

PE1581/S

Petitioner Letter of 22 September 2016

Response by Duncan Wright on behalf of Save Scotland's School Libraries

Please find detailed below supplementary information in relation to Petition PE1581 – Save Scotland's School's Libraries. This complements the original petition (and supplementary responses) which was lodged with the Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee on the 16th October 2015.

Research published in the TESS newspaper on the 20th May 2016 revealed that “the access Scottish Secondary pupils have to qualified school librarians varies wildly between councils and even within them.” This highlights a two tier system where access to a full time school librarian is not universal for school pupils across Scotland. This is unacceptable and goes contrary to the Scottish Government's education policy of “ensuring educational excellence for all.”

In addition, whilst we welcome the First Minister's efforts to promote reading for pleasure in schools we struggle to understand how this can be done effectively in schools where pupils do not have access to a qualified full time librarian. Public librarians can play a part in this scheme, and many are working in partnership with school librarians, but it is the school librarian who has the ability to put the right book, in the right child's hand, at the right time. School pupils are much more likely to engage and develop a relationship with their school library and school librarian, than public libraries and public librarians.

It is no longer acceptable for the Scottish Government to simply say that school librarians ‘play an important role in local authority schools’ (TESS, 20 May 2016). A national strategy for school libraries must be developed and implemented as a matter of urgency. The failure to do this leaves local authorities susceptible to removing school librarians from schools, and thus making the libraries left behind nothing more than repositories for books. Unfortunately, this has already happened in Argyll and Bute with devastating results for the pupils affected as can be seen in this excerpt from a letter sent to leading children's author Julia Donaldson:

“Recently announced cuts to the council budget in Argyll and Bute mean that, along with other high schools in the region, our school librarian has lost her job and our school library is to be closed as a result.

Obviously this will have a massive impact on the amount of reading that pupils do as we will no longer have access to books or dedicated library periods. But our librarian does so much more. She promotes the library and reading for pleasure, running a book club and a poetry club. She organises library inductions for all pupils. She organised visiting authors as well as taking us on trips to the Edinburgh Book Festival, to Authors Live and to the finals of the Children's Book Awards. We live in Oban, so these opportunities are not on our doorstep and we won't get them without [her].”

“...please would you mention our situation to reinforce the importance of school librarians and school libraries and to try to stop this happening anywhere else. As school pupils we feel as if we don't have a voice, but we were hoping you might speak on our behalf.”

This letter prompted the multimillion bestselling author Julia Donaldson to write an open letter to the First Minister highlighting the importance of school libraries:

“I write to express my dismay that Argyll and Bute Council has stopped funding all its school librarians.

I became aware of this situation when I received a letter from students at Oban High School. I am enclosing a copy of the letter, but to paraphrase: their enterprising librarian has lost her job; the school library is closed; there are no dedicated library periods; reading has decreased; there will be a reduction in trips to the Edinburgh Book Festival, the Scottish Book Awards and other literary events.

It seems obvious that the result will be a decline in literacy. I feel sure that as the instigator of the First Minister's Reading Challenge you are aware that reading broadens the mind and feeds the imagination, and that you would rather increase than decrease school pupils' access to books and author visits and the caring and inspiring advice which a school librarian can provide.

When I was on an Australian book tour recently, I attended a dinner for school librarians. Talking with them, I was impressed to learn that in that country the post of school librarian is a prestigious and coveted one: to attain it, one has to be a teacher with an additional librarian's qualification entitling one to an increase in salary. My dinner companions were almost incredulous when I told them that in the U.K. there were hardly any primary-school librarians and that many of those in secondary schools were losing their jobs.

I am worried that the situation in Argyll and Bute might set a precedent for the rest of Scotland, and I would urge you to persuade the councillors to reverse their decision. Obviously you and not I are the policy-maker, but I did have the idea that provision of a secondary-school librarian could be a statutory requirement.

“...The cost-cutting argument against this is very short-sighted, since it is widely known that illiteracy leads to increased unemployment and crime, putting a strain on other budgets. “

We were pleased that Petition PE1581 was included in the legacy paper of the previous committee but are frustrated that nearly 12 months after the petition was lodged little progress has been made. We recommend any action taken should be of an immediate nature and we look forward to receiving the result of the committee's considerations and the next course of action.

