been well disseminated beyond the profession, and when it has been, administrators, policy makers, parents, and the general public have often ignored or dismissed the results (Kachel 2013).

Lack of knowledge and concern for the impact of a school librarian is critical because this lack has led to disappearance of jobs and denied students' access to the skills that school librarians bring to 21st-century learners. Of 875 school administrators surveyed in 49 states, 89% considered cuts to school libraries in 2011 (Ellerson 2010). In addition, 58% reported that they were unable to save school librarian positions for 2010 (Ellerson and McCord 2009) and about 31% more of the same group reported that they intended to cut school librarians in their districts by the end of 2012 (Ellerson 2010). Key policy battles over retention of school librarians have been fought and won in Washington, lost in Arizona, and continue in numerous other states. The professional outlook for many school librarians is grim at a time when their fostering of information and technology skills and multiple literacies is increasingly viewed as an essential aspect of quality education (Johnson, Smith, Willis, Levine, and Haywood 2011).

With cuts looming, school librarians are often relegated to reacting in a crisis mode to convince administrators and school boards of the value of school librarians. Advocacy, in the form of presentations, social-media campaigns, press releases, and sharing of research results, frequently takes place at the end of the school year as school librarians and their supporters try to thwart imminent elimination of positions. This phenomenon has spurred a variety of guides (e.g., Levitov 2012; DelGuidice and Luna 2012; see list of additional resources) and even a Crisis Toolkit from the American Association of School Librarians (2013). Although these resources provide the means for gaining advocates when jobs are in jeopardy,

Methodology

The project team designed a focus group methodology that included presentation of school library research findings and group discussion. Specific goals for the focus groups were:

1. Participants will gain information about the status of school libraries in Pennsylvania and key research findings about school library programs' impact on student learning and academic achievement.
2. Through consensus-building activities, participants will clarify which components of the school library program infrastructure they value most.
3. Participants will disseminate information learned to their constituencies.

Focus Group Program Development

A steering committee from the project developed the program and schedu Td (3(o)-10(1o)-10(t)-2(he)4(f)3(c

journey." Another commented, "I am always concerned that libraries should remain funded and give the public access to information."

2. *How interested were you in the topics presented after attending the focus group?*

All participants expressed affirming or increasing their interest in school libraries based on the data and research that were presented. They noted that there was potential for getting the education community and legislature involved and for raising awareness among stakeholders like Parent-Teacher Associations. As one person commented, "I was both encouraged and concerned. It was good to know that people would be advocating for school library resources, but disheartening to see evidence of such need." Many other participants mentioned that they had not been aware of the extent to which school libraries had been cut and appreciated learning about the issues. One participant, whose daughter is a school librarian in another state, used the information she obtained at the meeting to begin a dialogue and find out more about the challenges her daughter faced at work.

3. *Are there aspects of the discussion that you would like the facilitators to know now that were not expressed?*

This question generated many responses from interviewees. Most felt that the facilitation was skillful because they had an opportunity to bring things up to the group, particularly during breakout groups as well as in large discussions and that the facilitators were good at getting participants to share. Interviewees lauded the writing activities as providing important opportunities to distill thoughts and ideas.

Some participants raised minor concerns in response to this question, too. One interviewee was adamant that information about students with special needs should have been addressed and that there was too much emphasis on access to books when some of these students can't turn the page of a book. Access to other types of media should have been discussed. A participant expressed a desire to have heard about the school librarians' role in fostering Internet safety and etiquette. Interest in learning more about statewide plans to provide information access to English Language Learners in schools was mentioned as well.

However, these responses reflected more of an expanded awareness of the role of school librarians rather than a need for the facilitators to have acted differently. One woman noted that as a result of the session she "couldn't stop thinking about the plight of school libraries." She pointed to an article that she had just read in the (then) most current *American Educator* magazine[1] about the socioeconomic differences in library access and its affect on children's learning. She said that the information she gained in the focus group process helped her to understand that it's not just about access to library books: "The person is the cart [i.e., book cart]. The librarian is the real asset. I mean, who else helps kids find good things to read and can help them with computers?"

4. *Are there aspects of the discussion that you would like to learn more about?*

Since it had been several months since the focus group sessions, participants said they would like to have an update on what is happening in Pennsylvania school libraries this school year. They would like an update on the numbers of positions eliminated and school libraries closed in well-to-

libraries are. I mean, it's one thing to kind of hear about it, but when a real person tells you they're vulnerable, it really means something!"

8. *What additional information might you need in order to better understand school libraries in Pennsylvania?*

Participants again expressed a desire to be updated on what is currently happening. Several participants mentioned that they would like to see a list of the number of school librarians in the state and the areas they service. This interest in learning about the policy-level structures that govern school librarians in Pennsylvania was mentioned by a few participants. Their comments included: "How is it that the schools in my city can ignore school libraries when we are state run?" "What does the Pennsylvania school code say about school libraries?" "How does funding get from the state to school libraries?" "How are school librarians prepared to fight these battles and stick up for themselves?"

9. *Could you comment on the strengths of this event?*

All noted it was very interesting and provided useful information. Several participants mentioned valuing the diverse mix of people in the focus groups. Interviewees described the event as "well organized," "beneficial," "inspiring," "balanced," and "important."

10. *Do you have any suggestions for improvement of future events?*

Participants appreciated that this was not a full-day event. The length of the event allowed them to keep their focus and leave wanting more. While a participant wondered if perhaps more people could speak to the ligted t

1. Participants will gain information about the status of school libraries in Pennsylvania and key research findings about school library programs' impact on student learning and academic achievement.

Interviews with the selected participants revealed that they gained important knowledge about school libraries in Pennsylvania. Before attending the focus groups most were unaware of the findings presented, and participants were both surprised and moved by the presentation. In particular, they expressed that they learned about the influence of the instructional role of the school librarian—a role they had previously been unfamiliar with. They also found the information about the impact of the school librarian on student achievement to be enlightening. Participants exited the focus groups seeing school librarians in the roles prescribed in *Empowering Learners:* leader, instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, and program administrator (AASL 2009).

2. Through consensus-building activities, participants will clarify which components of the school library program infrastructure they value most.

Common themes with all four groups concerning program infrastructure were staffing and resources. The participants came to realize that a quality school library program could not exist without a certified full-time school librarian. And while resources were important, they were substantially less effective if not promoted and integrated by a qualified school librarian. Some differences between the four groups did exist, however. Interviewees from urban areas emphasized the school library as a center of information access for all learners, regardless of socioeconomic status, learners' ability, and English language facility. In suburban areas the emphasis leaned toward the contribution of instructional partnering and technology leadership.

3. Participants will disseminate information learned to their constituencies.

Several participants reported using the materials received as starting points for conversations with colleagues and members outside their immediate circles. To express their concerns about failure to maintain funding and staffing for effective school library programs, interviewees proactively sought out educators with whom they had not interacted previously. One person shared the materials with her child's school librarian and her public librarian and was surprised to learn they were unaware of the research surrounding school libraries. While some packets are awaiting further re-distribution, no participant mentioned not valuing the material or discarding it after the focus group. This willingness to retain the information suggests that some participants require time to digest the contents and think about how best to apply their new knowledge.

Additional Conclusions

The focus groups that were conducted presented an opportunity to comprehend the ways in which valued stakeholders in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania view school libraries and school librarians and respond to research about them. Although these groups were not representative of all Pennsylvania citizens, the opinions solicited provide a foundation for the development of a campaign that successfully meets the needs of Pennsylvania communities. The information obtained from the focus groups is critical to the development of further messages to the public because the information considers various perspectives and provides insight into those concepts that are not well understood and how individual experiences color perceptions of school libraries. These findings may also be of value to library advisory groups.

Overall, these focus groups were well received by the participants. Many participants expressed their appreciation for having the opportunity to learn about school libraries. They also were glad to be able to vocalize their opinion on this subject and engage in the activities at each site. Various members volunteered to be interviewed. The sessions reinforced the notion that individuals are willing to participate when they know their opinions are valued and can make a difference. It was also clear that many people with diverse positions and perspectives value school libraries.

Recommendations

The findings indicate the participants' willingness to become library "champions" who will take actions to support school libraries—the next logical phase of this endeavor. Their enthusiasm should be embraced, and active participation by members of these focus groups should be encouraged in further advocacy efforts. It is in that context that the following recommendations are made.

1. **Develop a toolkit for stakeholders**. Participants pointed to a desire to have an outreach and advocacy toolkit available online for download as a way to help all interested parties continue to have means to raise awareness among policy makers. This toolkit can be an extension of the existing Pennsylvania School Library Project website, and it should be easy to access prepared materials for different audiences. Links to existing toolkits, like AASL's Parent Advocacy Toolkit (2012; see list of additional resources), could also be incorporated.
2. **Expand the outreach.** The success of the focus groups should be expanded to other audiences. Although the four sessions were spread throughout the Commonwealth to some degree, they took place in urban and suburban areas. An attempt should be made to have the opinions of rural residents heard. It was also noted by an interviewee that as a parent of a child with disabilities, she would have liked to see information about their needs addressed in the presentation. Parents of children with disabilities are often a vocal and organized group and may prove to be one of the other audiences targeted for participation in the future.
3. **Train the trainers.** A train the trainers approach that includes specific strategies on how to engage various diverse groups of stakeholders may prove beneficial in cultivating library champions and mobilizing grassroots advocacy. Administrators, PTO presidents, civic groups, and other groups each have a different perspective but could speak with a unified voice to their constituents on behalf of school library programs.
4. **Focus on policy makers.** Efforts to engage the public to support school library programs will go much further if the emphasis is on policy makers. Some of those interviewed noted that in the small-group discussions individuals who already have good school libraries in their local schools are satisfied with the status quo and are not interested in being involved in advocacy for others. Participants who held higher-level administrative offices at a state-wide level expressed more of an obligation to ensure that all residents in Pennsylvania could boost their students' outcomes with an effective, dynamic school library program that has the support of the community.
5. **Follow up with participants.** Although the evaluators spoke to participants several months after the focus group sessions, these stakeholder advocates should be contacted at