

## Pittsburgh: Check out why we must aid libraries



By [Nafari Vanaski](#)

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After he read my column about the new school library at Manchester Pre-K-8 school, reader Bill V. wrote me an email in large font.

Among other things, he wrote: "Libraries always have and always should exist as the result of donation of materials and staffing by volunteers. If these are not present, then libraries should not exist."

Spoken like the owner of a set of Encyclopedia Britannica, no doubt. It's an easy stance to take when you've never had to worry about access to books.

Another reader said I should have focused on the good of the Manchester situation — that volunteers stepped up to staff school libraries. She's right; it's selfless and it's great that someone is doing it.

But consider that the library existed with few books and broken shelves for a long time. There weren't enough volunteers then to help the thousands of children who must have graduated from that school thinking that no one cared enough about their corner of the world to fill or staff their library.

School libraries have not always depended on volunteers to keep them going, nor should they have to. There was a time when school funding went to libraries and full-time librarians. At my elementary school in Brooklyn, N.Y., the librarian, Mrs. Sacks, was sort of intimidating but she ensured our access to books.

So what has changed since then?

"Libraries have become expendable," said Jessie Ramey, a history professor at the University of Pittsburgh who manages the website Yinzercation, a grassroots effort aimed at preventing further education budget cuts. Ramey said the \$1 billion in cuts in the 2011-12 state budget caused school officials to make tough decisions about using the money they got.

"Some schools were forced to hire a first-grade teacher instead of a librarian," Ramey said.

Ebony Pugh, spokeswoman for Pittsburgh Public Schools, said the district's high schools and schools serving grades 6-12 have full-time librarians.

Perhaps part of the reason libraries get short shrift is that many people don't understand the importance of a librarian. Sheila May-Stein, whose activism as a roving librarian for Pittsburgh Public Schools helped fill some of the spare shelves, said a full-time librarian can help support classroom curriculum by working with teachers.

A trained librarian is the only one who can check out a book to a student. That's why at Manchester, even with a revamped library, students typically can access it only twice a month.

A study by the nonprofit Education Law Center of Pennsylvania found that regardless of race, class or disability, students with access to a full-time librarian at school had higher state reading scores.

That sounds like, as the kids say today, kind of a big deal. Absent that, we'll have to continue to depend on the volunteers. Still, this situation begs the question: When schools can't afford to pay first-grade teachers, will we get volunteers for that, too?

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