April 28, 2017

The Honorable Elsie Arntzen
Montana Office of Public Instruction
P.O. Box 202501
Helena, Montana 59620-2501

Dear Superintendent Arntzen,

On behalf of the Montana Library Association Board, I would like to request that members of the school library community be engaged in the small focus group process as you gather additional information for the re-submission of the ESSA Consolidated State Plan.

In the paragraphs that follow, I explain the provisions in ESSA that are germane to school libraries and librarians. I also explain how school libraries and school librarians are integral to these priorities.

- Under Title I, Part A, ESSA includes new provisions that authorize school districts to include in their local plans how they will assist schools in developing effective school library programs to provide students an opportunity to develop digital literacy skills and improve academic achievement.
- Under Title II, Part A, ESSA includes new provisions that authorize States, as well as school districts, to use grant and subgrant funds for “supporting the instructional services provided by effective school library programs.”
- Under Title II, Part B, Subpart 2, ESSA specifically authorizes school librarians to participate in required grant activities that focus on children in kindergarten through grade 5 as well as activities that focus on children in grades 6 through 12. In addition, ESSA allows all local subgrants (that serve children in kindergarten through grade 5 and/or children in grades 6 through 12) to be used to provide time for teachers and school librarians to meet, plan and collaborate on comprehensive literacy instruction.
- Under Title II, Part B, Subpart 2, Section 2226, (Innovative Approaches to Literacy), ESSA specifically authorizes funds to be used for developing and enhancing effective school library programs which includes providing professional development for school librarians, books, and up-to-date materials to high need schools.
Finally, under Title IV, Part A, ESSA authorizes States to use funds to assist school districts in providing programs and activities that increase access to personalized, rigorous learning experiences supported by technology, including adequate “access to school libraries.” This Title also authorizes States to use funds to assist school districts in providing school librarians and other school personnel with the knowledge and skills to use technology effectively, including effective integration of technology, to improve instruction and student achievement.

Thanks to the Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM 10.55.709 and 10.55.1801) our Montana schools have made the tradition of commitment to equal opportunity for all students by providing for school librarians and libraries in every Montana school. Libraries and teacher librarians are the heart of learning in a school, offering students the tools to prepare for college and career, to develop the crucial skills and habits of information literacy, and support for the curriculum they study. They plan, organize, administer, and manage diverse human, financial, and physical resources. School librarians are organized for effective communication and management of resources for students and staff. Literacy and technology are the backbone of their training and expertise.

There is a significant body of research that supports quality library media programs in every school. One of the latest studies was published in 2015. The goal of this study was to evaluate the correlation between a quality school library program staffed by licensed school librarians and student achievement. The researchers found that students who attended schools with licensed school librarians performed better on standardized tests. Along with improved testing scores, the presence of a licensed school librarian on staff has a strong positive correlation to the school’s five year graduation rate (Coker 2015). It is important that Montana stay progressive in educational initiatives by providing resources for effective school library programs. All students and staff benefit from licensed school librarians who are the great equalizers for school size and student socio-economic levels.

Montana school librarians and libraries improve the nonacademic student outcomes in all Montana public schools by tailoring unique library programs to meet the needs of their students and broader community. Below is a sampling of library programs found across Montana that nurture the whole child.

- Extending the library’s hours before and after the traditional school day, thus providing a safe and welcoming place for all students to relax, read, study and be with friends.
- Creating makerspaces in libraries where students have the opportunity to engage in hands-on STEM activities like crafts, coding, robotics, and electronics.
- Assisting students one-on-one with college applications and research projects.
- Inviting students to join library sponsored events like Book Clubs, Genius Clubs and Battle of the Books Competitions.
- Providing a variety of guest speakers to speak in the library during lunch on high interest topics.

Most importantly, school librarians are in the unique position to form connections with all students in the school and to assist them with their social-emotional growth as well as academic growth over the course of their K-12 career.
With the help of ESSA funding, school libraries and librarians are eager to support and actively engage in the successful implementation of ESSA in our public schools.

Cordially,

Lisa Mecklenberg Jackson
President, Montana Library Association

cc: The Honorable Steve Bullock, Governor
    Tim Tharp, Deputy Superintendent, OPI
    Susie Hedalen, Director of Educational Services, OPI
    Siri Smillie, Education Policy Advisor, Governor’s Office
    Jennie Stapp, State Librarian

For more information please contact: Dr. Ann Ewbank, ESSA Steering Committee, Montana Library Association at 406.994.5788 or ann.ewbank@montana.edu.