School Libraries matter—But not all students have what they need

The Special Commission on School Library Services in Massachusetts submitted its findings in February 2018 with recommendations to improve equity of access to school library services in its report: The Massachusetts School Library Study: Equity and Access for Students in the Commonwealth to the Legislature’s Joint Committee on Education. The Commission, which included educators, legislators, librarians, and members of the business community, found that Massachusetts public school students do not have equity when it comes to their school library programs.

- **Access to a school library and a school librarian benefits every student, but**
  - There is no Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) staff member charged with overseeing school library programs and no data is collected regularly regarding the number of schools with libraries or the number of schools with licensed school librarians in Massachusetts public schools.
  - One in five schools have no licensed school librarian.
  - The majority of school libraries have no support staff. Librarians are performing clerical work, when they could be teaching students.
  - Fewer than half of Massachusetts school districts have a library or technology director.
  - School libraries, often in urban schools, are frequently closed to provide testing or due to lack of staff.

- **Access to information from digital resources and technology benefits every student, but**
  - Urban school districts have significantly less access to information technology compared to rural and suburban districts. This includes access to state-funded online resources.
  - Many districts have limited access to computers in the school library and poor internet access, and this is more common in urban and rural districts.

The Massachusetts School Library Association (MSLA), the professional organization for Massachusetts school library teachers, calls for action to implement the recommendations to improve equity of access to students in Massachusetts as recommended by the Special Commission.

The most important first steps:

1. **Creating a position at the DESE to oversee implementation of the Special Commission’s recommendations**, to work with stakeholders to recommend appropriate language in possible Chapter 70 revisions and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) documents and funding requests, and to act as a liaison between DESE, school librarians, the library community and other stakeholders.

2. **Conducting a thorough, detailed census of public school library programs** to determine exactly where the inequities lie with regard to student access to a school library, librarians and staffing, funding, information technology, physical/electronic resources, and other factors related to school library services in the Commonwealth.

MSLA will co-sponsor and be represented and many of its members will attend Massachusetts Library Legislative Day on March 5, 2019 at the State House in Boston. We hope you will join us and visit the showcase which will include school library exhibits.

Further information on the Special Commission’s report is available at: https://libguides.salemstate.edu/MASchoolLibraryResearchProject

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