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## Quality School Libraries for Every Child: An International Concern

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# Quality School Libraries for Every Child: An International Concern

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The movement toward the creation of school libraries grew dramatically during the last half of the twentieth century. Spurred on by the spread of compulsory education for all children and the goal of universal literacy, an effective school library with trained staff that could provide library and information services came to be viewed as central to the mission of the school.

## International Advocacy

At the heart of the international school library movement is a deeply-felt concern for the child. Principle 7 of the United Nations Declaration of the Right of the Child states: "The child is entitled to receive education which shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stages. He shall be given an education which will promote his general culture, and enable him on a basis of equal opportunity to develop his abilities, his individual judgment, and his moral sense of social responsibility, and to become a useful member of society." Adopted unanimously by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1959, this statement served to boost the growth of universal education as a right for children in both industrial and developing countries.

School libraries soon became a focus of educators. After the World Confederation of the Teaching Profession assemblies in the late 1960s, delegates interested in school libraries met to discuss their concerns. These meetings led first to the creation of an ad hoc committee and then, in 1971, to the founding of the International Association of School Libraries.

## International Association of School Libraries

The International Association of School Libraries (IASL) is the main organizational, educational, and advocacy association devoted exclusively to the school library. The IASL position statement on school libraries focuses the challenge for both government and public support around the globe: "The establishment of good school libraries can demonstrate that public authorities are fulfilling their

responsibilities to implement education that will enable children to become useful members of the global society and develop each child's individual potential. A good school library with a qualified school librarian is a major factor in developing quality education."

## School Library Manifesto

Working with the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and UNESCO, the School Library manifesto was ratified by the 39th UNESCO General Conference in 1999. In a manner similar to the philosophy stated in the American Association of School Librarians' 1998 publication, *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning*, it states: "The school library provides information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning successfully in today's information and knowledge-based society. The school library equips students with lifelong learning skills and develops the imagination, enabling them to live as responsible citizens."

In reaffirming the school library as integral to the educational process, it focuses on the following goals:

- a. Supporting and enhancing educational goals of the school's mission and curriculum
- b. Developing and sustaining in children the habit and enjoyment of reading and learning and in the use of libraries throughout their lives
- c. Supporting all students in learning and practicing skills for evaluating and using information in all formats
- d. Organizing activities that encourage cultural and social awareness and sensitivity
- e. Advocating for intellectual freedom and access to information
- f. Promoting reading, resources, and services of the school library to the entire community.

These goals are applicable both to industrial countries with a history of school libraries as well as to countries that are currently establishing library services to students.

## IASL Activities and Services

IASL encourages these goals through their publications and conferences. *School Libraries Worldwide* is a journal published twice yearly. Annual conferences are held around the world and sponsored with other associations. I attended the 1998 IASL conference, *Education for All: Culture, Reading and Information*, in Ramat-Gan, Israel, in 1998. I was immediately aware of the similarities of activities and issues facing school libraries regardless of country. Discussions revolved around the need for teacher-librarian collaboration, successes in literature promotion efforts, the challenges of teaching information literacy skills, and the need for library advocacy. Much of this is captured in A

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*Day in the Life ...*, a themed issue of *School Libraries Worldwide* (Vol. 6, No. 1, January 2000.) Here school librarians from Sierra Leone, Korea, Australia, Botswana, Canada, and Japan, as well as other locations share a typical day. The authors of these stories represent a worldwide profession that has much in common regardless of whether they work in a busy, urban center or miles from another population center. They all relate busy, sometimes unorganized and even chaotic days in which they respond to the needs of students and teachers as they arise. They would all agree that the school librarian should be active in the school and community. The languages and demographics vary, but all librarians seem dedicated to literacy and developing information accessing skills for their students.

School librarians in developing countries face many problems, such as low literacy rates of parents, the need to purchase books in many languages, and often very little funding or administrative support. These concerns, as well as similarities, are shared in an ongoing manner on the School Libraries listserv, IASL-LINK.

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## IFLA and Its Role

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being done in Third World countries, especially in Africa. In 1998, IFLA's Regional Section for Africa launched a staff development program to increase staff competency, professionalism and professional growth in African countries whose people are some of the most isolated in the world. IFLA recognizes the socio-economic barriers that must be overcome in less-developed countries to enable them to access the benefits brought through the GII. International literacy is also a key issue that IFLA hopes to impact through initiatives and policy recommendations. One of the fastest growing round tables is women's issues (RTWI), which has focused on wide-ranging issues such as the status of women librarians in various countries, the need to target women in developing countries, and providing service to community women. A recent RTWI conference drew speakers from the International Information Center and Archives for the Women's Movement in Amsterdam; the Korean Women's Development Institute in Seoul; the Center for Women in Ekaterinburg, Russia; Bulawayo, Zimbabwe; and Rabat, Morocco. Issue papers on emerging concerns such as the international forum on copyright law, the decline of government funding, and outreach to latchkey children, reflect IFLA's total commitment to world betterment through libraries. One member, Duane E. Webster, summed up that commitment clearly when he stated that "We face an exciting era where new technology must be viewed as a precious public asset to be leveraged for the benefit of society as a whole, not as an exploitable economic commodity for the monetary gain of a few." (Wedgeworth, 1995) 

### International School Library Day

International School Library Day, a celebration of school libraries, started in 1999 and is held annually on the third Monday in October. People involved in school librarianship are encouraged to celebrate and advocate for school libraries on that date. Librarians are encouraged to organize an activity in their school library for parents, students, teachers, and community members to celebrate the role that school libraries play in education. And in a continuation of the *A Day in the Life ...* activities, librarians and others are invited to send an electronic message to the Web site describing their local International School Library Day activities. These efforts aim to promote a sense of community among people who are involved in school librarianship around the world. 

Future IASL conferences will include New Zealand in 2001 and Malaysia in 2002. Contact information for IASL in the U.S. is: IASL, Suite 300, Box 34069, Seattle, WA 98124. The Web site is <http://www.iasl-slo.org>.

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