

Advocacy at ALA by Judi Paradis

MSLA members used their “loud library voices” at the urging of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to promote school libraries at the ALA annual meeting this summer. Duncan’s meeting with AASL leadership on June 28th at the Washington D.C. Convention Center was the high point of a week filled with rallies, meetings with legislators, and workshops designed to help school librarians become better advocates for their programs.

Duncan stressed that he understood the importance of school library programs, saying that school libraries are where students find their passion, where cross-curricular instruction and critical thinking take place, and where students are “engaged on an individual basis.” He assured the group that he wants to invest in what is working and encouraged us to “tell the stories” of library success. This is a tough time to be in education, citing both academic and financial difficulties.

Duncan said that the No Child Left Behind Act had many negative, unintended consequences leaving schools with many ways to fail without looking at what is working. He said he believes that there has been a “dumbing down” of standards and a narrowing of curriculum with too much emphasis on top-down control of schools. He said we need to empower educators, letting great ideas come from the local level. He would like to go from “pockets of excellence” to “systems of excellence.”

Schools are also facing a bleak financial future if the Blueprint for Education before the legislature is not passed this summer. This initiative includes \$1 billion for educational programs, including \$450 million for literacy initiatives. If this legislation passes, “we hope to see more funding for libraries—materials, technology and supplies. I hope we will see great proposals with innovative educators recognizing the value of good school libraries,” he said. Without this funding, however, he is concerned about a “level of devastation” for schools. “We have already cut the flesh and fat and are now looking at cutting bone.”

Libraries are not specifically mentioned in the Blueprint. Sylvia Norton of the AASL asked if this could be addressed. Duncan said that he “heard us loud and clear” and assured us that this could be addressed as the legislation was put into its final form. He emphasized, however, that the DOE would be focused on rewarding states that show they are closing the achievement gap and promoting student achievement. AASL President Cassandra Barnett asked Duncan to consider integrating the new AASL Learning for Life Standards into the Common Core Standards that have been adopted by 17 states to date. Duncan said that we need to “tell

stories about library programs that increase high quality, integrated experience. Show projects that are changing students’ lives—helping them graduate, stay in school, find their path past graduation. Don’t be shy about telling your stories.”

Following this meeting, librarians from Massachusetts joined an advocacy rally on Capitol Hill on June 29. Librarians from across the United States heard from Senator Jack Reed of Rhode Island and Representative Vernon Ehlers of Michigan, as well as young adult author Lauren Myracle. All agreed with ALA President Camille Alire’s call to action. Alire urged librarians to call on their legislators to support both the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). A delegation from Massachusetts led by Rob Maier met with Senator Scott Brown, and Senator John Kerry’s senior staff.

ALA provided an opportunity for librarians to get expert advice on advocacy from those who lobby for a living. Librarians were encouraged to use 2.0 tools: Facebook, eLists, Twitter, and Youtube to promote libraries. South Carolina librarian Curtis Rogers demonstrated how a coordinated campaign using these tools saved his state’s libraries from serious budget cuts.

Jonathan Godfrey, a member of the House Judiciary Committee staff, told librarians to “foster connections with as many legislators as you can. There are librarians in every Congressional district in the country, and that makes your group much more powerful. You never know who your champions might be.” He recommended having parents, students and

teachers lobby on behalf of libraries to show the wide support libraries have. He told librarians that they should always ask for something – a vote, a letter of support or co-sponsorship of a bill—when they meet with legislators.

Advocacy expert Stephanie Vance described how to put together an effective coalition to get legislation passed. She urged librarians to think about what groups could partner with them to increase assets available to

them and contacts with key decision makers. Vance and Godfrey both emphasized the importance of developing good relationships with legislative staff members. “These people become experts on your issue,” Godfrey said, “and they will often go to bat for your cause.”

