In addition to the myriad jobs that comprise the role of school librarian, advocacy must be an integral component of every school librarian’s practice. The future of the profession depends on it.

In order to form relationships with the many different stakeholders across our states and beyond, we need a reliable group of volunteers to step up and serve our state organizations. Everyone has an expertise in something, whether it is social media, standards and curriculum, advocacy and PR, or professional development. Do not be hesitant to step into a leadership role—if there is a committee chair vacancy, contact the organization’s executive board to throw your hat into the ring. Seeking out new people for these positions can sometimes be a challenge, and I know board members would be delighted if interested members stepped forward to help out. If committee chair positions are already filled, ask if they need team members. NJASL’s own advocacy chair has built a team of over fifteen people to assist NJASL with our advocacy efforts. Many hands make light work, and this team has been invaluable when it has come time to speak out at board education meetings and to meet with legislators, the department of education, and the state board of education.

Although more expensive, membership in national organizations can be invaluable as they provide a vast network of pre-service and professionals already in the field. Most state organizations are led by an all-volunteer crew who are also working full-time and this can limit what they are able to offer. Organizations at the national level often employ experts for their different offices and, as a result, are able to consistently offer access to professional development opportunities and resources to help support the profession. And, just like the state organizations, they will assist librarians who face job cuts or materials challenges.

School librarians can also serve their organizations, and their colleagues, by presenting at professional development events, such as conferences. There is no better way to help keep the great things you are doing and, if you do present, make your administration aware of this professional accomplishment. Don’t forget about your state conference—submit proposals to national organizations. When a colleague and I learned that the national Association for Middle Level Education was going to be held locally in Philadelphia, we submitted proposals on how we incorporated coding and maker activities into our program and, to our surprise, our proposals were accepted. It was great PR for us and for our district.

As EveryLibrary executive director John Chrastka recently mentioned in his article “School Librarians Must Treat the Fight for Their Status as a Legal Political Campaign It Is,” librarians who are members of their education union are just as vital to the association’s activities. School librarians such as, for example, Kristin Boyd and Christopher Stewart, school librarian activists in Washington, D.C., enlisted the help of the Washington Teachers’ Union and when they organized, they were able to, through the city council to not only reverse proposed cuts but also to promise to hire more school librarians. It’s important to foster partnerships with their local association leaders as well as local state and national organizations. If you are an administrator or librarian and the group is not already formed, you can be impactful contributors to these conversations. When the time comes to plan for the next cycle, ask your principal or supervisor if you can be a part of the planning committee. Whenever there is a curriculum rewrite, ask to be part of the team who works on it.

In New Jersey, there have been many new education mandates rolled out in the last few years that school librarians have been able to directly support with resources and instruction on topics like social-emotional learning, civics, LGBTQIA+ issues, climate change, and computer science.

If your building administration seems unaware of what the work of a school librarian entails, it would be helpful to share AASL’s job description. This description covers all of the facets of the job, from front-facing instruction to all of the behind-the-scenes responsibilities that keep a school library program running smoothly. NJASL used AASL’s job description as a basis for its own model job description. We encouraged members to share it with their colleagues, staff, and school board. We also incorporated the description into our advocacy efforts and used it with administrators and other stakeholders. We support the status of school library programs and influence the passage of related legislation. School librarian participation in New Jersey Education Association’s meetings and professional development opportunities led to the production and broadcasting of a comprehensive school librarian training and a social media campaign during School Library Month.

Join the Ranks

Membership in professional organizations is a must: an organization of 1,000 members makes more of an impact with decisionmakers than an organization of 500 members. Every school librarian should at least be a member of their state organization—dues typically cost less than a weekly coffee run and membership can be as active or as passive as a person prefers. Membership in our state organization, the New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL), includes access to our listserv and ensures that members receive important email announcements. NJASL has created templates for members (and members of their friends and family) to use when the New Jersey Department of Education or the New Jersey State Board of Education accepts open public comment. We have also provided sample statements to send to legislators to ask them to co-sponsor our information literacy curriculum and school librarian-to-student ratio bills. Advocacy cannot get any easier than copying and pasting messages to send to stakeholders.

I have encountered many librarians who feel they are not capable of volunteering for their organization, and this is simply not true. Everyone brings something to the table, and if you had the wherewithal to complete a graduate program and work in a school setting, you have something to offer to your fellow school librarians. State organizations often serve as the first responders whenever there is a need for advocacy. NJASL has supported librarians facing cuts and censorship challenges and we frequently share information and resources so our members can be proactive and not reactive.

Start Local

At the district level, librarians can advocate for their program in multiple ways. Having a presence on social media platforms enables school librarians to showcase their programs to their colleagues, administrators, and perhaps most importantly, families and members of the community. If your district has a PR person, reach out and ask if they will post about your program. If you prefer, you can also provide the content, many will be happy to share it via the district’s social media channels. Follow administrators, colleagues, and the PTO/PTA if they are on social media, and make sure to tag them when posting yourself.

Some state organizations have run campaigns encouraging members to post pictures and videos of their programs. The New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL) ran a #firstfriday campaign where librarians post content on the first Friday of the month. It is important folks are given enough of a heads-up so they can plan what they would like to post and, most importantly, remind members the picture does not have to be fancy or perfect! Many organizations have a hashtag for posts related to use and tagging stakeholders can bring even more attention to your library program. In New Jersey, our advocacy team created a spreadsheet of stakeholders from the department of education, legislators, and other organizations that support education. We have found that many tagged groups will like and retweet, further amplifying your posts.

Librarians also need to get on the radar of their administrators. Become familiar with your district’s goals and strategic plan and share how your program supports these priorities. If your library program is not addressing these focus areas, start to incorporate aspects that do. Many districts will invite staff members to help draft these goals and school librarians should volunteer to serve on these committees. Since they work with every student in their building and, hopefully, most staff members, school librarians can be impactful contributors to these conversations. When the time comes to plan for the next cycle, ask your principal or supervisor if you can be a part of the planning committee. Whenever there is a curriculum rewrite, ask to be part of the team who works on it.

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School librarians who do not live in the district where they work should be aware of the landscape of their own hometown. NJASL has been notified of schools where volunteers or paraprofessionals manage the library facility and are being listed as the school librarian. School librarians who live in districts that have cut or
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here aren’t many school staff members who support every student and staff member, provide a collection of professionally vetted resources accessible to the entire school community, and maintain an inviting facility that is not only the largest classroom in school, but also a safe space for many students. Certified school librarians do all of this and so much more. This educator should be valued as highly as math, science, and language arts teachers and also a safe space for many students. Certified school librarians do all of this and so much more. This educator should be valued as highly as math, science, and language arts teachers and also a safe space for many students. Certified school librarians do all of this and so much more. This educator should be valued as highly as math, science, and language arts teachers.

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School librarians can also serve their organizations, and their colleagues, by presenting at professional development events, such as conferences. There is no better way to promote the great things you are doing and, if you do present, make your administration aware of this professional accomplishment. Don’t hesitate to ask your school’s conference—submit proposals to national organizations. When a colleague and I learned that the national Association for Middle Level Education was going to be held locally in Philadelphia, we submitted proposals on how we incorporate coding and maker activities into our program and, to our surprise, our proposals were accepted. It was great PR for us and for our district.

As EveryLibrary executive director John Christakos recently mentioned in his article “School Librarians Must Treat the Fight for Their Future Like a Political Campaign It’s,” librarians who are members of their education union are just as vital to the association as the professional librarians. In New Jersey, school librarian activists in Washington, D.C., enlisted the help of the Washington Teachers’ Union and when they organized, they were eventually able to elect a new executive board to the city council to not only reverse proposed cuts but also to promise to hire more school librarians. It’s important to foster partnerships with their local association leaders as well as the state level and with their administrators as they are among the most powerful unions in many states and they have a seat at the table with policy makers and legislators. The support of state education associations can spread the word about school library programs and influence the passage of related legislation. School librarian participation in New Jersey Education Association’s meetings and professional development opportunities led to the production and broadcasting of a community service announcement during National Library Week.

The future of the profession depends on it.

March/April 2022

March/April 2022
Speaking Truth to Power
NJASL has reached out to professional organizations for school administrators and school boards to communicate the importance of having a certified school librarian available to every student. NJASL members have also submitted proposals to administrator and school board conferences so that we are not just preaching to the choir. We have also had a presence at the New Jersey Parent Teacher Association conference, the annual New Jersey Education Association convention and when the New Jersey Department of Education held an equity conference this summer, school librarians hosted the session “School Libraries: Equity Happens Here.”

Our organization recognizes that reaching out to legislators or education leaders can be daunting. To that end, whenever public comment is solicited from these stakeholders, NJASL creates template letters for members (and their family and friends) to customize and send to these groups. Although it might seem like a small gesture, when large numbers of these messages are sent they get noticed.

NJASL’s advocacy team has ramped up its legislative efforts in the past two years. When everything went virtual in 2020, NJASL grasped the opportunity to schedule meetings with legislators across the state to ask for their sponsorship of our information literacy curriculum bill. In one instance, we worked on a bill to create a state-to-student ratio bill. We reached out to members who lived in specific legislative districts to join us in sharing their school library story. These personal stories are what interest legislators. We began by meeting with legislators individually and then over the summer of 2021, we organized two open house information sessions and invited every senator and assembly member to attend. These visits paid off—after meeting with State Senator Mike of 2021, we organized two open-house information sessions. These personal stories are what interest legislators. We began by meeting with the executive director of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians, to help advocate for reinstatement of the positions. This meant having a sustained presence at BOE meetings and it had an impact. Over $50,000 was allocated to update the collections at the K-8 schools and there are plans to renovate the middle school media center. We continue to advocate for these spaces to be run by certified school librarians, and we will continue to speak out until all of the students in our town have consistent access to a strong school library program.

Conclusion
Since the Spring of 2020, our society has grappled with the devastating effects of misinformation and disinformation. It has impacted our health, our democracy, and personal relationships. As many of us heard our elected leaders lament about the digital divide in schools, the falsehoods about COVID-19 being spread like wildfire via social media, and an insurrection spurred by a falsehood. However, in the school setting, school librarians can make their advocacy personal by inviting their district’s legislators to visit their library and observe how a dynamic library program looks. Unfortunately, many legislators we have spoken to are unaware of how school libraries have evolved over the years and the decades since they themselves have been in school. Some are even unaware of the differences between public and school libraries. Having the opportunity to see a school librarian in action and what students are able to experience in a school library can have much more of an impact than an email or a phone call.

If you had the wherewithal to complete a graduate program and work in a school setting, you have something to offer to your fellow school librarians.

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4 How Your SLMS Can Support Your District & Building Goals

SCHOOL LIBRARY MEDIA SPECIAlIST: MAKE THEduto NOT JUST A LUXURY

ACCELERATED LEARNING

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion

Social, Emotional Learning

Professional Membership

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Beth Thomas, MLIS school library media specialist Lawton C. Johnson Summit Middle School Summit, NJ. Beth has been a middle school librarian since 2003 and is the immediate past president of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians. A past board member of the Summit Educational Foundation, Beth has co-written over 20 grant proposals for her middle school library program. In 2017 she, along with her district librarian colleagues, were named the Summit & New Providence Rotary Club Citizens of the Year. Beth can be found on Twitter @biblibeth and at lcjsmslibrary

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We also recognize that administrators are busy and that sometimes an eye-catching infographic is the best way to spread the word about how school librarians can support their mission and goals. After meeting with the executive director of the New Jersey Principal and Supervisors Association, we learned that three priorities for New Jersey’s administrators this school year would be accelerated learning, social emotional learning, and equity, diversity and inclusion. That evening, I created an infographic using Canva that explained the ways school librarians can support these three areas. Our organization recognizes that reaching out to legislators or administrators, and school boards, should not be the only way to spread the word about how school librarians can support their mission and goals. As a result, we have begun relying more heavily on social media to spread the word about our advocacy efforts.

One of the most effective ways to spread the word about the importance of school librarians is by publishing an article in a local or state newspaper. We have written several articles for local and state newspapers. As of press time, for the first time since these bills have been introduced over five years ago, the senate version of the information literacy curriculum bill was unanimously approved by the education committee to move forward for a vote.

School librarians can make their advocacy personal by inviting their district’s legislators to visit their library and observe one day how a dynamic library program looks like. Unfortunately, many legislators have spoken to are unaware of how school libraries have evolved over the years and the decades since they themselves have been in school. Some are even unaware of the differences between public and school libraries. Having the opportunity to see a school librarian in action and what students are able to experience in a school library can have much more of an impact than an email or a phone call.

Finally, be proactive in engaging journalists to amplify your message that every student deserves access to a strong school library program that is run by a certified school librarian. Op-eds were published in NJ Spotlight News and the NJEA Review, and journalists at Politico and the New Jersey Herald have covered the issue of school librarian cuts. These articles came to fruition because we simply engaged with the journalists. Education is always a hot topic, and it has been covered even more since the pandemic. Reach out to local and state editors with a proposal for an op-ed or a feature article.

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