library. The building itself will not improve the learning outcomes of its students, but a qualified teacher librarian *collaborating* with the classroom teacher, managing a *well resourced* library, will.

Advocacy Action

Firstly, ensure that *you* and the library are *valued* resources in the school.

We must continue to make our executive and teaching staff aware of the importance of collaboration in both planning and teaching.

Granted, this is difficult when a teacher librarian may have limited opportunity if their

teaching role is predominantly that of release, but it is not impossible.

We must respond to the curriculum needs of the teaching staff, increasing the collection through knowledge of locating virtual resources while also being able to obtain items not held by our own libraries by establishing partnerships with local public and surrounding school libraries. Ensure you are the first one that staff ask '*Where can I find....*'

We can provide active advice regarding information literacy, literacy and the array of web 2.0 tools and beyond to the school community at staff meetings, information sessions for new parents and via the school website or school newsletter.

We can keep the school community informed regarding the teacher librarian's program and its relationship to student learning using the same avenues as above.

We can be innovative users of technology, assisting staff in how to integrate ICT into their teaching.

Being confident in our knowledge of information literacy, of our ability to resource the best tools with which to teach and learn *and* knowing that the school library has an impact on student academic achievement can be empowering.

Building partnerships with teaching staff and leading the way in developing enhanced learning opportunities creates knowledge and understanding of the important role that the library and a qualified teacher

librarian play in the education of our students.

Second, *write*.

Find out the email addresses of your state and federal members of parliament, and write to them, particularly in response to issues currently in the news which are relevant to school libraries. Recently, several teacher librarians wrote to a federal senator after a question was raised in parliament regarding teacher librarian training. As a result, a dialogue has now been established with this senator and has led to an enhanced understanding, knowledge and support of the important role of a teacher librarian and the school library. Writing to the editor of the local, state and national newspapers and being published, ensures a wide audience and assists in the dissemination of information about issues affecting the profession.

Respond to current education issues via feedback forums and blogs. Identify the journalists and editors who are responsible for education issues and respond to their pieces. Similarly, writing articles in newspapers and relevant journals, particularly those whose audience may include school principals, can also achieve significant results in raising awareness.

Publicise your library events and activities. Write a press release. Using the school newsletter, website or library page to inform the school community places a focus on

the teacher librarian and the significance of the program.

Third, *speak up*.

Make presentations at staff meetings, P&C meetings and at conferences—delivering the message that school libraries and a qualified teacher librarian make a difference to students and their lifelong learning. Advocacy for our profession is not the realm of those few who may hold a position on a committee. Teacher librarianship is *our* profession, therefore advocating the importance of school libraries in the first instance, is *our* responsibility.

References

Lonsdale, M 2003, *Impact of school libraries on student achievement: a review of the research*, A report for the Australian School Libraries Association, ACER, Melbourne. <www.asla.org.au/research/summary.htm>

School Libraries Work! 2008, Scholastic <www2.scholastic.com/content/collateral_resources/pdf/s/slw3_2008.pdf>.

Spence, S 2002, *Survey highlights major problem with library staffing*, AEU Journal, <www.slasa.asn.au/Advocacy/docs/aeusurveyarticle.pdf2>

For further information see:

ASLA	http://www.asla.org.au/advocacy/
AASL	http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/aasl/aaslissues/issuesadvocacy.cfm
The Hub	http://hubinfo.wordpress.com/about/
SLASA	http://slasa.asn.au/Advocacy/forlibrarystaff.html
ALIA	http://www.alia.org.au/advocacy/
CASL	http://www.cla.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=CASL2