



It is important to align our work supporting students' right to read with the efforts of other educational groups.

Intentionality: We Are All Advocates

Kathy Lester, 2022–2023 AASL President | kathylester.lib@gmail.com

The AASL vision statement “Every school librarian is a leader; every learner has a school librarian” (AASL 2022) is a statement that is important to me. I am passionate in my belief that *all* students deserve equity of access to effective school libraries staffed by certified school librarians. I have been very active in Michigan advocating for our students’ access to school libraries and have worked hard alongside other Michigan Association for Media in Education (MAME) leaders to educate stakeholders about the unique expertise of certified school librarians, and their impact on our students and the wider educational community. MAME has also worked to build relationships among stakeholder groups to build support for our aspirational goal for all students to have access to an effective school library.

In my years of state-level advocacy work I have learned many things, and I’d like to reflect on a few of those lessons here:

- 1) The importance of state- and local-level advocacy
- 2) The importance of aligning the work of the school librarian with the goals of educational leaders and stakeholders
- 3) The importance of centering school library advocacy on the impact on students

I have learned that state and local advocacy is extremely critical because, while federal programs provide some funding and guidance, most educational policy is defined and implemented at the state and local levels

- 4) The importance of building partnerships
- 5) The importance of *all* school librarians having a role in advocacy work

One. The Importance of State- and Local-Level Advocacy

I have learned that state and local advocacy is extremely critical because, while federal programs provide some funding and guidance, most educational policy is defined and implemented at the state and local levels (Findlaw 2018). An example of this is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which provided guidance to states on the possibility of spending federal program dollars on school

libraries, but it was up to each state to define their own plan based on this guidance.

What do things look like in your state or your district? What decisions at either the state or local level can you influence?

Two. The Importance of Aligning the Work of the School Librarian with the Goals of Education Leaders and Stakeholders

In Michigan the AASL Chapter, Michigan Association for Media in Education (MAME), recently worked with the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) to align the role of the school librarian to the MDE strategic plan. The document “Effective School Libraries – Alignment with MDE Strategic Plan” (MAME 2022) outlines the work of school librarians towards the goals of improving early literacy achievement; improving health, safety, and wellness of learners; and increasing high school graduation rates and learners’ post-secondary success. This alignment document has supported MAME’s collaboration with MDE and helped lead to a memorandum that was sent to all Michigan school districts to reaffirm the importance of school libraries, to provide guidance on the essential instructional role of the school librarian, and to remind districts about the possibility of using Title IA, Title IIA, and Title IVA dollars for effective school libraries under ESSA (Michigan Dept. of Ed. 2022).

What are the goals of the educational leaders and stakeholders in your state, district, or school? How can you align your work with these goals?

Three. The Importance of Centering School Library Advocacy on the Impact on Students

The American Library Association Committee on Library Advocacy developed a new infographic in 2021 titled “Students Reach Greater Heights with School Librarians.” I am a member of that committee, and we designed the infographic to keep the messaging both centered on students and aligned with key goals in education. These educational goals included:

- improved student achievement,
- equitable access to diverse resources,
- digital literacy and meaningful technology integration,
- social-emotional learning and the library as a safe space, and

Much of the work of advocacy is educating stakeholders about our work and establishing relationships.

- information- and media-literate students.

How can you use this infographic for advocacy? How do you include the impact on students in your messaging about your library?

Four. The Importance of Building Partnerships

In Michigan we have found it important to build partnerships with a wide range of educational stakeholders. In 2021 seventeen organizations signed onto a letter (MAME 2021) supporting the Michigan School Library Bills that are currently stalled in the House Education Committee: HB4663, HB4664, and HB 4665. These organizations include the Michigan Parent Teacher Association, the Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association, the Michigan Education Association, and more. In addition, although the Michigan Association for Secondary School Principals, the Michigan Association for Superintendents and Administrators, and the Michigan Association for School Boards did not sign onto the letter because of funding concerns, all three of these associations wrote articles aimed at their members and published in their newsletters, advocating for investment in school libraries.

Recently, MAME released a Joint Freedom to Read Statement with the Michigan Reading Association and the Michigan Council of Teachers of English (MAME, MCTE, and MRA 2022). It is important to align our work supporting students’ right to read with the efforts of other educational groups. We are hopeful that this will strengthen our fight against censorship.

What are some potential partners for your work in advocating for student access to libraries at either the state or local level?

Five. The Importance of All School Librarians Having a Role in Advocacy Work

AASL Past-President Audrey Church’s theme when she was president of her state’s association was “Advocacy Begins with You!” and I could not agree more. Much of

As we move forward into what some call “the new normal,” we, as school library professionals, must continue to advocate for the needs of our learners and to advocate for equity of access for all students to effective school libraries staffed by certified school librarians.

the work of advocacy is educating stakeholders about our work and establishing relationships. Thus, as we begin a new school year, set a goal to reach out to at least one stakeholder or legislator to:

- share information or stories about your library’s work with students, or
- invite to visit or attend a special event in your library, or
- invite to read with students, or
- all of the above.

What specific action will you commit to for the upcoming school year?

Moving Forward

As we move forward into what some call “the new normal,” we, as school library professionals, must continue to advocate for the needs of our learners and to advocate for equity of access for all students to effective school libraries staffed by certified school librarians. My hope is that all AASL members will commit to an advocacy action no matter how small. In addition, I know that we will support each other in our state or local advocacy work.

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) as well as on COLA’s Ecosystem Subcommittee. 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.

Works Cited:

- American Association of School Librarians. 2022. “AASL Governing Documents.” <<https://www.ala.org/aasl/about/govern#vision>> (accessed June 22, 2022).
- American Library Association Committee on Library Advocacy. 2021. “Students Reach Greater Heights With School Librarians.” <www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org/advocacy/files/content/stateandlocal/School%20Librarians%20v2.pdf> (accessed June 16, 2022).
- Findlaw. 2018. “The Roles of Federal and State Governments in Education.” <www.findlaw.com/education/curriculum-standards-school-funding/the-roles-of-federal-and-state-governments-in-education.html> (accessed June 5, 2022).
- Michigan Association for Media in Education. 2021. “Sign-On Letter Hearing on School Library Bills” (September 7). <<https://bit.ly/SLsignon>> (accessed June 16, 2022).
- . 2022. “Effective School Libraries Alignment with MDE Strategic Plan.” <www.mimame.org/uploads/1/2/3/9/123921068/effective_school_libraries_-_alignment_with_mde_strategic_plan.pdf> (accessed June 13, 2022).
- Michigan Association for Media in Education, Michigan Council of Teachers of English, and Michigan Reading Association. 2022. “The Freedom to Read in Michigan” (May 14). <<https://bit.ly/MIrightread>> (accessed June 16, 2022).
- Michigan Department of Education. 2022. “Memorandum: April is School Library Month in Michigan.” <www.michigan.gov/mde/-/media/Project/Websites/mde/Memos/2022/04/April-2022SchoolLibraryMonth.pdf> (accessed June 16, 2022).