



**Testimony by Angela Crockett Coxen, NJASL President
Certified School Library Media Specialist
PS 24: The New Roberto Clemente School
Paterson NJ**

March 26, 2009

Good morning Chairman Greenwald and Members of the Assembly Budget Committee. I am Angela Crockett Coxen, president of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians, the professional organization of school librarians in our state. I am a school library media specialist at PS 24: The New Roberto Clemente School in the Paterson School District, Passaic County.

Let me start by commending Governor Corzine for his continuing commitment to public education in his proposed 2010 budget particularly in the current economic crisis. The proposed state aid to public education will make a real difference in the opportunities for achievement for New Jersey's school children and we urge the members of this committee to support the Governor's proposed education budget.

Given the economic challenges facing our nation and our state, today's poor economic climate creates both challenges and opportunities for students and schools. As New Jersey raises the academic bar and schools refine the curriculum to help students achieve higher standards, an effective school library is a cost effective and critical tool to support student learning and achievement, and school success.

The school library supports early literacy, a priority of our state, by promoting a love for books and reading that will serve children throughout their lives. As they progress through elementary school, the school library media program helps students develop key information literacy skills. The school librarian teaches students how to use technology to access information, and how to evaluate and incorporate it into research and further learning. In addition to providing direct instruction to classes and individual students, the school librarian also collaborates with classroom teachers to help them include information skills in the curriculum.

Since 1999, 14 different states have conducted empirical studies documenting the positive impact school libraries have upon student learning and achievement. The results of these studies are summarized in a publication entitled "School Libraries Work!" that can be reviewed at the following link http://www2.scholastic.com/content/collateral_resources/pdf/s/slw3_2008.pdf

The studies show that a school library staffed by a certified school library media specialist and provided with adequate print and technological resources has a direct positive impact on student test scores. The most recent of study, conducted by two prominent Rutgers library science professors, found that library-based instruction enables students to access, evaluate, and use information to further their own learning. My Association is in the final steps of commissioning a study by Rutgers University to ascertain the impact school libraries have upon student learning and achievement in New Jersey's public schools.

School libraries are also cost effective. Each book or computer in the school library is available to every student and teacher in the school. The school library also has access to shared databases, enabling students and teachers to tap resources that a single school or district could not afford to purchase on their own.

The NJ Association of School Librarians recognizes that the state faces a monumental budget crisis this year, and the Legislature and Governor have to make extremely difficult decisions about how to address the current shortfall.

Like the Legislature, school boards must make very difficult choices in order to plug their own budget holes. Unfortunately, some districts are choosing to reduce spending for school library media programs.

Would it surprise you to learn that New Jersey does not require every school to have a library media center or a certified school librarian? While cutting library programs does not make sense educationally, there is nothing in state law or regulation to prevent a school district from reducing school library programs, services or staff even though the state's new school funding model includes school librarians in the staffing assumptions as well as library programs. This is a deficiency in law that we must address over the long term.

As president of our statewide professional organization, I am often contacted by school librarians whose jobs and library programs are threatened by budget cuts. Every month I hear from school librarians about loss of positions, or districts replacing retiring school librarians with aides or substitutes.

Regrettably, it is the students who suffer from shortsighted decisions to cut spending on school libraries. How can we expect to boost early literacy without supporting libraries as the primary resource for books and literature? How can we emphasize technological literacy without providing qualified school librarians to hone students' technology skills and teach them how to acquire, organize, evaluate, and disseminate information?

The research is clear. Well-endowed school libraries, staffed by certified school library media specialists, are conduits to high student achievement and academic success. A quality school library media center is much more than a collection of books. It is a unique instructional site where students establish a love of reading and learn to become effective users of information, ideas, and resources. These are priceless outcomes that must not be sacrificed to temporary budget constraints.

We know it is not the Legislature's intent to reduce support for school library programs. But, with so many mandated and fixed costs in their budgets, many school districts are forced to cut programs and services that impact directly on students. School library programs are not excess "fat" that school districts

can afford to trim. Eliminating library jobs, books and media resources will slow our progress in childhood literacy and student achievement, and it will hurt students and the State now and for years to come.

On behalf of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians, I appreciate the opportunity to present information to you on the importance of properly staffed school libraries.