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Science and Technology Books in Maryland Elementary School Libraries

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Over the past twenty years, school library budgets have plummeted while costs have dramatically increased. Today's school librarians must buy not only books, but also computers and software.[1]

No doubt there are a number of reasons for declining school library budgets and for the growing inequality of school library services within individual school districts and across the country. But it's safe to say that three factors contribute to this dilemma: (1) books and computers are expensive; (2) federal funds haven't been targeted exclusively for school libraries since the 1970s; and (3) site-based management—where school principals allocate funding—is tough on school library services.

Nonetheless, reading is the buzzword in Maryland education. Students in grades three, five, and eight take the the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program test (MSPAP), which is designed to see how well students can apply knowledge in authentic problem-solving situations. Can they predict outcomes? Can they compare and contrast information? Because of statewide low performance on a variety of indicators, Maryland educators have prepared a report on reading, citing twelve necessary principles for elementary student achievement.[2]

While public officials all agree on the importance of reading, historically there's been little agreement about money for school library books. In 1998, the Maryland state legislature recognized this problem and allotted $12 million—$3 million a year for four years—to improve elementary school library collections.

But is this enough money? And how old, exactly, are school library books in Maryland? Without knowing the approximate age of the books, it's hard to estimate how much it would cost to upgrade the collections.

In 1999, I conducted an evaluation of eighteen elementary school library collections in Maryland. I looked at the books in the science and technology sections (Dewey numbers 500s and 600s, respectively). Because students are being formally assessed on their ability to read, comprehend, and solve problems using information, it is critical that they have access to accurate, up-to-date science and technology resources.

The findings are distressing. In this sample, science and technology library books are, on the average, twenty years old. Less than 10 percent of the titles are recommended by a professional selection source. (Such formal tools provide annotated lists of quality materials that are worthy of purchase for school libraries.) On average, there are less than three books per student.

While this study is not a comprehensive evaluation of all 811 elementary schools in Maryland, the table does provide a snapshot of the state of science and technology in eighteen schools, and it may give some indication of the collections throughout the state.

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the science and technology books in eighteen elementary schools in eighteen Maryland school districts and: (1) determine the age of the books; (2) identify what percent of the books were found in a professional selection source; (3) determine how many books there were per student; and (4) estimate the costs in upgrading the collections.

Review of the Literature

This review of the literature highlights both news reports and professional research.

News Media Articles

On November 11, 1999, Bob Edwards, host of the Morning Edition of National Public Radio,

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Table 1

Science Books (500s) and Technology Books (600s)

School #	Grades	# of students	# of books	% found in ELSC	# books per child	Average copyright	Upgrade to 5 books/child*	Upgrade to 1990*	Upgrade to 1995*
12	PreK–5	450	1,564	28.0	3.5	1988	$11,428.76	$1,540.96	$9,946.20
13	K–5	500	1,321	17.8	2.6	1988	$19,642.14	$2,070.05	$10,132.33
5	PreK–5	410	505	9.5	1.2	1985	$25,739.70	$1,310.61	$3,931.84
3	K–5	650	1,114	N/A	1.7	1983	$3,5585.76	$4,801.40	$10,618.47
10	K–5	525	1,179	10.4	2.2	1983	$24,090.36	$4,172.68	$9,973.73
9	4–5	150	789	11.2	5.3	1982	N/A	$2,869.16	$6,672.46
15	PreK–5	500	2,074	4.0	4.1	1982	$7,097.16	$7,466.19	$15,800.54
2	PreK–6	481	1,360	13.5	2.8	1981	$17,409.70	$6,570.70	$13,367.98
4	K–5	650	1,118	7.6	1.7	1979	$35,519.12	$6,020.49	$11,006.20
17	K–5	534	1,595	7.5	3.0	1979	$17,909.50	$7,971.81	$13,419.21
18	PreK–3	425	1,222	7.4	2.9	1979	$15,043.98	$6,684.89	$11,749.20
1	K–6	337	1,105	9.9	3.8	1977	$9,662.80	$6,777.55	$10,624.27
7	PreK–5	327	729	3.5	2.2	1977	$15,093.96	$4,493.70	$7,712.16
14	3–5	770	1,490	7.0	1.9	1977	$39,317.60	$8,812.31	$13,776.99
16	3–5	360	478	7.0	1.3	1977	$22,024.52	$2,827.04	$4,419.73
6	K–5	470	2,286	4.1	4.9	1976	$1,066.24	$15,901.37	$24,342.84
8	PreK–5	365	1,269	7.0	3.5	1974	$9,262.96	$9,045.63	$13,568.45
11	PreK–5	637	2,936	8.2	4.6	1971	$4,148.34	$22,575.58	$30,602.45
Totals				**9.6**	**3.0**	**1980**		**$121,912.12**	**$221,665.05**
Estimated cost to upgrade all 811 Maryland elementary schools								$5,492,818.20	$9,987,241.90

* According to SLJ Online, Mar. 1999, <www.slj.com>, the average price of one hardcover children's/young adult book is $16.66. This is the cost used to figure the cost of upgrading the collections. The amounts in the last two columns do not include the funds needed to upgrade the collections so that there are five books per student.

aired a story declaring that Philadelphia has some of the worst libraries in the nation. On average, the books in Philadelphia school libraries (in schools that have libraries) are thirty-five to forty years old. Books on the shelves reported that Richard Nixon was the current president and that someday man might go to the moon.[5]

On January 18, 2000, Cnn.com Book News posted an article from the Associated Press stating *The Boston Globe* had found that nearly 50 percent of books in Boston's elementary and middle school collections have copyrights more than six years old. "I can see we are losing them. They're not coming in to take books out to use for their projects," said Phyllis Robinson, a librarian at East Middle School in Braintree. "They're just not reading for pleasure." "If kids aren't readers, they can't be writers. If they aren't writers, they can't be thinkers," said Barbara Camann, a media specialist in the Lynn public school system. The report noted that Sen. Jack Reed, D-Rhode Island, has introduced federal legislation to provide $275 million to school libraries to buy new materials. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Massachusetts, is co-sponsoring the bill "because it makes school libraries an essential part of education reform."[6]

On Monday, January 31, 2000, *Washington Post* staff writer Nancy Trejos described the aging school library collections in several Maryland schools in the Washington, D.C., area. School librarians have watched book budgets plummet while they have scrambled to find money for computers and Internet access. Site-based management was mentioned as a possible reason for the growing inequality of library services among schools. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) reported that in 1998, Baltimore spent 92 cents per pupil on library books, as compared to $19.34 in Worcester County. Even wealthy school districts are feeling the pinch. Montgomery County School District spent $5.89 per pupil on library materials, "down from $19.26 from the previous year."[7]

A question to consider is whether Gen Y will use books, or can the Web satisfy their complete learning and recreational needs? According to research posted on Cyber Atlas on July 28, 2000, more than 25 million children in the United States use the Internet. In fact, these surfers use all kinds of media; they watch more television, see more movies, peruse more magazines, and read more books for pleasure than their counterparts who do not surf the Web. So, for now at least, a school library needs a good balance of all forms of media to meet the needs of this generation.[8]

Another question that is especially important to administrators is how to improve test scores. On March 22, 2000, Education Week on the Web stated that research shows that students in schools that have updated library collections score 14 percent higher than students who have access to older collections.[9]

Professional Research

Keith Curry Lance, director of Library Research Service, Colorado State Library, has investigated the impact of school libraries on student achievement in Colorado, Alaska, and Pennsylvania. His research shows that there is a positive correlation between academic achievement and schools with strong library collections, access to technology, and librarians who lead and teach.[8]

In 1998, *The Final Report of the Maryland State Task Force on Reading* stated that: "The school provides a library media center containing a minimum of 20 titles per student. . . . Books encompass a range of difficulty and interests so that they are accessible and appropriate to all students."[9]

Van Orden, in *The Collection Program in Schools*, suggests that science books date quickly. She states, "Closely examine anything over 5 years old, except botany and natural history." For technology books, she states that most of these "materials are outdated after five years."[10]

The CREW method, as described by Segal, gives specific weeding guidelines by Dewey number. When determining what items should

be deleted, librarians should check when the item last circulated and its the copyright date. Because old books may be factually correct, Segal reminds librarians to carefully examine older titles.[11] Kachel reminds school librarians that collection development is more than an occasional weeding. She advocates the use of a conspectus—an analysis tool that describes a collection on a subject-by-subject basis. As a result, the librarian identifies strengths in each subject area and determines priorities for future purchases.[12]

When van Deusen asked school librarians in Iowa to log their time use for two days, she found that the median response for selection tasks was zero minutes. Selection either occurred after working hours, or it occurred so rarely that less than half of the respondents did these tasks during the data collection.[13] What's more, Jones found that Georgia school librarians spent less time in curriculum development than they were trained to do in their graduate course work.[14]

Doll reported that materials in the nation's school library collections are, on the average, twenty years old. She states that while there is no established appropriate or "ideal" collection age, she recommends the following measures for comparison to collection age: (1) frequency of curriculum revisions; (2) the average age of materials in standard bibliographies;and (3) weeding guidelines.[15]

In the October 1999 issue of *School Library Journal*, Miller and Shontz reported the good news that the average school library budget is up $1,000 from two years ago. Median expenditures for library books per pupil is $7.35[16]. (This amount, however, is nowhere near the average cost of a library book—$16.66, as reported by School Library Journal Online.[17])

Mancall predicted a paradigm shift for collection development. Some of the changes are: (1) collection size will not necessarily indicate quality; (2) information content will become more important than its format; and (3) access to materials will become more important than owning the materials.[18]

Using common sense, Johnson states that the Internet won't be replacing libraries for several reasons: (1) print is still easier to read than a terminal screen; (2) the use of books, magazines, and newspapers is growing, not declining; and (3) the Internet really isn't "free." Johnson also reminds educators to look at what kind of reading is being tested on state or national tests. If it's narrative, libraries will need plenty of fiction and narrative nonfiction. If it's expository, libraries will need magazines and current nonfiction.[19]

Sample Population

In May and November 1999, I conducted an evaluation of the science and technology books in eighteen elementary school libraries in Maryland. The schools represent the following eighteen counties: Allegany, Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Calvert, Caroline, Carroll, Cecil, Dorchester, Frederick, Garrett, Harford, Howard, Montgomery, Queen Anne's, St. Mary, Somerset, Washington, and Worcester. Schools were chosen at random. I numbered slips of paper, drew out a number, and by using the MSDE school directory, I selected the corresponding elementary school in each county district. As a result, I visited urban, suburban, and rural schools in each geographical area of Maryland.[20]

Collection Evaluation Method

School Visits

Following Doll and Barron's procedures, I had two hundred cards printed per school.[21] On each card, there was a place for title, author, copyright date, Dewey number, and selection source. The first four items were completed at the school. Later, I checked each title to see if it appeared in Brodart's *Elementary School Library Collection: A Guide to Books and Other Media*, 19th ed. (*ESLC*).[22]

For each school visit, one or more of my college students and I stayed approximately ninety minutes. After we counted all the books in the 500 and 600s shelves, we divided this number by two hundred to come up with our interval number. For example, we might look at every fifth book or every eleventh book, depending on the size of the collection. In the eleven schools I visited at the end of the school year, when all the books were on the shelf, the average copyright date of their books was 1980. During the school year, I visited the remaining seven schools and found the average copyright date of their books to be 1979.

Comparison to a Standard Selection Source

Professional selection sources help librarians purchase quality materials. Periodical selection sources that review new materials include *Booklist*, *School Library Journal*, *Horn Book Appraisal*, and *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*. Two sources that provide thousands of items (both current and older titles) are *Children's Catalog* published by Wilson and Brodart's Elementary School Library Collection (ESLC).

All school districts in Maryland have established selection criteria guidelines. For this study, I selected *ESLC* because it was frequently mentioned as a recommended source. *ESLC* selects quality materials that meet the curricular and personal interests of pre-kindergarten through sixth-grade-aged students. Their purpose is to serve as "a primary resource for the continuous development, evaluation, and maintenance of existing collections as well as for the establishment of new library media centers."

There are some limitations to using *ESLC* for this study. One, it provides for a basic collection. Also, because it is a purchasing guide, it includes only books that are currently in print. Several of the libraries in this study had older titles that were still useful and current, but because they were out of print, *ESLC* did not include them.

For this study, I wanted so see if there was some indication that librarians were using professional selection tools when purchasing materials. *ESLC*, with its recommendation of nearly eight thousand titles, was a good source to use as a comparison.

Average Copyright Age and Cost to Upgrade the Collection(s)

Brad Smith, a sociology professor at Western Maryland College, designed a Microsoft Excel program that determined the average copyright age and how much it would cost to upgrade the

Fifty Golden Oldies Still on Maryland School Library Shelves

While the following books may have some historical significance, they have seen better days and should be weeded from current school library shelves.

1. *A Book of Astronauts*, 1963
2. *About Jack's Dental Check-Up*, 1959
3. *About Sheep on the Ranch*, 1958
4. *All About Volcanoes & Earthquakes*, 1953
5. *Andy's Wonderful Telescope*, 1958
6. *At the Frozen Food Plant*, 1959
7. *Beyond the Solar System*, 1957
8. *Birds at Home*, 1942
9. *Chipper the Beaver*, 1968
10. *Computers at Your Service*, 1962
11. *Dinosaurs*, 1955
12. *Doctor's Tools*, 1967
13. *First Book of Rhythms* (by Langston Hughes), 1954
14. *Freight Train*, 1954
15. *Greg's Microscope*, 1963
16. *Here Come the Beavers*, 1957
17. *History Can Be Fun*, 1950
18. *How the Derrick Works*, 1930
19. *I Want to Be a Dairy Farmer*, 1957
20. *I Want to Be a Homemaker*, 1961
21. *Igloos, Yurts, and Totem Poles*, 1957
22. *Jets of the World*, 1966
23. *Johnny Learns to Type*, 1960
24. *Let's Take a Trip to a Firehouse*, 1956
25. *Little Corpuscle*, 1965
26. *Oil for the World*, 1960
27. *People Who Work in the Country & in the City*, 1943
28. *Peter Enters the Jet Age*, 1967
29. *Rabbits*, 1948
30. *Red Light, Green Light*, 1944
31. *Satellites in Outer Space*, 1966
32. *Ships of Our Navy*, 1953
33. *Snakes*, 1949
34. *Television Works Like This*, 1965
35. *The Atom*, 1955
36. *The Doctor*, 1953
37. *The Peaceful Atom*, 1963
38. *The Skyscraper*, 1958
39. *The Space Ship Returns*, 1958
40. *The Story of Our Calendar*, 1949
41. *The Story of Submarines*, 1962
42. *The Sun: Our Nearest Star*, 1961
43. *The True Book of Chemistry*, 1962
44. *The True Book of Moon, Sun & Stars*, 1954
45. *Timmy and the Tin Can Telephone*, 1959
46. *Trucks on the Highway*, 1964
47. *What Does a Jet Pilot Do?*, 1959
48. *What Does an Astronaut Do?*, 1961
49. *What is a Rocket?*, 1961
50. *Your Telephone and How It Works*, 1952

collections. To determine how many science and technology books there were per student, I divided the total number of science and technology books by each school's current enrollment of students.

Findings

Age and Coverage

For this sample, the average copyright date is 1980, which means that science and technology books are approximately twenty years old (see table). Some 71 percent of the books are at least ten years old. On average, books about space (astronautics, Dewey number 629.4) are eighteen years old.

None of the schools I visited had any books on sex education (Dewey numbers 612.6 and 613.9). While sex education in Maryland does not appear in the curriculum until middle school, surely school librarians would want to consider purchasing at least one recommended book appropriate for curious elementary school readers.

Here are a few "fun titles" I found on the shelves: *At the Frozen Food Plant* (1959), *Computers at Your Service* (1962), *How the Derrick Works* (1930), *I Want to Be a Homemaker* (1961), *The Space Ship Returns* (1958), and *Timmy and the Tin Can Telephone* (1959) (see sidebar). As interesting as these titles sound to an adult, it's wise to remember that school libraries should not be historical collections. Young researchers need to be able to distinguish fact from fiction—especially in a state that emphasizes reading for understanding.

Comparison to a Standard Selection Source

For this study, less than 10 percent of the sample matched the titles recommended in *ESLC*. Note that schools #12 and #13 have the best library collections. It's clear that professional selection sources are used in purchasing books, and, in fact, these two representative county school districts have strong selection policies. Note, however, that their collections aren't stellar; books are more than eleven years old.

There is no magical number of how many library books should match a professional selection source—a 100 percent match to one selection source would indicate a generic collection, not one that reflected the unique learning needs of the school's students. Yet, it is safe to say that 10 percent is too low. Books that appear in *ESLC* have previously been recommended in periodical selection journals; the low percentage is a good indication that the librarians do not have access to periodical or print selection sources.

Another contributing factor is that only two districts in the entire state have established book review centers where librarians can examine new titles. Most school librarians in Maryland never get to see many of the three thousand to five thousand new books published every year.

Still another reason that the collections may be so poor correlates with lack of time. Many elementary school librarians teach all day long, provide planning time for teachers, and supervise the school's computer lab. No formal time is allocated to working on collection development—the backbone of the learning process. One librarian said, "I know I need to weed, but I can't do it until the summer on my own time." During the ninety minutes that I was in this

school, the librarian taught three classes and was asked for help by teachers using computers located in other rooms at least five times.

A Note About Some of the School Collections

Several years ago, the site team at school #15 purchased science books for the library. With 2,074 titles, this school has one of the largest collections in this study. Note, however, that only 4 percent of the titles match the standard selection source and that the titles are eighteen years old. It bears repeating again: Professional selection sources—not publishers' catalogs or dated bibliographies found in textbooks—provide the best and newest titles appropriate for school curriculum.

Notice that the books at school #6 are twenty-three years old, with an average copyright date of 1976—the year the building opened. In nearly every school I visited, I saw school mottos stating that reading and learning are important. The students in one school recite a daily learning pledge. One look at the library tells these young students that adults do not mean what they say.

Number of Books per Student

In this sample, there are less than three books per student. As mentioned earlier, the Maryland State Task Force on Reading states that there should be a minimum of twenty titles per student. Of course, this minimum standard is for the entire collection. Even so, three science and technology books per student seem problematic.

Cost to Upgrade Collections

To figure the cost of upgrading the collections, I used $16.66, the average price of a children's book as stated by *SLJ Online*. The eighth column on the table shows the cost of upgrading the collections to five books per student. Because school #9 has five books per student, their amount is listed as zero. The last two columns show the cost of upgrading the collections to books with copyright dates of 1990 and 1995. The amounts in the last two columns do not raise the collections to five books per student. In short, upgrading the eighteen library collections in this study to an average copyright date of 1990 will cost approximately $122,000. To improve them to an average copyright date of 1995, it will cost approximately $222,000.

Let's push this estimation a bit further. To improve the science and technology books in Maryland's 811 elementary schools to an average copyright date of 1995, it will cost nearly $10 million. Again, this amount does not raise the collections to five books per student. Since science and technology books comprise just 20 percent of a school library collection, the cost to upgrade all 811 elementary school collections to an average copyright date of 1995 would be almost $50 million.[23]

Conclusions and Recommendations

When confronted with such prohibitive costs, administrators might choose to close school libraries entirely. However our current economy is strong, and, in reality, there has not been a better time in the last twenty-five years to secure funding for school libraries. When deciding on what actions to take, the moral of one Aesop fable comes to mind—"Slow and steady wins the race."

Here are some basic suggestions for improving collections and securing funding:

- At the national level, school library leaders must work to obtain federal funding. To help, contact Mary Costabile at the ALA Washington office.
- At the state level, library leaders should determine the age of school library collections statewide and present findings and solutions to state legislatures.
- At the state and/or district level, determine what is an acceptable age for school library collections and what is an appropriate number of books per student.
- At the state, district, and school level, examine how Internet sources can be integrated with print and other media resources.
- At the district level, library supervisors should prepare reports for school boards and principals on the status of library collections. (Baltimore County recently approved $10 million for school libraries.) Also, district or site supervisors should ensure that all school librarians have access to professional selection sources, opportunities to review new books, access to current collection development policies that describe weeding and collection building, and uninterrupted planning time to work on collection development.
- At the school level, librarians should determine the age of their collection as a whole and by Dewey Decimal classification. Prepare a five-year collection development plan. Then present a one-page report to the principal. List a few of the worst books on the shelves. Refer to the research on student achievement and strong school libraries and reading initiatives. Also, consider presenting this information to your local parent organization. If you haven't received funding recently, it may be simply because you haven't requested it in a clearly written and dramatic report.

While this report is a snapshot of the science and technology books in eighteen elementary school libraries in Maryland, it is presented to describe strategies for conducting evaluations at other sites, and to raise the awareness of administrators and legislators about the condition of our nation's school libraries. ●

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    U—ugly (beyond repair)
    S—superseded (newer edition or better title)
    T—trivial (no merit)
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. . . reading **memories**

"MY MOST VIVID MEMORY is the year that I decided I like small, green books. . . . In that era of practical library bindings, there were a number of small, green books on the shelves. I worked my way around the room week by week, encountering some books that I have never forgotten." ●