

The School Library in the 21st Century

An Agenda for Change



POLICY STATEMENT



School Library Association
in the Republic of Ireland

School Library Association

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

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The School Library Association (Republic of Ireland) (hereafter referred to as SLARI) offers support and information to all those involved in school libraries at both primary and post-primary level

SLARI believes there is an urgent need for the establishment of a comprehensive system of school libraries throughout the country, in recognition of the following:

- the necessity for all students and teachers to have access to a wide range of information sources in an increasingly resource-based system of education
- *the need to equip students for full participation in the rapidly changing "knowledge society"*
- the importance of developing students' information literacy or information handling skills
- *the vital role of the school library in encouraging young people to develop good reading habits*

We acknowledge and welcome developments which have taken place over the last six years. These developments, listed below, indicate for the first time some official recognition of the role of school libraries:

- Library "posts of responsibility" have been created in both primary and post-primary schools
- As part of the National Reading Initiative, the then Minister for Education & Science, Mícheál Martin, provided grants for school library resources to primary and post-primary schools, in December 1998 and in December 1999
- The publication by the Library Association of Ireland of "Library File: making a success of the school library" in 1999 was also funded by the Department of Education & Science as part of the National Reading Initiative
- The DES has also funded the "Junior Certificate School Programme Demonstration Library Project", a 3-year research project which has provided high quality school libraries in eleven disadvantaged schools since September 2002.

Much however remains to be done. "Once-off" grants are no substitutes for realistic and regular funding; and, until there is official provision for the employment of qualified librarians to serve all schools within the education system, school libraries will be unable to properly fulfil the central and crucial role which they have the potential to occupy within that system.

The recent independent research report, "The Borrowers at School: a Report on Primary School Libraries" (Library Association of Ireland, 2002) made some very welcome recommendations, most notably advocating that the Department of Education & Science should be statutorily obliged to provide a library service in all primary schools. We support the recommendations in this report.

STATUTORY RECOGNITION: The Education Act of 1998 makes no reference to school libraries. SLARI calls on the government to legislate for the establishment of a nation-wide system of school libraries. This could be co-ordinated by the Department of Education & Science in conjunction with an expanded local authority Schools Library Service, to cover post-primary as well as primary education.

FINANCE

A substantial and ongoing commitment by government to the development and maintenance of primary and post-primary school libraries throughout the country is essential.

The generous book grants of 1998 and 1999 serve to highlight the need for well-funded and well-staffed libraries to house and organise these books - equally, the recent government investment in information technology for schools strengthens the case for funding the kind of school library provision which will help to ensure the effective use of this information technology.

PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The capitation grant given to each public library authority towards a Schools Library Service for primary schools buys no more than one book per year for every three or four pupils. While this was boosted in 1998 & 1999 by the book grants to school libraries, this level of funding, even if it were on an annual basis, would do little to provide suitable accommodation and shelving for these books, or the staff and equipment necessary to fully exploit the collection.

Some of the newer primary schools have been given a room for use as a library, but often owing to pressure of space this is also used for other purposes. Many primary schools have classroom libraries - while these have a valuable role in the school they should not be seen as substituting for a central library. A policy for the provision of proper library premises for all primary schools, new and old, is urgently required.

POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The situation at second level where no Schools Library Service exists is most unsatisfactory. The option available to secondary schools to use a proportion of their grant towards providing space for a school library is unrealistic in the absence of ongoing funding for a library service, and is seldom used to good effect if at all.

Today's second-level students need the support which can be offered by an effective and dynamic school library, to help them with all aspects of their development and in particular with the development of independent learning and research skills. The demands of today's post-primary school curriculum are such that each post-primary school library would require a substantial annual budget in order to fulfil its role as a central information resource.

It is remarkable that in spite of the poor state of school library provision described above, there are many boards of management, school principals, teachers, librarians and parents who through dedication, fund-raising, hard work and sheer determination have managed to provide a high quality library service in a relatively small number of schools throughout the country.

Many of these people are members of SLARI, and in acknowledging their enormous contribution we must also insist that every school pupil in this country is entitled to receive this high quality service, and that the resources necessary for such school library provision must be built into our education system.

INFORMATION LITERACY / INFORMATION HANDLING SKILLS

The teaching of information literacy (*not to be confused with "computer literacy"*) should be an essential component of any school curriculum. A school which has a well-organised library has the best chance of delivering a successful information literacy programme.

Such a programme should help students at all levels to become competent library users and independent learners. They should learn how to identify and locate sources of information; to organise, record, present and evaluate information effectively.

In line with international best practice, an information literacy programme should be devised and taught by a team which would include the school librarian and members of the teaching staff.

READING FOR LEISURE

The school library has a crucial role to play in encouraging students to develop a lifelong interest in books and reading.

A thriving fiction section should be at the heart of every school library. Other areas outside the formal curriculum, including hobbies, extra-curricular activities and aspects of personal and social development should also be catered for.

Literacy

A recent report by the OECD highlighted the link between access to books and development of literacy skills. The improvement of literacy levels was an important aim of the National Reading Initiative. Government investment in resources for school libraries would go a long way towards furthering that aim.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

SLARI considers ICT facilities to be an essential feature of any modern school library.

The Internet and information CD-ROMs have an important role to play in complementing other sources of information. Computerised library management systems should be used in school libraries to enhance information retrieval, and also for ordering, cataloguing and circulation of material.

SLARI was disappointed to note that in the report which launched "Schools IT 2000" there was no acknowledgement of the key role which school libraries could play in this area of activity (and indeed do play in a small number of schools insofar as the very limited resources at their disposal allow).

While SLARI members probably have a greater appreciation than most people of the exciting possibilities for schools offered by the "Information Age", we are also concerned about the effects of pumping considerable funds for ICT into schools which up to now have not even had the basic resource of a school library.

The computers are no doubt being put to good use for many different purposes, but while they exist in a vacuum in a school which has up to now had no policy on library and information provision, it is very unlikely that they will achieve their potential as *information* tools. *A well-stocked and well-organised school library is the best setting for facilitating access to all types of information sources, printed and electronic.*

"SCHOOL LIBRARIES ENHANCE LEARNING OUTCOMES"

The *European Network for School Libraries and Information Literacy* issued the following statement in March 2003:

"International research shows that the quality of students' learning outcomes is greatly enhanced by effective school libraries.

All learners in each country in Europe are entitled to quality school library/media centres and services.

In order to achieve this, each country in Europe, and the European Union, should adopt the principles of the IFLA*/UNESCO School Library Manifesto"

**International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions*

(The *School Library Manifesto* is available at www.ifla.org)

STAFFING

It is vital that every school, both primary and post-primary, should have access to the services of a professionally qualified librarian.

Whether these librarians are employed by the Department of Education & Science, by Schools Library Services or by individual schools, it is very important that a national policy for the recruitment, remuneration and conditions of employment of school librarians be put in place. Such a policy should of course be agreed following consultation with all interested parties, including SLARI.

The Department of Education & Science should provide relevant in-service training for any teachers who continue to hold library posts. Modules on all aspects of school librarianship, including information literacy skills and how to impart these skills, should feature in pre-service teacher education courses for primary and post-primary level.

Provision should be made for the employment of either full-time or part-time clerical staff in school libraries as required.

Support currently available

School library staff should be encouraged to join organisations such as *SLARI*, *Children's Books Ireland* and the *Youth Library Group of the Library Association of Ireland*.

Organisations such as these publish information and organise events which will help to keep librarians and teachers in touch with current developments in school librarianship and/or literature for young people. (Addresses of these and other relevant organisations are listed in Appendix 3 of *Library File*, published by the Library Association of Ireland).

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