



## **Look in School Libraries For Graduation Rates**

By Sharyn Merrigan & Craig Seasholes

Our community's investment in public education of our children is central to our social, civic and economic future. This commitment determines everything else: the effectiveness of public safety; the quality of infrastructure and social services; and the never-ending need businesses have for an education workforce.

To that end, results from a recently released new study show the huge profit to be made for us all by slightly increasing just one small premium: Investing more in certified teacher-librarians (CTLs) for all of Washington's public schools.

"Students who attend schools with certified teacher-librarians and quality library facilities perform better on standardized tests and are more likely to graduate," reports Dr. Elizabeth Coker, who has just completed an exhaustive report, Certified Teacher-Librarians, Library Quality and Student Achievement in Washington State Public Schools for the Washington Library Media Association.

"However ... it is the quality of the library facility and related instructional services rather than its presence or absence that makes a difference for student achievement," according to Coker, who drew her analysis from the 1,486 out of 2,428 K-12 schools in Washington state responding to her 40-question survey.

According to the report, one plausible explanation for the higher achievement levels and graduation rates in schools with CTLs on staff is that CTLs "are far more likely to be directly involved in teaching curriculum-designed around Common Core standards." Additionally, "CTL-staffed libraries are more likely to use up-to-date library curriculum developed in collaboration with general education teachers."

More importantly, "CTLs carry a heavy load of teaching responsibilities focused on information technology; skills that are necessary for success in higher education as well as virtually any profession in today's world."

That, to us, hits the target dead center in explaining why some schools excel and other don't: Information technology, and the role CTLs have in raising the information literacy of students whose teachers have all they can handle teaching basic education or whose schools only have a volunteer, part-time or one fulltime librarian on staff.

The importance of this cannot be over-stated, as our favorite observation in Coker's report points out, "CTLs are actively involved in teaching students and collaborating with other teachers to ensure that students graduate with the skills needed to

differentiate, for example, between a peer-reviewed published research paper and somebody's late-night blog on the same topic." We'll forever need policymaking based on the former, if we are to make and have made for us informed decisions.

No surprise that wealthier school districts would do better than poorer ones in graduation rates. Their resources allow for some CTLs, but one finding in the report I would commend to everyone responsible for shaping an education budget is this: "... while high-poverty schools do have worse graduation rates than low-poverty schools, this gap is not inevitable; and one key factor distinguishing high-performing high-poverty schools from low-performing high-poverty schools is a quality library program."

That, we believe, makes as strong a case for CTLs in every school, not just the ones able to afford it. Yet, the state of Washington has cut approximately 200 CTLs from schools for the past 15 years, and many school districts have eliminated librarians and library programs entirely.

It always puzzles us to hear people say their obligation to education ended when their children graduated. Really? You don't have an investment in making sure that future EMT now going to school knows how to make the right decision while trying to resuscitate your life? Or, that children now going kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade know how to apply the latest technologies to everything you will ever need help in doing for your remaining years.

Certified teacher-librarians are an investment of pennies on the dollar for yields of nickels, dimes and quarters. They're fulfilling a function classroom teachers and non-certified library staff aren't able to do, and that is instilling technological literacy in students living in a state that fancies itself a tech leader.

You get what you pay for, and Dr. Coker's report is the first to show what we are getting in a little-known component of education that returns much more than it receives.

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