



# LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Angela Long

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In spring 2006, I was approached by a student teacher as we walked into school together. We were chatting, and I was asking about her experiences so far when she asked what I taught. I said I was the librarian. She stopped, looked at me, and said something such as, “Oh, it must be so nice just to read books to kids. Did you have to get a degree for that?”

Later, I invited her to observe a library class to see that I do read to students, but that is just one part of a complex and interesting job. Not more than two weeks before, another student teacher came in to borrow some books about China. As I was checking out her books, she informed

me that she thought that being a librarian was a secretarial position, and then asked whether I get paid the same as teachers do. When my head stopped its *Exorcist*-style spin, I shared with her our library’s curriculum, what a librarian does, and the degrees required for certification.

These conversations, and endless others with student teachers, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances over the years, prompted me to write a letter to the editor during National Library Week. It was published in the *Indiana Gazette* and the *Blairsville Dispatch*, our two local papers here in Indiana County, Pennsylvania. After the letters appeared, I received many positive responses, not only from teacher colleagues, but from other people as well. Friends that had known me for years said they couldn’t believe how school libraries had changed. Perhaps most importantly, parents and school board members spoke favorably about my letter.

Later that month, I spoke before our school board about the studies linking excellent school library programs with increased student achievement. My presentation took only ten minutes, but after the meeting the real advocacy took place. Two reporters from the local newspaper and radio station interviewed me, and we discussed the benefits of a good library program and how school libraries have changed. The next morning, I heard my voice on the radio! That five-minute interview has given Homer-Center Elementary School’s library program a greater presence in our small community than all of my years of hard work.

Here’s a copy of my letter to the editor. I hope it will encourage you to write one as well!

"Do you have to go to school for that?" "Are you the same as a teacher?" "I didn't know you needed a degree to be a librarian." "You teach? . . . I thought you just checked out books in the library." These comments, and many others, are the bane of the elementary school librarian. I have been trying for years to dispel these myths. So, what better way to do that than to write a letter to the editor during National Library Week?

So let's get to it.

1. "Do you have to go to school for that?" Yes, we do. In the state of Pennsylvania, all public school librarians must have a four-year undergraduate degree in library science, while some schools require a master's degree in library science. In other states, there are similar requirements. (I went to Clarion University for my undergrad and master's degree.)
2. "Are you the same as a teacher?" Yes and no. I am on the same pay scale and schedule as the teachers in my school. I sign the same contract as them. However, I have the joy of teaching ALL students in my school at least once a week. I give grades and create integrated lessons with my colleagues. A typical day might go like this: 8 A.M.—planning meeting with sixth-grade teachers about an upcoming unit on biomes; 8:25 A.M.—help first-grade student find a book that is "purple with wavy lines on it"; 8:35 A.M.—Send out a mass e-mail to our teachers about a Web site on reading readiness; 8:40 A.M.—Write lesson plan for upcoming biome unit; 9:00 A.M.—Assist student teacher who has no clue where to find materials about the War of 1812; 9:20 A.M.—fourth grade arrives to learn about using an atlas and exchange library books. As the day progresses, I will teach fourth, sixth, fifth, K, second, first, and third grades, respectively. While all this is happening, teachers will come in to make requests: "I need a new overhead bulb," or "I need a suggestion for a good adventure novel," or, "Do you know of a good Web site about plants for first grade?" So, I'm definitely a teacher, but also a librarian. I guess I could emulate our Canadian neighbors to the north and call myself a "teacher-librarian."
3. "I thought all you did was check out books." I have heard this comment more times than I would like. As evidenced by #2, my day is full of teaching. Yes, I check out books, but that is only a small piece of the puzzle. What I didn't mention in #2 is the amount of time that I spend on collection development (creating a library with the right materials for the curriculum), writing lesson plans, advising students on the best mystery or adventure, planning for and attending our monthly Breakfast Book Club, and more. My day is busy from the moment I arrive till the moment I leave.

School librarians are more than book checker-outers. We are definitely not the stereotypical bun-and-glasses-wearing archetype of old. Our profession is changing, and so are we. We are young and old, tall and short, trendy and old-fashioned, but above all we are here to help students. So the next time someone tells you that they are a school librarian, PLEASE don't ask, "Do you have to go to school for that?"

Happy National Library Week.



**Angela Long** has enjoyed being a School Librarian at Homer-Center Elementary School in Homer City, Pennsylvania, for the last eleven years. Currently, she is co-chair, along with Chari Lyons, of the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association's Public Relations Committee. She is committed to speaking out about libraries, school librarians, and their positive impact on children.