

Yes, It's a Crisis!
School Libraries on the Brink
Mike Eisenberg
Dean Emeritus and Professor
The Information School, University of Washington.

This is an article that can be summed up in two parables—one offered here at the beginning and one at the end.

Parable #1 - *The Parable of the Frog*:

If you place a frog in a pot of boiling water, the frog will quickly react and jump out. But, if you place a frog in a pot of cold water and slowly heat it up, you will eventually wind up with a boiled frog.

Replace “frog” with “school library programs,” and that’s what I think has happened. No, there hasn’t been a sudden, widespread decimation of school library programs and teacher-librarian positions in the Northwest. Rather, there’s been a slow but continuous cutting of teacher-librarians and budgets until we wind up with states such as Oregon having less than 20% of schools with certified teacher-librarians, and deep cuts in school districts across Washington including Bellevue, one of the top ranked districts in the country.

Each time there’s a threat, we become outraged, marshal the troops, and descend on school boards, administrators, and the press. We are fortunate when the fight is taken up by the community—such as the 3 mom’s from Spokane. The result, most of the time, is partial success—with some of the cuts rescinded or reduced. But, in the long run, we are still on the way to “boiled frog”—to schools across the region without teacher-librarians and quality library programs.

When we reflect on the causes of the problems—why teacher-librarians and school library programs are not valued as core and essential—we come up with answers such as:

- They just don’t get it (they = administrators, school board members, classroom teachers, parents).
- We aren’t doing a good job of explaining what we do.
- They are putting these expensive library facilities and resources at risk.
- With all the cuts, I can’t deliver any kind of meaningful program because, after all, I don’t even have time to get the books back on the shelves or handle basic clerical tasks.

At the same time, our national organizations and leaders seem to ignore the crisis, downplaying information literacy, reading advocacy, and other basics of school library programs, while promoting new initiatives and challenges such as multiple (21st Century) literacies, inquiry-based learning, and collaboration. These are certainly worthy initiatives, but really—shouldn't we be focusing on articulating and delivering a clear set of essential library program functions that make the program and teacher-librarian essential?

The problem isn't one of doing a better job in "selling" what library programs have to offer. This isn't a marketing issue. It's that school library programs aren't consistent and reliable in terms of nature and levels of functions and services. Even within the same district, can classroom teachers expect to have access to quality library programs that offer similar, consistent, systematic, and quality services and instruction? Certainly, we have some terrific, active, curriculum- and learning-focused library programs, but we also have too many that are passive, isolated, and unapproachable. And, even in the best of situations, it's rare to find library programs that are systematic (with clear goals, objectives, and plans), involving the faculty in decision-making (in terms of setting priorities and levels of services and instruction), and comprehensive (in terms of ensuring and documenting that services and instruction reach every student).

Now, I know there are some very good reasons contributing to this inconsistency and lack of high quality programs (including lack of support and meager budgets), but it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because we aren't going to stem the tide or improve programs by pointing fingers and complaining. In my opinion, the only way that we can avoid "boiled frog" is:

- To be super-strategic and systematic.
- To insist on the highest level of performance—from ourselves and our school library colleagues.
- To deliver essential, comprehensive instruction and services targeted directly to school-wide goals and teacher/classroom-centered curriculum and assessments.
- To document the targeted instruction and services as well as the impact on the school and classroom.

We also need to band together and take these steps in concert. We need teacher-librarians across the region to take up this challenge—with urgency—and determine what they need to make this happen.

We've already got the basics of the vision, agenda, and strategy in place. Building from the original *Information Power* mission statement (with some edits by Mike Eisenberg and Joyce Valenza):

The mission of the school library program is to ensure that students are effective users and producers of information and ideas.

We fulfill the mission through 4 functions:

- Information literacy learning
- Reading advocacy
- Information services
- Information management.

The school library program priorities and scope of functions in each school should be determined by the school leadership team. The priorities and scope of functions should be reviewed and revised regularly to make sure that the program is doing its best to meet the needs of students, teachers, and community and that funding, staff, and resources are being used most effectively and efficiently.

Above all, the program should be predictable and comprehensive: teachers and administrators should be able to rely on their school library program for consistent, across-the-board instruction and services. If the program is not fulfilling its potential, the school leadership team should determine why and help to remedy the situation.

Our regional professional associations can help. So can our professional educator preparation programs and state education agencies. Their role is to help us to speak with one voice, to aim for a common agenda, and to support each other through common strategies and approaches. I urge the school library and technology organizations and institutions in each Northwest state to take up this challenge.

As a first effort, we are very fortunate to have NCCE – the Northwest Council for Computer Education – to embrace this cause. At the March NCCE conference in Seattle, there will be an entire day – Wed, March 3, 2010 – dedicated as a Teacher Librarian Summit.* We hope this TL

* The first NCCE Teacher Librarian Summit is scheduled for March 3, 2010 from 9 am to 4 pm. There is a \$210 fee and lunch with administrators and IT directors is included. Visit www.ncce.org to register or for more information.

Summit will serve as a “call to action” for teacher-librarians and school leaders to define and deliver transformative school library programs through a clear vision, defined responsibilities, and actionable plans. The Summit will emphasize on essential and attainable ICT standards, learning-centered program standards, and implementation strategies and resources to support teacher-librarians and other educators determined to provide systematic and comprehensive school library programs that are widely recognized as essential for all students in all schools.

I’ll be at the TL Summit, along with the 3 Moms from Spokane, representatives from the Library of Congress, and library and education leaders from all Northwest states. We see this Summit as a highly-visible kick-off to actions and activities across the region to take up the challenge and work together to transform programs and perceptions. We certainly hope you can join us, but if you can’t, we will provide further information through NCCE, WLMA and other state school library organizations.

To close, here’s the second parable:

Parable #2 – *The Parable of the Fish:*

If you give a person a fish, you feed them for a day. If you teach a person how to fish, you feed them for a lifetime. BUT...if you help a person learn how to find and use information about fishing, they can teach themselves how to fish – or to do anything else they want to in life.

This is what we have to offer to students, teachers, and parents. We – teacher-librarians – know how to find and use information about fishing or about anything else! We can help students to learn how to find and use information. We can help their classroom teachers to help them find and use information about fishing or anything else. That is our role in education, and it is as, if not more important as any role of any other educator. Let’s do it--together! Let’s ensure that students are effective users and producers of information and ideas.

Short bio -

Mike Eisenberg, well-known school library educator and author, is Dean Emeritus and Professor at the Information School of the University of Washington. He received WLMA awards in 2002 and 2005 for efforts to promote teacher-librarians and school library programs. Mike is best know for his Big6 model of information literacy.

mbe@u.washington.edu

<http://www.ischool.washington.edu/mbe>