

Submission to the Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians in Australian Schools

**From the
State Library of Western Australia
April 2010**

Terms of Reference

To inquire into and report on the role, adequacy and resourcing of school libraries and teacher librarians in Australia's public and private schools. Specifically, the committee should focus on:

1. the impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities;
2. the future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy;
3. the factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians;
4. the role of different levels of government and local communities and other institutions in partnering with and supporting school librarians; and
5. the impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians.

1. The impact of recent policies and investments on school libraries and their activities.

School librarians are an essential partner in supporting literacy, information literacy and learning for children and school libraries integrate literacy and information skills into the curriculum.

There are strong links between literacy, school performance, self-esteem and life chances with poor literacy skills being linked with lower education, earnings, health and social outcomes.

It was in response to this evidence that, in 2005, the State Library of Western Australia launched its Better Beginnings family literacy program that supports families and communities in providing quality early literacy experiences for children aged 0–3 years to ensure that they begin school ready to learn.

To date, Better Beginnings has reached over 70,000 families in Western Australia. With the ultimate goal of raising literacy levels, findings from the ongoing independent evaluation by Edith Cowan University demonstrate that the program has had a significant positive impact on early reading practices, attitudes and beliefs. Eighty five percent of mothers surveyed reported that they read to their child after being involved in the program (only 14% of these mothers reported reading to their child beforehand) and 62% reported that their confidence in sharing books with their child had increased. A summary of the evaluation findings is attached.

The State Library is currently partnering with the Western Australian Department of Education through its Office of Early Learning and Development on a 12 month pilot that extends the reach of Better Beginnings to provide support for children aged four and five

years when they begin school. This pilot, funded by Rio Tinto, provides Australia's most extensive early literacy program, bringing together libraries and schools to provide sustainable literacy support for families and communities. The program recognises that families and teachers play a vital joint role in how well children do in school.

While many children enter school equipped with the skills to participate in learning, not all adults understand the importance of developing early literacy to ensure that children can become independent readers and learners who can understand and apply information within their daily lives. Better Beginnings makes this link between home and school recognising the importance of teachers and parents working together to promote literacy. A key message of Better Beginnings is that parent involvement doesn't end when school begins. As children begin to learn to read by themselves, it is vital that parents and children continue to read aloud together. School librarians are essential in conveying this message to parents as are school libraries in delivering resources to support the program.

The impact of the pilot extension is being evaluated by Edith Cowan University, with results available in late 2010.

Investing in school libraries with appropriately trained and skilled staff who can partner with other agencies on early learning programs such as Better Beginnings supports COAG's National Reform Agenda in the priority areas of early childhood (supports families in improving childhood development outcomes in the first five years of a child's life, up to and including school entry) and literacy and numeracy (improving student outcomes on literacy and numeracy).

A national program to strengthen our children's early literacy skills and maximise reading and school readiness is needed and Better Beginnings provides a best practice model for a national family literacy program, coordinated by libraries, to provide a key resource in addressing the national drive to support literacy and learning.

2. The future potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved educational and community outcomes, especially literacy.

Community involvement is vital to a child's success at school and one of the most effective ways of achieving this is through strategies and resources designed to support shared reading between parents and children.

Overseas research into factors that affect school readiness make it clear that children whose parents read with them have better developed emergent literacy skills and learn to read more easily when they begin school. A serious risk to children's emergent literacy is low levels of parental education and literacy as well as a lack of awareness of the value of sharing books, stories, rhymes and songs with children from the time they are born. Libraries and the programs they provide promote a key aspect of school readiness – parental involvement.

Library outreach programs have a consistent record of effectively fostering parent practice and improving young children's language development. Access to books is vital in supporting literacy and library resources for children and their families are a key asset in supporting children's reading needs. School libraries and teacher librarians are key to supporting families in this area.

Research conducted in the United Kingdom has shown that introducing a young child to the library is one of the most significant things a parent can do to make a difference to their child's later education – developing a library habit early in life gives children a head

start. Where there is a strong community of practice between schools, libraries and home, children clearly benefit.

3. The factors influencing recruitment and development of school librarians

School Librarians play an essential and unique specialist role in supporting students' learning so that they develop into effective, independent learners and readers.

With tighter budgets and the devolution of staffing to schools, the number of teacher librarians in public schools has dropped significantly over the past twenty years, particularly in primary schools. In addition, teacher librarians are also required to spend more of their time in classrooms rather than in the library.

Teacher librarians play an essential role in building partnerships for literacy and learning, both within schools and in the wider community and have particular skills in accessing, evaluating, and using information from multiple sources in order to learn, and to create and apply new knowledge.

Investing in teacher librarians is essential if schools are to instil in its students the ability to acquire the knowledge and skills that will facilitate lifelong learning. This not only provides the essential foundation for performance in formal education, but is also a prerequisite for successful participation in all areas of adult life. In particular, children must receive the information literacy skills they need to handle the variety of written information that they will encounter throughout their lives.

Librarianship is constantly developing and continuing professional learning for teacher librarians is essential to maintain an up-to-date information service for schools.

4. The role of different levels of government and local communities and other institutions in partnering with and supporting school librarians.

Teacher librarians facilitate collaboration with other agencies that support learning and education, particularly public, state and national libraries. These libraries share many common goals including education, literacy, information literacy and life-long learning.

There are currently 16 joint-use public libraries in Western Australia undertaken as a shared venture, jointly funded by local government and schools or other education provider/s such as TAFE colleges or universities. In addition, there are 30 collocated library/telecentres in regional and remote communities in Western Australia, providing a gateway to on-line information as well as a range of print resources.

Increasingly, Western Australian communities, particularly in regional and remote areas, are exploring opportunities to integrate library services for practical and economic reasons. Arrangements such as these enable the community to benefit from the investment of public money in a single building, share running costs, provide longer opening hours and an increased range of services and resources.

For some communities, the integration of public and school library services is the most effective method of service delivery and increases community access to library services through the sharing of resources and the provision of specialist facilities, equipment and staff expertise. It can also provide the opportunity for a specialist teacher librarian to be employed to provide information services to the wider community as well as the school community, providing equality of access for all and wider learning opportunities.

The State Library of Western Australia supports the development of shared library services that meet the needs of local communities. To assist in this, the State Library and the WA Department of Education jointly commissioned a report in 2007 to assist schools and local governments in the planning of future projects.

5. The impact and potential of digital technologies to enhance and support the roles of school libraries and librarians.

Modern libraries play a central role in today's digital society and teacher librarians have long been pioneers in teaching information skills and integrating technology skills into the information finding process. In the future, school libraries will continue to provide technology to support and develop reading and access to information.

School libraries as a physical space will continue to be important, but teacher librarians also develop programs to extend their service beyond the library walls, creating virtual libraries capable of reaching and serving students wherever they are, both at and away from school.

Libraries play a vital role in ensuring equitable access to technology, particularly for people who lack access elsewhere. School libraries are important in providing this equitable access for the school community to engage students in the world of digital information.

Today's children use digital media voraciously and this is transforming teaching and learning in our schools and in the community more widely. The work of librarians is vital in equipping children with the skills they need to find, evaluate and use information so that they become effective life-long learners.

Teacher librarians are a key resource in providing students with the necessary skills to foster literacy, in all its forms as well as lifelong learning. Libraries embrace the development of new technologies and the opportunities they afford to increase access to information. Programs provided by libraries enable learners to acquire and apply a range of multimedia literacies and to use digital media for information seeking and sharing. Teacher librarians play a key role in planning and delivering programs that integrate new technologies into the curricula, teaching and learning frameworks.

In summary, learning in its broadest sense remains central to the library mission to support skills development and engage audiences with information. School libraries and school librarians in particular are committed to supporting formal education and play a vital in fostering student literacy, reading, information finding and academic achievement.