

Dear School Library: Advocacy from the Heart

by Wendy Burch Jones

In the late fall of 2023, I was (at the time) the president-elect of the Ontario School Library Association (OSLA) and thinking about what I wanted to “do” with my time in leadership. I had been a loud and passionate voice for school libraries and this platform was going to give me an opportunity to be even louder. I needed to be clear about what I was going to do with that. So what exactly did I want to accomplish? What were the specific needs of school libraries in the province? What did our membership most need from us? How was I going to be accountable to the OSLA membership for my “time in office” so-to-speak? And, given all that, what was actually possible given our limited time and resources? It was a lot to consider. The reality was that the school library sector in Ontario was on fire and I, alone, was not going to be able to put it out any time soon.

OSLA has long recognized that school communities across Ontario are struggling to maintain their library staffing and programming. Over the past two decades, due to school board-level decisions, hundreds of thousands of students across the province have lost access to school libraries and the critical resources and support for student learning and achievement they provide. In the past few years, this has accelerated as several of Ontario’s largest school boards, when faced with challenging decisions and budget shortfalls or competing interests, have made dramatic reductions to school libraries and library staff, affecting hundreds of thousands of students (Ontario Library Association, 2021). Other school boards in both urban and rural communities have eliminated them altogether.

We know from years of collective experience and multiple studies that when library staff are pulled from their roles there is a direct impact on school communities. In April 2024, when the government changed the funding formula, the grant that specifically allocated funds for library staffing and resources disappeared. While the funding was still technically there, it was lumped together with Chromebooks and crayons, giving school boards the flexibility to make decisions based on “local priorities.” In our response to the Ministry of Education, the OSLA reminded them that research has shown that the presence of trained teacher-librarians in a school improves EQAO’s (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2024), assessments that measure the literacy and mathematics skills that students are expected to have learned at specific times in their kindergarten to Grade 12 education, and that a study showed a sharp decline in students who expressed a joy of reading, from 76% in 1997 to 47% in 2018, just over 20 years later (People for Education, 2011, Ontario Library Association, 2021). Not surprisingly, this decrease closely aligns with the declining presence of teacher-librarians in Ontario schools over the same period. This trend is alarming, as a love of reading not only has a positive impact on literacy scores, but also amplifies success across all areas of the curriculum.

Why the “Dear School Library” Project?

The “Dear School Library” project was born out of a deep need to create a stronger sense of community within our school libraries and school library professionals in Ontario. The OSLA wanted schools across the province to consider the reasons why their school libraries are important - highlighting all the incredible collaborative programming, events, resources, technologies, and community that our LLCs bring to school communities. We wanted to celebrate our school libraries - loudly and unabashedly. And use all the wonderful data we collect to show everyone - from our administrators, superintendents, districts to the Ministry of Education - that we won't go down without a fight.

Dear School Library was inspired by Lindsay Zier-Vogel's “Dear Street” (Zier-Vogel, 2023), a Blue Spruce nominated title in the Forest of Reading program (Ontario Library Association, 2024a). The story tells of Alice, a girl who loves her neighbourhood. When she discovers that not everyone shares in her delight of its beautiful maple trees, colourful blooms, and parades, she writes a love letter for someone to find. As others grumble through the seasons, Alice



continues to write love letters about the things they complain about, too. In the author's note, Zier-Vogel shares that “Dear Street” was inspired by her own “Love Lettering Project” in which participants write love letters to their communities for strangers to find.

After a conversation with Lindsay, who not only gave her full blessing for the Dear School Library¹, but also provided me with some great guidance and helpful tips for how it might unfold in a school library context, I was encouraged that this little idea might actually have legs.

“Dear School Library” Project Goals

There are a number of goals I hope to accomplish with this project that - as of the writing of this paper - are still unfolding. First, to highlight the amazing work being done in Ontario school libraries across the province. I want to celebrate the creativity and innovation of school library professionals in the Ontario School Library Association as they support and enhance school and district learning and achievement goals. I want to shine a spotlight on the incredible collaborative programming with teachers being done in #onted school libraries; providing culturally relevant and reflective lessons and activities within their school communities that highlights the unlearning, learning and relearning that occurs on a daily basis in our schools.

¹ In May of 2024 I was asked by the Forest of Reading to clarify with Lindsay Zier-Vogel and her publisher that by using “Dear School Library” we would not be infringing on any copyright. We were assured that (in her own words) “I definitely do not “own” Dear Whatever!!! The whole point of the book is for people to write letters! To spread community-based love!”

Secondly, to capture student voice as it relates to why school libraries are playing a vital role in their schools, both personally and in their wider school communities. Capturing this data is critical to helping us further our advocacy efforts and building a brand that will make a lasting impression with our stakeholders (Canadian School Libraries, 2024c, p.19). I want to summarize the qualitative data we receive from school libraries across the province into powerful postcards and infographics that the OSLA & school library professionals can use in our advocacy work. Third, I want to celebrate and promote #schoollibraryjoy across Ontario and beyond!

But, How Is All This Going To Work?

The first step to implementing this project was putting together some templates and prompts. I used Canva and used a public link so that the templates could be accessed easily with a bit.ly link or QR code. At the time, the template also included a QR code that could be used for students to upload a video response. However, by September 2024, FlipGrid was no longer a working option for the majority of school boards in the province so this option had to be removed (Warner, 2024).

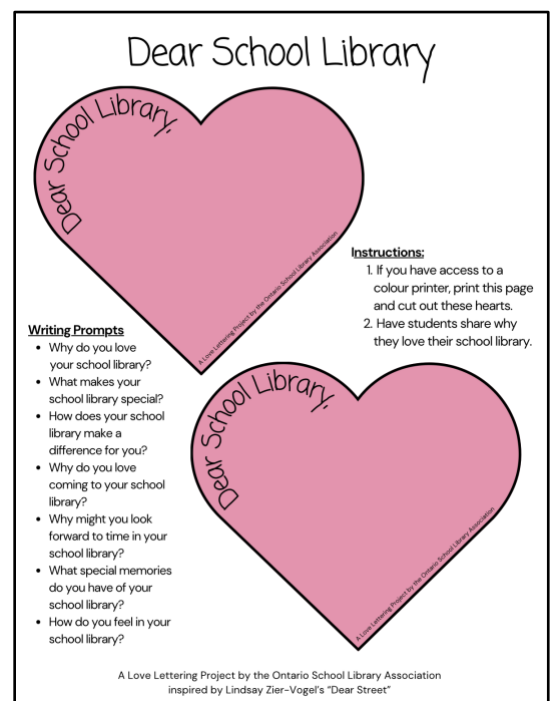
Through discussion at OSLA Council meetings, it was decided that we would use *The Teaching Librarian*, (Ontario Library Association, 2024c), social media, and workshops, to help school library professionals understand how to take the “Dear School Library” project into their school community.

Timeline - April 2024

In early spring of 2024, I set out to accomplish two main tasks. One was to secure sponsors for prizes. And the other was to apply for the Donald Hamilton School Advocacy Grant (Canadian School Libraries, 2024d), through Canadian School Libraries.

In order to encourage participation in this project in the fall, we considered that offering prizes might help school library professionals to add this project to their already very full plates. While we recognized the inherent worthiness of the project and the potential for community building within school communities, we figured it couldn't hurt to dangle a few carrots at the same time.

To this end, I reached out to two of our closest friends in the school library sector in Ontario for their support. Maria Martella of TinLids and James Saunders of Saunders Books are both



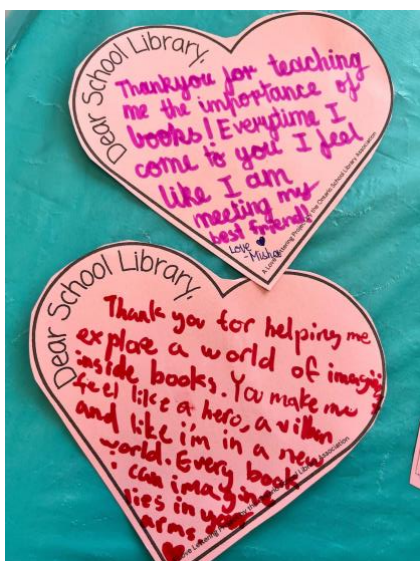
ardent defenders of school libraries, school library staff and children’s literature across Canada and I was confident that they would both see the value in this project. They were both quite happy to support us with prizing. Maria offered us a set of each of the Forest of Reading books and \$1000 in gift cards. James offered to donate prize packs and also said he’d be happy to help with promotion of the project (i.e., put links to “Dear School Library” out with their own promotions, on socials and email, on their website). From the OLA, Meredith Tutching, Executive Director of the Forest of Reading offered two Forest of Reading Registrations to schools (the caveat being that they be schools who would be new to the program).

My application for the Donald Hamilton School Library Advocacy Grant was a little bumpy. I was the inaugural applicant for the grant and as such, there were a few bumps to work out in the application process both in terms of clarifying what information was being asked to provide and the method by which I was asked to provide said information. After a few back and forths with CSL, I managed to figure out what the review committee actually wanted to see (as opposed to what the application asked for) and submitted my application. With the support of Judith Sykes, who then offered some helpful feedback, I revised some sections, resubmitted the proposal and was offered the first Donald Hamilton School Library Advocacy Grant for \$1000.

May 2024

Several members of our OSLA Council helped me launch “Dear School Library” at the Forest of Reading Festival on May 15 & 16, 2024 at Toronto’s Harbourfront Centre where thousands of readers gather in a celebration of books, reading, and Canadian authors and illustrators. We had a booth at the Festival where we were able to capture student voice as they responded to our

prompts: why do you love your school library?²



& I

Over two days, Richard Reid, Ruth Gretsinger, Lisa Lewis watched in awe as these students, most from Grade 3

² LEFT PICTURE - Dear School Library booth at the Forest of Reading Festival. (Photo by W. Burch Jones, May 15, 2024)
 RIGHT PICTURE - OSLA Council at the Forest of Reading Festival (L to R): Richard Reid, Ruth Gretsinger, Wendy Burch Jones. (Photo by M. Macks, May 15, 2024)

through Grade 12 from schools across the Greater Toronto Area told us just why they like their school libraries so much:

"I love you so much! If you were a bed, i'd never wake up. If you were a food I'd never stop eating"

"Thank you for providing quiet spaces to work, read, or just chill when the world is too loud."

"You are so amazing and can always whisk my [sic] away to a forbidden land."

"You give me education for the future, and... thank you!"

"My school library gives me a chance for peace!"

"Thank you for opening so many worlds for me"

"Libraries are the heart of a school.... Just like the kitchen of a home."

"You are like a cozy reliable hug. You are always there."

"You have changed my life. I remember the first time I saw you. You made me gasp in awe when I looked at you. Thank you for being a source where I could freely dream."³



Together with other school library staff and OLA staff, we were often moved to tears by the words written on these hearts. Maria Martella, owner of TinLids Books, and longtime Forest of Reading sponsor at one point eventually told me to stop reading them to her as she was "spent" and "out of tissues!"

Lest you think they were all this poignant. There were many, many that simply said some

³ HEART PICTURES - Forest of Reading Festival Dear School Library Booth (Photos by W. Burch Jones, May 15 & 16, 2024)

version of, “*I love the books.*” Quite a lot of them made us laugh, too. Because kids are kids, so one wrote that “*I eat frogs.*” And then, of course, there was one that just said, “*skibidi.*”⁴

I digress. By the end of two days we had hundreds of pink hearts with the collective student voice of hundreds of readers from across dozens of Ontario schools - all that love their school libraries for a variety of reasons. And now we had the proof.



One of Lindsay’s ideas was that we dress up the booth to look as much like a library as possible. To that end we had borrowed a display shelf from TinLids and I brought a box of Forest of Reading nominated titles with which we could cover it. We also put piles of books on the tables and there were shelves of books on our banners by design. This was all because in Lindsay’s experience with the Love Lettering Project, kids often don’t provide the best answers to what they love about a space when they aren’t actually in that space. So her other suggestion was that we put together envelopes with some hearts and instructions for some school library professionals to take back to their school libraries to do “in house.” So that readers could write about

what they love about their school libraries when they were actually standing in their home libraries. Brilliant! By the end of the Festival we had handed out sixteen self-addressed stamped envelopes with a handful of pink hearts, extra pink paper, the template, a letter of explanation, and instructions. Sixteen colleagues were all set to try “Dear School Library” in their own schools.

On top of all that, we had collected videos and hearts from some important allies at the Festival. Some of our kidlit author and illustrator friends had written hearts for us, some had recorded thoughtful videos, and we even had a heart from Toronto Mayor, Olivia Chow. We would be able to use these to promote “Dear School Library” when we went to roll out the project in the fall.

June 2024

After the Festival, I set about sorting the hearts we had collected. I started by writing hashtags on the backs of them based on what students had written:

#access	#books	#clubs
#choice	#community	#explore #dream #imagine

⁴ ibid

		#imagination
#ForestofReading	#gratitude	#inclusive
#joy	#learning	#programming
#reading	#SEL #safespace	#staff
#space #environment	#staff	#STEM #technology #makerspace

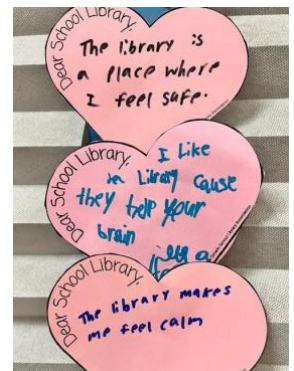
I ended up with these eighteen different categories into which hearts were then placed. I took a picture of each heart and then copied it into a folder I had created for each hashtag. Subsequently, an intern at the Ontario Library Association (OLA) did some data entry, whereby the message on each heart was entered into a spreadsheet and the hashtags for each was noted. This made the language for each heart searchable. Furthermore, the messages could be sorted by hashtag so when looking for all the messages that related to, for example, access, those could be easily called up and an appropriate one chosen for the message being crafted. This makes the data set much more effective and I am grateful to the OLA intern that did this work.

Summer 2024

The summer brought several changes to the school library sector in Ontario, including yet another cabinet shuffle, due to the resignation of Education Minister Todd Smith, who we'd welcomed early June, and the appointment of yet another Education Minister, Jill Dunlop, as of mid-August. This, coupled with a change in the funding formula and further cuts to the sector had many school library staff seeing a reduction in their allocations and/or being cut from their libraries altogether. I had done a number of media interviews over the summer and knew that tensions were high.

September 2024

The theme of the September, 2024 issue of *The Teaching Librarian* was "Community @Your Library." Within its pages was a two page spread that included an article authored by myself, (Burch Jones, 2024, p. 24-25), which highlighted the success of "Dear School Library" at the Forest of Reading Festival in Toronto in May and invited readers to consider what this project might look like in their own school communities. How might they collect student voice? "With this initiative," I wrote "we aim to unite school library professionals across Ontario with an advocacy project that will produce qualitative data you can use in your own school-level and district-level work. With the hearts we receive back, we will summarize the qualitative data we receive from school



libraries across the province into a postcard/infographic that both you and the OSLA can use for our collective advocacy work moving forward” (Burch Jones, 2024, p. 24-25).

At the same time, some of those colleagues from the Forest of Reading Festival were embarking on their own “Dear School projects to great success. Some were out during curriculum nights. Some rolled during library orientations. I did it at my school when we hosted the Scholastic Fair. It really didn’t matter how or when it. What matters was that we did it at all.⁵

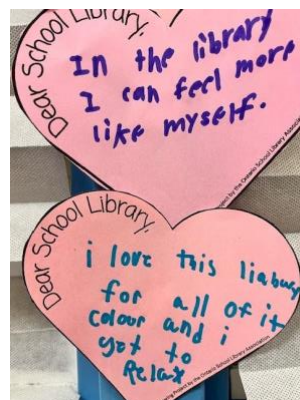
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speaking to anyone else’s experience. But I that when I did my own “Dear School project - it was just as impactful for me school community as it had been for us May. Students at Dixon Grove Junior Middle School, where I am the teacher-librarian to a Kindergarten - Grade 8 school community wrote the most lovely things about why they loved their library. Sure, a few were about me. However, many were about the space and the books - about which I was just as proud having come to the school to embark on a massive revitalization project. So the collection and space are both very different now than they were just over two years ago when I first arrived. So I feel like I can take some of the credit on both of those fronts, too. Dav Pilkey can keep the Dog Man love. The fact that there are copies of Dog Man, (Pilkey, 2016), in the library for students to read though, that might be me. At the end of the week, I can say that it was both humbling and amusing to read what they’d written. The #schoollibraryjoy was big and genuine.



October 2024

Leading up to Canadian School Library Day (Canadian School Libraries, 2024a), OLA did a big push on social media, not only reminding OSLA members to participate in Dear School Library, but inviting the public to weigh in with their own favourite memories of their school libraries, too.

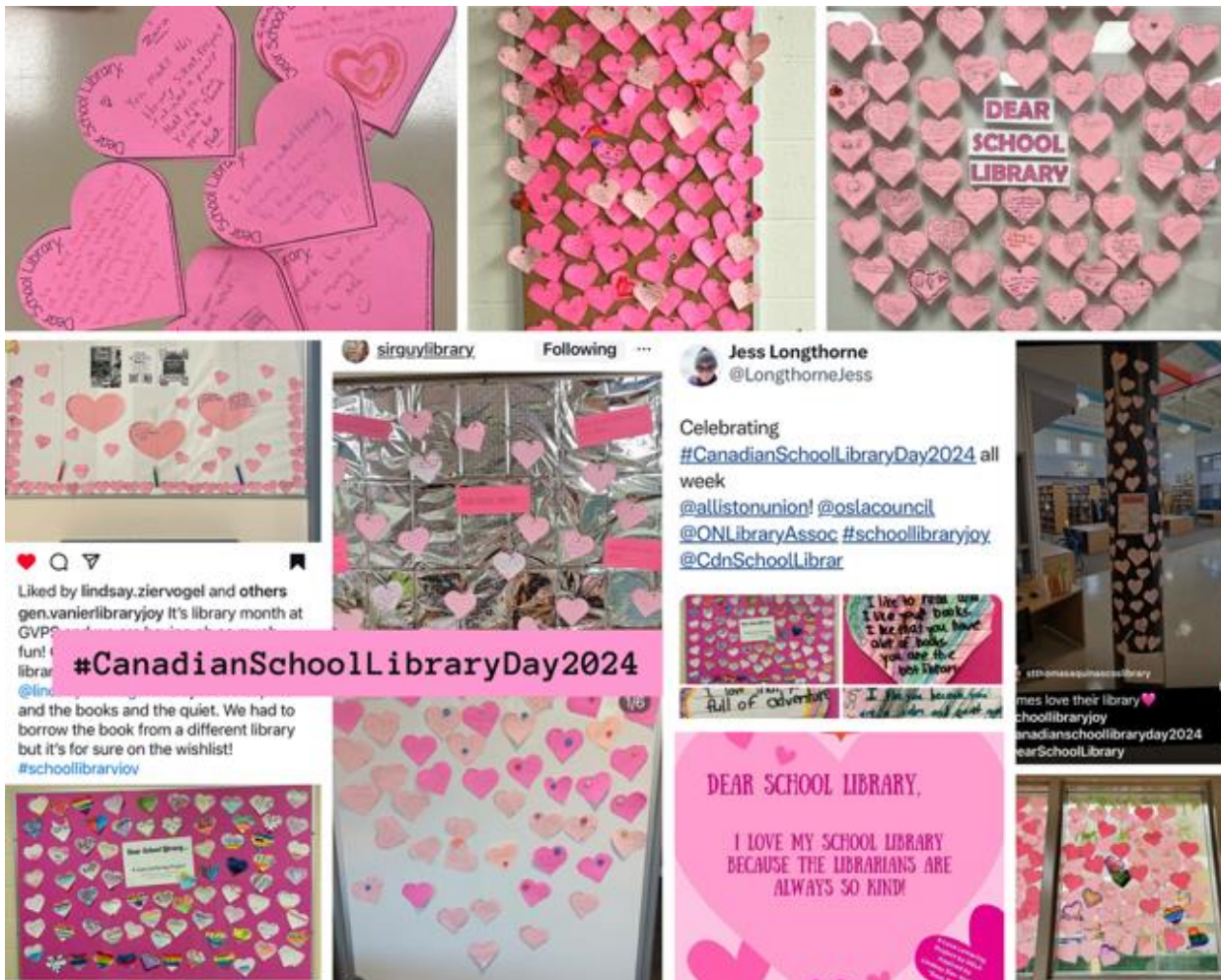
They also used the “Dear School Library” branding to help generate support for the Save our School Libraries Campaign (Ontario Library Association, 2024b), where authors Louise

⁵ PICTURES - Dear School Library at Dixon Grove Jr. Middle School (Photos by W. Burch Jones, Oct. 9&10, 2024)

Onome, Debbie Ridpath Ohi, and Kim Fahner weighed in on why their school libraries made an impact on them.



On Monday, October 21st we celebrated Canadian School Library Day and saw a flood of #schoollibraryjoy on social media as school libraries all across the country celebrated their incredible work.



Impact

As of the writing of this paper, OSLA is still collecting hearts from Canadian School Library Day, identifying the winners of the prize, and determining next steps for summarizing our qualitative data. We know the potential for the impact that this can have on the school library community in Ontario, and potentially beyond. So we are working carefully to ensure that we are thoughtful in how we craft the advocacy messages structured with the collective student voice elicited with “Dear School Library” projects to date. Together with the Ontario Library Association Staff, OSLA will be creating infographics and/or printing postcards that we will be able to use in our advocacy work moving forward. These advocacy materials will also be pushed out across the province so that school library professionals can use them in their own advocacy efforts within their own schools and school communities. It is the goal of this project that our collective efforts will help give teacher-librarians and school library technicians strong voices in their courageous conversations as they continue to fight for fully-staffed and fully-funded school libraries.

Advocacy & Foundations

When sitting down to write this paper, I thought long and hard about how the theme of “advocacy” fit into *Leading Learning* (Canadian School Libraries, 2024c) and *Foundations for School Library Learning in Canada: A Framework for Success* (Canadian School Libraries, 2024b). While I recognized a kernel of this in the sub-theme of “accountability” (and even went back to the early pages to include this word several times just to be sure it would “fit”), I’m not sure that advocacy and accountability are necessarily one in the same. Yes, it can be argued that they are, in some contexts. However, the “Dear School Library” Project is not about accountability. It is not about marketing, not really. Although, I can understand the use of that term as well. Advocacy is about gathering public support for a particular cause or policy. In this case, support for school libraries, school library staffing, and school library programming. While there might be marketing and sales strategies used in an advocacy campaign, I am not, in fact, selling anything. I am calling for support. I am championing a cause. I am defending school libraries. So I offer for consideration that we - as a school library community - might consider where advocacy fits in our Standards of Practice. Because it is also my ardent belief that we are in the business of advocacy by virtue of being school library professionals. We advocate with every choice we make in collection development. We advocate with every conversation we have with a colleague, administrator, or community member (Ngo, 2022). We advocate with every display we create. So why then, isn’t advocacy a pillar in our Standards of Practice? Why isn’t it a word that is repeated throughout *Leading Learning*? Why is it something for which one has to go searching? Given how much we have to fight for our allocations, our libraries, our budgets, sometimes our very jobs - it seems strange that advocacy is absent from this foundational document.

What’s Next

On a much lighter note, at the end of October, I was blessed to be able to attend the British Columbia Teacher-Librarian Association Annual Conference. To have the opportunity to network with other school librarian colleagues, hear about the issues in their province, share what's going on in Ontario, discuss our common advocacy interests and get to know one another better was such a gift and I didn't take it for granted. One of the great pieces to come out of my visit to Victoria was a long conversation with CSL Chair of the Board, Joseph Jeffery. I suggested that it might be a natural progression to use "Dear School Library" as a theme for next year's Canadian School Library Day theme. And without hesitation he readily agreed! So it is to be, then, that this little nugget of an idea, sparked by a beautifully written picture book, is going to be launched as a project nationally, from coast-to-coast-to-coast. In schools all across Canada, students will be asked to consider what they love about their school libraries. The impact of all that advocacy in all those school communities makes me tingle with excitement. The possibilities for all that data (albeit qualitative) make me giddy. And just wait until they see the bright beams of of #schoollibraryjoy radiating from Victoria to Iqaluit to St. John's. With that kind of wattage the powers that be just might have to envelop our funding back here in Ontario just to contain it.

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