

THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTE OF SCOTLAND

EIS Response to the Public Petitions Committee: School Libraries

The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) welcomes the opportunity to give its views on the petition calling on the Scottish Parliament to 'urge the Scottish Government to set out a new national strategy for school libraries which recognises the vital role of high quality school libraries in supporting pupils' literacy and research skills'.

The promotion of literacy is central to the aims of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE); good, well-resourced school libraries, staffed by qualified professionals are cornerstones of whole school literacy strategies. Therefore, in the view of the EIS, it is difficult to see how the aim of improving the literacy of all children and young people in Scotland's schools can be reached without essential investment in school libraries.

Qualified library professionals as custodians of school libraries are invaluable in the support that they give to children and young people. Their professional knowledge and expertise ensures that library stock is extensive, of good quality and attuned to the diverse interests of library users, at the same time as being organised in such a way as to maximise the accessibility and attractiveness of the environment to encourage students to explore and use it. School librarians, like teachers, get to know students well as individuals, forming positive relationships with them and making libraries welcoming learning environments.

In schools where libraries continue to flourish, pupil learning is enriched by these benefits. The school library supports pupils' development as successful learners and confident individuals, able to engage in both independent enquiry and collaborative research alike, and to develop and maintain healthy personal reading habits. There can be no question that the enhancement of literacy skills such as these has a positive impact on students' overall attainment. In the context of the drive to raise attainment generally, and to close the gap in achievement between Scotland's most and least disadvantaged children and young people, it is the view of the EIS that the value of school libraries and qualified librarians cannot be underestimated.

Regarding the aim of improving equity within education specifically, the EIS believes that adequate resourcing of schools, which takes account of the need for additionality proportionate to need, is essential. It is understood that some local authorities have already made cuts to school library provision to make financial savings. Variance of approach across

local authority areas has resulted in learners across Scotland having unequal access to the significant benefits that school libraries bring. Among those, the poorest children and young people are the most deeply affected since they are the least likely to have access to books, journals, magazines and reference material, and quiet places to work, at home. Many of those same children and young people are already denied access to community libraries because of cuts to services and several more local authorities are proposing cuts to public libraries as cost saving measures for the near future. Thus, any erosion of school library provision serves to widen the achievement and attainment gap at the very time when, in the EIS view, there requires to be a national collective effort to close it.

The promotion of digital literacy is another feature of CfE which is supported by school libraries and librarians. Many school libraries are equipped with a suite of computers, which contributes to the sense of the physical space as a stimulating learning hub. Students make use of the full range of information resources on offer- reference books and the expanse of the Internet, with the librarian on hand to provide useful signposting and advice where necessary. The library space with its combination of digital, print and specialist human resource, lays the foundations of lifelong learning for the children and young people who use it. Where this is not in place, students are at a disadvantage.

Another advantage brought to schools by in situ libraries and librarians is the conduit function that they can provide for interdisciplinary learning. Not only does the physical environment support this, so too does the librarians' expertise in identifying and acquiring useful material to support cross-departmental projects in the Secondary school, helping students to make connections across their learning and to transfer skills from familiar to less familiar learning contexts in the spirit of CfE.

For learners with additional support needs, the school library is an additional support. It offers vulnerable young people an alternative place to work for short periods on specific tasks with Support for Learning staff during class time where appropriate, and a quiet place to read or complete homework during break, lunchtime and after school. Responding to the growing diversity of our communities and therefore our school populations, good school libraries are able to support the learning of children and young people for whom English is an additional language by making books available in the home languages of these learners- a vital resource for the literacy development of multi-lingual learners. For many young people the school library is a haven and the librarian another supportive adult who knows her or him well. Such opportunities for nurture need to be maintained and, indeed, extended, particularly as GIRFEC becomes statutory.

Where school librarians are in post, they are an excellent support to teachers, making reference material available to support classroom-based research activities and project work, and they act as linchpins of personal reading initiatives- organising author visits, reading competitions, and participation in national book awards, for example- as well as providing the intensive day-to-day administrative support that is required to facilitate the regular book borrowing, reading and sharing that characterise a strong reading culture.

The school library as a physical space is also well used by teachers, particularly in light of the fact that in many schools, teachers share classrooms and teaching spaces with colleagues. During non-class contact time, the library is a space where teachers can complete marking and preparation, and the writing of reports on computers. Many school libraries retain a section dedicated to teachers' professional learning, the importance of which has never been greater. Again, ICT facilities within school libraries are used by teachers both to access professional learning online and to complete Professional Update profiles.

Finally, school libraries and librarians support the work of Skills Development Scotland in delivering careers education. Good libraries are well-stocked with careers information; librarians support young people in accessing this and in using ICT to inform decision-making around positive destinations beyond school.

In conclusion, the EIS shares the view of the petitioners that libraries and librarians are essential resources to which all children and young people should have equal access on a full-time, daily basis throughout the pupil week. The EIS would support the development of a national strategy for school libraries though would urge that any strategy devised be accompanied with the additional requisite funding to ensure that its aims come to fruition.