School Library Commission finds inequities in Commonwealth’s schools

Boston MA -- Special Commission on School Library Services in Massachusetts

Representative Sean Garballey, Chairman

For Immediate Release
March 2018

Boston MA: A special legislative commission charged with examining the status of school library programs in Massachusetts public schools released a report this month noting significant inequities in school library staffing, access to library resources, technology and funding in the Commonwealth’s schools. Based on these findings, the Commission provided legislators with a comprehensive set of recommendations and a long-term plan for achieving them.

The Commission, chaired by Representative Sean Garballey, was established following the passage of Bill S.1906 in 2013. This legislation included eleven data points for investigation to measure the status of school library programs. The Commission included members of the library and educational fields in Massachusetts, including those with extensive knowledge of school library programs. The Commissioners authorized an academic study conducted in concert with The Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries (CISSL) at Rutgers University and distributed by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to examine the Commonwealth’s school library programs. The research was conducted by two respected academic research experts in the library and information science field, Dr. Carol A. Gordon and Dr. Robin Cicchetti. Dr. Gordon is a retired Associate Professor in the Department of Library and Information Science at CISSL, and Dr. Cicchetti is the Head Librarian at Concord-Carlisle Regional High School in Massachusetts.
The Commission’s findings published as *The Massachusetts School Library Study: Equity and Access for Students in the Commonwealth*, included:

- **A lack of equity in school staffing**, with one in five schools in Massachusetts having no licensed school librarian, and 43% of schools have no library or technology director providing oversight of school library programs. In the majority of public schools, there is no library support staff, leaving librarians to perform clerical duties such as checking in books instead of teaching students. No one at DESE is charged with overseeing the Commonwealth’s school library programs, and there are currently no comprehensive data regarding the number of schools with licensed school librarians.

- **Limited access to school libraries in many schools.** Libraries, particularly in urban districts, are frequently closed, often to provide spaces for testing or due to lack of adequate staffing. Many schools have a “fixed schedule” program where students can access the library just once a week, not when they need research materials or a new book to read.

- **Inequities in access to digital information and technology** are seen in urban districts compared to their rural and suburban counterparts. Researchers also found that school libraries in rural and urban districts had limited access to computers compared to suburban districts, and 40% of school libraries reported poor internet access. The Commission also found that while the Massachusetts Library System (MLS) provides a host of subsidized electronic resources that schools can access, not all districts take advantage of them. For example, one-third of schools reported not using online academic resources, such as encyclopedias, periodicals, and newspapers provided by MLS. Two-thirds of school districts do not participate in inter-library loan programs, and 71% of schools did not take advantage of heavily subsidized e-books available through the MLS Commonwealth e-book collection. Membership in the Massachusetts Library System requires the presence of a licensed school librarian, and 20% of districts reporting did not belong to the MLS. Researchers also noted that school
librarians are well-positioned to provide professional development on information literacy, such as using digital resources or conducting effective internet searches, to teachers and administrators. However, this requires school librarians to receive continual professional training, and this is not widely offered.

- **A lack of uniform funding and budgeting sources for school libraries** is seen across the Commonwealth, and researchers found that urban school libraries receive significantly lower funding allocated than suburban libraries. Several librarians reported receiving no funding for their library programs, and use donations, fundraisers, and personal funds to add materials to the library collection. Many districts are using antiquated audiovisual materials, such as audiocassettes and VHS tapes, while students in well-supported districts are using audio and video streaming sources. Overall, however, the Commission learned that funding for school library resources in most districts is not adequate to provide newer materials or technologies.

- **Library instruction and help is not consistent across school districts.** School librarians are trained to provide instruction in information literacy and research, however, researchers reported wide variation in the number of classes taught in each school, the grade levels taught, and the ability of school librarians to collaborate with teachers to plan research and literacy projects. In some districts, librarians report covering multiple schools, managing study halls, having space closed for testing, and numerous other factors that interfere with their ability to teach. Many librarians participating in the study noted that having a supportive administrator was key in providing strong instruction, but in many districts, the instructional role of the school librarian was not well-supported.

In a letter to the Legislature, the Commission noted that DESE recently revised its educational frameworks in ways that indicate the importance of the skills and resources that are provided by strong school library programs. These standards focus on the need for strong print literacy skills for all students beginning in the early grades, as well
as building technology capacity for all students. Information literacy skills, the ability to find, evaluate and use information are now explicitly in the Digital Literacy and Computer Science Frameworks adopted by DESE in 2016.

The Commission provided legislators with a series of recommendations for improving equity in Massachusetts public schools, and provided a comprehensive plan and timeline for their implementation. In a letter to the Massachusetts Legislature, the Commissioners urged legislators to accept their recommendations and work with DESE to ensure their implementation. The Commission recommendations include:

**Recommendation 1.0. Improve Access to School Libraries and School Librarians**
- **Recommendation 1A.** Every public school in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has a school library and a certified school librarian.
- **Recommendation 1B.** Establish the position and responsibilities of the School Library Curriculum Specialist at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
- **Recommendation 1C.** Support a culture of inquiry in schools that sustains inquiry and resource-based learning, collaborative teaching, and the integration of digital technology to improve access for all students.

**Recommendation 2.0. Improve Access to Information Resources in School Libraries:**

*Information Resources* are highly dependent on digital *Information Technology* that facilitates access. Without adequate infrastructure and devices students cannot access the information and support they need to develop digital literacy, ethics, and safety.

- **Recommendation 2A.** Increase access to print resources in school libraries.
- **Recommendation 2B.** Increase access to electronic resources in school libraries.

**Recommendation 3.0. Improve Access to Information Technology:**

*Professional Development* for the licensed school librarians emerged as a strong trend in the data. It is critical that licensed librarians are hired to manage the
Commonwealth’s school libraries. Since the library and information science field is dynamic, school librarians need continuing and high quality professional development to deliver high quality, relevant instruction and help to students and ongoing, just-enough-just-in-time training for teachers and administrators.

- **Recommendation 3A.** Improve access to internet and digital devices in school libraries.
- **Recommendation 3B.** Increase access to Information Technology through staffing.

**Recommendation 4.0. Improve Access to Library Instruction and Help**

- **Recommendation 4A.** Promote best instructional practices in the school library.

**Recommendation 5.0. Improve Access to Funding:**

Funding cuts across all the dimensions of school librarianship. Guidelines for Budget Allocation and Expenditure should be developed to support Recommendations 1.0, 2.0, 3.0, and 4.0.

*The Massachusetts School Library Study: Equity and Access for Students in the Commonwealth* is available through the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners at [https://mblc.state.ma.us/school-libraries-study/](https://mblc.state.ma.us/school-libraries-study/)