

How do I get the politicians to listen?

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No school library can be a part of the development and innovation process without funding. To make sure the school libraries in your area get the political and economic attention it deserves, it is important to engage in dialog. This paper presents the practical experiences of The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark in starting, continuing and developing the dialog and overall communication with local politicians. Active engagement from the school librarians is essential in getting the attention of local politicians and various means of informing and communication can be used to strengthen the cause of the school libraries.

Understanding of the School Library

Politicians' understanding of the importance of school libraries is crucial to the further development of the field. Without their understanding, it is hard to influence them to give the school library top priority. Very few politicians, local as well as national, have any knowledge of school libraries. This has to change if we want to continue and extend the development of school libraries and school librarianship.

The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark is an organisation with a political foundation, which works to develop and improve the school libraries throughout the country on both a political and a professional level. What the Association would like to share is the ways and means of communication with and to politicians that has been developed over many years.

To understand the work of The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark, it is important to understand the basics of the Danish school system and the development of the association.

In Denmark children start school around the age of six. About 90% of the Danish students attend the Folkeskole – people's school, public school. The alternative to this is a private school or free school. These will have a different political, pedagogical or religious agenda. The first year of school is called "kindergarten class" and is used to prepare the children for starting in "the real school" in first grade. Students attend school up to the ninth grade, and all education after this is voluntary. Students who wish to get a higher education then move on to the voluntary tenth grade, Business School, a technical school or to "Gymnasium", which is the only of the schools qualifying the students for university.

Since 1931 libraries in schools have been mentioned in the library law - at first only as a suggestion to provide access to books for children in the school. In 1964 a new library

law was passed, and a school library in every school was now mandatory. In 1994 the school libraries were moved from the library law to the school law, but they remained mandatory.

With the integration of the school library as an official part of the school instead of being part of the public library, the pedagogical aspect of the school library was noticeable strengthened. In the same law it was specified that the school library should be staffed with a trained teacher, whom had received special training in servicing students and teachers in the school library. Having had these mandatory school libraries for so many years, the standard of Danish school libraries is very high throughout the country. In 2005 the school librarian education was renewed and it is now a p.d. education consisting of a basis module of 120 hours and two p.d. modules of each 246 hours.

The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark was founded in 1933 under the name of The Danish School Library Association. The aim of the association was to ensure school libraries in all schools. The founders and members of the association were various people with interest in this aim – both politicians and professionals, but with a very large share of school teachers.

With the law of school libraries in every school from 1964 the association had succeeded in accomplishing its goal. However this did not mean that there was no longer work to be done and problems that needed attention within this area. The Association changed its name to The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark and had as its declared goal to strengthen the cause of the school libraries on a political level and to contribute to the development of the school library. In 1982 the association changed its regulations to make a more political profile. The board then consisted primarily of politicians to give the association more impact and influence. Today the board is still consists mainly of politicians, but also the professionals and other institutions have representatives on the board. Both politicians and professionals are from different municipalities with a broad geographical representation.

The first step towards engaging politicians in the cause of the school library is to get them to acknowledge the impact school libraries have on student learning and to see the important role school libraries play within the development of the school. In Denmark there is no noticeable research to rely on, and though research from other countries may be helpful, it does not have the same impact as national research. Within a few years, the Association hopes to be able to establish a research project, but until then other arguments must be found.

In order to understand the difference the school library makes, politicians must learn the basic functions of the school library. Most politicians have not been inside a school library since they left school themselves unless they have children attending school, and very often, they still think that a school library is a place filled with books and used for quiet time of reading. They do not know that today the school library is a place of generating ideas, getting new inspiration and for interaction between students, teachers and school librarians, just to mention a few functions.

A good tool can be to produce a small leaflet explaining how the local school libraries work. Legislation of school libraries can be quoted to make the politicians aware of their responsibility. If it is not possible to produce such a leaflet “The school library manifesto” produced by IFLA and approved by UNESCO can be a very good substitute and can also be a very helpful addition to a leaflet.

The politicians must understand the world-wide transformation from a place that holds books to a place of learning. They must also understand the impact of new media and the teaching of using these affects have on the work of the school library and the school librarian. Once the politicians have an understanding of the work of the school library, it is important to help them see the future aspects and benefits of this work. It is essential that the politicians understand how development in the school library can support the learning of students, but also what consequences it might have, if the school library is not given a high priority.

In Denmark an investigation of children's cultural habits was carried out in 2004. This shows that 75% of all Danish children visit a school library at least once a month. It also shows that 52% of all children read a novel or part of a novel at least once a week. For comparison only 31% of all persons over 15 read at least once a week. This investigation is a very strong argument in the cause of the school library. The school library is – without any comparison – the cultural place where most children go on a regular basis. This gives great status to the school library, but it also gives responsibility. If the school library is where children go, then the school library is where they should meet culture in all forms, understanding and encouraging adults and inspiration to further engagement in all sorts of different cultural and educational activities.

Because every municipality, county or region around the world is different, it is also important to explain the stage of development that the local school library is currently in, where development is headed, and the anticipated results of further development. Subsequently, the politicians will hopefully be equipped to start a dialog with the local school librarians.

The Continuous Dialog

Before attempting to initiate a dialog between professionals and politicians it is advisable to establish the ideal outcome of the cooperation. If it is possible to create a network between local schools and school librarians to discuss which general issues should be the theme or themes of a meeting with the officials or politicians this can be a good idea in order to give the arguments more power. If more schools are facing the same challenges, it will be easier to convince politicians that this is an area that needs their attention.

To establish a contact between professionals and politicians it is important to take the right approach. However, not only the politicians are to blame if the school library does not have good conditions. It is also up to the professionals to ensure that the politicians are aware of a possible problem or conflict of interest. A good approach could be to offer the politicians to see for themselves, what work is being carried out in the school library.

It is of great importance to take into consideration which politicians to target. The first contact will be most beneficial if it is targeted towards politicians, who have an interest in the area. It is desirable to find someone who is already engaged in the development of schools or public library. They will most likely feel that the information a school librarian has to offer will be an asset to the knowledge they already have, and that it can contribute to the work they are already engaged in. Alternatively a former school teacher or librarian, who is now a politician, might have a strong interest in engaging in working for the school libraries.

Once a dialog between the politicians and the professionals has been established, it is important to sustain this dialog. A good way to keep a dialog going is to have one or two representatives from all the schools in the local area, who carry out the communication with the official department to which the school library refers. It is important to keep the politicians up to date with the development, so that they can see the impact of the work. Also, school librarians could invite themselves to meetings in appropriate forums to keep as many politicians as possible informed on new developments within the field. If professionals know that their local counsel is discussing something relevant for the school libraries, they could contact their local authority to offer their expertise or information on the area. Inviting the politicians to come and see their school library in turns can also be helpful, in order to give the politicians a wide perception of the variety within the school libraries.

If a dialog is not pursued after one or two meetings, many politicians will think that their attention is no longer needed, that they have done what was expected of them, that all needs of the school library are now met or they will simply forget about it. It is important to find the fine line between asking for too much too often and not drawing enough attention to the cause of the school library. Representatives from the school libraries can try to find this line by establishing contact with the official department. Here it is possible to make frequent suggestions to ensure and develop the field. If the department is not cooperative or if the representatives do not feel that they are being heard, direct contact to the politicians should be taken once again.

Experiences of Successful Communication. When communicating with politicians, The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark uses various strategies. Holding conferences with relevant topics and keynotes from a wide range of officials or professionals is a good way to disseminate knowledge and encourage discussion. However, it is important to put great consideration into the program when trying to attract politicians. If a conference mainly has professional speakers, it is hard to get the politicians to take an interest. A general topic (for example “The school library as innovation centre” or “All students learning through the school library”) can be a good idea, as it will have more appeal. It is also important to ensure prominent speakers in a political sense. These could be the Minister of Education or an official from the ministry, a member of the parliament, a politician responsible for the school area in a prominent municipality or region, the chairman of the teachers union or similar persons.

Conferences also give the politicians an opportunity to share experiences with each other and provide the professionals with a chance to discuss new tendencies with their own local politicians from a mutual starting point. If it is a national or regional conference it can be beneficial to do a bit of homework before going. A politician from a county or municipality near by, who is engaged or interested in the work of the school library can become an important ally. Politicians tend to listen if a fellow politician (preferably from the same political party) makes a recommendation or argues for a cause.

The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark also makes frequent appointments with municipalities that wish to take advantage of this service. Depending on the needs of the municipality, our political or professional representatives can give a lecture, or debate on school libraries in general or on new developments within the field of work. The combination of politicians and skilled professionals is often very powerful, as it provides both a strong interest from other politicians to signal the importance of the area and the knowledge and experience of the professionals who carry out the work on a daily basis.

If local professionals have succeeded in establishing a political network this can be very helpful to other municipalities, counties or regions. It is important to share experiences, but also to aid one another in achieving awareness. Exchange of information and cooperation in producing information materials can be helpful to areas trying to establish a new communication with politicians and officials. If a community has succeeded in getting political support and funding for development or a project, this can also be used as a good example in other communities. A small leaflet showing what great impact the support has had will make a strong argument.

The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark has extensive cooperation with several other associations, institutions and organisations, including different Ministries. This ensures a high interest from other target groups and a broad variety of topics and inputs. Further more, it is a good way of giving a statement more power, if many organisations or associations can come together to work for the same cause. Amongst others the Association's cooperation partners are The Danish School Librarian Association, The Danish Library Association, Danish Library Agency, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Integration and Local Government Denmark.

Publications are another means of communication that The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark uses. In December 2005, a booklet bearing the title "The Learning of All Children – how do I as a politician live up to my responsibilities?" was distributed to all politicians dealing with the field of the school library throughout the country. In the introduction this publication states that all politicians have a responsibility to try to improve the learning conditions for all children. In Denmark an investigation from 2005 showed that 50% of the weakest group of students did not have access to a computer at home. This is a serious problem in the information society and by strengthening the school library the optimal exploration of learning resources can be ensured.

To introduce the politicians to the modern idea of the school library, the following questions were asked:

- Should all children be able to read?
- Must all children have access to IT?
- Should all children be able to recognize the pitfalls of the Internet?
- Should all children be able to handle all kinds of media?
- Should all children meet and develop different learning styles?
- Must all children be able to express themselves and make their own decisions?
- Should all children meet innovative and creative environments?
- Should all children meet authors, musicians and other professional artists?
- Should all children know their local cultural inheritance?
- Should all children have knowledge of culture and ways of living in other countries?

- Should all children participate in new groups with children, who have a different background than their own?

As most people would hopefully answer yes to all of these questions, the school library is the natural choice for transforming this vision into reality.

Furthermore, the publication explains WHY the school library is the natural choice, and what competences are united in the professional team surrounding the school library. It also provides a guideline as to how the politicians can support and strengthen their own relation to the school library and its staff. Last but not least it explains how a modern school library works and how it has come to be what it is today in Denmark. It also outlines a few future aspects and encourages the politicians to support this development by giving the school library attention.

Many publications have come before and after the one mentioned above, and what is important when writing to politicians is to never assume that they know anything about the modern school library at all. The whole concept must be respectfully introduced to them. The visual appearance of the publication is also very important. Politicians are provided with much information, more than they have time to read, so it is important to make the publication aesthetically pleasing, short and reader friendly.

When developing publications, the Association is inspired and guided by the advisory counsel of professionals as well as the politicians on the board. By using this method, an equality of professional foundation and political understanding is achieved. As a national association The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark has many contacts nation wide. This naturally brings many obligations, and though visits to different school libraries are frequent, the employees of the Association do not naturally have the same feel of the development in the area as an every day school librarian does. Therefore the advisory counsel and the many contacts are important for the Association.

The advisory counsel of professionals consists of school librarians with coordinating responsibilities from various municipalities throughout the country. It is their task to bring ideas, trends, tendencies and needs to the table for the Association to communicate to professionals and politicians. The Association then researches the topics and finds the best way to share the information that has been found. The information in the various publications is written by the employees of the Association or by relevant professionals working with the area of which the publication speaks. This ensures that regardless of the target being professionals or politicians every publication has a solid professional foundation.

The result of these many years of work is not that every politician in Denmark has an extensive knowledge of the work of the school library. However, many important goals have been achieved:

- All schools must have a school library (pedagogical service centre) with professionally trained staff
- More than 50% of the municipalities in Denmark are members of The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark to ensure awareness of the school library and the development taking place in the field.

- The standard of school libraries throughout the country is so high that 75% of all students go there at least once a week
- The Danish politicians are amongst the politicians who know most about school libraries in the world
- The Danish school libraries are amongst the most developed in the world – from top to bottom.

There is no magic formula to create an ideal cooperation between politicians and professionals, but hopefully this has provided guidance and inspiration for the important task it is to create political awareness and cooperation.

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