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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**COMMITTEES**

**Education and Employment Committee**

**Report**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 24 May 2011**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

<p><b>Date</b> Tuesday, 24 May 2011  <b>Page</b> 4466  <b>Questioner</b>  <b>Speaker</b> Bird, Sharon, MP</p>	<p><b>Source</b> House  <b>Proof</b> No  <b>Responder</b>  <b>Question No.</b></p>
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**Ms BIRD** (Cunningham) (20:15): I want to take the opportunity to welcome the report *School libraries and teacher librarians in 21 st century Australia* produced by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment given that I was the chair of the former House Standing Committee on Education and Training, which originally commenced the inquiry in the previous parliament. I was very pleased that post the election the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth asked the new committee to continue with the work of the previous committee and to produce this report. I commend the chair, Amanda Rishworth, the member for Kingston, for the work that has been done and all members of the committee in following up and producing this final report. I do so in particular because the issue was originally brought to my attention as a result of an online petition that had been running amongst teacher librarians. They were particularly concerned about the fact that in the digital age, for some reason—I think we gathered a lot of evidence that is reflected in this report about why this was happening—people were coming to the view that teacher librarians were not necessary in schools, where in fact quite the opposite could well be argued to be true. With the depth, complexity and breadth of information available to young people today, they need an experienced navigator more than ever to assist them in assessing the source, the legitimacy and the value of information that they are accessing, in particular, online. It was something that, particularly as a former teacher, caught my attention. We sought a reference from the minister, the current Prime Minister, and undertook to do a study into the matter.

As previous speakers have said, the Commonwealth is not the direct employing authority, so some of the issues that particularly exercise teacher librarians around staffing formulas used in the provision of their expertise in schools are directly matters for employing authorities. In the quality agenda in terms of school leadership and digital education that the Commonwealth was involved in, there may well be some useful actions that we could take in order to provide national leadership on the issue of teacher librarians and the resourcing of school libraries. I commend the work in this report and hope that the government takes up every one of the recommendations and pursues them. The importance of this issue is reflected in a quote on page 36 of the report:

Each day we are inundated with vast amount of information [through television, radio and an immense array of online resources]. Though we may know how to find the information we need, we must also know how to evaluate it ... This new type of literacy requires competency with communication technologies, including computers and mobile devices that can help in our day-to-day decision-making.

That is a quote from President Obama's proclamation of a digital literacy awareness month in October 2009, where he was emphasising the importance for all Americans to be adept in effectively navigating the information age. I think that there is a profound argument, which is made in this report and was brought to the attention of the committee by teacher librarians across the nation, about the significance of full digital citizenship, full participation in the digital age, enabling all of our students to manage this sort of information. I think there are real threats if we do not get on top of this. Cyberbullying, as some of the previous members have talked about, is an emerging issue that is very much at the forefront of the minds of educators and parents. But, more broadly, digital citizenship is an important issue that all young people are going to have to come to terms with. There are, for example, the privacy implications of digital participation. With the posting of photographs on social websites, the exposure of personal information will exist in that environment for a lifetime. All of these conversations are occurring now.

It is important to acknowledge that the dual qualification of a teacher librarian—the teaching qualification, which helps them to understand the pedagogy, the curriculum and the developmental issues with the young people that they are working with, combined with the library qualification, which gives them the expertise in information management and assessment—is a unique combination that is invaluable in a school. We could see, when we took evidence from some of the more well-to-do private schools, that, where they had the capacity, they were investing in these resources in very significant ways. The teacher librarian leadership in their libraries was in fact part of the school leadership and was developing the schools' digital policies, digital citizenship policies and

education programs. Teacher librarians across all sectors were very keen to take up the new responsibilities and to play a greater role in their schools in this way.

There is much in this story of their involvement that should be shared. We found in some states—and it is identified in the report that a couple of states did not give evidence to the committee, although most did—that there was a very sad depletion in the numbers of teacher librarians. They were down to what you might call critical mass if you were looking at figures for the survival of a species. They were really, really low numbers. If you have gone through as the leader of the school never having had the value of a teacher librarian, then, not surprisingly, you are unlikely to seek that out and value it. And yet all the international evidence, including the Lonsdale report in Australia, backs up the argument that there is a direct link between a fully resourced library with a qualified teacher librarian working in it and improved literacy and numeracy results in a school. If more people in school leadership roles were aware of this evidence, they would be more likely to seek out and to utilise more effectively their teacher librarians. I think it is a real asset that we should be looking not only to maximise but to expand.

I am encouraged by the fact that the member for Kingston, as chair of the committee, reports that there has actually been increased enrolment in teacher librarian courses at universities this year. Some of that may have been as a result of the conversations that occurred as this inquiry took place, raising the awareness.

In the few minutes I have left, I want to challenge some of the evidence that was given to us, when I was chairing the committee, that all teachers would do this and therefore there was no requirement to have a specialist in the school. As a former history teacher, I am acutely aware of the importance of resources. I am also acutely aware of the multiple pressures on the time of a classroom teacher. The thought that you would say to a history teacher in my day, 'There are a thousand text books published in this particular topic; go out and have a look at them and work out what is most appropriate for your curriculum,' is ridiculous. The average classroom teacher does not have the time or capacity to engage in that way. The teacher librarian is a specialist who does that for you and provides good quality resources for your classroom. It is a tremendous partnership that I relied on on many occasions. I think it is very short-sighted of education authorities to think that this role can just be subsumed into the classroom teacher's role. I would challenge them to have another look at what the evidence actually shows about the importance of the teacher librarian.

I want to commend the recommendation around the provision of at least a base level of online resources to schools. Schools reported to us widely variant amounts of resources that they had available to purchase products for their libraries. It is important that we keep books, that we keep reading and that we keep the love of literacy, but it is also important that we keep good quality based resources available online. I think that this is a good proposal.

Finally, because I did not have a chance in the former parliament, I also want to acknowledge the work of the secretariat: Glenn Worthington, the secretary; Justin Baker, the inquiry secretary; Ray Knight, a senior researcher who I worked with; and Daniel Miletic and Tarran Snape. They are not my committee secretariat anymore, but they were a fantastic group who did tremendous work. It is certainly reflected in the support that they have given to the current committee and I absolutely commend the recommendations in this report to the government. I look forward to seeing some action come out of all the work and the commitment of teacher-librarians who gave us evidence across the nation.