

MEMO

To: State Library Commission
From: Karen Strege
Re: Public Library Standards
Date: October 1, 1998

Introduction

The Public Library Division of MLA and the State Library worked together to revise public library standards. Through many meetings, the joint committee drafted a set of standards that we then distributed for comments. The committee could not agree on all proposed standards or the idea of tying state aid to the achievement of a subset of standards. The committee's inability to reach a consensus reflected a lack of a consensus in the library community.

Now that the committee has completed its work, the Commission must decide first, whether to adopt the standards and then, decide if any should be made mandatory. I recommend also that the Commission formally thank the committee for its work.

The Commission has the statutory authority to set standards for public libraries. The Commission also has the authority to tie standards to the distribution of state aid. Currently the state library only requires that libraries provide proof of legal establishment to receive state aid. In FY 1999, two libraries were unable to submit this proof and were subsequently denied state aid.

The state's purpose in distributing state aid is clear from the statute, which reads,

"To broaden access to existing information by strengthening public libraries; to augment and extend services provide by public libraries; and to permit new types of library service based on local need."

Current statutes require that local governing bodies cannot use state aid to supplant general operation funds of public libraries. If a library receives less support from a mill levy or local appropriation than the average for the preceding

three fiscal years, the Commission can withhold states funds. However, you can only do so if the decrease of local money is linked to the receipt of state funds. The Commission has never taken this action nor has MSL staff monitored the income of local libraries.

Options

Below I present four options for your consideration. Of course, more options exist. In this memo, I only discuss option number four in detail for that option is my recommendation.

Option 1 - Adopt standards as voluntary.

Option 2 - Adopt the standards with a subset as mandatory in two years.

Option 3 - Adopt standards as voluntary. Seek increased state aid in 2001 to help libraries meet standards.

Option 4 - Adopt the standards as voluntary with a set of standards as mandatory in 2001. Seek increased state aid in 2001. After state aid is increased, adopt a three-tier approach to the distribution of state aid tied to standards.

Discussion

To begin this discussion, I would like to share some of my assumptions:

1. Standards are statements that reflect a professional consensus about what constitutes quality library services, management, and governance.
2. Adopting standards alone does not improve public libraries; however, standards can be part of a plan to improve Montana's public libraries.

I think the Commission must examine what effect state aid has on libraries. To try to answer this question, I chose at random 14 public libraries and examined their progress in selected service measures over the last eight years. This survey showed that outcome measures generally increased as state aid increased. However, a substantial, i.e. expensive and time-consuming, research study would be needed to see if the variable of state aid was influential on these increases.

What this study did show, however, was on the average, in FY 1997, state aid made up only 3% of libraries' total income. The national average percentage of

state aid as a percentage of total income is 12%. A close look at the ratio of state aid to local funding shows that the libraries in which state aid is 9% or more of the total income will have the most difficulty meeting minimal standards. None of these libraries serve more communities of more than 4,500 and all are city libraries.

Tying state aid to standards will not automatically improve service in these libraries. In some libraries that rely heavily on state aid, the total local income from tax revenues already exceeds the maximum mill levy. In these cases, consolidation with a larger jurisdiction to expand the tax base is possible. In other cases where the maximum mill levy is not yet met, the electors may approve tax increases. These political solutions to improve inadequate library funding are possible. Education about these processes and encouragement to attempt these changes could be the responsibility of state library staff during the next two years.

However, a possibility exists that some communities may not think meeting standards is “worth” the effort of change. That is, if a library has to spend \$2,000 more on open hours per year to meet the standard and only receives \$1,500 in state aid, that board may choose to forego state aid rather than try to increase its revenue locally.

At the beginning of the standards revision process, I informally surveyed other State Librarians to see if their states tied aid to standards. I found that approximately 17 other states do so. However, only 22 states responded to my inquiry. Of course, the fact that other states do this is not a sufficient argument for adopting the practice in Montana. However, because this practice is wide spread, a consensus may exist that it leads to the library improvement.

I believe the Commission should require public libraries to meet minimum standards in order to receive state aid. Some libraries may not meet these, even with assistance from the State Library. However, I believe that this action represents a position by the Commission and therefore, by the state, that each community must fund minimal library service before the state spends its funds in that community. The proposed minimal standards are modest and, I believe, achievable in every community.

In addition to this action, I also believe that the Commission should study our state aid situation during the next two years. Compared with the national average our state aid is small. I would like the Commission to explore whether MSL, along with the Montana Library Association, should advocate for increasing state aid and tying standards into an overarching program to improve Montana’s public libraries. As part of this exploration, I recommend that the Commission examine a tiered approach to the distribution of state aid. Under such a program, the

base amount of state aid to each library would depend on their compliance with one of three tiers of standards. In addition, a per capita amount of state aid would be tied to the three tiers. My proposal owes much to recent activities in other states, in particular Iowa's initiative called "Enrich Iowa's Libraries."

A schematic representation of such a program follows. I omitted a list of specific standards under each tier and amounts of funding to avoid a premature discussion of details. I believe that this scheme, coupled with an increase in state aid, would give libraries an incentive for achieving standards.

Tier I Libraries

Funding

Base amount of 1x and
1x per capita

Tier I Standards

Basic standards

Tier II Libraries

Funding

Base amount of 2x and
2x per capita

Tier II Standards

Basic standards plus
Additional standards

Tier III Libraries

Funding

Base amount of 3x and
3x per capita

Tier III Standards

Meets all Montana Public Library Standards