

# **sba Frankfurt / Main. A Competence Center For School Libraries. Innovative and efficient support in close cooperation with librarians, teachers and volunteers**

Eva von Jordan-Bonin  
Executive Library Director of Schools' Libraries  
Deputy Executive Head of Office  
The Public Library of Frankfurt am Main  
Germany

*In Germany the cooperation between libraries and schools is becoming ever more important – also in the context of full-day school care. There are a growing number of cooperation agreements between libraries and schools. Due to Germany's federal structures and because of the lack of a legal framework, this development is not standardized. Frankfurt/Main is one of the few German cities which have professionally supported school library work for a long time. Professional school library work has been part of the Public Library Frankfurt/Main's portfolio for more than 30 years.*

School Library, School Library Network, Germany

## **1. The Situation in Frankfurt**



Frankfurt has 165 schools with 90,000 students, of which about 50% have a migration background. Frankfurt Public Library provides a differentiated public library system to the city's 660,000 citizens. This includes 73 school libraries that are managed by the School Library Division (sba). Since 2000, it was possible to increase the number of school libraries by 100%. There is currently a waiting list until the year 2012. The City of Frankfurt focuses on the entire spectrum of collaboration between libraries and schools in order to directly address students in various ways - since there is not "the one" access to reading and media, as we all know. What kind of support can a central body such as the sba offer and which results can be achieved in a broader area? With only 20 people working at the sba, is quality assurance even possible? And how can we include numerous committed teachers and the great number of about 250 volunteers?

## **2. Services of the School Library Division**

Over the past 10 years, our services steadily improved and were adjusted to meet the schools' needs. Our service includes three key aspects:

- Advice and Training: This block is aimed at all 165 schools. Individual advice is important, but we cannot meet all the demands. Further training opportunities are therefore a crucial aspect to quality assurance. Corresponding to the schools' requests, training opportunities range from media-educational to library-operational issues.
- Central services for the promotion of reading skills, including lendable media kits and best practice transfer via print or online resources.
- Among sba services for the School Library Network are, besides the regular media budget, librarian services, such as cataloguing and subject indexing -> [www.stadtbuecherei.frankfurt.de/sbaopac](http://www.stadtbuecherei.frankfurt.de/sbaopac)



This is where we offer our core library expertise, since we believe it is useful to centralize and professionalize these tasks in order to achieved beneficial synergy effects. 13 consolidated libraries are managed by our own staff supported by volunteers.

In addition to the three key aspects mentioned above, we offer numerous other service blocks – from on-site services to regular information services. This ensures constant direct communication with teachers and volunteers.

### 3. Customer Orientation or Not everything for everybody

The conceptual design of content-related services requires a specific knowledge of the situation of the school. Because of our range of services we maintain close contact with teachers at (almost) all schools in Frankfurt. The sba is a sought-after contact in all questions regarding the school library's every day routine. Especially, when libraries are reorganised or newly founded. School directors and teachers realize that well-founded school library work cannot be done on the side, but they are seeking professional support. Due to the great number of contacts – more than 300 meetings with schools per year – we can consolidate feedback from schools and adjust our services accordingly. We act upon our principle that we do not offer everything to everybody according to a high library standard. But we rather determine in close cooperation with the school which specific service is requested.



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In addition to 5,500 teachers, students are our main target group. One of the main challenges in our work is to directly reach the students directly and add weight to their needs. Following state-of-the-art reading promotion, our school libraries do not only focus on providing media for classes, but also emphasise offers to students that show them that their interests are taken seriously. This is done, for example, by regular activities to promote reading, which also include polling students. The results of such polls, which usually register about 2,000-3,000 responses, are transferred back to the schools and serve as a foundation for our central media services i.e. for the “Frankfurt BOOKbag,” or for our low-

threshold offer for 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> graders “The red box”, a ready-to-use school library rallye, as well as for suggestion registers to expand the collection which are published twice a year.

## 4. Challenges

### a) Personnel: Full-time and volunteer workers

How can the sba offer its services to an ever growing school library network, considering its ratio of full-time and volunteer workers of 1:17? This would be impossible without the commitment of many volunteers, as human and general resources did not increase proportionally to the growth of the network. From the very beginning we have thus offensively incorporated volunteers in our work and have consequently arranged our offers and services accordingly. Two things are important here:

- Making use of the advantages of volunteer involvement and compensating possible disadvantages by corresponding offers and services, and
- Identifying the area of work where a professional basic library service is indispensable and clearly separate this area from tasks that can be assigned to volunteers.

The public environment significantly contributes to the success: No other German city, compared to its size, is similarly defined by foundations as Frankfurt/Main: A tradition of a free public spirit, which is almost 1,000 years old. There are more than 450 foundations in Frankfurt. In this environment, volunteer work is a matter of course in many of the city’s institutions. The Public Library is not an exception: 180 salaried employees are currently supported by around 350 volunteers.

The number of volunteers in school libraries has significantly increased throughout the past years: In 2000, 30 volunteers were involved in school libraries. In 2007, there were 130 volunteers and in 2009, we can count on 250! This development is enhanced by the special situation of school libraries. Parents strongly identify with their children’s school and thus get happily involved in the school library.

Saying “yes” to working with volunteers should always be a conscious decision by management. Organising a great number of volunteers (with a corresponding high turnover) and the daily collaboration is calling for enough human resources and diplomacy. We do not always succeed in stopping all envisaged “separate paths” in time. However, our experience shows that it is always possible to achieve professionally acceptable solution with mutual respect and good knowledge of the situation at the school – even if it sometimes requires many small diplomatic steps.



Crucial to the success is the selection of volunteers: It is part of a professional organisation that we require an interested person to take part in three mandatory “job shadowing” sessions at a full-time managed school library. During these sessions, interested

persons can get an idea of the daily school library work and check whether the motivation “I like reading” still holds true in a school library filled with 80 students at recess. We strengthen this mutual trust with an annual “Thank You” party, to which all volunteers are invited.

## b) Contents

The sba’s work follows quantifiable standards which are, however, of no use without a framework with regards to content. The relevance of questions regarding content has not only increased with our customers throughout the past years, but also in our self-perception. We are expected to provide not only ready-to-borrow media, but also impulses regarding school library work. Schools expect an added value from their school libraries. But oftentimes there is a lack of ideas – especially because the issue “school library” does not play a role in teacher training.

## 5. Solutions

### a) Further Trainings

Further training opportunities, which we have completely re-established since 2001, are indispensable not only to meet the request for content-related support of school library work, but also to master the challenge “volunteer work.” We focus on qualified volunteer work. The trainings range from half-day-seminars to 30-hour-courses.



It all started in 2001 with the first course “School Library Basics,” which introduces interested non-professionals to the world of school libraries and which imparts basic school library skills on 10 days and a total of 30 hours. In addition to the practical and theoretic basic knowledge, it is important to us to give volunteers factual arguments and confidence to take with them for talks with teachers or the school administration. Reflections about various ideas of “the school library,” which oftentimes originate from one’s own time as a student, are a recurring issue in the course. This is how we – at least in Frankfurt – develop a common philosophy for school library work and ensure that all quality aspects of professional school library work are also applied and continued by the volunteers.

Due to a high demand, we have substantially expanded and diversified our further training opportunities. In 2003, we could record 742 training hours, in 2006 there were already 1,805 hours. 3,247 hours were recorded in 2007 and even 3,500 hours in 2009! Whether “School Library Field Day” that includes job-shadowing, “Altered Media Childhood as a Challenge for Collection Build-Up” or “Public Relations within and with the School Library,” all our trainings are free of charge. Since 2005, all events are accredited according to the Hesse Teacher Training Act. Since then we have much more teachers attending our courses. In 2008 we introduced a 3-day “Advanced School



Library Basics,” which is also well-received. Additional trainings are currently being planned.

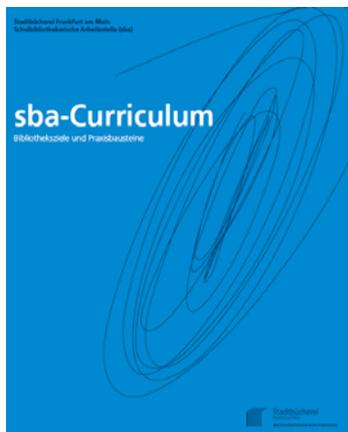
### *b) Regular Publications / Written Information*

But it cannot be done with further training opportunities alone: The increasing number of volunteers within the sba-network also requires effective and undisturbed communication. In conversations with schools – and thus also with volunteers - we repeatedly emphasise that “their” library is part of a network which provides support and which pursues a common professional standard. To ensure that the common goal is ever-present to all, a long-term established contact to all persons involved is indispensable. And one has to constantly keep in touch: In addition to a central contact person within the sba, there are designated contact persons for the various services we provide.



The sba-Info-Letter, which is published three times a year, and which includes reports on one’s own experiences, important dates and innovations, strengthens a sense of community and ensures that all members are provided with updates. Additional knowledge transfer is ensured by monthly sba-Praxisanregungen, which provides an overview over articles worth reading and links on school library work. Interested persons can order the full article with us – this service was used more than 600 times last year.

Our loose-leaf collection sba-Curriculum that was published in 2007 continues with



the basic idea of a central support. Inspired by international examples, the sba reviewed education standards and general rules, objectives and procedures, identified educational objectives for school library work, and assigned them to relevant activities. The result is a 230-page loose-leaf collection for grades 1-10, which provides the theoretical framework as well as detailed descriptions of over 60 (school) library activities to persons involved in school libraries. This collection has become an important tool, also for school libraries managed by volunteers.

Our service is complemented by the conception and distribution of reading promotion material for various target groups such as the Frankfurt Reading Star, Reading Passport, and Reading File.

### *c) On-Location Service*

With the change of educational concepts, the expansion of full-day schools as well as the increased focus on reading promotion by teachers and also parents, the schools’ expectations towards their school library and towards the sba rises. Many questions can no longer be answered by standardized further trainings and publications. At the same time, we are facing the challenge to continue to assure quality in a steadily increasing network of school libraries. We do not just want to stimulate thoughts about minimum standards, but want to establish them across the board.



We cannot achieve our goal centrally designed material such as lists of recommendations or media boxes alone. Many measures only achieve their full impact in conversations and in close collaboration. This is why the sba has introduced an On-Location Service already several years ago. Employees of the sba regularly visit the network's school libraries and tackle urgent tasks together with the teams at the school – mostly basic questions regarding collection maintenance, presentation and borrowing procedures. They focus on basics that can be implemented in one to two days. This Mini-Program is very popular – but it is not sufficient to answer more complex questions.

Schools, whose libraries are in currently in a transformation process – i.e. when they are included in the sba-network or they are facing a new start due to personnel or conceptual changes – request a much closer cooperation. Since 2007, we have two graduate librarians at our disposal, who share a position. These librarians can join a school library as “temporary school librarians” for several weeks to initiate and realise projects together with the schools. Every school is different – especially with regards to their library situation. This is why no standard procedure of a new Maxi-Program can be identified. It is often the case that a school is seeking impulses for their promotion of reading. The On-Location Service with its media-educational skills is then called-upon and implements numerous children and youth library activities. An interesting side effect is the close interaction with existing services of the Public Library's branches. The On-Location Service sees its task in strengthening ties between schools to the Public Library in general – i.e. by modular projects in the school library as well as the local branch of the Public Library. But solutions are also jointly developed for conceptual expectations, i.e. regarding the discussion of the library's portfolio or the integration of the school library into the curriculum.



Taking on such a broad range of tasks is only possible by the sba's clear decision against time-consuming individual solutions. We develop transferable building blocks for as many aspects as possible. One example is the so-called “Activity Suitcase“. An abundance of prepared material ranging from standardised tours for classes to a library game make it possible to transfer services without time-consuming preparations – a key aspect to the success of On-Location Services.

We always work together with the schools and prioritize reasonably what is possible in 6 to 8 weeks. And: Our expectations come true: The On-Location Service works across the



board, with very little personnel expenditure. We have succeeded in gaining all involved people's trust. A good personal relationship is very important, and also another advantage of the On-Location Service: When you are on location, you are the face of the entire system. But in addition to this, expectations towards the sba team with regards to professional distance and “being able to let go” should not be underestimated. Each assignment of the On-Location team has been completed when the schools are able to continue to work well without the

extra help, and when the On-Location team is looking forward to its new task.

## 6. Cross-Sectional Tasks or Looking Beyond One's Own Nose

The development of the sba-Curriculum described above is an example for the changed role of full-time sba school librarians. We do not just provide theoretical information about possibilities of school library work, but we convey them in practice as well. Our colleague's work in the 13 full-time and professionally managed school libraries of the sba-network have an exemplary responsibility. In these libraries our employees develop, adapt, and test models to promote reading, informational and media skills in close cooperation with teachers. We consider these libraries as an "experience pool." What would be more obvious than processing existing structures and services in order to publish it in a way that many school libraries can participate – in this case as sba-Curriculum? This look beyond one's "own" school library's nose – a so-called cross-sectional task – has by now become self-evident and also includes involvement in further trainings, job-shadowing or the design of central reading promotion activities.

## 7. Public Relations

One of our tasks is to also create publicity and to thus provide further impetus to strengthen school libraries. We pursue this goal in various ways:

- We use regular events on World Book Day and during School Library Month for elaborate press activities
- New openings of school libraries are appropriately introduced to the public
- Special activities such as i.e. "Are you reading yet or still picking out?" where students independently choose new media for the school library during a teaching unit, work very well to introduce the public to the issue of school libraries

A very successful activity was implemented 2003 and 2008: School Library Activity Week, where many school libraries presented their activities to a broad public for one week during School Library Month October.

School Library Activity Week pursues several goals:

- Presentation of the various functions of a modern school library in every day school life
- Public portrayal of the commitment of many involved volunteers in school libraries, that means things that usually take place "behind the scenes" in each school shall be visible during Activity Week. We are not concerned about certain highlights, but about the normal every day life.
- Stimulating and promoting exchange.



Here, aspects of training and public relations mix, as many teachers and volunteers take the opportunity to get to know the work of other school libraries. The response from the press was overwhelming. In 2008, 42 schools participated with more than 80 events. All events were listed in an extensive program, the core of the Activity Week ([www.stadtbuecherei-frankfurt.de/sba](http://www.stadtbuecherei-frankfurt.de/sba)). It was also important to us to attend as many events as possible. Employees of the sba thus attended more than 40 events – something that was very much appreciated by the school library teams. In a steadily growing school library network, we place great emphasis on a personal relationship. And the Activity Week

presented a great opportunity. One exemplary feedback: *“It was very nice that you could come today. We are so proud and happy about our project that we develop, maintain, and further refine with this small team. It is so rare that we can meet in person – an encounter that almost seems like supervision. Thank you very much!”* It is important for Frankfurt’s positioning in the field of school libraries to take on extended local, nationwide and international tasks, such as managing the DBV experts group „Library and School,“ which we hold since 2003.

## 8. Conclusion

### a) Requirements for Success

We have a tightly woven, cooperative and sustainable support system for school libraries which ensures attractive school libraries and which achieves good results in the promotion of reading skills and media competence. This is the reason why Frankfurt schools, the Public Library and local politics believe that expenditures are justified, and that the sba is an indispensable competence center for schools when it comes to the city’s promotion of education. In a nutshell, the following requirements are essential to succeed:

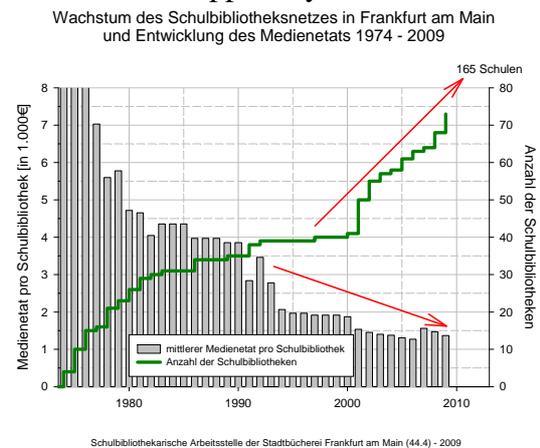
- a high content-related expertise and innovative spirit,
- taking on central library services in a professional and rational way,
- dynamic structuring of resources,
- sophisticated, reliable logistics,
- strong customer orientation and customer acceptance,
- close relationship with teachers and qualified volunteers,
- a noticeable relief for school library teams,
- networking and cooperating with partners, and
- constant evaluation and advancement.

#### *I.e.: To raise the profile*

By using its core competencies, the sba ensures further developments in regards to content, adaptation to technological advancements, and a good quality within school libraries. The structured services – especially when it comes to consulting and training – and its clear external presentation have sharpened the image of the division at schools and at the responsible persons in the city. This is especially beneficial with regards to cooperating and networking with external partners. An important foundation is the connection to the infrastructure of a modern library system and the use of synergy effects (for example in the field of information technology). We always work with the tools and the methods of the Public Library. This ensures the connection of school library work in Frankfurt to technological and content-related advancements.

#### *I.e.: Acceptance amongst customers*

The sba has positioned itself as a competent contact that provides support in every day situations, without limiting the school library. Customers feel they are taken seriously, and





they appreciate relief from organisational-administrative tasks, as well as professionalism and reliability. The demand for services increases steadily. The waiting list for admittance to the network lasts until 2012 by now.

*I.e.: Proven service capability*

The dynamics of the development in recent years becomes clear when looking at operating figures. While all key performance indicators increase, costs per beneficiary decreased significantly. In times of tight budgets of public funds, the question arises again and again whether the expenses are justified. We believe that education is one of the core tasks of public libraries. If education may cost something, the supply of school library may also cost something. However, service is only justified if it is done rationally and cost efficiently: This does not mean “let’s make a school library” or “school library – this is something we just run on the side,” but a clear service profile, professional and flexible structures, and consistent use of all synergy effects. The assurance of a binding standard that applies to all school library services is an important contribution to children’s and young adults’ media education. The result will save costs, as it helps to prevent “school library ruins” as we all know them.

*b) The role of policies*

The idea of a promising and effective competence center with good structural and process quality, which provides services in close cooperation with teachers, which stands for continuity and innovation, and which ensures quality sustainably – despite limited resources –, also convinces politicians.

The active support of volunteer work – mainly the commitment of parents – is especially relevant to school and education policies. Although the presentation of certificates by the mayor at the end of the “Basis Skills” training may seem as a traditional press appointment at first, it gives us the opportunity to regularly present our work to political decision makers. And this is why the steadily growing number of school libraries and their high value to schools and parents did not remain unnoticed in Frankfurt. In addition to the new position of a On-Location Librarian, the media budget was therefore regularly increased by political decision makers.



Although many wishes are still unfulfilled, and we of course would want full supply for all school libraries, we consider the path in Frankfurt to be successful. We provide indispensable library basics. Together with a binding structural framework and together with the school’s prerequisites to succeed, such as the internal integration of the school library by connecting it to the teaching curriculum, integration in the school’s methodology curriculum, determining standards for continuous learning that includes the school library as well as interdisciplinary educational objectives, we can sustainably promote the city’s school library work. It is important that all people involved can identify their own benefits:

Advantages for schools:

- they are part of a qualified network
- there are immediately identifiable advantages for lessons and each school’s profile

- school library teams will be relieved
- quality will be assured

### The Public Library and the School Library Division (sba)

- demonstrate presence in the city with the network of public libraries and school libraries (about 100 access points in the city)
- are considered active service providers and education partners for schools
- distinguish themselves as multipliers, experts and a driving force for impulses, and as
- life insurance to school libraries

Even without the desirable legal foundation, the sba is a pragmatic response to the current challenges in education policies. It will continuously expand and optimise its activities together with relevant persons and bodies.

The continuous evaluation of our products, i.e. by surveys and comment forms, provides a foundation. And the feedback we collect on a regular basis plays a decisive role.

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[www.schulmediothek.de](http://www.schulmediothek.de)

### *Biographical Notes*

Eva von Jordan-Bonin, graduate librarian, has been head of the School Library Division | sba since 1998. Since 2006, she has also been Deputy Director of the Public Library Frankfurt/Main. In addition to managing and steadily advancing the services of the School Library Division's, the design and implementation of further training opportunities for various target groups are an important part of her work.

She contributes to various local and nationwide working groups that are concerned with the collaboration of libraries and schools. Among other things, Eva von Jordan-Bonin has taken over management of the "Library and School" expert group of the German Library Association (DBV).

Internationally, she recently participated in the IASL-Annual Conferences in Lisbon, Portugal and Berkeley, USA, as well as in various European meetings. Additionally, Eva von Jordan-Bonin can also look back on numerous consulting trips, presentations and workshops on behalf of Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) / the Supreme Education Council of Qatar, as well as on behalf of the Goethe Institut.

### **Statement of Originality**

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others is referenced.