



*In today's world with abundant spread of misinformation and efforts to limit the teaching of history, the need for school librarians to engage learners as active participants in civic learning is more important than ever.*

## Civic Engagement in the School Library

Kathy Lester, 2022–2023 AASL President | [kathylester.lib@gmail.com](mailto:kathylester.lib@gmail.com)

In the March/April 2006 issue of *Knowledge Quest*, Nancy Kranich wrote “The Civic Mission of School Libraries.” Kranich provided examples of civic engagement in libraries (see sidebar), including “enabler of civic literacy.”

Today's school librarians can support the civic engagement of their learners in all of the categories listed by Nancy Kranich, but “enabler of civic literacy” connects perfectly with the AASL National Standards Shared Foundation of Inquire. The Key Commitment of the Inquire Shared Foundation is: “Build new knowledge by inquiring, thinking critically, identifying problems, and developing strategies for solving problems” (AASL 2018, 34). As an “enabler of civic literacy” the school librarian guides learners through the inquiry process that is so critical in today's world of widespread misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation that is amplified by social media. For Inquire, the learners' competencies include seeking knowledge, enacting new understanding through real-world connections, and using reflection to guide informed decisions (Learner I.D.1,3,4). These skills are necessary for learners to be civically engaged and productively involved in our democracy. Teaching our learners to find, organize, evaluate, use, and critically think about information is extremely important.

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in service learning; and leading project-based learning about their communities. Reflecting the current need to teach civic literacy, this year's AASL award winners offer examples of collaborative projects that civically engage learners.

**“Bulls on Parade – Banned Books Week Poster Design”** was the 2022 AASL Collaborative School Library Award-winning project co-taught by Michael Giller, Director of Library Services for South Carolina Governor's

School for the Arts and Humanities in Greenville, South Carolina, and David Gerhard, Visual Arts Department Chair and Graphic Design teacher. Learners researched information about intellectual freedom and banned books, and designed posters to support students' First Amendment rights and intellectual freedom. As Giller noted, "Students love learning about their rights and advocating for themselves" (ALA 2022b).

**"Asian American History IS American History"** was the 2022 AASL Roald Dahl's Miss Honey Social Justice Award-winning project from Dunwoody Elementary School in Dunwoody, Georgia, co-taught by school librarian Sarah Sansbury and fourth-grade social studies curriculum lead Emma O'Connor. Learners engaged in a lesson developed in response to the 2021 Atlanta spa shooting. Anti-Asian beliefs were spotlighted by using school library resources and historical fiction to learn about the Asian American experience during westward expansion. The project culminated in the creation of a StoryWalk by students. As Sansbury notes, "If it is not taught, it will remain foreign, reinforcing anti-Asian sentiment" (ALA 2022a).

**"Empathizing with Teens in Trauma: Terezín/Theresienstadt Museum Project"** at Saint Marys Area Middle School in St. Marys, Pennsylvania, was the 2022 Sara Jaffarian School Library Program Award winner. School librarian Ellen Stolarski worked with learners to research the history of Terezin/Theresienstadt, and the artwork, poetry, and music of teenagers at the camp. Stolarski collaborated with the school social worker to highlight how art and music can help people cope with trauma and stress. Students created presentations at the end of the project to share their personal responses to trauma that the teenagers in the camp faced (ALA 2022c).

As in the Dunwoody Elementary project, school librarians can co-teach projects to educate learners about our complex history. Asian American history was not part of the curriculum in Dunwoody. However, the new lesson helped fill in this gap. Similarly, school librarians can look at the curriculum in their schools to find concepts that are not included but would be valuable to their communities. One such gap may be civil rights history. In a 2022 *Washington Post* opinion piece, Nate Powell and Andrew Aydin, who along with Representative John Lewis created the March trilogy (Penguin Random House), make a case for teaching a full history of the civil rights movement. They reference a Southern Policy Law Center report that highlighted the "nine word problem," the problem that most U.S. high school graduates had heard only nine words about the civil rights movement: "Martin

## THE LIBRARY AS:

- **Civic Space**  
School libraries provide a safe space for civic activities.
- **Enabler of Civic Literacy**  
School librarians teach information and media literacy skills while co-teaching projects about contemporary issues so that "students can gain critical thinking skills along with a better understanding of civic problems."
- **Public Forum**  
School libraries can host programs that encourage civic engagement.
- **Civic Information Center**  
School libraries can provide civic and government information to the school community.
- **Communitywide Reading Club**  
School libraries can lead or take part in communitywide reading clubs that focus on a title of civic interest.
- **Partner in Public Service**  
School libraries can partner with other community organizations to provide civic programming or participate in collaborative civic projects.
- **Service-Learning Center**  
School librarians can co-teach project based learning or service learning projects to "strengthen academic skills, foster civic responsibility, and develop leadership abilities."
- **Champion and Advocate of Free Expression**  
School librarians can engage students in advocacy efforts to promote intellectual freedom and free expression. (Kranich 2006)

Luther King,” “Rosa Parks,” and “I have a dream.” Powell and Aydin call for us to carry on John Lewis’s efforts to teach our young people a full history.

I attended the August 2022 webinar “Civic Online Reasoning: Sorting Fact from Fiction on the Internet” presented by the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) and sponsored by the AASL Information Literacy Community of Practice. In this webinar, Joel Breakstone, Director of SHEG, mentioned that when Stanford developed their curriculum to help students learn how to evaluate information, the team specifically used “civic” in the title of their curriculum Civic Online Reasoning (COR). The researchers at SHEG believe that learners need the skills taught through COR lessons to become “better informed citizens able to participate in our democracy in an educated and responsible way” (Wineburg n.d.). SHEG’s Civic Online Reasoning is a recipient of the AASL Best Digital Tools for Teaching and Learning (2022) designation. AASL’s Information Literacy Community of Practice, and other Communities of Practice, are free for AASL members to join. Check them out and join in the conversations today <<https://connect.ala.org/aasl/communities/all-aasl-groups/aasl-communities-of-practice>>.

As evidenced by Kranich’s 2006 article in *Knowledge Quest*, the school librarian’s role in teaching civic literacy and encouraging civic engagement is not new. Yet, in today’s world with abundant spread of misinformation and efforts to limit the teaching of history, the need for school librarians to engage learners as active participants in civic learning is more important than ever.

Do you have a great collaborative civic engagement project or lesson to share with your colleagues? Do you have a go-to digital tool that you use in teaching inquiry lessons on civic issues? If yes, consider applying for an AASL award or suggest your favorite digital tool for consideration by February 1, 2023, at <[www.ala.org/aasl/awards](http://www.ala.org/aasl/awards)>.

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**Kathy Lester**, 2022–2023 President of AASL, is a school librarian at East Middle School in Plymouth–Canton Community Schools in Michigan. She is also an ALA Councilor-at-Large and serves on ALA’s Committee on Library Advocacy (COLA). She is active in her state association, the Michigan Association for Media in Education (MAME). She is a past-president of MAME and serves as a co-chair for its Advocacy Committee. Kathy also serves on the advisory council of two Institute of Museum and Library Services Grant Projects: *School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution?* (SLIDE) led by Project Director Debra E. Kachel and Principal Investigator Keith Curry Lance, and *Restoring Urban School Libraries* (RUSL) with Project Director Kafi Kumasi.

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