

January 30, 2019

Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner  
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
75 Pleasant Street  
Malden, MA 02148

Dear Commissioner Riley:

We are writing, pursuant to a New Business Item approved by the Massachusetts Teachers Association at its Annual Meeting of Delegates on May 5, 2018, to express our support for the recommendations of the Special Commission on School Library Services in Massachusetts.

As you may be aware, this special commission released its report, *The Massachusetts School Library Study: Equity and Access for Students in the Commonwealth*, in March 2018. This report details the commission's findings of gross inequities in Massachusetts students' access to well-funded school library programs staffed by certified librarians, and it makes a number of recommendations for correcting these inequities. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's data on school librarian staffing support the commission's findings and indicate an even more dire situation, with Massachusetts public school districts reporting that just under one-third of schools had full-time-equivalent librarians or media center directors in 2017-2018.

This situation is a travesty. Numerous studies have documented the positive impact of strong school library programs staffed by certified librarians. For an article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Keith Curry Lance and Debra E. Kachel compiled research and reported that more than 34 statewide studies have found that when their schools have strong library programs, students score higher on reading and achievement tests. The authors reported that this trend holds true regardless of other factors, such as class size, per-pupil funding and student socioeconomic conditions. The authors also included information from a study in Pennsylvania concluding that significantly fewer students scored "below basic" in reading when they had access to a strong library program. Another study cited in the article found that National Assessment of Educational Progress reading scores for low-income, black and Latino students improved in states that added certified librarians, while ELL reading scores dropped in states that lost certified librarians.

Because we believe that *all* of our students in Massachusetts deserve access to strong school library programs, we agree with the commission's recommendations that support a well-resourced, comprehensive library program:

1. **Improve access to school libraries and school librarians.** Every public school in the Commonwealth needs *at least* one school library with a certified full-time school librarian, and

there should also be mandated librarian-to-student ratios to accommodate larger school populations.

The commission found that at least one in five schools does not have even one school librarian. Your own department's data indicate that at least two out of three schools do not have a school librarian. Clearly the available data are inconsistent and insufficient; therefore, we also agree that DESE should conduct an audit of all schools to make an accurate accounting of school library staffing and resources.

We also strongly endorse the recommendation to increase access by eliminating the widespread practice of closing libraries during school hours, especially for standardized testing and special events.

2. **Improve access to information resources in school libraries.** Every school needs a library with adequate print and electronic information resources in order to develop students' love of reading, their curiosity, and their independent inquiry skills. School libraries also need sufficient infrastructure in order for students to access these resources.
3. **Improved access to information technology.** As more information resources, instructional tools and creation software move to digital environments, all students need access to the internet and digital devices in school libraries.
4. **Improved access to library instruction and help.** All students need access to the best instructional practices in their school libraries. In addition to certified school librarians, schools should employ at least one library education support professional who is responsible for noninstructional tasks, freeing up the librarian to focus on instruction and collaboration.

As has been the practice in many districts, *replacing* certified librarians with ESPs is not only inequitable, it's also unethical. It means that students are not being supervised and instructed by a fully trained and licensed librarian while they are in the library, and it exploits lower-paid ESP staff members, giving them many of the responsibilities of a licensed educator without the commensurate pay, support or professional development.

5. **Improved access to funding.** Guidelines for budget allocation and expenditure to support the commission's recommendations are needed. We also need to establish compensatory guidelines for school library budget allocation that are equitable, taking into account school libraries in underfunded districts and schools.

Fully funded school libraries for students in *every* school are part of MTA's vision for public education. The commission has provided valuable recommendations and a plan for implementation that will start to right the gross existing inequities and ensure that ALL Massachusetts students have access to the proven academic advantages that school libraries and librarians provide.

Very truly yours,

Merrie Najimy, President

Max Page, Vice President

## References

2017-18 Race/Ethnicity and Gender Staffing Report (DISTRICT) by Full-time Equivalents [Librarians and Media Center Directors]. (n.d.). Retrieved December 16, 2018, from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website:

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