

Charles Dabritz, Vermont School Library Association

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The Vermont School Library Association offers the following comments to the Working Group on the Status of Libraries's May 2023 meeting on Library Structures and Organizations in Vermont.

The Vermont School Library Association (VSLA) is the professional organization for Vermont School Librarians. Its members include current and retired school librarians, as well as affiliated individuals who support Vermont school libraries. Current membership is around 200. The VSLA is a state affiliate of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA). Our members pay yearly dues of \$15-\$35 on a sliding scale based on their professional salary. Often school librarians are the only professionals in that role in their schools or even their districts. VSLA is critical for mentoring and supporting school librarians in all aspects of their work. The yearly dues support our advocacy, leadership and professional development efforts for Vermont school librarians. The VSLA supports members in a number of ways, these include, but are not limited to:

- Advocating for school libraries with the Agency of Education
- Providing mentors for newly hired school librarians.
- Providing professional development and conferences for teacher librarians
- Supporting members around issues of intellectual freedom, including book challenges
- Advocating for and supporting members facing elimination of library positions
- Advocating for library related issues on a national level
- Connecting and working in partnership with other state education advocacy groups such as VITA-Learn and Vermont Humanities Council.
- Connecting and supporting Vermont school librarians via a robust listserv

What is going well?

Despite the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic upon public education, the VSLA has had several important successes the past few academic school years.

- Recognizing the unique role that school librarians play in each school, and the lack of a formal program to support new librarians in our state, the Vermont School Library Association (VSLA) and Vermont NEA applied for and received a three year \$157,00.00 Great Public Schools Grant funded by the NEA (2020-2023). The "Mentoring School Librarians Matters" grant was awarded to develop a statewide network of trained school librarian mentors who would be available to support new librarians hired in Vermont schools, preK-12. Over the past three years 46 experienced librarians have been trained as mentors and 67 novice school librarians have been mentored through their first year. In March of 2023, VSLA and VTNEA hosted Dr. Christopher Johnson, a Senior Grant Specialist from the National Office of NEA. Dr. Johnson recognized the "Mentoring Matters" grant as exemplary, the highest honors possible for awardees. With the creation of a new Mentoring Coordinator position the VSLA plans to

sustain the work of this grant and offer formal mentoring as part of our statewide advocacy work.

- The VSLA worked in partnership with the Vermont School Boards Association (VSBA) to update model school board policy around materials selection and move the updated policy from a policy to consider to a recommended policy. This collaborative effort took several years to complete, ending with formal adoption of Model Policy D22 in May of 2022. The new policy states that it exists, "...to ensure that the District provides access to a diverse library collection, that supports students in the curriculum, their personal research, and recreational reading, and that sustains students' First Amendment Rights to access information and to read freely."¹
- Successful partnerships between the VSLA and the Vermont Humanities Council have brought some of the biggest names in YA literature to our state to meet with and talk to our students both in person and virtually. Visiting authors since 2018 have included: John Lewis, Angie Thomas, Sarah Henstra, Andrew Aydin, and Jason Reynolds. Most of these events involved the VSLA working to empower small groups of students who interviewed the visiting authors.
- Continued partnerships with our public library colleagues in the Vermont Library Association. Including hosting a joint, in person, Vermont Library Conference in April, 2023.

What are your organization's pinch points?

Some challenges facing the Vermont school library community include:

- While the requirement for librarians in schools is included in the state Educational Quality Standards, there have been times when these requirements are not met by local school districts - meaning that there is either no certified school librarian available or inadequate staffing.
- Local and state funding for schools has had significant staffing impacts. From 2007-08 to 2018-19 (the most recent AOE data available), school library support staff FTE statewide decreased from 136 to 71, a decrease of ~47%. Our school librarians are being asked to do more work with less support than in the past.
- Access to school library materials and staffing is not equal across the state. There are great discrepancies in VSLA member salaries and library budgets. A recent survey of VSLA members found, "On average, our respondents from small, rural, and/or economically disadvantaged schools report making less money, working with smaller library budgets, having more assigned duties outside the library, having a less flexible library schedule, living with lower household incomes, and being more likely to have more than one job."²
- Vermont school libraries are also not immune to the pressures facing public education nationally. As it has become politically advantageous to attack libraries, we have seen a rise in informal book challenges in Vermont schools, and anticipate this continuing in the future.

¹ VSBA Model Policy Manual <https://www.vtvsba.org/copy-of-model-policy-manual>

² VSLA Identity and Professional Values Audit: Executive Summary
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iXnswsEUQfHAZjaNlIxj5D-2kMwuCJO0/view?usp=sharing>

- The demographics of Vermont school librarians reflect those of the state as a whole. We recognize a need to recruit and support a more diverse teacher workforce.

What do you see on the horizon for your organization in the next 10 years?

- The VSLA continues to advocate for the statewide adoption of our National AASL Standards for Learners. We are currently working with the AoE on the steps for formal adoption.
- With large numbers of teacher turnover we foresee a continued importance of providing experienced mentorship to new librarians.
- As technology continues to drive changes in both education and our society at large, the need for Information literacy will become increasingly important. This need will begin at the earliest levels of education as we strive to graduate informationally literate students who know how to navigate a world increasingly filled with AI and human generated disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. We believe that this can best be accomplished by embedding information literacy within all parts of our K-12 system and having our school librarians work in partnership with other K-12 educators. VSLA hopes to be at the forefront of state initiatives to address these needs.
- An increase in challenges to our student’s intellectual freedom via book challenges and as a result an increase in the organizational support we provide to members around the state.
- Providing more support for members around advocating for staffing positions, adequate budgets, and library resources.
- A continued emphasis on working together to support the success of Vermont students.
- An investment in transforming school libraries in ways that enhance social connections and public space design to counterbalance the epidemic of loneliness and isolation facing our youth.

What improvements in statewide structures would help the libraries and library staff your organization supports? (Please note that this question is *not* limited to asks of the Department!)

- Increased communication/cooperation between AoE and DoL to support school librarians better. This could be achieved with:
 - The restoration of a School Library Media Consultant position (removed in 2003), or a new position created within the AoE that can lead and support library media educational initiatives including information literacy.
- Clear guidelines and consequences from AoE on what happens if a school district is not following the EQS staffing levels for school libraries.
- It would be great if the state took a larger role in supporting teacher mentoring by creating and providing training for mentors across academic disciplines - keeping in mind that some things are universal while other needs are unique to each discipline. This is a partnership that the VSLA would welcome.
- Clear ways for Vermont school librarians to support and give input on DoL initiatives that impact schools, such as Vermont Online Library resources.

- Updates and support from DoL around how to access, use, and benefit from DoL initiatives, such as the MHEC program, Vermont Online Library, movie licensing and other shared resources for schools. This can impact our new librarians and other new school staff who have access to these programs and discounts but may not know how to access them.

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