

Celebrating school librarians

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by Christina Cucci, NJASL President

Meet April Bunn, a certified school library media specialist working at Red Bank Regional High School. April is not only her name, but also the name of the month that is designated by the American Association of School Librarians as a celebration of school librarians and their programs. The New Jersey State Board of Education will again proclaim April as School Library Month with a resolution at its April meeting.

Unfortunately, many schools in New Jersey no longer have a library media specialist to celebrate. This is a tragic loss to a school district because a certified school library media specialist transforms learning for students. Every student in New Jersey should have a certified School Library Media Specialist.

Famed author Dav Pilkey is this year's spokesperson for School Library Month.

Libraries equalize information for all students, regardless of socio-economic background. They are the heart of the school where all are welcome, and everyone has a place.

"Over the years I've had the privilege to have met many committed librarians whose passion and dedication to literacy is life changing," Pilkey says. "I'm honored to be this year's AASL ambassador for school libraries and an advocate for everything they do to make the world a better place."

A day in the life of April Bunn

It's 3 p.m. on a blustery February afternoon. April Bunn stays after school to keep the library open, and I've called her to speak with her about her job. As we are talking, she is visited by a technology aide, who is following up on a broken Chromebook. She puts the phone down again to help a teacher with the laminator, located at the back of the library.

"I try and cultivate a place where everyone wants to be," Bunn tells me. "It's like doing six people's jobs, but the energy in the library is so gratifying."

Bunn's typical day consists of a variety of tasks in the learning community. She hunts for resources for a student's project on the Russian Revolution. In the middle of this, she runs over to help science students get their Chromebooks logged in to Discovery Streaming. Later, she assembles a podcasting station for a class of English language learners. She meets with student volunteers during a study hall period to review the procedure to inventory the library collection.

"I am here to serve the entire community: the teachers, students, administrators, and parents. I try to be essential to everyone," Bunn says.



Student volunteers helping create seasonal displays at Red Bank Regional High School.

Library media specialists support effective instruction

The research is clear: certified school library media specialists support effective instruction, provide innovative information literacy education for all and partner with teachers to craft authentic research assignments. School library media specialists are poised to make a positive impact in a school because they reach the entire community.

Tricina Beebe, a school librarian working in Hainesport, knows the value of a school library on a personal level. As a resident of Berlin Borough, she fought when her community's board of education terminated a certified school library media specialist in her child's school after 14 years of dedicated service. Beebe testified about her experience at a State Board of Education meeting in September 2017, asking:

- Who will teach our students 21st-century skills?
- How will our children be able to matriculate into high school without the continuity of a Future Ready skill-set?
- Who will match a student's IEP, Lexile Reading level, associate a Fountas and Pinnell label, aid with state-mandated standards and link students to 21st-century initiatives?

Beebe has seen libraries evolve over the last few years. She has witnessed libraries add spaces to incorporate STEM learning, makerspace kits, pre-engineering activities, and technology hardware.

"The role of librarian has changed," Beebe says. "We used to be a teacher of print resources only, but today's librarians have so many roles in the school. They may be the makerspace coordinator, the teacher collaborator, a professional development leader, a resource researcher, a grant writer and a community outreach advocate.

"I have a great relationship with my public library," Beebe says. "We discussed and developed the idea to create STEM kits for schools in Burlington County that didn't have a makerspace or resources available at their school. These are now available on loan through the public library."

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Everyone has a place in the library

Libraries equalize information for all students, regardless of socio-economic background. They are the heart of the school where all are welcome, and everyone has a place. Parents want their children to reap the benefits of a fully staffed school library because their children will learn essential skills for an ever-changing world.

School library media specialists teach students to inquire, explore and engage with information. Students become inclusive and collaborate with others to deepen their understandings.

But a new trend is threatening these positions in New Jersey schools. Many certified school

library media specialists are being replaced with volunteers, classroom teachers and technology coaches without the certification to teach information literacy skills. This is like asking an English teacher to take over a math class.





Tricina Beebe with preschool patrons. Beebe is the school library media specialist for over nine grade levels in Hainesport.

Parents are learning about these losses and contacting the New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL). They are asking NJASL to advocate for the inclusion of certified school library media specialists in their children's schools. NJASL has partnered with critical stakeholders to advance and promote legislation to require a prescribed ratio of certified school library media specialists to students as well as require an information literacy curriculum.

As president of NJASL, I am proud to serve an organization with this vision: "Every student in every school in New Jersey is served by a certified full-time school library media specialist and has access to the technology and other resources needed. All students are empowered to achieve success through inquiry-based, collaborative school library programs led by credentialed school library media specialists. These professionals are recognized as educational leaders and indispensable resources in their school communities."

Students know the value of a school library as well.

Our hope is that all New Jersey school districts will recognize the benefit they have with their school library media specialists and that all New Jersey schools will employ certified school library media specialists.

"I enjoy working in a space where there is community and collaboration," a Morristown High School student reports. "I find the librarians to be wonderful resources regarding educational matters for all aspects of my life. For me, the library has a special feeling, I accomplish a great deal when I go to the library."

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I encourage you to reach out to your school librarian and ask about collaborating on an upcoming project. As fantasy science fiction writer Vera Nazarian says, "Sometimes, reaching out and taking someone's hand is the beginning of a journey. At other times, it is allowing another to take yours."

Christina Cucci is the president of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL). She has been a school library media specialist for eight years, working with K-2 students in Upper Saddle River. Previously, she served as a classroom teacher for 11 years, educating students in grades K-3. Cucci was selected as the 2015 ALA Emerging Leader and helped co-write a toolkit for AASL called Promoting School Library Programs. She is the former Co-President of the Bergen/Passaic affiliate of NJASL. She can be reached at president@njasl.org.