

April 3, 2022  
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Administrative Rules of Montana  
Chapter 55 Committee Members:

Today many Montana school libraries are just another classroom. Erosions in staffing are compounded by erosions in library budgets and teaching assignments seizing a librarian's time. A school library should never be just another classroom.

In reading the proposed changes to ARM 55, specifically for school accreditation related to school libraries, I wonder if we are really serving Montana students well. Libraries should be open for student and staff use throughout the day. When a librarian's time is assigned exclusively for pupil instruction, the library is closed to the rest of the school community. It's hard to check out resources if you can't go in the library. When these accreditation standards were adopted, paraprofessionals were also common in school libraries. However, this staffing has also dried up across school libraries in Montana. When I retired from Whitefish Middle School in 2020, paraprofessional time had shrunk from 2.4 FTE to .5 FTE in the elementary library only.

At the same time Montana school libraries are trying to triage staff shortages with volunteers and reduced services, districts are cutting school library budgets. Some rural elementary schools no longer have a library budget, and the librarians must request new books from a principal or district clerk at the end of the school year. Librarians from some class AA schools report all new library titles for their libraries are purchased and cataloged by a central office with very little ability to acquire titles specifically for their student populations. Budgeting is another ingredient for a healthy school library. Do we really want school libraries that cannot afford two new books per student annually?

As we decide how best to address students' needs, perhaps we could use total staffing and how schools schedule this staff. Certified librarians are important as advocates for student literacy in text, research, online tools/social media, hands-on application of classroom lessons, and even play. Librarians are trained to be partners to all teachers and experts in curriculum. Librarians work to identify student and staff needs and fill the gaps as partners in learning. They push students to read more challenging materials, identify reliable sources of information for research assignments, even checking out computer coding equipment to extend what they're learning in another classrooms. A good library will also provide tools to balance inequity challenges, such as access to ebooks, iPads, or hotspots, so students can seamlessly attend to coursework without drawing attention to financial limitations in their homes. The Board of Public Education needs to consider all the pieces for healthy school libraries. **If changes to librarian/pupil ratios are on the table, so too should we consider minimum standards for library budgets, flexibly scheduled hours for patrons to use a library, and site-specific materials or programming offered to the school by the library.**

Sincerely,

Dana Carmichael, Retired Teacher-Librarian

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