

# SCHOOL LIBRARIES & INFORMATION LITERACY

From the People for Education Annual Report  
on Ontario's Publicly Funded Schools 2011



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*What a gift to give a child, this chance to discover that you can love a book and the characters in it... No one else can get in the way, no one else can invade it, no one else even knows what's going on in that wonderful space that opens up between the reader and the book. And the body that gave it to you is the library.* Philip Pullman, author

School libraries are a doorway for children and youth to learn about the world.

By design, they are sites for students to explore and develop their own interests, and to foster a love of reading,<sup>1</sup> along with their inquiry and research skills. And as the digital world puts more and more information at students' fingertips, the library can open the door to learning beyond the walls of the school.

## CONTINUED DECLINE IN TEACHER-LIBRARIAN NUMBERS

In Ontario, there appears to be declining support for the role of school libraries. This year, only 56% of elementary schools have a teacher-librarian (eighty percent of them part-time), a number that has fallen steadily from 80% in 1997/98. In high schools, where students do more independent work, the number is higher—66%—but is down from 78% ten years ago.

Students in smaller communities and in smaller schools are much less likely to attend schools that have teacher-librarians. Only 19% of elementary schools in Eastern Ontario and 10% of elementary schools in Northern Ontario have teacher-librarians, compared to 92% of elementary schools in the GTA. Some principals from these regions say that their schools don't have a library at all.

The loss of teacher-librarians also affects the number of hours school libraries are open each week. Libraries in schools with teacher-librarians are more likely to have longer hours, which ensures that students have access to them before, during and after the school day.<sup>2</sup>

## QUICK FACTS FOR 2010/11

- 56% of elementary schools have a teacher-librarian, a decline from 80% in 1997/98.
- 66% of secondary schools have a teacher-librarian, a decline from 78% in 2000/01.
- 40% of elementary schools and 57% of secondary schools have a policy on social networking.

## THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARY IN BUILDING "21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SKILLS"

There is a widespread movement—in politics, business and education—to shift the emphasis in education from the industrial/manufacturing skills needed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>3</sup> to the "knowledge" skills or competencies needed for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There are varying definitions of these so-called 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.<sup>4</sup> Some suggest adding the 4Cs of communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity to the 3Rs; others focus more on technological skills. But the common core element of this new movement is a focus on developing students' capacity to find, evaluate, organize and transform information now available in the staggeringly large, unfiltered and collaborative digital universe. These skills fall under the term "information literacy."

There are references to information literacy throughout the Ontario curriculum, and many curriculum documents link information literacy to the library. But there appears to be a gap between the provincial policy-level commitment to "21<sup>st</sup> century learning"<sup>5</sup> and what the province communicates to Ontario principals.

That gap is evident in the responses to a new question on this year's surveys. When asked if their school had an information literacy strategy or plan, elementary school principals were almost six times as likely to describe plans for improving test scores in reading and writing as they were to report on strategies to improve students' skills in research or the use of information technology. High school principals were three times as likely to reply with descriptions of strategies to improve literacy outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

But some schools did provide responses related to research and information technology. And in those schools, half listed the teacher-librarian as having a key role in the implementation of their strategies.

### BUILDING A LEARNING COMMONS

While most teachers see technology in the classroom as beneficial, the majority remain unable to find feasible ways to make full use of it.<sup>7</sup> Information literacy needs a base in schools where both teachers and students can develop these competencies. The [Ontario School Library Association \(OSLA\)](#) recommends developing school libraries as “learning commons” to provide that base.

In 2010, the OSLA, with support from the [Ministry of Education’s Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat](#), published *Together for Learning*, which provides a blueprint for the development of a “learning commons” in every school. These hubs would be based in school libraries and would provide centres for information literacy, technology and collaborative learning. Although the Ministry funded the document, the Ministry has not endorsed it for use in schools.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

All students and teachers should have the capacity to find, evaluate, organize and transform information in the digital universe.

People for Education recommends

- the province support a leadership role for teacher-librarians, who can work with classroom teachers to develop feasible information literacy programs for all students, and
- the province support information and technology education in faculties of education and through ongoing professional development for all teachers.

### WHAT PRINCIPALS TOLD US . . .

**We no longer have a library. The bookroom is used by teachers.**

*Elementary School, DSB Ontario North East*

**Teachers look after themselves in the library—we have a 0.1 teacher available to support student research and learning.**

*Elementary School, Bluewater DSB*

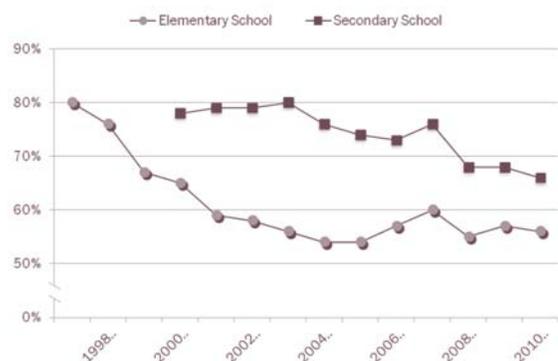
**We only have in-class libraries in our school, and we go to the local public library twice a month.**

*Elementary School, Sudbury CDSB*

**Our committee is trying to raise \$36,000 in order to purchase more laptops for the school. We find we are very limited in this technology and therefore have to find ways to provide it for our students. We feel that information literacy is important, but without the technology, we struggle to move towards greater use by staff with their students.**

*Elementary School, Simcoe Muskoka CDSB*

**Percentage of elementary and secondary schools with teacher-librarians, full- or part-time**



# NOTES

- 1 People for Education & Queens University. (2006). *School libraries and student achievement in Ontario*. Toronto, ON: Ontario Library Association. Retrieved from <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/School-Libraries-2006.pdf>
- 2 There is a statistically significant correlation between schools reporting a teacher-librarian and the number of hours the library is open:  $r(462) = .189, p < .001$ .
- 3 Internationally, see e.g. Ananiadou, K., & Claro, M. (2009). *21<sup>st</sup> century competencies and skills for new millennium learners in OECD countries* (OECD Education Working Paper no. 41). Paris, France: OECD. Retrieved from [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/21st-century-skills-and-competences-for-new-millennium-learners-in-oecd-countries\\_218525261154](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/21st-century-skills-and-competences-for-new-millennium-learners-in-oecd-countries_218525261154); provincially, see e.g. Educational Quality and Accountability Office. (2011, January). Preparing students for the world beyond the classroom: Linking EQAO assessments to 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. *EQAO Research Bulletin*, 7. Retrieved from [http://www.eqao.com/Research/pdf/E/ResearchBulletin7\\_en.pdf](http://www.eqao.com/Research/pdf/E/ResearchBulletin7_en.pdf); Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (2010). *Essential employability skills*. Toronto, ON: Queen's Printer for Ontario. Retrieved from [http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/audiences/colleges\\_progstan/essential.html](http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/audiences/colleges_progstan/essential.html); for initiatives from the private sector, see e.g. Conference Board of Canada (2010). *Employability skills 2000+*. Retrieved from <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/topics/education/learning-tools/employability-skills.aspx>; or the Cisco/Intel/Microsoft initiative, Assessment & Teaching of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills (<http://www.atc21s.org>).
- 4 As the OECD noted, they are contradictory definitions and have limited implementation. See note 3, Ananiadou & Claro.
- 5 Email from G. Clark [Assistant Deputy Minister of Education] to XXI<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Roundtable participants on December 15, 2010.
- 6 After a detailed review of principals' answers to our question about their schools' information literacy plans, we were confident that there were information literacy plans present in less than 10% of elementary schools that answered the question, and we were concerned that a far greater number did not appear familiar with the concept of information literacy. In high school, 15% identified themselves as having plans that clearly related to information literacy.
- 7 Centre for Educational Research and Innovation. (2010). *Inspired by technology, driven by pedagogy: A systemic approach to technology-based school innovations*. Paris, France: OECD; Cuban, L. (2003). *Oversold and underused: Computers in the classroom*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.



People for Education is a registered charity that works to support public education in Ontario's English, French and Catholic schools.

For more information, contact us:  
phone: 416-534-0100 email: [info@peopleforeducation.ca](mailto:info@peopleforeducation.ca)  
web: <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca>

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