

The Hub: Campaign for Quality School Libraries in Australia

By Georgia Phillips, Co-founder, NSW, Australia

Members of the small but active group who have been lobbying since 2007 for action on declining teacher librarian numbers are pleased that Julia Gillard (Education Minister and now Prime Minister) responded with a request for a federal inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians.

The group was frustrated with the lack of action as Australian schools lost at least one third of their qualified teacher librarians (TLs) over the past 15 years. 15 parents, authors, academics and teacher librarians formed The Hub: Campaign for Quality School Libraries in Australia.

We needed to let the public know how inequitable school library services had become in Australia, even with the much needed new Building the Education Revolution (BER) economic stimulus library buildings. Northern Territory remote schools have no TLs. Western Australian primary schools do not require TLs. Tasmania, Victoria and the ACT count TLs as part of teaching staff, may or may not have a teacher deployed in the library and do not require that teacher to be a teacher librarian. 50% of TLs have been lost in these states. Probably one in 10 public primary schools in Melbourne have TLs. Queensland appoints TLs but does not require them to be in the library. Seven high schools on the Gold Coast now do not have TLs. In South Australia in 2002, apart from those very small schools with no teacher librarian entitlement, a third of school libraries around the state were understaffed and/or staffed with unqualified personnel. By 2008, 28% of primary schools in SA had no TLs.

Principals are being forced through devolved staffing and inadequate budgets to downgrade staff in school libraries, often to clerical positions. This is part of a global trend toward local school management.

Meanwhile, since the early 70s New South Wales primary schools have been staffed with trained teacher librarians. While too often used for teacher relief planning time, they nevertheless are professionally trained in collection management, literacy support, leadership, collaborative teaching and other unique TL professional skills, and sponsored in this by the state government.

If we are talking about equity, I know we agree that ALL Australian students deserve professional school library services run by professionally trained TLs.

In October 2009, The Hub launched an online petition to the then Minister of Education, Julia Gillard, for a federal review. The petition with 1600 signatures was presented through federal MP, Sharon Bird, Chair of the House Education Committee in November. (As of August 2010 it had over 2600 signatures.) In March of this year, Sharon was able to report that Julia Gillard had asked for a House Inquiry into School Libraries and Teacher Librarians. The teacher librarian community was jubilant, though somewhat astonished to learn we had 5 weeks to make submissions!

Nevertheless, we met the challenge and using our extensive networks, 382 submissions were received by the Inquiry committee.

Hearings have now been held in every capital city. The Australian School Library Association has been a witness at two hearings and actively followed the others.

The Committee has done its homework and asked the hard questions. Transcripts and submissions are available via <http://www.apl.gov.au/house/committee/edt/schoollibraries/index.htm>. We would like to thank members of the international school library community for their support and submissions to this inquiry.

We hope their recommendations will include, but not be limited to:

- The collection of data nationally on school library staffing, funding and scheduling.

- National standards for school libraries
- Funding to support literacy and the National Curriculum through school libraries.
- A clearinghouse of research to guide principals and education authorities in best practice for excellence in school libraries.
- Support for an increased number of teacher librarian training positions in university programs.
- The development of a new funding model to ensure that there is a teacher librarian in every school

Now that the new government is formed, we are hopeful that a report with recommendations will be tabled in Parliament late this year. The Hub, ASLA and all supporters of quality school libraries will continue to lobby for action on its recommendations.

Even without the report, significant progress has been made through the holding of the inquiry. The media knows about TEACHER librarians, now! ASLA, the CBCA, The Hub and others have succeeded in getting excellent articles into the nation's papers. More principals are starting to look at the research. Parents are asking why their school doesn't have a TL. Universities are looking at how to extend their programs. And politicians are starting to understand what can be done at all levels to improve student literacy and learning through school libraries. We have a long way to go, but it is a vital start.

The Petition can be found at <http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/a-qualified-teacher-librarian-in-every-school.html> The Hub: Campaign for Quality School Libraries in Australia is located at <http://hubinfo.wordpress.com/>



From left to right: Leonie Paatsch (The Hub), Julie Collins (MP), Sharon Bird (Cttee Chair), Georgia Phillips and Sharon McGuinness (The Hub) at Sydney hearing April 28 2010.