



Public and School Libraries in Decline: When We Need Them

Libraries are not antiquated and are vital for communities and schools! An informed citizenry is the foundation of a democratic society.

Children use libraries.

Surveys done in the United States and the United Kingdom show that children get a surprisingly large percentage of their books from libraries. When asked where they got the book they were reading now, between 30 percent and 99 percent of the children interviewed mentioned some kind of library.¹

The school library is especially important as a source of books. A survey of 40,000 teachers conducted by Scholastic, Inc., and the Gates Foundation² included the following question: "Where do your students get books for their independent reading most often? Select all that apply." The school library was the clear winner. According to the teachers, 83 percent of all students said they got books from the school library, compared to 38 percent from public libraries and 20 percent from retailers. For high school students, 80 percent got books from the school library, compared to 46 percent from public libraries and 35 percent from retailers.

Adults use libraries.

According to the January 2011 Harris Poll of over 1000 adults,³ an astounding 58 percent said that they had a library card, and 62 percent said they had visited a public library in person during the last year; 23 percent had visited the library more than ten times. Nearly all of those interviewed (94 percent) agreed with this statement: "Because it provides free access to materials and resources, the public library plays an important role in giving everyone a chance to succeed," and 79 percent agreed that "my public library deserves more funding."

Better libraries mean better reading.

Studies show that higher quality school and public libraries correlate with higher scores on reading tests

done at the US state level,⁴ at the national level,⁵ and at the international level.⁶ Aspects of school library quality relate to reading achievement include the size of the collection, the presence of a credentialed librarian, and overall staffing.⁷

All this makes sense. There is consistent evidence showing that when children have access to books, they read them, and when they read a lot, all aspects of literacy improve.⁸

High levels of poverty mean little access to books.

Study after study reveals that children of poverty have very little access to books at home and in their communities—fewer bookstores and fewer, less well-stocked public libraries that are open fewer hours.⁹ Tragically, school is not helping. Schools in high-poverty areas have inferior school libraries and inferior classroom libraries.¹⁰ Children of poverty are blocked from access to books everywhere in their lives. Lack of access to books is a major reason why children of poverty consistently do poorly on reading tests.

Access to books appears to offset the impact of poverty.

A number of studies have appeared in the last few years indicating that access to books not only has a positive effect on reading achievement, but also that the positive impact of access is as large as the negative impact of poverty.¹¹ This suggests that a good library can offset the effects of poverty on reading achievement.

Public library funding has declined.

In the years 2008–2010, more than half the states that responded to a survey from the American Library Association reported a decrease in funding.¹² A *Library Journal* survey published in January 2011 revealed similar findings. In cities with populations above one million, 86 percent of public librarians responding reported budget cuts.¹³

School library funding has declined.

The American Library Association reported that school library funding is declining and the decline is more severe in places where school libraries are needed the most—in high-poverty areas. Overall, school expenditures on information resources from 2009 to 2010 decreased 9.4 percent, but in high-poverty areas, the decrease was 25 percent.¹⁴

The results of this decrease have been felt in books and periodicals collection sizes. The overall decline in number of books was 2.6 percent, but in high poverty areas it was 4 percent.¹⁵ The overall decline in periodical subscriptions was 11 percent, but in high poverty areas it was 22 percent.¹⁶

The US Department of Education recently eliminated the Literacy through School Libraries grant, which provides about \$20 million per year to school libraries in high poverty areas.¹⁷

Why we still need books and libraries

Only a small percentage of information contained in print is on the Internet¹⁸. The Web is not a substitute for libraries.

A popular argument these days is that computers and the Internet will eliminate the need for traditional libraries filled with books and magazines. But for “Kindle-ization” to take over libraries, or even be a significant threat, the costs must go down enormously. E-book readers such as the Kindle cost at least \$100, and individual e-books cost around \$10.

The high cost of e-readers and e-books makes it difficult for libraries to lend them out. At this time, only 6 percent of school libraries circulate books on e-book readers, and one publisher (HarperCollins) has announced limits on how many times an e-book can be checked out from a library.¹⁹ E-book ownership is much higher among the affluent. According to a recent report, 12 percent of those earning \$75,000 or more owned e-books, but only 3 percent of those earning less than \$30,000 did.²⁰

Conclusions

All of language education is in crisis because of the decline of libraries. We now know that libraries are utilized, that they contribute powerfully to literacy development, and have the potential of closing the gap between children from high and low-income families in reading achievement.

Yet library funding is declining, and the situation is the most serious in high-poverty areas. Library funding should be expanded, not cut.

Democratic societies need libraries.²¹

The time has come for organizations such as NCTE to campaign vigorously to strengthen public and school libraries.

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