



How safe is your Schools Library Service?

Article Author:

[Margaret Smith](#) [1]

Article Author:

[Mary Hoffman](#) [2]

[72](#) [3]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

Margaret Smith outlines national changes and... **Mary Hoffman** describes a little local difficulty.

Margaret Smith outlines national changes ...

Schools should, and do, buy books. However large their budget, though, they could never afford sufficient stock to meet every possible learning and recreational demand. Even resources required by the National Curriculum are not needed in every school every day ... not to mention the questions of updating, of changing requirements and of the unpredictability of private, individual taste. Here's where the Schools Library Service (SLS) comes in. At its best, it should offer the following:

<!--break-->

Topic collections - all types of learning resources for teachers and pupils in all subject areas.

Permanent loan collections - books, tapes, etc. for recreational reading.

Exchanges of reading materials - to keep reading *fresh* whether in school or at home.

Book purchase schemes - to provide subsidised purchase of books by schools.

Professional support and advice - to teachers and school librarians about the quality and range of stock in school, its display and promotion, and the development of pupils' information handling skills.

Up till now such services were provided centrally and, as far as individual schools were concerned, were 'free'. In many areas that has now changed. The development of Local Management of Schools (LMS), pioneered in Cambridgeshire, is at the heart of a wish to see schools more accountable for their own success. The notion is of Headteachers being responsible, with Governors, for the quality of teaching and learning in their school. Hence many local authorities are beginning to devolve more and more of Education funding into schools' own budgets. The expectation is that schools will buy back into the central support system they require ... including Schools Library Services.

A survey of all SLSs in England and Wales carried out for this article indicates enormous differences in provision. SLSs across the country either have, or will have, their funds devolved to at least secondary schools during 1992. In fewer cases are funds to be devolved to primary schools. Where primary Headteachers have been consulted, the majority have stated their preference for centrally funded SLSs. Those same primary school Headteachers often raise a concern about the effect on their schools of the devolution of the SLS funds to secondary schools. If secondary schools do not buy back in, there will be less money to provide services for primary school needs.

Secondary schools have traditionally, until GCSE courses began, not used SLSs as much as primary schools. However,

the demands of GCSE for wider ranges of learning resources, and for pupils to be more effective at finding information, has led to a shift in the perceived needs of secondary schools, too.

The only reason for secondary and primary schools not to buy back into SLSs should be if they, as potential customers, do not perceive sufficient benefits and savings to justify the costs. What's worrying, though, is the possibility that schools' funds for the purchase of SLSs may have competing pressures on them, including the need for teaching staff and repairs to buildings.

Many SLSs have become much more aware of how vital it is to provide what their customers want. Questionnaires and surveys have asked schools to say which of the present services they value and what new or different services they would buy.

SLSs are now 'marketing' their expertise to schools - providing publicity material indicating types of provision, and negotiating service level agreements.

One way of describing the worth of the book support schools receive is a value statement such as that devised by Cambridgeshire SLS - this provides individual schools with 'personalised' information about

- - the cost of the actual services recently received from their SLS if the school had had to buy these resources for themselves.
- - the value of the school's entitlement to SLS support within a service level agreement.
- - the cost of not subscribing to all SLS services from devolved funds but rather using an alternative of payment for individual elements, as and when required.

These statements have proved their worth in discussion with Governing Bodies and senior management in schools - there is now clear understanding of the real costs of a number of resources required from SLS by school staffs.

Although several LEAs are devolving SLS budgets to schools, others have considered and rejected this idea, whilst a very small number have not even considered if central education service funds should or could be devolved to funds. There's no one 'best' solution - consideration and decision depends on local situations. Certainly, it's timely that SLSs are being asked to be more accountable about how and why they provide their resources. They are highly valued and sometimes highly praised support services to schools, and can be rightly proud of their reputation. Let's hope their clients are aware of what they have to offer.

Margaret Smith is a Senior Adviser with the Schools Library Service in Cambridgeshire.

If you want further information or need to make any enquiries, she can be contacted on 0733 330870.

... **Mary Hoffman** describes a little local difficulty

It all started with a badger. It was dead; indeed it had died long ago but that didn't stop it becoming a TV star. BBC Schools were making **Badger Girl** in the 'Look and Read' series, and I was, then as now, their Reading Consultant. We consultants don't get much say about live, human actors, but when it comes to casting a stuffed badger the pros relax a bit. We already had Mary, our Star Badger and her understudy and Stunt-badger. But there were a lot of scenes to be shot in studio in Bristol, far from the action on Dartmoor, where a glimpse of static badger was required by the script. 'I know where there's a stuffed badger,' I said helpfully. 'Haringey School Library Service!'

Where else? What was hearsay soon developed into a close personal association. If you are lucky enough to have, as we had in Haringey in 1984, when **Badger Girl** was made, a really first-class SLS, you will find not only a treasure-house

of glossy new books but a complete Aladdin's Cave of artefacts from ceremonial masks to oriental cooking-pots. There will be an approval copy of every new children's book worth looking at, fact or fiction, fresh from the distributors.

There will be several professionally qualified librarians, who specialise in children's books, keep up with all the review journals and publishers' catalogues, and run reviewing groups, which you can join - some circulating book information to other teachers. They will advise you on what to buy and if you buy it, pass the full discount on to you. If you are borrowing, they will lend you a self-selected project loan collection. They will come into your school to run In-Service courses and regularly give advice on the spot about setting up and stocking your school or class library.

That is what a good SLS can be and most teachers long for it. That we no longer have such a service in Haringey is no fault of librarians. We do still have SLS, just, by virtue of strenuous campaigning earlier in the year; but it is much reduced, operating on a term-time basis only, with one librarian, and two part-time library assistants. The technician who kept the Primary Arts Loan Collection in . spanking order has been axed; there is no wall of new books for teachers to inspect, no work in schools. Worst of all, the hard-pressed Librarian has had to conduct a marketing exercise, to see if the SLS can become self-financing by next Spring.

This noble spectre of the SLS costs something like £45,000 a year to run at its present level of service. There are 77 Primary schools in the Borough and nine Secondary schools. You don't need to be a mathematical genius like Ruth Lawrence to see that schools would have to be asked to buy in at rates of £500 to £600 or more each, and that for less of a service than they had before. It is supposed to come out of their LMS funds, but no extra money has been earmarked for this purpose. In fact Education budgets in Haringey have been cut, because of several years of overspend across the Council budget as a whole.

One Secondary Librarian, who has already received the questionnaire about the buying-in scheme, said 'My entire book budget for one year is £900. If I gave over £600 to SLS, I'd have only a third of it to buy books with.' And this was from a warm supporter of SLS.

This kind of exercise is going on all over the country. The present government is in favour of devolving provision of services to schools, through LMS, and the School Library Service is not a statutory one. We might have a different government in six months' time; the Labour Party is committed to making SLS a statutory service, centrally funded. By then Haringey's SLS might be as dead as my badger. Or we might still have the same government, talking about the marketplace and its forces. Either way, we can't just sit back and let it happen.

Haringey is rich in children's writers and illustrators. I managed to contact thirteen of them - a Baker's dozen? - and we wrote a letter in support of SLS, which we sent to Councillors involved on the committees and to the Directors of the relevant Council departments. Signatories included Leon Garfield, Vivien Alcock, Douglas Hill, Mike Rosen and Jane Ray. It was such a starry list that the letter fairly shone, though I don't suppose many Councillors had heard of any of us.

Four weeks later, we have had one short note from the Director of Education, and a longer letter from the Chair of Education Committee, very appreciative of our concern. I don't know if what we did will have any effect when the budgets for 1992 are set, but if it raises the profile of the service a bit and alerts decision-makers to the presence of an active lobby, it will be better than just wailing and gnashing our teeth, though I do a lot of that too.

The Library Association fights the SLS corner admirably, but I think it's time for a national campaign of interested parties, like writers, to save School Library Services for the Nation before it is too late. I do not write books so that they can only be read by those who can afford to go into shops and buy a hardback at £7 or £8; I doubt if any children's writer does. If you would like to join me, please send an SAE to me at 28 Crouch Hall Road, London N8 8HJ.

Mary Hoffman is a children's writer and journalist, and is Chair of the Hornsey Library Campaign. Her latest hardback, with illustrations by Caroline Binch, is **Amazing Grace** published by Frances Lincoln (0 7112 0670 8, £7.95).

Source URL (retrieved on Jan '20): <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/72/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/how-safe-is-your-schools-library-service>

Links:

- [1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/margaret-smith>
- [2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/mary-hoffman>
- [3] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/72>