

## **The Role of Foundations and Philanthropy in Supporting School Libraries**

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Madame First Lady, honored guests:

I'm delighted to be here to help celebrate the launch of the Laura Bush Foundation, which is dedicated to a cause that could not be more important or timely: helping school libraries become full partners in promoting the love of reading and learning among all children.

Your leadership has given all of us considerable cause for optimism that school libraries will at last reach their rightful place in the national education firmament. For that alone we are grateful.

I'd like to address the Wallace Funds' experiences working with school libraries and the lessons we've learned over the last decade from our initiative called Library Power. Specifically,

- How school libraries can support national education goals, particularly in meeting the bold challenges outlined in this administration's historic *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*.
- Current threats to Library reform.
- And finally, how foundations can help support reform.

In 1988, before libraries had Internet access, and even before librarians were called "media specialists," the Wallace Funds began Library Power. Our goal was to work with a select number of schools to reverse years of neglect of libraries. We wanted to help school libraries become full partners in improving teaching and learning. We sought to discover how to transform libraries into educational centers that could work much more closely and effectively with teachers and the classroom curriculum to help all students succeed.

When we began our work, school libraries were in terrible condition. Chronic budget crises of the 1970s in New York City and elsewhere had left a legacy of libraries that were dark, unfriendly, and unstaffed where they existed at all. As you might imagine, the worst conditions were in schools in high-need communities.

I visited some of these schools.

In some, library books were scattered among classrooms because schools could no longer afford to keep their library spaces open. Books were few in number, old and falling apart. Encyclopedias in some libraries were so shockingly out of date that Eisenhower's election was treated as a current event. Remember, this was 1988. We had put men on the moon nearly 20 years earlier – but these children couldn't read about it in their school library. Libraries were disconnected from the life and learning of classrooms. And where libraries existed at all, students seldom spent more than an hour a week in them. School librarians themselves were often expected to be little more than babysitters left in charge when the classroom teacher dropped students off.

A dozen years later, Library Power has taught us that these conditions CAN be changed.

In the 700 schools and 19 communities where the Wallace Funds invested directly, Library Power has helped renovate library space, purchase new books, map library resources to the goals of the classroom curriculum, and create professional development opportunities and tools for teachers and librarians. Libraries became warm, welcoming spaces, with up-to-date material that connected and reinforced the lessons students were learning in their classrooms. The libraries were open before and after school and operated on flexible schedules during school hours so students could come in to check out a book or look up an important fact for an assignment without waiting for their regularly-scheduled class time.

Library Power demonstrated that school libraries can be a positive influence on curriculum, instruction, and professional development.

When teachers and librarians work and plan together, they both can establish shared goals for student learning. Together they can analyze curriculum, identify weaknesses, and develop

interdisciplinary lessons that enrich the subject matter. This is a sea change in many schools. As one school leader reported: “Before, the school librarians were the weakest link...Now we see them at the front end of the curriculum.”

We’ve also learned that leadership is critical to successful school library reform. Within schools, principals must ensure that teachers and librarians have time to meet with one another and can hold them directly accountable for that collaboration. Outside of school, community organizations, parents and residents must also support these new practices.

Another important lesson: compatible policies matter. Local, state, and national policies affect what schools value and prioritize. That’s why it is so important that the *No Child Left Behind Act* calls attention to school libraries. The Act provides federal dollars to help schools provide up-to-date school library materials, technology that can help to develop the information retrieval and critical thinking skills of students, professional development for school library media specialists, activities that foster increased collaboration between school librarians, teachers and administrators, and access to school libraries during non-school hours.

We know that this combination of factors work, because they are similar to the elements of the Library Power program. A key finding of the evaluation conducted by the University of Wisconsin was that changes fostered by Library Power helped schools engage students in rich learning. Using updated library materials, many teachers expanded the curriculum to include assignments that focused students on using reading, research, and critical information skills. For example, in one school library sixth graders studying the Civil War used books, CD ROMs and the Internet to analyze and interpret information, develop timelines, graph casualties, write poems, and present dramatic readings based on historical events.

Finally, we know that school libraries need not be just for students. At School 15 in Paterson, NJ, parents and teachers are deeply involved in the library. Students use it for school projects. Teachers discuss lesson plans with librarians. Parents use its Internet connections to research topics of personal and professional interest. As one Paterson librarian told us: “Everyone likes the library. It occupies a special place in the life of the school – and the whole community, too.”

In short, Library Power enabled schools to strengthen instruction, teach students how to effectively research and analyze information, and create connections between teachers and librarians committed to delivering high quality education. All for an average annual cost of \$17 a student. And that includes the program's start-up costs. Librarians suggested that with efficient use of school personnel and resources, the cost could be half, or less than \$9 per student.

We thought that all of this was timely a decade ago. If anything, it's more urgent today. The lessons of Library Power demonstrate that school library reform can provide all districts with important support in meeting the goal of leaving no child behind. Yet the longstanding threats to school library reform never seem far off. There are still far too many who do not see that school libraries are places where students get excited about learning, where they learn to dig deeper into their subjects and where they find that knowledge is without limits. Because of that, too many continue to see school libraries as "frills," not as vital resources that are critical to success in schools. So it is important to continue to build on the powerful lessons from Library Power. And that's where foundations can play an important part.

When we think about creating positive national change, the role of foundations, especially large, national ones, is not just about money. While Library Power had directly benefited some 700 school libraries over the last decade, there are thousands more we haven't touched. No foundation initiative by itself can carry the load of national reform. What we CAN do, when we are successful, is provide practical lessons on the ideas we've tested so that others can decide their value and whether they are worthy of emulation. That's why we were so delighted when the American Library Association adopted Library Power as a model for school libraries, endorsing the belief that school libraries are full partners with teachers in deepening understanding and providing pathways to learning that classrooms alone can't offer.

We've come a long way since 1988, but there's still a long way to go. The galvanizing effect of the establishment of the Laura Bush Foundation and your personal commitment to the issue, Madame First Lady, will increase the momentum toward making all school libraries powerful and creative places of learning – places filled with children digging into books on dinosaurs, with students looking up Civil War poetry, and with young and old alike developing an appetite for learning that stays with them for life.