

# An Advocacy Story

**A**s I sit down and write this article for *The Teaching Librarian*, the theme of anxiety certainly fits. Not in the ways that I suspect you would think. Am I nervous and anxious to write an article when I've never done so before? Would the words I need to write actually come? Would the tick of the clock make me anxious as the deadline approaches? The answer to these questions is maybe a little. However, what is really getting my heart beating is making you, the reader, understand the power each of you has to advocate for school libraries and the integral role of the teacher-librarian. I truly believe that our future is dependent upon this. This is where my anxiety lies. I have this awesome opportunity and I hope that I can convey why advocacy is so important and why you need to join us in this fight.

I have just begun my second three-year term as a councillor on the Ontario School Library Association Council where I represent the Southwest Region. Being on council has been transformative for me in so many ways and has given me a perspective far beyond my school library and the libraries within my board of Greater Essex in Windsor. I have small town roots at heart, which have helped with this perspective. I am extremely proud to have grown up in Timmins. I'm also keenly aware that there are virtually no teacher-librarians in Northern Ontario. We, as an OSLA Council, are even struggling to find a council representative from the North.

Through my work on council, it has quickly become apparent to all of us sitting around the table, that school libraries and the role of the teacher-librarian has been declining at an alarming rate over the years. To be honest, membership with this association has dropped and this is attributable to this province-wide decline.

I know that I don't have to preach to the choir as to why school libraries and teacher-librarians are necessary for the students that we teach. We know the value of a well-stocked and relevant school library and how a teacher-librarian is the ultimate facilitator for knowledge building, critical thinking, and a genuine love of reading. We help students work with information and guide them as they gather, analyze and synthesize it. Our work is of critical importance as we equip students with 21<sup>st</sup> Century competencies.

During the summer of 2015, our then OSLA President Jeanne Conte and fellow OSLA Councillor, Melissa Jensen, attended

the Annual General Meeting of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. They brought forth a motion to create a provincial Library Standing Committee, which was passed by the membership. This committee's terms of reference are as follows:

- To advise the Executive on the current issues facing teacher-librarians in elementary schools.
- To identify for the Executive the variety of roles and working conditions of elementary teacher-librarians from board to board.
- To advise the Executive on promoting the vision of the school library learning commons and the crucial role of teacher-librarians in elementary schools.
- To advise the Executive and recommend strategies that will strengthen the role of elementary teacher-librarians as specialist teachers of literacy, information literacy, and the integration of information-communication technologies (ICTs) into the curriculum.
- To advise the Executive and recommend programs and resources which will support teacher-librarians.

In the fall of 2015, applications were accepted for this newly-formed Library Standing Committee. I was ecstatic to be selected and subsequently chosen to Chair this committee with four other passionate teacher-librarians. Our work led us to the creation of two resolutions that would head to the ETFO 2016 AGM which dealt with proportional teacher-librarian staffing based on 1:763 elementary students and providing dedicated school library budgets based on per-pupil funding. We knew that there was a lack of consistency and accountability among school boards and between work sites.

Unfortunately, time ran short that summer and these two resolutions did not make it to the floor. Meanwhile, we were jolted into a sense of urgency after reviewing results of our library committee's survey of ETFO Local Presidents. We found the following:

- Very few locals are staffed by an ETFO teacher-librarian. Many are staffed by a central or onsite technician, parent volunteers, or not at all.
- A theme in the data was that there was a distinct difference in staffing between urban and rural settings, with rural settings tending to have little or no teacher-librarian allocation, or even library staffing at all.

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