Towards Provincial Standards: The Alberta Experience — Mission Possible

by Blanche Friderichsen

Abstract

Lobbying and political advocacy have resulted in Alberta Education's Minister, David King, approving **Policy, Guidelines, Procedures and Standards for School Libraries in Alberta.** Vested interest groups, along with Alberta Education initiatives, have resulted in considerable action to improve school library services and programs in spite of financial restraint.

Against a background of financial restraint and the continuing erosion of teacher-librarian positions, Alberta's Minister of Education, David King announced approval of a School Library Policy in November, 1984. At that time he acknowledged that "an effective school library can have a major influence on a student's academic achievement."

Policy Guidelines, Procedures and Standards for School Libraries in Alberta (Alberta Education, 1984) is but one of a number of steps recently taken by the Department of Education to improve the quality of education in terms of the management and financing of education. Major departmental thrusts are in four dimensions: 1. The legal framework of the education system; 2. The management of education; 3. Program considerations with an emphasis on results, and; 4. Effectiveness of teaching — learning process.

The school library policy initiative falls

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under the dimension of Program Considerations which are intended to affect students directly or indirectly.

STATUS QUO

Alberta is divided into 149 local school districts, each with a school board and a superintendent. Provincial funding is provided to these local districts who have considerable administrative control over their schools. However, in most districts funding is decentralized to the individual school where the principal, in cooperation with the staff, determine how the funds will be allocated. This has led to a diversity of school library services and programs ranging from dismal, to what some have described as lighthouse programs in North America.

A recent provincial survey of its 1648 schools reveals that of the 1386 schools reporting, over 100 do not have a school library. Of those schools with a library, 42 percent are administered by a teacher-librarian half-time or more. The remainder are administered by a library technician (16 percent) or clerical (42 percent). Most clericals have little or no library or teacher education; 92 percent of the teacher-librarians do not have the minimum qualifications recommended by the new standards (8 half courses in librarianship and instructional technology). Facilities range from "showcase" to non-existent, and collections of resources from sophisticated to a close competitor for an 'archives of the decade' award.

Alberta administrators are probably not very different from their colleagues throughout Canada in the importance they place on having a library in the school. From that common goal there are varied perceptions as to the real function of a school library. Few Alberta schools have developed goals and objectives for library services, and fewer still have policies in place for collection development. This situation is perhaps understandable when one would be hard pressed to even find the word "library" in any of the Alberta Education curriculum documents or statements of educational policy.

ACTION

Scene 1

The mission for improved school library service began to look possible in 1982 when the Library Association of Alberta orchestrated an informal luncheon with a dozen school librarians at the annual library conference, and invited the Minister of Education not to speak, but to enjoy the food and fellowship. A frank and lively discussion about school libraries ensued. That evening, when the Minister spoke to the entire association, he publicly announced that libraries are important to the school system, but Alberta Education had never said this, and he intended to change that position. And so school libraries became part of a major review of educational programs, legislation and financial administration that has been an on-going activity for the past two and a half years.

With a little help from the two provincial associations for libraries, the mass media provided the visibility required for school library issues to become a more prominent educational topic for educators and the general public than ever before.

Scene II

True to his word, the Minister struck a Task Force on School Libraries with a mandate to:

1. Identify the major problems and issues affecting school libraries.
2. Identify the alternatives for the resolution of these issues.
3. Advance a position with respect to these alternatives.
4. Describe the major characteristics and services of an effective school library.

Traditionally one would have expected a Task Force membership of persons with a vested interest in school libraries, or the typical procedure of representation from stakeholder groups such as superintendents, school trustees, and the teachers' association. Instead, the committee was composed of four associate directors of curriculum, with peripheral knowledge or experience in school library services, and one representative of the vested interested group. This was a less costly approach, because travelling expenses and honoraria for committee meetings were not necessary. It proved to be a good combination. Not only did it raise awareness about school library services among key persons associated with curriculum, but also it provided a wider perspective for committee deliberations.

Scene III

By the end of 1982 the Task Force position paper was completed and sent to the Minister with a recommendation that it be widely distributed. The Minister preferred a low-key stance and only invited response from five key stakeholder groups — school superintendents, school trustees, the Home and School Association, the provincial library association and the provincial teachers' association.

These groups were asked to react by June 1983 to two questions: 1) Does the paper identify the key issues for school libraries in Alberta at this time? and 2) Are the five issue statements appropriate and valid?

In essence, the position paper reiterated the wide disparity in both quality and quantity of school library services to students in the province and identified five interrelated issues for discussion.

Issue 1: What should be the role of the school library in the overall instructional program of the school?

Issue 2: Whose responsibility is it to develop policy direction for school libraries, and what kinds of policies are needed?

Issue 3: Who should establish standards and guidelines for school libraries, and should these be expressed in quantitative or qualitative terms?

Issue 4: Is professional direction at the school and/or district level a critical component of an effective library program?

Issue 5: Is there a real shortage of funding to support effective library services?

Again, the provincial library association and the Learning Resources Council (an affiliate of the Alberta Teachers' Association) were not about to let the issuance of this Position Paper go unnoticed. Their action plan extended to all corners of the province and was one of visibility, political advocacy and lobbying. And what better time to lobby than with a provincial election planned for October 1983?

The parameters for affirmative action to keep school libraries in the public eye were set as a result of two significant activities. The first was an invitational symposium, sponsored by the Learning Resources Council (L.R.C.) to hear varying points of view prior to formulating their response to the Position Paper. A copy of the L.R.C. response, which was an outgrowth of this symposium, was sent to all Members of the Legislature and to the Deputy Minister of Education.

The second significant activity was a speaker at the 1983 annual library conference who detailed how marketing and organizational behavioral theories can be applied to promote school library issues to decision makers.

This speaker also chaired the provincial library association committee, whose decision it was to devote the major portion of their 1983 annual brief to the government to school libraries.

As a follow-up to this presentation, members of the L.R.C. hosted coffee and dessert sessions to write letters to government members to reinforce the points in the brief. They also mounted an awareness campaign which suggested arranging for M.L.A.'s to visit their local school libraries. They formed citizens' committees and encouraged teachers to get kids talking about their school library at home. Furthermore, they advocated contact with all candidates for the October elections to insure they understood and would support library issues. Not overlooked was the leverage parents have in influencing many vital decisions.

To facilitate this contact as well as to provide a basis for discussions with local M.L.A.'s, parent groups, public library trustees and the media, a short document was prepared. It outlined the issues facing school libraries and emphasized the importance of students becoming information literate as a prerequisite to lifelong learning.

All of this, combined with a very positive and consistent response to the Position Paper not only from the stakeholder groups, but also from concerned parents, citizens and teacher-librarians, led to the Minister asking the Task Force to reconvene and prepare another paper setting out policy, guidelines, procedures and standards for Alberta school libraries. Members of the L.R.C. wrote to the Minister to let him know they were encouraged and excited by the Task Force recall. The policy paper was completed in March 1984, and received wide distribution.

At the Alberta Library Association Conference held in the spring of 1984, copies of the completed policy paper were made available, and the Minister of Education was invited to become honorary president of the association. Learning Resource Council members continued lobbying their M.L.A.'s, which led to a private members' bill dealing with school libraries. This bill was not passed, but it served to inform all members of the government of the need for improvement in school libraries.

Included with each copy of the policy paper was a questionnaire asking for responses based on a five point Likert scale. Forty-three percent of the 4500 respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed policy. Seventy-nine percent considered the policy absolutely essential.

Scene IV

The format and succinctness of the final document, **Policy, Guidelines, Procedures and Standards for School Libraries in Alberta** (Alberta Education, 1984) is in keeping with the new Alberta Education Management and Finance Plan. The funding structure of this Plan will allow greater autonomy to local school boards to determine how provincial funds will be used to meet student needs. At the same time, school boards will be more accountable through annual reporting of their programme and service results to Alberta Education.

The new library policy states that students in Alberta schools should have access to an effective school library program. It also maintains that the library program should be integrated with regular instructional programs in order to provide students with improved education opportunities.

The guidelines and procedures set out the responsibility of school boards and of Alberta Education. School boards will bear the responsibility for developing, implementing and assessing the guidelines, procedures and standards.

For its part, Alberta Education will assist school jurisdictions in carrying out these tasks by making available to them recommended implementation models and inservice materials, suggesting areas of research related to school library services, and including in its new or revised curriculum guides ideas on how to integrate the library program with curriculum goals. The department also will "endeavor" to provide consultative service to local school boards.

CURRICULUM RESOURCES

debate the issue of school libraries and educational media, such a discussion trivializes the major issues. While we bemoan the lack of integration of different types of learning resources, particularly into effective programs, we focus too on the media and their collection and organization. In an information society more time and energy has to be devoted to national debate on using the resources we have available to us in effective instructional programs to teach youngsters how to process and use information.

To do that, we go right back to the promise of **Resource Services for Canadian Schools**. We need a clear aim for the program, a role for professional personnel which is clarified and focused, good programs to prepare this staff, a district approach to coordination of resource centres and their development in a unified system, staff development programs which focus on program development and enhancement, and a commitment to well-designed, well-integrated resource based learning programs for young people. This is really the least we can do with any degree of professional competence and respect.

MISSION POSSIBLE

The standards contain both quantitative and qualitative statements, and "represent a compromise between 'what should be' as expressed in the literature and 'what is realistically attainable' in the present economic climate." It is intended that they be interpreted as minimum rather than desirable expectations.

The inclusion of quantitative standards for school library collections, staffing and facilities is always controversial. At once they are seen by schools exceeding them as too low, and by those at the other end of the spectrum as impossible to attain. According to responses to the questionnaire, about 36 percent of the school jurisdictions would have some difficulty phasing in the standards over a 3-5 year period.

Following are the standards for library staff and the school library collection.

Library Staff
1. Professional direction is critical to the development and implementation of an effective program.
   Professional direction may be provided through a variety of alternatives:
   a) By a full-time teacher-librarian on the school staff.
   b) By a teacher-librarian with a part-time library and part-time teaching assignment.

c) By a teacher-librarian serving more than one school in the district.
d) By supervision by a school district (central office) teacher-librarian.
e) By cooperative agreement with a regional library system.
f) Where no teacher-librarian is available, by the principal and teaching staff of the school.

Note: i) The minimum qualifications of a teacher-librarian should include teacher certification and successful teaching experience along with university credits in at least eight half courses in librarianship and instructional technology.

ii) Active participation on the part of the principal and teachers in the implementation of the library program must increase as teacher-librarian time is decreased.

2. Qualified technical/clerical support should also be provided.
3. Professional and technical/clerical support should meet or exceed the following standards:

School Size	Teacher-Librarian	Technical/Clerical Support
150 Students	-	½ - 1
300 Students	½	½ - 1
500 Students	1	1
750 Students	1	1½ - 2
1000 Students	1	2
over 1000 Students	1½ - 2	2½ - 3

The School Library Collection
1. The basic collection should support the major content areas of the instructional program and represent a balanced range of student interests and needs, including the appreciation of literature.
2. The size of the basic collection should be dependent upon the total student enrollment served, the number of grades taught in the school, the number and types of instructional programs, and accessibility of relevant materials through regional cooperation, networking and interlibrary loan arrangements.
3. The basic library collection for a school of 250 students should include: print and nonprint materials . . . 4,000 titles
   magazines . . . 20
   newspapers. . . 2
   pamphlets, pictures . . . to meet program needs
   film/video, etc. . . from Regional Film Centre, District IMC, ACCESS (Alberta Educational Communications Corporations) etc.

Note: 1. The above represents an average basic collection for 250 students regardless of the type of school (elementary, junior or senior high). The number of course offerings in junior and senior high is offset by more grade levels served in elementary school and the need for more books at the primary school level.
2. For schools with larger enrollments, the collection should be increased to meet the needs of the students and the instructional program.
3. The ratio of fiction to nonfiction and reference should range from 15% - 30% fiction and 70% - 85% nonfiction and reference depending upon accessibility and the nature of interlibrary loans available from other school, regional, public, college and university libraries.
4. The reference collection should include at least one current general encyclopedia.
5. Schools offering programs in both English and languages other than English, should increase the basic collection to include a comparable standard of materials (print and nonprint) to support instruction in the language(s) offered.
6. Selection criteria for the library collection should be consistent with:
   a) Guidelines for tolerance and understanding.
   b) Controversial issues policy statement.
   c) Canadian content priorities.
   d) Identified library program goals and objectives.
   e) Needs identified by students and teachers.
   f) Information from recognized selection tools.
7. An annual school library budget should be allocated for the purchase of new materials, supplies and equipment (if equipment is not provided for in the capital budget or some other budget category). The budget should be determined on the basis of the funds required to realize library program goals and objectives. It should be recognized that smaller schools and schools offering programs in English as well as languages other than English will require a higher than average allocation.

Scene V
The Department has several activities completed or underway to provide the means for accomplishing its responsibilities.
1. A description of over 30 schools throughout the province illustrating effective library program development and implementation, **Alberta School Libraries in Action** (Alberta Education, 1984), has been distributed to all superintendents. School addresses and phone numbers are provided so that advance arrangements can be made for on-site visits.
2. A model for an integrated school library program has been developed. A description of this model will be made available to all Alberta schools, spring 1985, in the form of a monograph.
3. Throughout discussions related to the new policy, continual reference was made to the need for inservice educational programmes for teacher-librarians, teachers and administrators. In 1984, Alberta Education established a new fund for teacher inservice education in the suggested priority areas of computer literacy, gifted and talented students, and evaluations. Added to these priorities for 1985/86 is school libraries. The grants provide for $9.00 per pupil in grades one through twelve, and $5.40 per early childhood services student. The guidelines for this funding focus on activities which will result in improved classroom instruction.
4. Since 1984, a number of special needs areas have been identified by Alberta Education for additional funding. These may vary from year to year. For 1985/86, additional support will be given for the enhancement of school library learning resource collections. These funds will be allocated to school boards on the basis of $10.00 per student or $1000.00 per school which ever is greater. The funds are to be applied in addition to, not as a subsitution for, the funds normally allocated for the development of library collections. In June 1986, boards will be expected to make an interim report of the utilization and impact of this funding, with a final report in June, 1987. School boards will be required to have documents on file that are consistent with the new library policy; a plan for priority needs for collection development; and an evaluation and selection policy approved by the school board.

The 4500 responses to the questionnaire are a testimony to the commitment of Albertans to improve school library services — from the leading man, David King, Minister of Education, to the 'cast of thousands' starring the L.R.C. and provincial library association, strongly supported by parents.

Educators have given a standing ovation to the initiatives taken by Alberta Education. Curtain calls are inevitable.

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Alberta Education. (1984). **Alberta school libraries in action.** Edmonton, AB: Author.

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STANDARDS REVISITED

Harry Newsom (from his base in Edmonton and later in Kamloops) worked with the sub-committees which were situated in Winnipeg, Regina, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver. Since I was located in Toronto, I related with the groups in St. Catharines, Toronto, Guelph and London. Meetings of the national committee were held in Edmonton, Winnipeg and Toronto. These had to be kept to a minimum because of the costs involved. The principal coordination of the work of the various groups in western and central Canada was achieved by frequent meetings between Harry Newsom and me. Most of these work sessions were held in Winnipeg, although some were in Toronto and Kamloops.

Neither the Canadian School Library Association nor the Educational Media Association of Canada (or its successor, the Association for Media and Technology in Education in Canada) had the financial resources to support activities on such a large scale. The preparation of the manuscript might well have been impossible had it not been for the generous grant of $12,000.00 by the World Book Encyclopedia of Chicago and Toronto. With that assistance it was possible to pay for the postage, telephone charges and travelling expenses that were necessary.

We have now come full cycle in 1985 and it is again time to consider revision of the recommendations of **Resource Services for Canadian Schools**. We have today the same two options which we had in 1971: two separate books (one each published by C.S.L.A. and A.M.T.E.C.) or a single set of standards published by the two associations jointly.

The convenience is tempting for each organization to produce a unilateral statement of the true faith from its point of view, without the bother of developing a consensus with others in the field. It would be the easier way to go and more conducive to ego trips, both corporate and personal. It would, however, be a dereliction of duty.

The dangers which we face as librarians and media specialists, we face in common. When reduced funding undermines the provision of learning materials, all are affected. The negativism of the "back to basics" revisionists makes no distinction between us. Neither books nor films are safe from witch hunts. We are attacked in common and we must defend ourselves together. Any revision or the replacement of the present standards must be a joint A.M.T.E.C. - C.S.L.A. project.

The central issue is whether we want to recommend unified standards or to retrogress to separate sets of recommendations. It is not whether it should be a single larger book or a series of smaller ones dealing with various particularities of recommendations. That dichotomy is a red herring. Either comprehensive or modular publications can be produced cooperatively or separately. One of our options is to publish two separate books (or, if we go the modular route, ten or twelve booklets in pairs), competing with each other for sales, subtly contradicting and lessening one another's credibility. Our other option is to develop a consensus and to speak with united conviction and doubled authority to those who need to be convinced of the importance of learning materials in all media and to be shown how to use them effectively.

The members of the Association for Media and Technology in Education in Canada and of the Canadian School Library Association have an obligation to present the case for the acquisition, production and utilization of learning materials in every medium, not competitively so as to advance the fortunes of one association at the expense of the other, but cooperatively in a bond of union, that will be, for media specialists and librarians alike, the means of obtaining better protection against common dangers and of achieving greater success in common endeavors.