School Libraries in 2012 – the SLA Survey

Introduction

The School Library Association (SLA) is a registered charity formed 75 years ago with the aim to support everyone involved with school libraries, promoting high quality reading and learning opportunities for all.

Having received many anecdotal reports of school libraries in difficult and awkward situations due to economic and educational changes the Board decided a wider survey was needed to construct a better sense of what was actually happening and the impact of some of the actions we were hearing about. This survey was undertaken using SurveyMonkey – a web-based survey tool - allowing us to do a widely publicised survey quickly and economically, and would allow us to analyse the results with the built-in tools the system provides. The link to the survey was available on the SLA website (www.sla.org.uk) and was distributed through our usual email and e-list communications to get it to as wide a population as possible within the short time frame. The survey ran for 4 weeks from 27th April and over 1,000 responses were received.

The Benefit of School Libraries

The characteristics of 21st century education have been articulated by many and continue to evolve. However, in order to achieve within this developing context and beyond, it is accepted that students need:
■ Reading literacy
■ Information literacy
■ Technological literacy
■ Skills for personal knowledge building
■ Oral literacy and numeracy
Research evidence from the USA, Canada and Australia shows that where school libraries are resourced effectively and managed by a qualified librarian with educational expertise, all of the above are fostered and student academic achievement on standardised tests is higher than in schools where these conditions do not exist. Studies over the last 50 years have supported this conclusion, but increasing numbers of investigations and improved methodology over the past decade have brought new credence and immediacy to this positive relationship.
From - "*Effective School Libraries: Evidence of Impact on Student Achievement*" by Lynn Barrett, from the *School Librarian*, Volume 58 Number 3 Autumn 2010.

The primary and secondary schools visited emphasised the school library as contributing markedly to improving literacy skills. All the schools visited had well-resourced libraries, often with computerised loan systems and facilities for accessing learning resources on an intranet. Libraries in the secondary schools were often open for much longer than the school day. This enabled students to complete their homework on the school's computers before and after school. The enthusiasm and responsiveness of the librarian generally had a direct impact on the attitudes of the students towards the library and reading.
From - Ofsted (2011) *Removing Barriers to Literacy*

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Headline statistics from our May 2012 survey -
- o 60% of respondents were state schools
- o 25% were academies
- o 71% of respondents were from secondary schools
- o 72% of respondents had librarians in charge of their libraries.

The major variation came in the variety of budgets that school libraries have (taken from all respondents) 11% had up to £500 pa; with both the £1-3,000 pa and £3-5,000 pa categories having 17% each. More light is thrown on school budgets when one considers that 34% of schools had less budget this year than last, with 48% having the same as last year (which, in effect, is a cut to the value of the rate of inflation), but only 18% had any increase on their budget year on year. Comparing budget figures with three years ago 38% had less money, 32% more and 30% the same as in 2009. Some of the free text comments show the real hardship these bald statistics hide -

- o *Budget was cut by over a half after librarian was made redundant*
- o *Due to reduction in school budget, amount the school is able to identify for the school library has reduced*
- o *In 8 years the budget has gone from £3,500 to £750. Last year I was allocated £500 but argued that it just could not be done and I had already spent more than that in the first month! I eventually received £800 but have had to be very creative about where and on what the money is spent. I'm holding it together but it is a struggle.*
- o *Head very supportive but money tight.*
- o *Budget had stayed stable for 12 years, no increase or decrease, but 10% reduction this last year.*

The text comments also give a sense of a depressed picture in some school libraries

- o *I am leaving after 26 years. I doubt if I shall be replaced by a qualified librarian in the Main School Library.*
- o *I have too little paid time, to do too much work, with too little resources, especially money.*
- o *Our small village library is under threat of closure so even the small library we can offer the children is going to be very important in the future*
- o *Post is being made redundant this June*

With others obviously being valued as a major contributor to the success in their school -

- o *The LRC acts as the hub of the school for learning activities. It is a valuable and valued space both by students and teaching colleagues alike.*
- o *Our school library is an important part of our school and all our students and staff are encouraged to use it.*

School Results by Phases

To dig a little deeper here is some analysis of the questionnaire according to the phase of the school. It must be pointed out that the sample here – at over 1000 responses - is a good indicator of a national position but was, by its nature, a self selected group so the fact that all the respondents had a library comes as no real surprise. A school without a library was probably unaware of the survey as it was mainly distributed via school library and school library services networks.

Primary Schools

What type of school are you from?
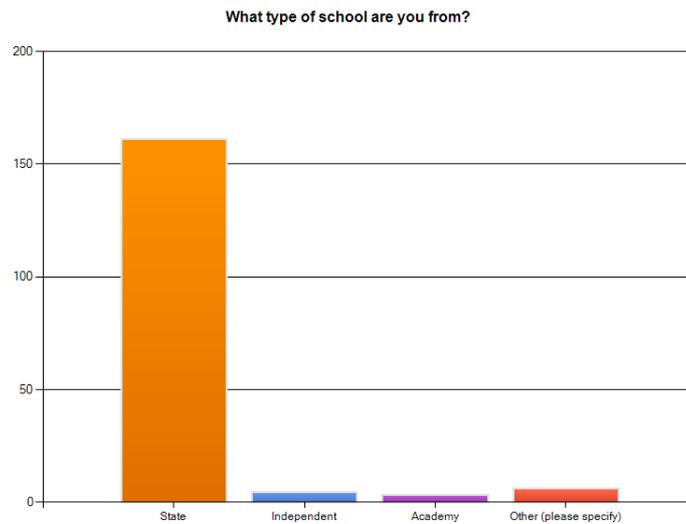
Primary schools make up

17.7% of the survey respondents were from Primary Schools, with 92.5% of those being state schools. The 'other' category represented Voluntary Aided schools in its entirety. Size of school varied from 40 to over 900 pupils with the majority falling in 4-550 pupil range. All of these schools maintained they had a school library but this varied in its presentation (from the free text comments)-

- *2 large book cases in main corridor of School*
- *Class libraries*
- *We are in the process of setting one up*
- *It is in the process of being reinstated*
- *A non fiction area*
- *Separate KS1 & KS2 libraries*
- *This is visited regularly by all children during lunch times on their selected day from Year 1 – Year 6. It is also used throughout the day with staff and small groups of children doing a variety of activities. The library also has an after school club for lower and upper juniors, supporting their library skills.*

What skills and activities do you undertake in the library?
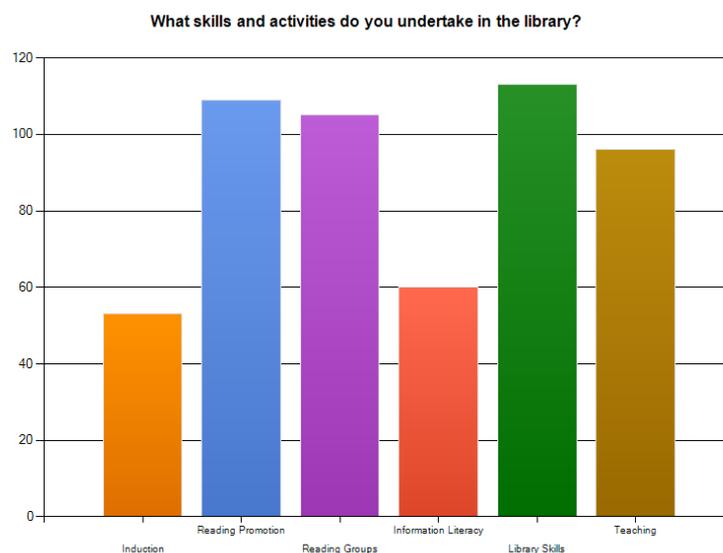
Skills and Activities in Primary school libraries

As can bee seen from the figure above there are a wide range of activities undertaken in primary schools 73.9% in Library skills, and 71% Reading Promotion with 69% running reading groups. Of particular importance with the current emphasis on reading for pleasure and in the discussion of reading, some of the comments add flesh to the image -

- o *The library also provides links to resources etc. on the school intranet. A separate and larger area is now a designated research area and books are transferred there as required to be used as required, Both the room and the librarian may be booked by teachers.*
- o *Training pupil librarians*
- o *Parent session after school for borrowing*
- o *KS1 children come into the library during the school day for stories and reading. The library is open break time and lunchtime 4 days a week (opened by librarian on 10 hours pw and volunteers). Clubs, competitions and top trump tournaments are run in the library. The library is also used for projects in collaboration with the Central Library and other organizations/ events (eg Greenaway Shadowing). Once children are free readers (ie have passed a certain level on the reading scheme), they take their reading books out from the school library. This makes the library central to reading in the school. The emphasis of our school library is on encouraging children to read for pleasure, and providing books for children who may not have many books at home. Children's knowledge and interest in books has increased over the time the library has been open, with children coming in asking for new books and additions to their favourite series.*

I am sure all parents would want their child to be a pupil at the final school quoted!

The staffing of primary school libraries has always been a very mixed picture and the response to this survey illustrates that well – with 34% managed by a Literacy Coordinator, 25% by a Teaching Assistant, 19% by a teacher, 6% by Head Teacher, 8% by volunteers and 2% by parents. The 'other' category included Y4 pupils, HLTAs, Literacy Governor, Office Staff, Y6 pupils and a technician amongst others.
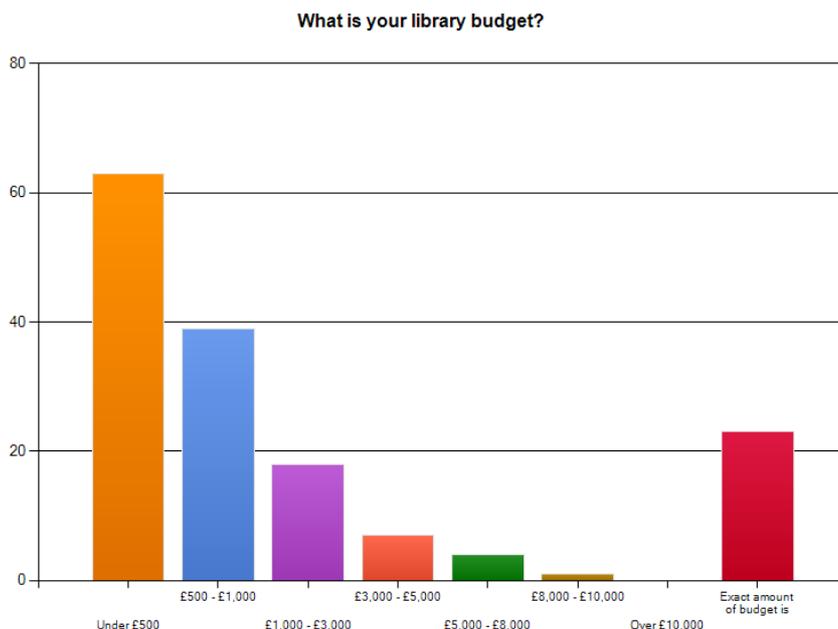
Primary School Budgets

The majority of budgets are under £1000 with 41% of the total being under £500. The independent schools that answered the survey had significantly higher budgets than their state counterparts, though were usually no larger than the average respondents primary size (3-500 pupils).

A query on budget change since last year showed that 43% of schools had stood still with the same amount, whilst 40% had less than last year and only 18% showed a rise on last years amount. That is perhaps not as dire a situation as might have been expected in the economic circumstances, but, those schools on the same amount of money as last year are in effect taking a cut as inflation has not stayed the same year on year – thus they are experiencing a small % cut in their budgets. Again the comments add colour to the actual situation, as some schools obviously do not have a firm policy on library budgets –

- o *We have also lost membership to the School Library Service supplied by the Count, as that is too expensive for what they offer (according to my head!!)*
- o *I have to bid for the budget from the PTA each year, I usually ask for £1k for books and £1k to cover Library Week when I get authors/illustrators in to the school. The PTA set up the library but they review the funding every year.*
- o *We could spend at least 4 times as much as we do every year.*
- o *We purchase books as and when needed when finance allows. This is dependent on topics being studied by year groups in our 'World Class' curriculum*
- o *We cannot afford to specifically budget for library and rely on parental donations, scholastic book fairs, PTFA fundraising*
- o *Fluctuates according to needs*
- o *No set budget due to cuts. We have to try and obtain books at no cost by fundraising and good will.*

There are obviously huge differentials in the primary sector, and there is no 'one size fits all' library but it is heartening to see some of the comments from the schools and that schools still value their libraries even if they are working under very difficult conditions at present in terms of funding and staffing.

- o *Although funds are tight, literacy is a high priority for the school management and the library is seen as a major contributor to that, which is reflected in this year's budget*
- o *Everyone in the school is proud of the library. It is a welcoming space that children and teachers value*
- o *I believe it is essential to keep libraries 'living' rather than just relying on the internet for research*
- o *Our small village library is under threat of closure so even the small library we can offer the children is going to be very important in the future. All the children in the school can borrow books, from the age of 4 up.*

Secondary Schools

71% of all the schools that responded were Secondary Schools, made up of 54% state schools, 32% academies, 10% independent and 5% other (mainly faith schools, 1 international school and 1 sixth form college.) The school size varied – the smallest being 250 students, the largest 2,400 with the average being approx 1,000 – 1,500. All the schools have a library, but again the comments add to the picture of the provision –

- *Yes, 2 as it is a split site school*
- *Yes (just about!)*
- *Yes, of sorts*
- *Yes, but one that has been reduced in size.*
- *Yes - but closing Sept 2012*
- *At the moment yes but librarian to be made redundant end of may 2012 so possibly not after that.*
- *Yes but it's closed at the moment*
- *We have 5 learning zones each housing the non-fiction stock relative to their subject areas within their zone e.g. Culture Zone (Humanities & Languages). The Fiction stock is accommodated in the Bookshop which students can use to select a book to take out or just to sit in for quiet reading.*
- *Yes although it only houses fiction the non fiction are in departments to allow room for 6th form*
- *A very small one. However it is no longer staffed; many books have gone missing due to no supervision and there are plans to make the room even smaller in order to make space for a behaviour unit.*

What skills and activities do you undertake in the library?
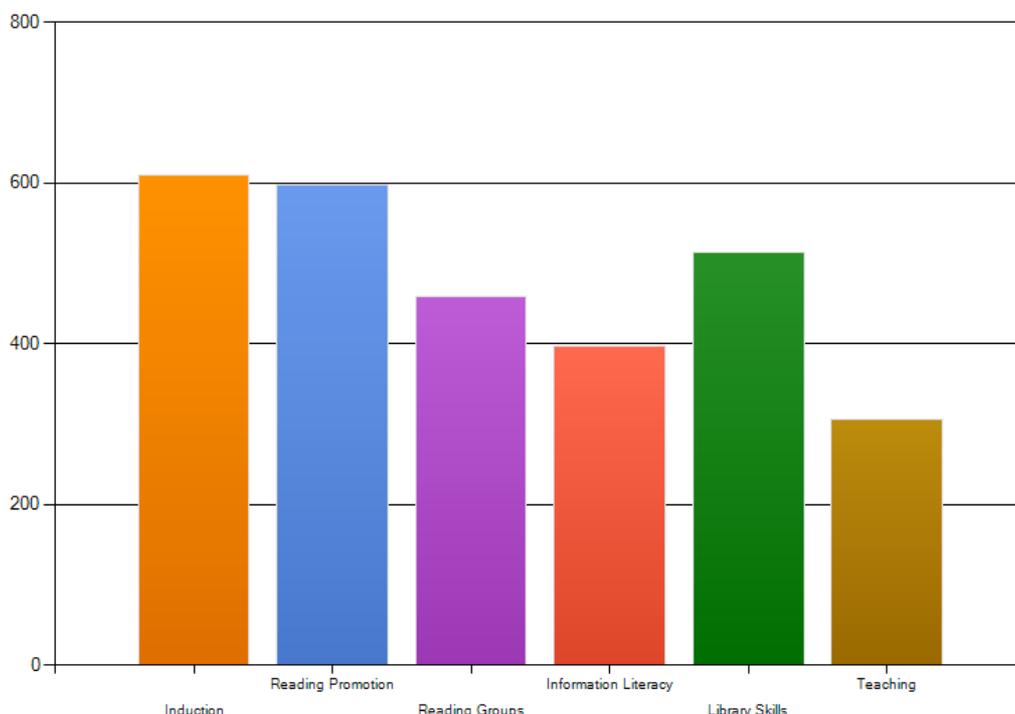
Skills and Activities in Secondary schools

There is a huge variety of activity and skills training undertaken in Secondary school libraries – as might be expected with responses listing almost every activity one can imagine – the list below gives just a flavour of all the activity undertaken –
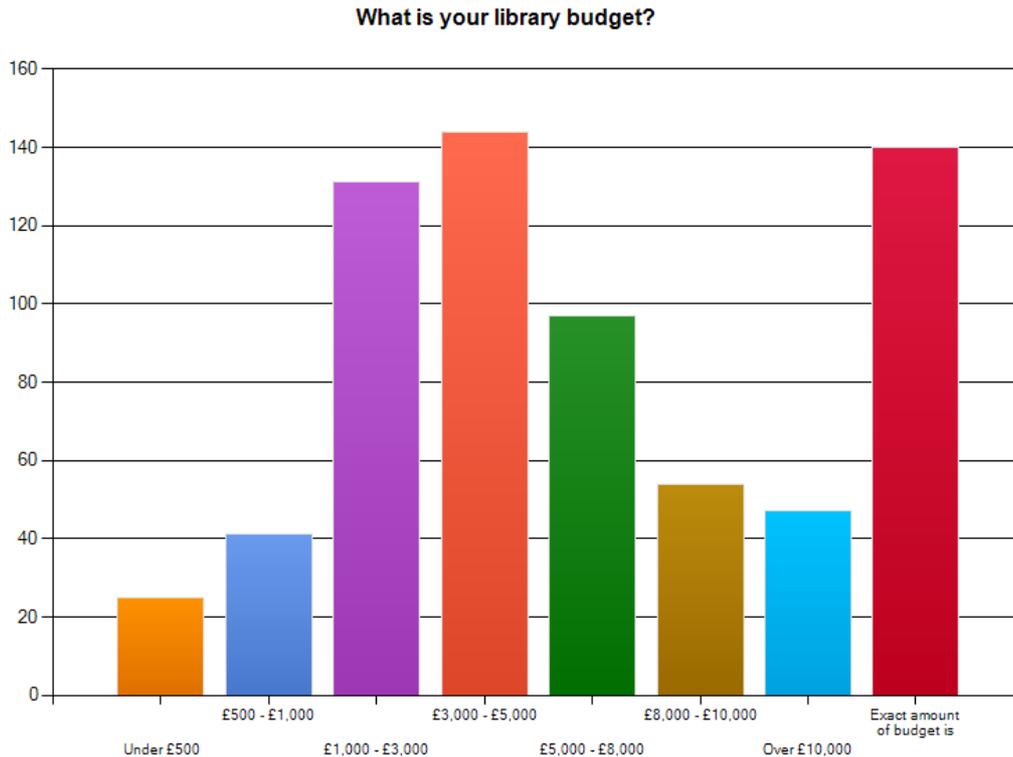
Carnegie shadowing	Accelerated Reader
EPQ Team leader	Pastoral support
Debate society	Reading Champions
Warhammer club	Laptop loan
Creative writing	Reading Buddies
Homework Club	Breakfast Club
Multimedia learning activities	Literary Quiz
Information Literacy	Chess and Board Games
Storytelling	E-Safety Courses
Poetry slam	Manga events
Author visits	Book fairs
Film Club	Multicultural week

- *We hold Flash Reading Sessions where a member of staff will suddenly appear at lunchtime and start reading. This generates interest and pupils gather around to listen.*

Or as one librarian summed it up -

- *Basically ANYTHING that supports the learning and teaching in my school!*

85% of respondent's libraries are run by Librarians, 8% by Assistant Librarians, the rest have a mixture with the majority being a variation on Learning Resource Centre manage/Officer type title – and many comments that these are not qualified librarians. This echoes similar findings from the recent CILIP School Libraries Group research carried out in 2010 (see http://www.cilip.org.uk/get-involved/special-interest-groups/school/Pages/school-libraries-in-the-uk.aspx).

What is your library budget?

Secondary School Budgets

With bigger schools than in the primary sector the budget picture is as you might expect with the majority (21%) sitting in the £3-5,000 range, worryingly 10% have less than £1000. As a general rule the largest schools have the larger budgets, but one school with 2000+ pupils only has £2 per pupil to spend, and one Academy of over 1,500 pupils only spends 31p per pupil on library budget, another spends 62p! In some cases comments show that author visits are funded separately, in others the budget must cover all library activity including newspapers, on line resources and any subscriptions to Schools Library Services. Booktrust's 2007 survey (latest year this survey was carried out) of School Library spending suggested the recommended figure for spending on library books per pupil in primary schools is £10 per academic year and for secondary schools is £14 per academic year. The research found that 61% of primary schools and 92% of secondary schools reported a total library spend below these figures. Primary schools spend an average of £10.25 per head per year and secondary schools spend an average of £4.28. I would suggest from our average findings this seems to have dropped to around the £4 in many schools with a significant number being considerably worse off than that.

The query on budget change elicited a rather gloomy picture too – only 17% of secondary schools had had any improvement in budget over last year, 34% had less and 49% had the same – thus, in effect a cut to the value of the rate of inflation (i.e. 3% - May 2012 Source http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/news/article-1586103/Inflation--Interest-rates--Economic-growth--Unemployment-Latest-statistics.html). Taking this over a period of 3 years 29% of schools had stood still with the same budget, 38% had less budget than 3 years ago, but happily 33% had more. The comments add a layer of understanding to these stark figures (representative sample) –
  - o *Funding of the library is seen as unimportant by many members of staff and our budget falls whilst that of ICT grows.*

- *My budget now is less than half what it was 5 years ago in terms of £ - and therefore is considerably less in real terms.*
- *My budget has shrunk by well over 60% .... a massive hit*
- *Resource prices increase, but overall budget decreased.*
- *Budget was reduced by 10% last year, and budget for 2012/13 also reduced by 10%*
- *Used to get more per pupil*

These two comments also show the difficulty of the role for many librarians

- *It's a fight to keep it*
- *It's becoming impossible to maintain anything like a decent standard at this level of (non)- funding*

The general comments from the respondents highlight the huge differential in the provision of secondary school libraries and librarians, how they are viewed within the school and how they are used and incorporated into the policies and actions of the school – some of the many responses given.

Negative

- *As school librarian I am due to be made redundant with effect from 18th May 2012. The post has been reduced from 37 hours (term time) to 20 hours weekly. The plan had been that a librarian would work just 4 hours a day to cover break time, lunchtime & 2 lessons - this would have meant that there would not have been time for the library sessions which applied to all Yr7 & 8's from this academic year, something which had proved to be successful and popular.*
- *Reading & the Library remain popular within the School, but lack of money for time & books mean many opportunities to promote these are being missed.*
- *The library has no status, no support and maintains its budget because no one – thankfully cares enough to look at it.*
- *I have too little paid time, to do too much work, with too little resources, especially money.*

Positive

- *Lucky to work in a school library that employs 3 professional librarians*
- *My role is essential and complementary (to teaching), as I have an overview of the whole curriculum and all the many extracurricular demands that are made, by pupils and staff, and am equipped to anticipate and meet those needs, as part of the team. I love the job.*
- *We are well supported by our head and leadership team and would struggle to achieve what we do without that support and belief.*
- *I have a huge amount of autonomy to create a vibrant and exciting Library.*
- *I am recognized as a valued member of staff and encouraged by the head on to strategy groups etc*
- *My library is a vibrant and active place, well used before registration and at lunchtimes, as well as during class times. As Librarian, I feel I am valued by the staff I work with and the Management Team (although it doesn't necessarily always feel like it)*
- *A very busy and hectic resource center at the heart of the school*

And a plea from the heart form one librarian -

Schools need to place a greater emphasis on this in their development planning. It easily links with cross-curricular skills. Without funding, however, libraries will not be able to keep up with new publications and therefore will not be able to offer teaching staff and pupils the wide range of resources that are essential for project work.

The SLA would like to express its thanks to all the librarians who took the time to fill in the survey and share their situation with us.

Conclusions

In many respects SLA are unsurprised by the findings here. We have had anecdotal evidence from our enquiries service that the position in many schools was worsening. More posts are either being made redundant or being re-advertised as term time only when previously they had been full time posts.

As always the SLA is committed to supporting everyone involved with school libraries, promoting high quality reading and learning opportunities for all. The results of this survey seem to indicate that there is less and less of a high quality service being provided for our students. Without the skills and pleasures that reading and researching can give us we will have a cohort of students lacking even more of the life and work skills that are appropriate for today's 21st C world of work. We do not, and never will advocate one style of library for every school – the library will be as individual as the school and it's community but it seems self evident that the time is ripe for making an entitlement for students to

- Support from designated library staff with extensive knowledge, enthusiasm and experience to advise, encourage and inspire wider reading and reading for pleasure to ensure fair provision for all

- A skilled trained library practitioner with responsibility and time to help children and young people develop the skills needed to manage today's information world, to become lifelong learners and to meet the future job market's need for problem solvers and independent thinkers

- A safe and secure library environment for learning during and outside school hours, where help, resources and advice are freely available to all

- High quality and wide-ranging library and classroom resources to support their curriculum which have been carefully selected to meet the needs of their age, learning style and ability and organised to provide easy access and availability

- Be valued as an individual, having access to reading materials which are exploited by a knowledgeable person to support the emotional, cultural, leisure and wider needs of the whole person
From School Libraries: A Right - http://www.cilip.org.uk/get-involved/advocacy/school-libraries-advocacy/Documents/school-libraries-a-right.pdf compiled by CILIP's Youth & School Libraries Joint Committee (of which SLA is a contributor)

In practical (and pragmatic) terms there are several steps that can start to build this process –
- ❑ Government support for trained school librarians in secondary schools as a first step towards trained librarians in all schools
- ❑ Ofsted inspection of the role of school libraries in schools reading for pleasure and literacy policies
- ❑ Ofsted inspection of the library role in whole school curriculum support
- ❑ Schools Library Services offering more Librarian-based advice and support services into Primary Schools to support staff there

❑ Exploration of co-location and facility sharing options between public and school libraries, groups of schools or clusters.

I urge everyone with an interest and stake in the future of our students to embrace our campaign to ensure equity of access to libraries and librarians in all our schools.

Tricia Adams
Director, School Library Association
www.sla.org.uk
tricia.adams@sla.org.uk

NB Minority reports on the Middle, All Through and Other School responses will be available at a later date. The full summary report from the survey will be available on the SLA website from July 30th.

Further Reading –
School Library Association (2010) *Primary School Library Charter -*
http://www.sla.org.uk/primary-charter.php

School Library Association (2011) *SLA Standards for Secondary School Libraries -*
http://www.sla.org.uk/standards.php