

Background:

For the past 15 years, three successive governments have declared their commitment to improve student literacy rates in Ontario as a cornerstone of their education policy. Increasingly, resources have been devoted to standardized testing in order to attempt to measure literacy outcomes. Special literacy programs have been initiated to improve results.

Ironically, during this same period, schools in the province have seen a marked reduction of professional library staff. School library hours have declined steadily. Collections have diminished. The gap between 'have' and 'have not' schools has widened. This is in spite of educational research, both internationally and provincially, which clearly demonstrates that well-funded and appropriately staffed school libraries are essential elements of reading, informational literacy and the key to improving student achievement.

Here are just a few findings from recent research.

For student achievement, after poverty, "The next strongest and most consistent factor is the quality of the school library program."

—Keith Curry Lance
Author of *Libraries and Student Achievement*, 2004

"This study [*School Libraries and Student Achievement in Ontario, 2006*] provides substantial evidence linking the presence of trained library staff to improved student achievement." Furthermore, "The enjoyment of reading is linked to the presence of teacher-librarians," and the OECD PISA studies "have documented an association between reading enjoyment and student achievement."

Ontario Library Association (OLA)/
Queen's/People for Education Report 2006

Despite these findings, libraries in Ontario schools continue to have a diminishing capacity.

Clearly a challenge for our schools is to ensure equity of access for all students, regardless of their school or region. The support of school libraries throughout the province, however, varies widely. For instance, according to People for Education's 2006 Secondary Tracking Report, 58 percent of our northern schools



have no teacher-librarians, compared to 12 percent in Toronto. The report also shows that the number of hours secondary school libraries are open and staffed by a teacher librarian has declined from 27 hours in 2002/03 to only 21 hours per week in 2006." This again varies across the province and from school to school. Some schools have no scheduled hours of library operation; others are open full time. Often the most underserved schools are outside of urban centres. Unfortunately, community public libraries in these same communities



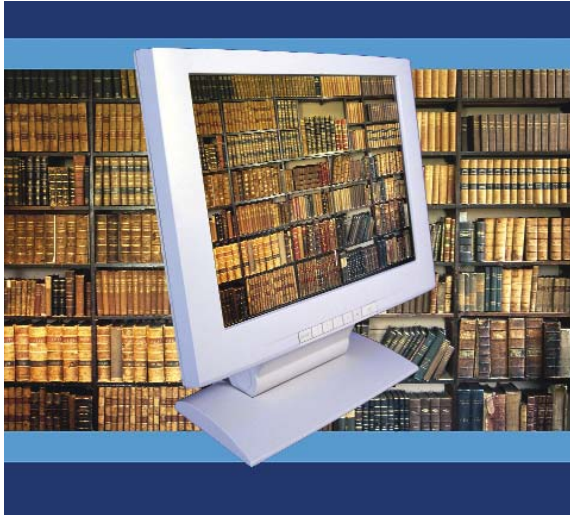
also have limited hours and often limited resources.

People for Education's 2005 Secondary Tracking Report showed just as dramatic a gap exists in school library collections and resources. In three years the average collection has declined by 20 percent. Provincially, school libraries that had an

average of 20 books per student in 2002, had only 17 in 2005. Most damning from an equity perspective is that the bottom 10 percent of schools had six or fewer books per student, whereas the top 10 percent had as many as 32 books per student. As schools come to rely ever increasingly on fundraising and less on sustained, operational funding, this gap will only increase.

The one-time library reinvestment grants from the Ministry in the past two years has attempted to address this inequity.





Clearly, a long-term solution is needed to address the severe gap between those school libraries that have and those that have not.

It has been a difficult and challenging period for school library staff. Operating funds have steadily declined. Too often staffing has been reduced and in some instances, eliminated. Although the previous government took no overt steps to diminish school library capacity, their enveloped funding, however, made it difficult for boards to maintain school libraries. Library staff, like student services staff, were outside the classroom teacher designated envelope and were therefore left vulnerable.

Only a few brave boards defied this initiative. For nearly a decade, Ministry documents were silent, never mentioning school libraries or staff. Faced with difficult choices, most boards abandoned or severely reduced the capacity of their school libraries.

Thankfully, the current government has begun to recognize the vital role of teacher librarians and library technicians. Ministry curriculum documents are once again including a recognition of the school library and library staff. This important reaffirmation of school libraries as a vital component of our students' success is reassuring. We now need, however, sustained funding and a commitment to well staffed and well stocked libraries, in order to address the systemic inequities that are all too evident across the province. This investment will also help to improve our students' achievement and enhance literacy levels.

We at the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation look forward to a commitment by this government to reinvest in this vital but neglected asset, our school libraries.

For further information contact Doug Little, Executive Assistant
416-751-8300 or 1-800-267-7867
littled@osstf.on.ca



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