

Advocating Together

Gaining success through concerted efforts

by Jim Rettig

On June 26, 2007, dozens of librarians took a break from their usual ALA Annual Conference activities to rally outdoors on Capitol Hill to support the SKILLS (Strengthening Kids' Interest in Learning and Libraries) Act. SKILLS will help ensure that every school employs a state-certified school library media specialist. Afterwards, a school librarian expressed surprise that I cared about this issue. Why wouldn't I care?

Abundant research demonstrates that school librarians contribute to students' academic achievement. Nevertheless, school systems eliminate librarian positions, leaving children behind. If a community loses its school librarians, students and parents turn to their public library to fill the void its school librarians can't. When students lacking library experience reach college, academic librarians provide remedial lessons so they won't be left behind at that level. All of us have a stake in the success of every library. Our advocacy efforts must support all types of libraries.

Just as SKILLS, ostensibly a school library issue, affects all of our libraries, so do other seemingly narrow issues. Legislation to make it possible to use orphaned works protected by copyright will benefit teachers, entertainers, and others, not just academic researchers. Growing e-government services primarily affect public libraries; however, citizens also turn to academic libraries for these services. Restoring EPA

libraries is an issue for everyone who breathes air or drinks water. Our libraries constitute an information ecosystem. If part of that system is weak or threatened, the whole is weak or threatened.

Our library associations don't always reflect that integrated ecosystem. Some states have multiple library associations representing the interests of various types of libraries. They advocate for the issues most important to their members, rarely with the support or collaboration of other associations. Our voice will be stronger and our results more gratifying if we unite to advance every issue that affects any part of the library ecology.

Technological change and other forces continually increase society's need for continuing education. No agency delivers lifelong learning opportunities as well as libraries. School, public, community college, and university libraries meet varied needs throughout the life span. Society's lifelong learning imperative gives our libraries common cause and a shared opportunity to convince the public, decision-makers, and funders that they also have a stake in the success of every library.

ALA has a long and proud history of library advocacy. Each year brings the opportunity to strengthen our advocacy program. In Anaheim last



Working together we can make the case for investing in all libraries so we can contribute even more to our communities.

month, ALA members gathered to brainstorm about the things our libraries have in common, the essentials of successful collaborations, lessons learned from past efforts, and ideas for the future.

Taking those ideas, a task force of experienced, energetic, creative advocates also met during Annual Conference and began work on an advocacy approach that promotes a healthy library info-ecosystem. Chaired by past ALA president Carol Brey-Casiano, the task force will work with members, ALA state chapters, and others to identify interests that transcend type-of-library differences and issues that demonstrate the library ecosystem's interdependence. It will also highlight and analyze successful collaborations between state associations that represent different segments of that ecosystem. The task force will develop case studies and strategies to help library advocates at every level create effective coalitions that leverage their collective strengths.

Our libraries' contributions to their communities are incredible. Working together we can make the case for investing in all libraries so we can contribute even more to our communities. ■

ALA President JIM RETTIG is university librarian at Boatwright Memorial Library, University of Richmond in Virginia.