Good morning everyone. My name is Alexia Hudson-Ward and I am serving as your moderator today for what promises to be a richly engaging discussion on school libraries at risk.

Over the past ten years, K-12 public school libraries within Pennsylvania’s counties have been gradually reduced in size and staffing composition or completely eliminated. The impact of these school library reductions and eliminations are most visible in our state’s two largest cities – Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Within Philadelphia (the nation’s eighth largest school district), the librarian to student ratio is 1 to 8,757 (Lash, 2012). In Pittsburgh (home to 25,906 public school students), the librarian to student ratio is 1 to 1,233 (Kachel & Lance, 2013).

The rationale for dissolving school libraries in these cities has been largely financial. Both Philadelphia and Pittsburgh suffer from an eroding tax base, crumbling and aged school facilities and a highly politicized environment that require school districts to demonstrate return on investment (ROI) metrics. As a consequence, school libraries were deemed expendable by those in control of school district budgets (Pennsylvania Education Law Center, 2012). The two cities eliminating their school libraries appear to have had a ripple effect across our state.

Widely held beliefs among state politicians and educational consultants were that students’ library and research needs could be adequately served through online search engines and in the cities’ public libraries (Pennsylvania Education Law Center, 2012). These beliefs did not take into account findings from the school library research literature that provide evidence of how school librarians positively impact long term student success (Strong, 2013; Lance & Hofschire, 2013; Lance & Schwartz, 2012; Twomey, 2007; Smalley, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2004; Oberg, 2001; Lance, Rodney, & Hamilton-Pennell 2000).
Several school library impact studies concur that the dissolving of school libraries has negatively affected Pennsylvania’s students, leaving many of them inadequately prepared with the necessary information literacy skills to succeed in college and in life (Lance & Schwartz, 2012). The lack of college level preparedness of Pennsylvania’s students is most evident from internal studies and anecdotal data from large university library systems across the country including Penn State University Libraries. Concurrent to the timeframe of massive school library elimination in Pennsylvania, many of our Commonwealth’s librarians have found themselves feverishly attempting to solve for information literacy skill deficits with college students.

Nearly forty percent of Pennsylvania high school students required remediation in reading and comprehension before taking college level courses in 2009. Many of these students reported that they were not required to complete a research paper nor take a library skills course in high school. (Lance & Schwartz, 2012; Pennsylvania – Complete College America.org, 2011; Pennsylvania Remediation Report, 2009).

Conversely, students who have had some interaction with a school librarian performed above the satisfactory level on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) in reading and writing (Curry & Schwartz, 2012). Advanced scores in reading and writing on the PSSA is one determinant of student success at the post-secondary level (Kachel, 2013; Lance & Schwartz, 2012; Pennsylvania Remediation Report, 2009; Pennsylvania School Library Study, 2011; Pennsylvania State Board of Education, 2011). Consequently, it is essential to the state’s socio-economic livelihood to ensure that all Pennsylvania students have access to quality school libraries managed by certified school librarians. And although our state legislators passed a bill (HR 987) in 2010, there is regression – not progress - on this challenging issue.
Today’s issue and action based discussion – features some of our field’s leading minds and experts on this topic. Our goal today – which requires your participation as well - is for us to engage in a solution based dialogue on what can and should happen to address the crisis of the elimination of school libraries in our state.

Paula Gilbert is the Director of Youth Services for the York County Library System. As a children’s librarian for more than thirty two years in York, Mrs. Gilbert has worked to promote reading and literature to all children through partnerships with schools and community organizations. The Library views partnerships as an important way to build support for schools as funding locally and at the state level decreases. Our collaboration with the School District of the City of York, York Academy Regional Charter School and other schools in our area has given us the opportunity to provide alternatives to the shortfalls that schools are experiencing.

National Board Certified high school librarian, Michael Nailor currently serves as President of the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association. He currently a full-time member of the faculty of the Education Department of Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove where he is the Director of the Teacher Intern Program. His current teaching interests are Instructional Design and Technology in Education.

Michael was a high school English teacher, a program administrator and staff development specialist, and a high school librarian in the public schools of north central Pennsylvania before coming to Susquehanna University. He was also a high school speech and debate coach for 40 years. He served on the board of his local public library for over 25 years. He is active in local, regional and international humanitarian programs through Rotary International.
Jim Neal is the Vice President for Information Services and University Librarian at Columbia University, providing leadership for university academic computing and a system of twenty-two libraries. His responsibilities include the Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning, the Center for Digital Research and Scholarship, the Copyright Advisory Office, and the Center for Human Rights Documentation and Research. Previously, he served as the Dean of University Libraries at Indiana University and Johns Hopkins University, and held administrative positions in the libraries at Penn State, Notre Dame, and the City University of New York.

Neal is a member of the OCLC Board of Trustees, serves on the Council and Executive Board of the American Library Association, and recently completed a three-year term as ALA Treasurer. He has served as President of the Association of Research Libraries, Chair of the Research Libraries Group (RLG), and Chair of the National Information Standards Organization (NISO). He is also on the Boards of the Freedom to Read Foundation and the Digital Preservation Network. Jim has also participated on numerous international, national, and state professional committees, is an active member of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), and is the recipient of several prestigious awards including ALA’s Hugh Atkinson Memorial Award in 2007 and the Melvil Dewey Medal Award in 2009. And in 2010, he received the honorary Doctor of Laws degree from the University of Alberta.

Please join me in welcoming each of our panelists. The panelists will provide their opening remarks and then I have a few questions to pose to get our conversation started. After that, the floor will be opened to the audience for comments and questions [italics bold indicate questions I will ask; other questions submitted will be asked if audience is quiet/time allows]
How can/should school and academic libraries and librarians productively work together to address the challenges of the erosion and disappearance of school library programs?

What do you believe to be the consequences for students in areas of Pennsylvania that are not served by either a school or public library?

What are the wider economic and social implications for the US in the erosion and disappearance of school library programs? Does the lack of school library programs pose an equity issue for our society?

Closing Remarks:

Many thanks to Paula Gilbert, Michael Nailor, and Jim Neal for their time and participation in today’s session. We hope that you found this discussion worthwhile. There are several files related to this session available to you through the PaLA conference attendee site including my remarks with resources included for your reference, the full 178 page Pennsylvania School Library Project research study, a review of all of the school impact studies conducted across the US with associated resources, the Mansfield University School Libraries report, and the AASL infographic you’ve seen displayed during the session.
RESOURCES


