

CUPE

Position Paper
on
School Library Technicians

The Ontario School Board Coordinating Committee

CUPE Research
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Shock waves were sent through the school library network this past June when the Windsor-Essex Catholic DSB announced it was closing all of its school libraries, and converting the spaces into “learning commons.”

Hard on the heels of that news, the City of Toronto’s mayor declared there were too many branches of the Toronto library (he erroneously claimed there were more library branches than Tim Horton’s in his old ward), and that some needed to close. The mayor’s brother subsequently got into a public debate with literary icon Margaret Atwood about the worth of libraries, and the story was picked up around the world.

What is going on? In the case of the city of Toronto, it seems easier to explain. The Ford brothers are carrying the torch of the “common sense” revolution led by former premier Mike Harris and his cabinet (that included current Conservative leader Tim Hudak). The “common sense” dispensed by the Harris regime always had elements of anti-intellectualism as part of its right wing, populist mix. Harris’ first education minister, John Snobelen (a high-school dropout) vowed to “create a crisis” to justify a half a billion dollars in cuts to an education bureaucracy whose purpose he couldn’t fathom. And remember, this was a premier who, when once asked by a reporter what book he was currently reading, could only come up with the title of a bedtime book for his son.

Not everyone expects our political leaders to be champions of literacy and learning, but news that a school board is attempting to eliminate libraries is a stunning development. (The board’s attempt to soften the blow of this announcement, by mentioning the “learning commons”, did little to ease the anxiety of Windsor parents worried about the loss of school libraries. The board’s vision for learning commons, i.e. a library with fewer staff, seems at odds with that outlined by the Ontario School Libraries Association in its 2010 paper, *Together for Learning: School Libraries and the Emergence of the Learning Commons*, where a vision of all library staff working together with students and teachers is promoted.)

We have reached this point because funding for school boards has never fully recovered from the hole carved out during the 1990s, despite decent efforts by the current government. While some deficiencies in the funding formula have been remedied, libraries remain on shaky ground. The government recognized that in 2008 and announced a \$40M, four year grant for library staffing, but the grant expires this coming school year. That funding--and more--needs to be rolled into the funding formula to ensure that it does not disappear and that library staffing is put on more stable footing.

The declining financial support for school libraries helps explain seemingly bizarre decisions to close school libraries throughout a system (and equally odd comments such as one made by a WECDSB official who suggested the time spent by students traveling from a classroom to a library was wasted!). School boards are being forced to ration resources and rationalize decisions to close institutions that are at the heart of the education system. They feel they have no choice but to make decisions they know will be roundly criticized and that make little sense on the face of it.

No doubt the Windsor-Essex Catholic board (and the City of Toronto) are in the vanguard. Others will be watching to see if the board sticks to its plan. We may be on the verge of a revolution in the way students access information resources not traditionally available in the classroom. But as electronic documents rapidly overtake paper as the media of choice, the revolution is being shaped by funding deficiencies, not by an overall plan to bring libraries and information resources for students up to speed.

A well thought out provincial policy on libraries and information resources would take into account studies that have found clear links between library staffing and student success. Such a policy would also reverse the decline in the number of teacher librarians in school systems, and in the number of library technicians, and other library staff.

The majority of library support staff working in schools in Ontario are members of CUPE. There are well over 1,000 library technicians working in Ontario schools (as reported in school board financial statements) and an unknown number of other library support staff classifications, including cataloguing and systems technicians, information analysts and library clerks.¹

Our library support staff are among the 50,000 CUPE members working in public schools in the province. CUPE represents support staff classifications in the vast majority of the province's school boards, and is by far the largest support staff union in the province.

Our experience in school libraries extends beyond Ontario's borders. CUPE represents school library workers across the country, more than 3,700 in 2009. And our experience in libraries extends beyond the school walls: CUPE represents more than 21,000 library workers nationally in municipal libraries, schools and universities, and non-educational institutions such as hospitals.

¹ Unfortunately, we cannot be more precise about library support staff numbers because of gaps in the reporting system. Many boards, including some of the province's largest, report having no library technicians despite having CUPE library technicians on the payroll. The financial reporting system, called EFIS, also bundles library support staff who are not library technicians with guidance staff, so it doesn't reveal the precise number of library support staff at each school board.

Thus, CUPE has a compelling interest in the state of school libraries in Ontario. We are using this paper to draw attention to the cuts that have occurred and that are looming for some school library systems, and to suggest ways to reverse the trend of declining support for libraries.

The parents' watchdog group, People for Education, has tracked the plight of school libraries since the days of the "common sense revolution" in their annual "tracking" reports of school resources. The tracking reports consist of surveys sent to every school in the province, asking about staff and material resources available to the school, class sizes and fundraising activities.

In 2011 People for Education focused on teacher librarians and reported that:

In Ontario, there appears to be declining support for the distinct role of school libraries. This year, only 56% of elementary schools have a teacher-librarian (eighty percent of them work part-time), a number that has fallen steadily from 80% in 1997/98. In high schools, where students do more independent work, the number is higher – 66% – but is down from the 78% of ten years ago.

People for Education's research, like a lot of research into school library resources, focuses mostly on the decline in teacher librarians. Though CUPE does not represent teachers, we do not dispute the primary role they play in effective functioning libraries. The decline in their numbers is a clear indication of declining financial support for libraries.

For a while it appeared that school boards in Ontario were coping with declining funding by replacing teacher librarians with library technicians and other library classifications. But even that stopgap measure appears to be unaffordable, as the most recent staffing statistics indicate a decline in the number of library technicians. Though library technicians increased in number province-wide following the \$40M grant, their numbers have declined the last two years. Estimates for the 2011-12 school year show a 6% decline in the number of library technicians employed province-wide from 2008-09 levels. The staffing numbers, which are presented as FTEs or full time equivalents, obscure the fact that in many boards, library technicians and other library support staff work 6 hour days or less in 2011, whereas in the 1990s most of them worked 7 hour days.

Not surprisingly, there is solid academic research showing that library technicians and other library staff contribute to student success. A frequently cited Texas study looked at the factors that contributed to high student test scores, and found that while socio-economic status was the key variable, library staffing ranked highly among factors contributing to student success. Interestingly, Smith's study underscored that the presence of library technicians and other library "aides" allowed teacher librarians to do the work they are trained to do:

Lower than recommended staffing levels and especially the absence of library aides significantly curtail the range and type of services that librarians can provide. In libraries staffed by both a librarian and an aide, librarians are more likely to offer services identified in the standards and guidelines as high priority. These high priority services consist of collaboratively planning and teaching with teachers, providing staff development to teachers, facilitating information skills instruction, managing technology, communicating with school administrators, and providing reading incentive activities.

The importance of all library support staff emphasized in the Texas study was underlined by a 2006 Ontario study conducted by a Queen's research team and People for Education for the Ontario Library Association, School Libraries and Student Achievement in Ontario. Using EQAO test scores, the study found that higher reading test scores were associated with the presence of trained library staff. For grade 3 reading test scores in particular, the study found that library staffing was the only significant factor related to libraries that affected test scores. More trained staff led to higher test scores: fewer trained staff was associated with lower test scores.

These and other studies that underscore the importance of trained library staff on student achievement should throw cold water on any notion that technology now allows students to navigate their own course through the electronic information age, and that what students need is simply access to better technology to succeed. Up-to-date technology is part of the formula for student success: trained library support staff is another crucial component.

A review of some of the qualifications sought in a recent school board job posting for a Library Technician gives a good sense of what contributions library technicians are expected to make to student achievement and to fostering literacy in the wider community:

Supports the delivery of curriculum and the development of information literacy by helping staff and students locate and use relevant print and electronic resources;

Delivers regular book exchanges, readers' advisory, and reading aloud to groups of students; assists with school-based literacy initiatives;

Provides annual orientation and training of students and staff on the organization of the library collection as well as library policies and procedures;

Promotes library services and literacy activities within the school and parent community through book fairs, web pages, and newsletters.

One wonders how these important contributions to student achievement would be delivered without library technicians. Are not the activities described in the job posting core activities of primary and secondary educational institutions?

Karen Infantino, a Library Technician with the Niagara Catholic DSB for many years, clearly understands how the skills she brings to her job enhance the lives of students and members of the wider community.

Library Technicians are Paraprofessionals; college graduates who need excellent reading, writing, organizational, communication and interpersonal skills in order to work independently and as part of a team. We have in-depth knowledge of library processes, procedures, protocols and coding systems, can operate library automation software, and are qualified to manage an elementary or secondary school library. These skills allow us to help students and staff locate and select reading materials to meet academic needs. To help cultivate a love of reading we conduct story time, reading to classes from JK to grade 8. Library Technicians organize literary events, author visits, and reading programs. Often we liaise with the public library and encourage and prepare students to make use of other libraries in the community. Library Technicians contribute to the school community by promoting library services and literacy activities through web pages and newsletters and by organizing book fairs which are major fundraisers for the school library.

The rapid implementation of Ontario's Early Learning program now underway makes library resources, and dedicated support staff like Karen, more critical than ever. The OLA study on school libraries and student success found the impact of library staffing was more pronounced at Grade 3 than Grade 6, suggesting that library support at earlier ages are most effective. It also found that inculcating a love for reading early in life is associated with higher test scores.

Early Learning Extended Day programs (i.e. before-and-after-school childcare) could put libraries to better use outside of the core school day. In fact, libraries are under-utilized outside of the core day and better use of libraries by community groups could be promoted by school boards and the ministry.

It seems redundant to cite additional evidence that library staffing and resources are crucial to student success. If ever there was a common sense proposition that most of the population could agree with, it would be that learning to read and to enjoy reading is good for students and good for society. Even Mr. Harris understood that when he took the time from his busy and important schedule to read to his children at bedtime.

We can't assume, however, that all our students come from backgrounds that permit nightly reading sessions with parents. Our schools contain students who come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Some come from families where single parents work at their children's bedtime. Some students do not get support and encouragement from their families to succeed in school. It is clear that these students will be left behind if our schools do not continue to provide excellent reading and literacy resources and opportunities for challenged students to succeed.

Our members want to contribute to student success; for many who work as library support staff facilitating student success helps make up for a job that is often under-appreciated. It helps compensate for the irregular hours, the low annual salary, and the job insecurity. Like all support staff in our schools, our library members understand the importance of the roles they play in the system, even when it is not apparent to others.

Now, more than ever, those roles need strengthening and support. The provincial government needs to articulate a policy for school libraries and information resources before more school boards go down a path from which it will be difficult to return. That policy needs to be backed up with financial resources as well as a human resources strategy to increase the training of existing staff and recruit new graduates of library technician programs.

With the implementation of full-day junior kindergarten and support for wrap around programs, the province has created a fantastic opportunity to foster love for reading and learning in all children. It would be tragic to deprive these newest learners of the full resources they need to succeed, and there can be no argument that fully functioning, well staffed and well stocked libraries should play a major role in the province's prescription for student success at all grade levels.

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