

**Empowering Voices: The Importance of BC Teacher-Librarians
in Union Activism and Advocacy**

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Empowering Voices: The Importance of BC Teacher-Librarians in Union Activism and Advocacy

Objectives:

- To recognize the importance of Teacher-Librarian (TL) activism in the union
- To inspire local and provincial associations to consider funding similar projects
- To increase the awareness of working and learning conditions of Teacher-Librarians in British Columbia

Every role in the school is important and helps our students grow as learners. Teacher-Librarians are no exception. In fact, TLs are vital to a thriving public education system. We can see from *Canadian School Libraries* (2023, p.11) that:

According to 50 years of research, the power of the school library is in facilitating teaching and learning. For this reason, staffing libraries with teacher-librarians, qualified teachers with additional qualifications in school librarianship, has a measurable impact on student learning and achievement.

Multiple studies from organizations and think tanks like the British Columbia (BC) Ministry of Education, American Association for School Libraries, International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement and *School Library Journal* clearly state that there is a positive effect of the school library learning commons and teacher-librarians on student success. Lance (2018) detailed that:

The mere presence of a [teacher-librarian] is associated with better student outcomes, but what [teacher-librarians] do also has positive effects...in schools where [teacher-librarians] spend more time:

- Instructing students, both with classroom teachers and independently;
- Planning collaboratively with classroom teachers;
- Providing professional development to teachers;
- Meeting regularly with the principal;
- Serving on key school leadership committees;
- Facilitating the use of technology by students and teachers;
- Providing technology support to teachers, and
- Providing reading incentive programs.



BCTLA Executive in 2023

This is long-established but somehow the teacher-librarian working and learning conditions in British Columbia and beyond continue to deteriorate. This juxtaposition of value versus reality spurred the British Columbia Teacher-Librarians' Association (BCTLA) executive to proactively find a solution.

Part of our journey further examining the working and learning conditions of BC teacher-librarians stemmed from the need to find ways to support our members with the upcoming bargaining happening in our province. This became imperative when we observed that some school districts interpreted our recent improvements from our current contract in a way that disadvantaged staff and students. In BC, a few districts have elementary teacher-librarians teaching classes from bell to bell to cover contractual preparation time (prep time) for classroom teachers in the library learning commons as part of their role. For these TLs, time is divided between covering teacher prep time, collaboration time, administrative time and their own preparation time.

When our contract added an additional ten minutes of preparation time for all elementary teachers, which is well deserved, it worked out in a way that surprised us for certain districts. Rather than hire more teachers to teach the additional preparation time we bargained for with the Ministry of Education, some districts decided to add this additional ten minutes of preparation time onto the TL's load, thus allowing them to reallocate the money elsewhere. This way, districts did not have to hire more teachers. Instead, they further reduced or eliminated what little collaboration time elementary TLs had with teachers and students.

Scholastic stated in their 2016 research compendium that,

Even as the demand for accountability grows and mounting evidence continues to affirm that school libraries staffed by certified school [teacher-librarians] make a measurable difference on student achievement, library resources are too-often reduced or eliminated from budgets all together. (2015)

This includes the work we do in collaboration with our teachers. By downgrading elementary TLs to teachers covering preparation time in the library learning commons, we are devaluing the work TLs can do with classes. We understand the impact we have on student learning and achievement. The question is "how can we use this information to advocate on behalf of TLs, especially when our work is often diminished to covering a teacher's preparation time?"

Origin of the Working & Learning Conditions Survey

For historical reference, in January 2002, the BC provincial government imposed a province wide Collective Agreement settlement on teachers, gutting local collective agreements of class-size, class-composition, and staffing-ratio provisions including those for TLs. Future negotiations of such terms and conditions of employment were made illegal until the Supreme Court of Canada ruled otherwise in 2016. Teacher-Librarian positions across BC were vastly reduced or eliminated completely during this period. Due to this situation, the BCTLA created the Working and Learning Conditions (WLC) Survey in 2002 to gather the data necessary to advocate for a better working environment. This survey has been sent out yearly to all its members and TLs across the province since.

The BC teachers Collective Agreement was reinstated in 2016 (Supreme Court of Canada, 2024). The reinstatement of this collective agreement is a win; however, it is still a collective agreement from 2002. It does not reflect the current needs of students. We are still recovering from the impact of this loss, which was further exacerbated by COVID and other factors. As funding decreased from year to year, our budgets got reduced while our job responsibilities increased. This role has been slowly eroded away. For example, as mentioned previously, in several BC school districts, elementary teacher-librarians have gone from being literacy leaders and collaborators to teachers teaching classes from bell to bell to cover contractual preparation time for classroom teachers. Without support for clerical work, TLs are doing more paperwork and book processing on their own time or at the detriment of time that could be spent with students and teachers.

Our observations, based on years of reports, our own lived experiences, as well as what is shared by our Chapters (local associations) throughout the province, show that our roles have changed. More than ever, our advocacy and work through the union is necessary to make positive changes. We created the WLC Survey as a tool to better understand the impacts and future needs of school library learning commons, but we did not know how to fully utilize it. A few of our executive members decided to take the opportunity given to us by the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) to apply for a Teacher Inquiry Program (TIP) grant in 2023 to help achieve our goals.

We wanted to find ways to equip ourselves so that we could advocate to improve what is being quietly taken away due to a multitude of reasons. Our administrative tasks are often not recognized as a vital part of our job and require time. In addition, teacher and funding shortage make it difficult for everyone and we are always asked to sacrifice the work done in the library learning commons.

We are a small group of specialized teachers who need information and knowledge to be able to fight for better working conditions. Our connections with our union helped us through this with funding as well as expertise. After all, Sarah J. Maas (2012/2023, Ch.8) said it best, "Libraries [are] full of ideas – perhaps the most dangerous and powerful of all weapons." We know how to find solutions because we know how to fully access this weapon!

Method and Process of the Teacher Inquiry Program:

As stated on the BCTF website (2023), the TIP grant is a professional development opportunity funded by the BCTF and must be matched by the approved association to support an inquiry made by a group of teachers. Last year, for the first time, the BCTF offered this grant to include Provincial Specialist Associations (PSA). As the BCTLA is a PSA, we applied to conduct an inquiry of our own with the following executive members:

Name of Executive Member:	School District:
Marliyn Carr	Surrey (36)
Doni Gratton	West Vancouver (45)
Nicole Hurtubise	Surrey (36)
Tammy Le	Surrey (36)
Serena Mohammed	Richmond (38)
Lisa Seddon	New Westminster (40)

The focus of our inquiry from our application was:

...[E]xplore the working conditions of Teacher-Librarians (TLs) across the province to provide better support and develop bargaining ideas.

Through the support of our provincial union and TIP facilitators, we found out what we could achieve and the limitations of our grant and time. We met five times as a group in-person and online. We had two facilitators, Holly Lloyd and David Barnum, who joined us in the morning to set the agenda and focus our inquiry direction. Then in the afternoon we continued to work on our own, brainstorming, delving into research and sharing ideas of what we could accomplish. One of the first things we did was improve our WLC Survey. As a group we talked about what questions needed to be asked to

help with our inquiry. The BCTF was able to give our group a contact in their research department to assist. Anne Hales, BCTF Senior Researcher, was able to help us hone our questions and give guidance in making the questions clearer and more concise.

Through our process, we discovered that we needed to make teacher-librarians visible and raise awareness of who we are and what we do among our fellow teacher colleagues as well as community members. This was particularly important as we knew we were coming up to a bargaining year and wanted to amplify our voice as specialist teachers. We created a colouring sheet that could be shared out with peers at the March BCTF Annual General Meeting (AGM). With the success of the colouring sheets, we created additional documents aimed at parents, guardians and keyholders in BC's K - 12 public education system.

Our final meeting was to present to the other thirty Provincial Specialist Associations Council (PSAC) of BC. We spoke about the process of doing the TIP, some results from the WLC Survey and how they, as colleagues, can support teacher-librarians in their PSAs, schools and locals. The presentation inspired a few other PSAs to apply for the grant to do similar work with their members the following year.

Results From the Working and Learning Conditions Survey:

The BCTLA conducted its newly written annual survey on Working and Learning Conditions in February 2024, receiving 431 responses, a decrease from 566 in the previous year. The decrease in responses was not a surprise to the TIP group as we anecdotally knew increased demand on workload would mean less time for teacher-librarians to fill in the survey. The survey sample, representing approximately 27% of standard public schools, included 67% from elementary schools and at least one response from 44 out of 60 school districts. We felt like this represented TLs and schools across the province.

Despite the decline in survey participation, it highlighted ongoing issues like increased workloads, erosion of the teacher-librarian as a specialist role, and budget constraints. Lack of clerical support meant that TLs needed to process their own books, place book orders and other tasks. A big concern was TLs being often pulled from their school library learning commons and put into classroom teaching roles as we had overwhelming numbers of "failures to fill" - that is when there were not enough teachers teaching on call to cover classes - which resulted in over 1800 hours of lost TL time just from the respondents. Collaboration time also saw a decrease, particularly among middle school and elementary TLs. Budget constraints continue to be a significant concern, with library budgets failing to keep pace with inflation, and many TLs resorting

to creative funding solutions like book sales or asking the Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) to fundraise on their behalf.

“Pulling Tls from their positions to cover unfilled classroom positions is horrible. It demoralizes the whole school.”
 - BCTLA WLC 2023/24 Survey participant

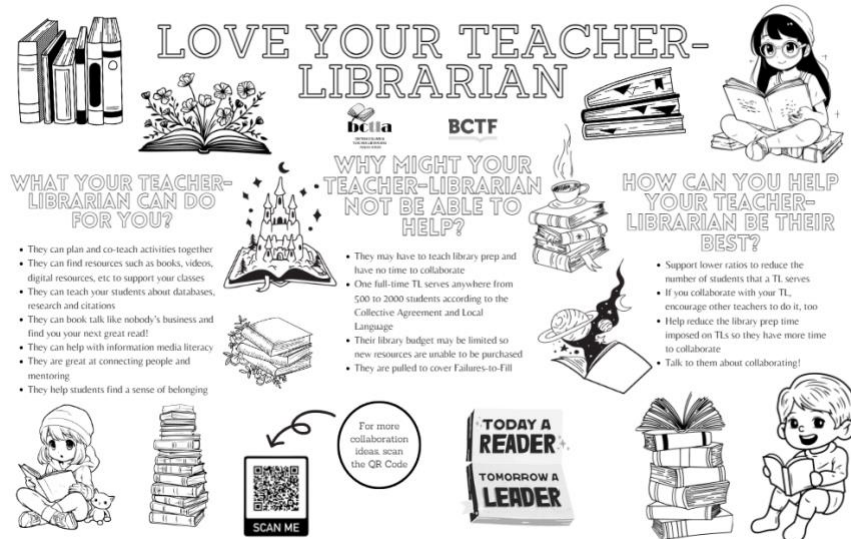
“I have found with the reduction of our Library Admin time, my workload has been near unmanageable. I have been a librarian and teacher librarian for over 30 years and this is the first year where I feel overwhelmed by the amount of work that is required of us.”
 - BCTLA WLC 2023/24 Survey participant

The survey highlighted what we suspected was happening in districts. We were concerned about the decline in workplace satisfaction rates and increase in workload, and knew we needed to advocate on a bigger scale

beyond our own association.

Actions Plans Resulting from the Tip:

We decided that we needed a larger audience for support. At our BCTLA AGM, we shared a letter template stating bargaining goals with our Chapter Councilors who represent local TL associations across BC. The purpose was to have our Chapter Councilors use this template to encourage their local unions to include TL working and learning conditions into their bargaining priorities. The success of this was reflected in the numerous local unions submitting resolutions supporting improvements to TL working and learning conditions.



Love Your Teacher-Librarian Colouring Sheet

Furthermore, we decided to engage other teachers and inform them of our work in hopes of gaining support when we asked our union to prioritize the working conditions of teacher-librarians. Since we knew the multi-day BCTF AGM was coming up in March, we created a colouring sheet titled, *Love Your Teacher-Librarian*, that showcased our work with staff and students. This colouring sheet was divided into three parts: *What Your Teacher-Librarians Can Do for You*; *Why Might Your Teacher-Librarian Not Be Able to Help*; and *How Can You Help Your Teacher-Librarian Be Their Best*. These 11x17 inch sheets were left on tables with pencil crayons for AGM delegates to colour. We received very positive feedback from those who both attended and did not attend. We continue to share our colouring sheet on our [website](#) for anyone to download.

After the success of the BCTF AGM, it occurred to us that we needed to broaden our advocacy to include parents so that we would have support from the community to rally on behalf of TLs and school library learning commons. Very often, the public and even our own colleagues do not understand the role of the teacher-librarian. This felt like the moment to educate others as much as we could. To further our goals of raising awareness, we decided with the suggestion of our TIP facilitators to purchase a table at the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (BCCPAC) during their AGM in May 2024 so that we could speak to as many parents as possible. In addition to revising the colouring sheet to be more suitable for parents and guardians, we created a bookmark, a slide show and informational display to share out at our table. Many parents and the then Minister of Education, Rachna Singh, stopped by to learn about the realities of school library learning commons and share their stories about and support for public education libraries.



BCTLA Executive Members, Lisa Seddon and Doni Gratton, at the BCCPAC Conference

BC TEACHER-LIBRARIANS ASSOCIATION PRESENTS

LOVE YOUR TEACHER-LIBRARIAN

WHY ARE TEACHER-LIBRARIANS IMPORTANT?

- The library learning commons is the heart of the school.
- This space welcomes all students and helps them grow as learners and citizens.
- Teacher-Librarians help cultivate and empower a community of learners by providing opportunities to share, create and collaborate.
- We find ways to engage students and improve student learning.

WHAT DO TEACHER-LIBRARIANS DO FOR STUDENTS?

- Find resources such as books, videos, databases and websites to support your child's learning.
- Teach your child about digital literacy, critical thinking, and how to strategically and safely navigate media.
- Book talk like nobody's business and find your child's next great read!
- Connect, mentor and inspire students, and help them find a sense of belonging

“Google can bring you back 100,000 answers. A Librarian can bring you back the right one.”

-Neil Gaiman

BCTF

Love Your Teacher-Librarian Bookmark

LOVE YOUR TEACHER-LIBRARIAN

DID YOU KNOW?

- One full-time Teacher-Librarian serves anywhere from 500 to 2000 students
- The provincial ratio is 1 Teacher-Librarian for every 702 students, which means many schools do not have a Teacher-Librarian at their school every day
- Teacher-Librarians may not have time to collaborate with all teachers or see every student each week
- The library budget may be limited, and many new and exciting resources are unable to be purchased
- Teacher Librarians may be pulled to cover teacher absences, resulting in closures of the library

HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR SCHOOL LIBRARY:

- Visit your school library and engage with your Teacher-Librarian, sign out some books!
- Write to your Principal, School Board, and Trustees to show support for Teacher-Librarians
- Write to your MLA to advocate for better Teacher-Librarian ratios
- Visit <https://bctla.ca> to learn more

Important Library Dates:

- Canadian School Library Day (Oct 22)
- Drop Everything And Read (Oct 28)
- I Read Canadian Day (Nov)
- Love Your School Library Day (Feb 14)
- Canadian Freedom to Read Week (Feb 17-21)

In November 2024, a few members of the BCTLA executive were voted by their local to attend the BC Federations of Labour (BCFed) Convention. Upon learning that the BCTF would have an information booth for visitors, we asked if we could join them to continue our advocacy. Visitors to the booth were able to take the parent/guardian revised colouring page as well as a bookmark. On the first few days, executive members of the BCTLA were released and were able to sit at the booth and talk about the importance of school library learning commons with people from 50+ unions across BC.



BCTLA President, Tammy Le, at the BCFed Convention

Conclusion:

The journey to examine and improve the working and learning conditions of BC teacher-librarians underscores the critical role these professionals play in fostering student achievement and supporting educators. The challenges revealed through our inquiry and survey highlight the urgent need for greater advocacy, awareness, and systemic change. Teacher-Librarian activism has been renewed with the erosion of our roles and autonomy in the library learning commons. The BCTLA has multiple executive members in various roles in their local unions, so the TL voice is represented. In addition to this, many TLs were elected to attend the BCTF AGM in 2024 to speak to and vote for motions supporting improvements to TL working conditions. By amplifying our collective voice through initiatives like the Teacher Inquiry Program, engaging parents, educators, and unions, and creating accessible advocacy tools, we have laid a foundation for sustained efforts.

This inquiry we undertook helped us look at the gaps we had and inspired us to further pursue awareness. We continue the work to advocate for teacher-librarians. We were not able to find out who all TLs were across the province, and we did not find out if every district was upholding the TL ratios set by our provincial collective agreement,

which is 1 TL for every 702 students. We know that there are districts that have no TLs and districts that have recently lost grievances for not meeting ratios.

Canadian school libraries are crucial today as they equip students with essential digital literacy skills to navigate a world full of misinformation, while also promoting reading and critical thinking. They provide equitable access to resources and technology, helping to close gaps for students who may lack these at home. Additionally, school library learning commons offer safe, inclusive spaces that support mental wellness and provide diverse materials, making them integral to fostering a well-rounded, future-ready generation. The information we discovered in the WLC survey and the work we did on the TIP are valuable. This work serves as an inspiring blueprint for unions, associations, and communities to recognize and support the invaluable contributions of teacher-librarians to public education in British Columbia. Together, we can ensure that school library learning commons thrive as vibrant, equitable spaces for teaching and learning.

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