

It's all in the Game

Ann Perham, MSLMA President

All of life is a game, with stakes, rules, winners and losers. Education is also a game, with student achievement as the goal. School libraries and library teachers need to be prominent players or we will be voted off the island, like the game of "Survivor". My mission as president of MSLMA has been not only to advocate for school libraries and get them into the educational game, but it's also been to bring more players into the game.

Hard Facts: School Libraries have been left out of the game

Despite the abundance of studies proving the connection between strong school libraries and student achievement, Massachusetts school libraries lack a well-defined role in the game of education. When the rules for Ed Reform were written, school libraries were completely left out. It's up to the principal, who holds all the cards with site-based management, to elect to fund a library program. Too many of our principals do not have the vision of what a library classroom can be. As town budgets experience shortfalls, it's the school libraries that take a disproportionate "hit". Witness the situation in Newton, where the town proposes to balance its budget on the backs of the elementary school libraries by firing 50% of the library teachers. That's what happens when you aren't written into the rules.

On March 16th, the executive board of MSLMA had a roundtable discussion with Connie Louie, Director of Instructional Technology with the Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE). The question was asked, "Why does the DOE have technology standards, but not library standards?" The DOE has refused to endorse the MSLMA "Standards for 21st Century Learning" and will not link to our standards. MSLMA has offered to work with the DOE to formulate standards that could parallel the technology standards. Essentially, the answer that we got is that unlike technology that has the e-rate funds for which districts need to have an approved technology plan, school libraries do not have any similar "stake" in education. Funds are all granted on the local level. In the roundtable discussion, the point was made that school libraries need to have their long-range plans in place in order to qualify for LSTA grants. Connie did not see what role the DOE would have in this process but suggested people MSLMA might talk to. MSLMA will continue the dialog with the DOE, and Connie has agreed to consider the inclusion of a library exhibit or session at the 2006 Spring Technology Conferences. At this point, technology has the "monopoly" on Boardwalk and Park Place and owns all the railroads. School libraries are not players in this game and until we have a legislative mandate, the DOE cannot help us.

The inclusion of school libraries in the regional library system has been a positive development for education, but it is not a perfect system; rules need to be added to the game. On one hand, school libraries have membership in the regions and enjoy the benefits, provided they employ a certified library teacher. This rule is advantageous to school libraries because it keeps the standards high and it may be the only criteria that

affects elementary libraries in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (MBLC), however, does not see its role as establishing standards for school libraries. The regional library system is there for those programs that self-elect to join and meet their criteria.

The MBLC sees school libraries as being under the auspices of the DOE, yet the DOE does not acknowledge any role in establishing standards for libraries in their schools towards furthering student achievement. Ed Reform is “mute” when it comes to school libraries. Connie Louie stressed that, “We are just bureaucrats.” With no legislative mandate to fund school libraries, the DOE cannot do anything for school libraries. So, the cold hard fact is that school libraries have been left out of the game. MSLMA understands that if school libraries are to survive, we need to change the rules via legislation.

We are trying to figure out how school libraries fit into the Game of Education. On March 18th and 19th, twelve MSLMA members represented Massachusetts in New York City at a National Leadership Summit, sponsored by School Library Journal. Evan St. Lifer, Editor of SLJ had a vision of gathering all the stakeholders together to examine the state of school libraries and to work together to develop solutions. Evan realized that rather than talking just to ourselves, school librarians need to problem-solve with legislators, superintendents, federal Department of Education, book publishers, colleges and public librarians. For two days, these leaders worked on the three challenges: Literacy, Student Achievement and 21st Century Learning Skills/Technology. This is not a once-and-done event, but rather the start of a continuous effort towards changing the game from “Survivor” to “Students WIN”.

Team Play: Joining together

Given the state of school libraries in Massachusetts, it is imperative that we school librarians play together, as a team. It is a grim image, but I am thinking back to Benjamin Franklin and the leaders of the Colonies as they debated declaring independence. His admonishment has been echoing in my ears, “We must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we will all hang separately.” No one is literally going to hang, but we have already witnessed the massacre of school library programs in Massachusetts. Without the foundation of legislation or Ed Reform, we are at the mercy of the budget guillotine unless we stick together and work as one for change via legislation.

MSLMA is the lone voice in Massachusetts that advocates for school libraries, yet we cannot say that every library teacher belongs to MSLMA. Why not? The Game of Education is not a spectator sport – those who watch will be left out and even perish. We are ALL busy with our programs and we feel like the Lone Ranger, but we need to prioritize and make time to become informed and active in the state of school libraries. The daily routines of our libraries are like dusting in housework – they will always be there. MAKE the time to join a committee and advocate for your profession; it will ultimately benefit you, your programs and your students. If you are reading this, you already probably already a member of MSLMA, but who do you know who isn't a member? Reach out! Remember what it feels like to be invited and wanted. After you

print an MSLMA membership application and give it to someone who needs it, offer to share rides to the conference, or to join a task force together. Help them to connect to the MSLMA listserv, our professional lifeline. Attend your area meetings together and look around – who else needs to be invited to join?

Not a Spectator Sport

I am sad to say that in many ways, we are our own worst enemy. Is it apathy, fueled by constant beatings and demoralizing cuts? Or, are we letting ourselves take the excuse of “I don’t really matter.” I was appalled to learn that in last year’s ALA election, the school library candidate, Barb Stripling, lost by a miniscule margin. The crime was not that she lost, but rather that only 17% of the school librarian AASL members voted! What is wrong with us? We teach civic duty to our students and model acceptable behavior, yet we cannot be bothered to vote in the national library election? Worse yet, consider how many of us are NOT members of ALA and AASL? Yes, it costs \$90 to join ALA and another \$40 to join AASL, but what a small price to pay to be represented, especially considering the cost of being cut. Every one of us DOES count and we NEED to hang together.

For two years as your MSLMA president, you have listened to me as I urge you to SHOUT rather than whine, and I am so proud of what I am hearing and seeing. I believe in the importance of participating, taking charge of our future and not waiting in the wings for someone else to decide our fate. Granted, sometimes we cannot decide, but there are many opportunities for us to DO something that demonstrates our integral role in student achievement. I am heartened to welcome new players to our executive board and to our task forces. Thank you for stepping forward. Always, I hear the words of Joan Gallagher, MSLMA president from 1999 to 2001, “If we all do a little, we can accomplish so much.” There is power in numbers, so let’s play the game together, as a team.

It has been a privilege to serve as the president of MSLMA. At times, it has felt like a two-year marathon, but I think it’s more of an Indian Run. With an Indian Run, the pace is set by the leader, who challenges all runners to keep up. This lead runner decides the path, direction and speed of the run. Before the pace slacks off, the runner at the end of the line sprints to the front, becomes the leader and takes the responsibility of setting the pace and charting the course. It may not be the perfect metaphor for the MSLMA leadership, but I think that you get the picture. Kathy Lowe is ready to go with energy and ideas; she has been preparing for her two years as the #1 runner and we are ready to follow her lead.

An Invitation to be Involved

I will be dropping back, but hardly out of sight. I am looking forward to putting more time into the MSLMA webpage, working for legislation, supporting School Library Month celebration, and planning the MSLMA Conference. I encourage you to join me on these and other committees, or stepping up to the Executive Board.

Looking back, I clearly remember being invited in 1999 to join the eBoard as webmaster, and in 2003 being asked by the nominating committee to accept the position of

president-elect. To each of these invitations to “join the game”, to be a player, I said “no”. How could I? After all, I had a new program, five kids, and....and...and... After thinking about it, I realized that I could and that I would “join the game” – in fact, I needed to. This was my chance to make a difference. I would like to think that I have made a difference in the school library world, but in truth, this experience as president of MSLMA has been a two-way street and it has made a difference in me.

Thank you for letting me play the game and I invite you to join in.