

Michigan Reading Association
Statement in Support of School Libraries and School Librarians

*Adopted by the Michigan Reading Association Board of Directors
October 22, 2016*

In pursuit of its mission to empower all Michigan students and educators through literacy, the Michigan Reading Association (MRA) is committed to improving literacy access and achievement across our state. No educator is more uniquely placed to support achievement of these intertwined goals of access and achievement than the school librarian. Research has consistently demonstrated that the presence of a school library staffed by a full-time, certified school librarian has positive schoolwide effects on literacy achievement across all demographics (Scholastic Library Publishing Company, 2016).

A 2003 study conducted by the Library of Michigan found a 35 percent difference in the average percentage of fourth graders scoring proficient or above on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program between schools that had qualified librarians and schools without qualified librarians. Additionally, there were statistically significant positive impacts on reading achievement in grades 7 and 11 regardless of school or community conditions (Rodney, Lance & Hamilton-Pennell, 2003).

Since 2003, Michigan students' access to appropriately staffed school libraries has fallen along with literacy achievement. The number of qualified school librarians employed in Michigan schools has declined by nearly two-thirds over the past decade resulting in fewer than 500 qualified school librarians employed to serve over 1.5 million students during the 2015-2016 academic year (Kottke, 2016). In this same period, Michigan was one of only five states to show negative improvement in fourth grade literacy achievement as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Should current trends continue unabated, Michigan is projected to rank 48th in the country by 2030 (The Education Trust - Midwest, 2016).

The value of a school library does not reside simply in its status as an access point for print and digital texts. An effective school library is a classroom where students learn valuable information literacy skills that support their development toward career and college readiness. The most critical component of an effective school library is a full-time, certified school librarian.

According to recent testimony before the Pennsylvania House Education Committee, qualified school librarians are able to not only support classroom teachers in addressing 134 of Pennsylvania's academic standards (which are nearly identical to Michigan's standards), they have the professional expertise and specialized knowledge to provide instruction aligned to 44 of those standards alone (House of Representatives Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2016). Qualified school librarians are not only curators and circulators of resources; they are teachers.

Given the current decline in access to school and public libraries, bookstores, and other sources of print, "book deserts" have emerged in many of Michigan's most economically challenged communities (Wong, 2016). As its 2015-2016 International Project, MRA supported the Little Free Library initiative to increase literacy access in underserved areas of our state and decrease the spread of book deserts (Rivard, 2016). While this is a first step, Little Free Libraries cannot supplant school libraries.

We must commit to providing access to quality libraries in our schools and communities so that regardless of age or demographics, every student can benefit. It is for this reason that the Michigan Reading Association supports Strategy 2.7(a) of Michigan's Top 10 in 10 Years initiative which strives to "[e]nsure that all students have access to libraries and media centers within their school, district, and/or community [and] that such resources are appropriately staffed to ensure system integrity" (Michigan Department of Education, 2016, p. 9). Additionally, the Every Student Succeeds Act provides several golden opportunities to reverse Michigan's downward trends in school library access and staffing (Vercelletto, 2015).

MRA invites educators and policymakers to consider a number of possibilities to empower Michigan through increased literacy access and achievement. As part of the state aid budget, we urge policymakers to include funding for all libraries, particularly school libraries and the hiring of qualified school librarians. We encourage districts to reconsider the elimination of school libraries and qualified librarians in their annual budgets. By working together, we can make a positive, lifelong impact on literacy across our great state.

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