

Jen Park
Testimony
NJ State Department of Education
September 4, 2019

Good afternoon. My name is Jen Park and I am here to speak about the importance of school librarians. My role in this is two-fold. First and foremost, I am a parent to two boys--an 8 yr old who is entering third grade and a 5 yr old who is entering kindergarten and, thus, beginning his public school education. These boys are the main reason why I sit before you today. I would be remiss, however, if I did not state that I am an academic librarian. I serve on the faculty at a four-year-institution where, among other responsibilities, I teach information literacy sessions to our students. Because of my profession I understand the importance of school librarians from a scientific perspective. There are a number of studies that showcase the positive outcomes a school librarian has in relation to student learning in the K-12 environment as well as the importance of leisure reading among students.

This past year saw a severe restriction in book lending privileges among elementary schools in Mahwah, my hometown. Whereas students used to have the ability to check books out weekly from their library, at the start of the 2018-19 year we (the parents) were informed that our children would be limited to checking books out once every two or three weeks, depending on the grade level. When I spoke with the Administration in private, as well as public, we were told that this change was due to technology standards being included in the curriculum. And when I brought up that this impinged on their access to information, an administrator stated to me that students would still have the ability to access the information while the class visited the library--they just couldn't bring the materials home. From a school library. Nevermind this goes directly against the American Library Association's Bill of Rights or, frankly, common sense, but for children to NOT bring books home after visiting the school library was an unprecedented move without any research on how this would impede students' research abilities as they moved on to higher education. I saw the circulation statistics. Thousands... and I mean thousands of fewer books were going to find their way into the hands of local children if these policies were not reversed.

There are certainly reasons for robust technology standards in our schools, but without guidance some administrators are using tech standards as an excuse to gut library programs. The fact of the matter is that while the school was focused on including a technology-focused standard, they were not directed as to the best practice of incorporating this standard into the curriculum. Rather than allow students to check out books and bring them home in support of early literacy efforts, the administration focused on the incorporation of technology instruction and felt that something had to go. That "something" was further early literacy support.

After strong advocacy efforts, my town, Mahwah, has made some positive changes, but the decision was not reversed. My son is now limited to checking out books every other week rather

than weekly, but the number he is allowed to check out has increased. Seemingly a positive move, this produces an issue of equal access to information. For example, if students are in the library before his class and they all check out a popular series, he will, most likely, never be able to borrow books in the series. While he has the ability to find books that interest him that do not generally relate to the in-class curriculum, I'm sure you can see how this would become problematic since many students are drawn to the same books. He does bring home books from his classroom collection, but he does not devour them in quite the same way as he does with books from his school library. It is essential that young children his age continue to read because studies show that children who stop reading find it much harder to begin again. Habits become destiny and this is the age when habits are being formed.

As the State Department of Education I ask that you have a stronger oversight regarding the incorporation of standards in our public schools. I ask that you ensure our children and students have access to information and the ability to explore information across a number of book types and materials through a full-time school librarian. I ask that you continue to invest your efforts in laying the foundation for information literacy skills that the children will need to succeed in higher educational settings and becoming responsible citizens. Understand that weak information literacy skills lead to confusion regarding authority, credibility, and reliability when exploring and researching literature. Last, I ask that you be stewards in early literacy efforts by ensuring schools understand that content knowledge is not mutually exclusive. With the proper planning and implementation, there is room for technology and early literacy.

Thank you.

Jen Park's Son
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Hello. I am a third grader in Mahwah, NJ. I love my school library. They give us books to read and in my point of view, books are the most educational things I have ever seen. I like books because sometimes they are funny and sometimes they can teach you about past wars, a lot of cultures, and even a new language.

The school librarian is important because they help you read. My younger brother Bruce needs to learn how to read so life will be a little easier. The school librarian teaches us words and even reads us books if we're good. And I think that really helps us grow. She helps us read about why the spine label on books is important, the Dewey Decimal system, and who the authors are on books. If I did not know this information I would not be able to find my books. And I only have a limited amount of time to find a few books. If I didn't know where they were located then how would I find the right ones?

I hope that school libraries become settled as always having a librarian who is there to help students. Libraries rock.

Thank you.