



Pennsylvania  
Library  
Association

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*A Chapter of the American Library Association*

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Good morning members of the Basic Education Funding Commission and thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Christi Buker, and I am the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Library Association. Founded in 1901, we are a non-profit, charitable organization with a current membership of more than 1200 representing public libraries, academic and university libraries, school libraries, special libraries and the staff and trustees of these libraries.

I know that you already received testimony from Dr. Laura Ward a past president of the PA School Librarians Association. We agree that there is significant value and importance to having a certified school librarian in each school, and a well-resourced school library. We support and believe in the great work of school librarians. Since you've already heard about school libraries, my testimony today is focused on how Pennsylvania's public libraries already positively impact education and have the potential to be a larger part of the solution to the equitable and quality educational needs of our residents, particularly our youth.

In Pennsylvania, we have 467 state-aided public libraries with an additional 175 branches and 20 bookmobiles for a total of 662 library outlets. The Office of Commonwealth Libraries within the PA Department of Education collects data annually to verify a public library's eligibility to receive state aid. From the 2022 annual report data, there are almost 5,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff in public libraries. Roughly 60% of these are part-time workers which means there are well over 8000 library workers in PA. Approximately 85% of our public libraries are IRS registered 501(c)(3) non-profit, charitable organizations. More than 100 of these libraries operate with less than \$100,000 each year, and some as small as \$30,000. While not ideal, our libraries operate very leanly. Yet, these lean public libraries are powerful in contributing to the literacy and education of all ages.

For the discussion of basic education, I'd like to highlight that libraries provide extensive focus on early learners from birth to kindergarten, after-school programs and resources for school-aged children, summer reading and learning programs that have multiple benefits, support for teachers and homeschoolers, and career development tools. While the Commonwealth is still working to provide broadband and technology resources across the state, public libraries provide internet access, computers and in many cases Wi-Fi hot spots to check out.

From birth to kindergarten, libraries provide a range of story times that show enthusiasm, joy of reading and exploring, group social interactions, and model practices for parents and caregivers to support these early learners. Activities and resources for early learners range from books, special audio books, computer resources and special software for preschoolers, games and small manipulatives that teach essential motor skills to prepare them for kindergarten. Libraries designated as Family Place Libraries ([www.familyplacelibraries.org](http://www.familyplacelibraries.org)) also provide essential connection as community centers for developing not just the child, but the parent-child relationship and development and support of parenting skills through connections to community resources. Whether a child is able to attend a formal pre-school program or not, the library is a great place to encourage and equip early learners.

School age learners often find the library as an after-school destination. With caring, trained, and helpful staff, the library has materials and programs for a variety of interests. From STEM programs, learning coding, comic book clubs, or reading to a friendly canine, libraries offer so many ways to explore and learn. Many libraries provide access to online



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resources such as Tutor.com which provides online one on one tutoring, and options in other languages. Of course, libraries are also a frequent meeting place for local, in-person tutors and their students.

Summer reading and learning programs provide excitement and encouragement for engaging young brains and reducing the “summer slide” or loss of skills when they aren’t in formal educational settings. While programs vary across the commonwealth, summer reading programs are a major activity at the library to support essential reading skills and education. These also provide no or low-cost activities in safe spaces. In 2022, more than 91,000 programs were offered for ages birth through 11, and another 14,000 were offered to ages 12 through 18. While some libraries are not able to offer programs due to a lack of funding or space, simply averaging the total number of programs across 662 library results would be an average of 158 programs over one year.

Secondary level students have access to more robust research and learning tools. Whether accessing the automotive repair source, or taking free online skill development and certification classes, libraries offer career exploration and development resources. PowerLibrary.org offers free eResource cards to all Pennsylvania residents and includes access to learning languages through Transparent Languages or Duolingo.

Perhaps the greatest benefits of public libraries are summarized in saying that they are welcoming places of voluntary inquiry and learning, for all ages, and open days, nights, and weekends. Families with members of all ages, and regardless of resource and educational levels, can use a public library.

The Basic Education Funding Commission has a difficult task to find better ways to fund and distribute educational resources. Not all public libraries in Pennsylvania are able to provide some of these K-12 educational programs and resources due to a lack of funding. One recommendation we would like to offer is that public libraries, with expanded funding for staff, be utilized through their existing infrastructure, programs and activities to support and deepen the education of our young people.

Yes, public libraries already positively contribute to education and literacy in Pennsylvania, and if properly funded and leveraged, can do more.

To quote our PA Forward® initiative tagline from 2011, “Literacy is POWER, Libraries provide the fuel, for you, for your community, for Pennsylvania.”

Sincerely,

Christi Buker, CAE  
Executive Director