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Report

SPEECH

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Speaker	O'Neill, Deb, MP	Question No.	

Ms O'NEILL (Robertson) (20:30): I rise to welcome the document too. As a new member of the parliament I did not get to be a participant in all of the hearings. But certainly, in the early part of my parliamentary career the latter part of this report was pulled together and I had the opportunity to hear some evidence from some key participants in the field of teacher-librarianship. I acknowledge the previous speaker, the member for Cunningham, and I come to this assessment of the inquiry and its report from the point of view of being a teacher myself. I have never been a librarian and I have always held them in great esteem. The access that teacher-librarians have provided for my own children in the primary context has been a transformational learning experience.

A teacher-librarian is an amazing asset to any school. Teachers have a curriculum to contend with. They have their own pedagogy to continue to work on. As the member for Cunningham has indicated, the capacity to be across the entire range of articles that are available, the entire range of resources that are available for your field and the entire range of literature that is available for your own students—particularly for me looking at it from that point of view as an English teacher—is simply impossible without an outstanding teacher-librarian. I think of my own experiences of how different the experiences were in the primary school setting, the secondary school setting and then the tertiary setting, not only because of the developmental differences that need to be addressed in those different contexts but also because of the different needs of students at those different points.

Being able to access your teacher-librarian outside of the classroom—during recess, at lunchtime, and before and after school—can become transformational learning moments for young people in school. I recall, very fondly, a teacher-librarian who worked at my school during my secondary schooling. As the eldest of six children I can say that our house was a very busy place. In the weekend leading up to the HSC she gave me access to the library so I had a bit of quiet time and a bit of space and access to the books on the shelves to do my final preparation. I am forever grateful to Miss White for giving me that opportunity. Sadly, for a whole generation of young Australians the role of teacher-librarian has become an indication of a crisis in staffing capacity.

I want to address the recommendations of the report in particular. There are five core recommendations. The first section relates to the impact of recent Commonwealth government policies and investments in school libraries. Recommendation 1 is particularly important at this time because it recommends that the Commonwealth government partner with all educational authorities to fund the provision of a core set of online databases which would then be made available to all Australian schools. Of course, books remain a very important part of what a library offers and many debates in many parts of academia and the general community abound about the difference between books and digital information. I note the digital engagement of my two colleagues in the chamber at the moment. We want information. We want to access information and we know that the digital world is out there. How then can we as Australian educators resile from the responsibility to make sure that excellent data access is available to those people in our schools who need to learn about how to responsibly use digital information? The capacity to interact with databases and high-quality academic literature is a very important element of preparing our senior students in secondary schooling to take on the breadth of information that is out there in the world and to be able to make very careful, informed decisions about the quality of the types of articles they are reading. To be able to do that before you get to university really enhances your learning as a student in the later parts of your senior secondary education. It also certainly sets you on the right path for engaging with that digital literacy in the tertiary context.

The second recommendation that comes under the impact statement is regarding the work that needs to be undertaken with the states and territories to develop a discrete national policy statement that defines the importance of digital and information literacy for learning in the 21st century. This needs to be used as a tool to guide teachers and principals on the centrality of deciding how we use resources in schools, how funds are allocated to and for learning in a digital way with the librarian and through a library or how they might be allocated to other things. Without a framework that articulates the importance and the centrality of our teacher librarians and the work that they do, they become extremely vulnerable. That is what we found in the inquiry. Although I only heard the end of the inquiry, certainly that remained the case as the inquiry closed.

The second section dealt with the potential of school libraries and librarians to contribute to improved community educational outcomes. This really goes without saying. The reality is that teacher librarians bring a special set of skills and competencies to any school community. They are an asset to the local community, who have come to use the library in many situations. Right now in Spencer on the Central Coast a community school library is being constructed with funds from the Building the Education Revolution. I also want to note in my own electorate the amazing facility that the Central Coast Grammar School have built. The access that they provide for the community to that resource is a fantastic thing. The teacher librarians were an absolutely vibrant part of the conversation about how that physical space could be shaped and also how that space could be used most effectively for the students.

One of the other critical recommendations that I want to address in the time that I have remaining regards perhaps the core issue that triggered this report, and that is the issue of recruitment and development of teacher librarians. As the member for Cunningham expressed in her speech just a few moments ago, we have hit a point where we have lost so many teacher librarians that they are nearly extinct. There are many reasons we could explore for the reality we currently face, but the reality of the future is what we need to be focused on. That is why this report offers us some very important signposts for the way we proceed.

One of the things that needs to be addressed is the reality of some teachers returning to work from periods of time where they may have been unwell, and instead of being supported adequately, they are simply farmed off to the library, which positions the library as a mere adjunct, something perhaps much less important than what happens in the classrooms. We have heard comments that the perception that teacher librarians do not make a significant contribution has actually become alive and well in some of our schools. It is hard to believe that we could have reached this point in an age when we talk about literacy so frequently and openly. And the multiplicity of literacy that we need to acquire demands that we have even more skilled teacher librarians than has been the case in the past. Instead, a number of principals have told me that they put the worst teachers in the library because that is where they will do the least damage. There can be no possible way that it would ever be okay, not only for the students but for the teacher themselves, to put a poor teacher—a teacher who is struggling in any situation where they are interacting with young people—in that situation, regardless of whether they are delivering a curriculum or delivering critical digital literacy, critical thinking and critical support for students in a teacher-librarian context inside a library. This goes to the heart of the professionalism that is required. The professionalism of the teacher librarians that I, along with my colleagues on the committee, took evidence from was absolutely outstanding. They deeply understand what a teacher librarian can bring to learning and to life outcomes for young people.

I definitely commend the report to the House and I look forward to the minister's action in this area.