

Show Us the Money: Politics and the School Library

While this issue of INCITE is primarily about the politics of the industry, this is a different perspective: How have the politics of this country affected the industry? There has been a love/hate relationship between the school library and state and federal governments for the last 40 years. So how have political decisions impacted on the current state of Victoria's school libraries?

Interest in the school library in Australia from the government's point of view began in earnest with the release of two key documents in 1966: the Fenwick report, *School and Children's Libraries in Australia*, and the Library Association of Australia's (now known as ALIA) *Standards and Objectives for School Libraries*. The result was a formal submission to the federal government and a \$27 million grant for secondary school libraries in 1968.

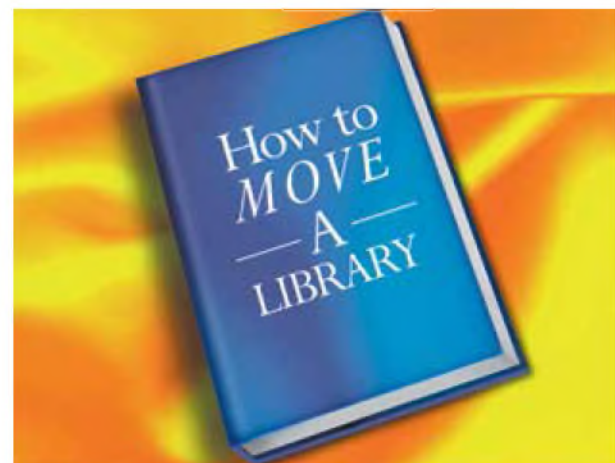
In 1973, the Whitlam government and the newly established Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission used the Fenwick report and the 1972 federally funded report from the Department of Education and the University of Queensland as a basis for their chapter on school libraries in the publication *Schools in Australia*. In that report, high standards were set for school libraries, including the need for teacher-librarians at both primary and secondary levels and for flexible learning spaces to accommodate the changing needs of the curriculum.

The impact of *Schools in Australia* was huge. There was an explosion of building works for new school libraries and training courses for teacher-librarians across the nation. By 1977 there were more than a dozen courses for teacher-librarians with about 900 students enrolled. Teacher-librarian numbers rose from 385 in 1974 to 1425 in 1978. Because of continued funding, during the 1980s school libraries were largely unaffected by the growing economic crisis.

Then, in Victoria, everything changed. In 1993, the Kennett government launched the *Schools of the Future* education reform. It was a bold move to school-based management in which the principal essentially became the CEO of the school. Efficient spending was paramount and many cuts were made. The impact of these reforms in Victoria was dramatic: Class sizes increased, special programs were shut down, 351 schools closed, and over 8000 teachers resigned or were voluntarily retrenched. Teacher-librarians lost their specialist title and were moved into classrooms, and then they were replaced with library technicians, officers, or parent volunteers. This was also the case if they moved on or lost their positions.

Such has the state of the Victorian school library been until today. Recent surveys and last year's Parliamentary inquiry *School libraries and teacher librarians in 21st century Australia* have revealed that the courses for teacher-librarians in Australia have dropped from 15 to three over the last 20 years and that, before the Building the Education Revolution in 2008, up to 44% of school library buildings were over 20 years old. Nearly 3500 libraries have received funding under the BER, 522 of them in Victoria, however there are few teacher-librarians left to staff these libraries. Regardless of where the blame lies, the fact remains that issues raised 40 years ago about the lack of qualified staffing in school libraries have come back to haunt us.

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