

We are the weather makers

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Both Holly and Olivia are active members of their local teacher librarian community and maintain an interest in educational and other political issues at a local and national level.

Abstract

Have you heard what's been happening in the ACT? Find out about the successful advocacy work that teacher librarians in Canberra have been achieving in recent years. This article delivers an overview of the ACT journey, identifies strategies for success and provides useful tips. It includes support materials and practical ideas to try in your local area. Together we can make it!

Introduction

Let's not beat around the bush. These are grim times for teacher librarians. Yes, it is also an exciting and dynamic time for our profession, but there are alarming reports from across the country of teacher librarian (TL) working hours being reduced and TL positions being cut altogether. Of course, this is not true in all schools or in all sectors. But, even in schools where TL

staffing is flourishing, people must see what is happening elsewhere.

Rather than being overwhelmed and despondent, we hope after reading this you will feel empowered. Our message to you is this: *Do something!* Our experience in the ACT has been that when *something* happens to get advocacy started, further actions evolve and grow.

Over the past three years, our efforts with our colleagues have resulted in issues connected to teacher librarianship being brought into the spotlight for teachers, principals, politicians and the community at large across the ACT. In a time when our profession is arguably in a global crisis and when 49% of ACT government schools do not have a qualified TL, we have been able to establish and maintain momentum towards

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our goal of having at least one qualified TL in every school. We hope that this article can help that movement spread around the country.

Our story

We would like to share our advocacy story, including the components we think have made us successful as well as some challenges we've faced so far. We will list some practical tips for you to consider before we conclude with a discussion of *Where to from here* for us in the ACT and for you in your state/territory.

Our story began organically and has become more targeted, intentional and goal-oriented over time. It is a story about the government sector in Canberra; however, please keep an open mind if you are employed in another sector — focus on the commonalities rather than the differences in our situations. Many of our specific experiences or ideas from Canberra might be useful to you, but even if they are not, ultimately we are all members of the same profession with the same end-goals in mind.

2010: The thunder rumbles

Our story is preceded by an event in 2010 when the ACT education minister closed our centralised professional library. Despite widespread opposition to this among teachers and TLs, our protests were ignored, and the library was completely dismantled. This was very dispiriting.

2011: Lightning cracks

Our advocacy story really begins in mid-2011, in the context of declining TL numbers worldwide and the federal senate inquiry into school libraries that had not yet been tabled. In the ACT, Australian Education Union (AEU) members were in the middle of an Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) negotiation with the government that was not going well.

In Canberra, we have a professional learning network called *TLnet*: an email group made up of school library employees from the government, Catholic and independent sectors. There had been the occasional discussion on *TLnet* about the issues facing our profession as a whole. All up, the mood of TLs might be described as 'charged'.

Holly gave a speech at an AEU stop-work rally that specifically mentioned the need for more TLs in schools. This was received with a mighty roar from the crowd. Looking back on it, we think this proved to be the spark that ignited an already charged atmosphere.

The union: We are not alone

All of a sudden *TLnet* was alive with excited and angry comments. People asked why issues regarding TLs were not on the table in the current EBA negotiations. Phone calls were made to the union and eventually sub-branch motions were put forward to the AEU,

requesting that these issues be brought up in the negotiations.

Unfortunately, we had left it too late — the bargaining process was at its tail end. But an AEU organiser suggested that we have a meeting with TL union members and AEU staff to share our concerns.

As you might imagine, we had a great turnout to that meeting! As people shared their concerns, the AEU staff suggested that we formulate some goals and said that our

federal level. In preparation for this meeting, we developed a document articulating what a TL is, common myths about what we do, what we actually do, and our goals — which included, at that time, getting the senate inquiry tabled. The MP was very positive and receptive to what we said and promised to raise those issues with both the federal and local education ministers.

Again, we left feeling very hopeful — we were meeting with people who actually had the power to effect change.

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goals could become part of union policy. This was really empowering for us and was a significant moment when we realised that we could tap into an organised structure that could help us take action. We were not on our own.

Looking back on it now, this support has been critical. Because the issues facing our profession are global, they can feel overwhelming. It is the classic case of 'What can I do? I'm only one person'. By tapping into the AEU as an active ally, we were filled with hope and possibility.

After much discussion at a second meeting, we settled on one goal: To have at least one qualified TL in every school.

A pitter-patter of raindrops

Shortly after that, we were invited by an AEU staff member to join him to meet with a federal MP for Canberra, to discuss TL issues at the

2012: And the rain came down: making it happen

By 2012, we were in a totally different mindset than the previous year; we felt that we actually could make a difference. And we were right. In the course of that year, we achieved the following things:

- We got our goal put forward, discussed and adopted as a part of AEU policy — this means that now whenever union staff meet with politicians or talk to the media, TLs are regularly mentioned.
- We formed a core team with a member from early childhood, primary, high school and college (Years 11 and 12 in the ACT) to prepare for a meeting with a new education minister.
- Under the auspices of the Australian School Library Association (ASLA), Olivia conducted a survey of all ACT government schools regarding staffing and funding levels.

- We worked with ASLA to develop a flyer to use for lobbying. This included data from the Softlink studies and links to international data, demonstrating the positive impact of TLs on student learning outcomes (ASLA 2013).
- An opinion piece about the importance of TLs was published in *The Canberra Times* (Godfree 2012).
- The ACT AEU published an article in their journal celebrating our successes in working with them (Godfree 2013).
- We got a meeting with the ACT education minister. Out of that meeting:
 - › Olivia was invited to make a presentation to all the principals in the ACT government sector about TLs. This is significant because of the push towards 'school autonomy' in the ACT;
 - › The ACT Labor party made an election promise that tied grant funding for primary schools to the employment of a TL at the school; and
 - › Teacher librarianship was made a priority area for professional scholarships offered by the ACT Education Directorate.

The importance of data

One of the most important things we learned that year was that hard data is a game changer. Time and again, when we have met with anyone able to make decisions, it is when we pull out the hard evidence that their eyes light up and the whole tone of the meeting shifts in our favour.

2013: Keeping it going

With the knowledge that this is a marathon, not a sprint, we began last year by identifying goals for the year and spreading the responsibility of actioning these goals. We were also invited to speak at the ASLA

XXIII Conference in Hobart. That, along with the invitation to write the AEU article, gave us a sense that what we were doing was special and worthwhile.

The snapshot of last year looks like this:

- We called a meeting of our TL/AEU Advocacy Group in Term 1. About 10 people and an AEU officer attended. Together we brainstormed goals for the year.
- Seven different people took on leadership for eight out of 11 goals. We were delighted with that result; our group was growing.
- One of our first goals was to conduct a large-scale survey about perceptions of TLs across the ACT. The AEU has a full subscription to Survey Monkey and the email addresses of all their members. So, again, we tapped into their resources to our benefit.
- The ASLA Chief Executive Officer invited ACT TLs to meet with an advisor to the federal shadow education minister.
- We met with (yet another) new ACT education minister and also the ACT shadow education minister (at different times!).

What's worked: Components of success

As reflective practitioners, we've exercised our metacognitive muscles to identify what it was, and is, that is making our advocacy movement work. Please do not view these components as a 'must have' list, but rather as a sort of case study from which you can take what might work for you and leave the rest.

- *One 'driver':* This person maintains momentum by calling the meetings at the beginning of the year and generally keeping the short-, medium- and long-term visions in mind in all communications.

Our Story - Components of Success

- One "driver" - Momentum
- Two leaders - Shared vision
- Anger . . . Tapping into passion for our profession
- Professional Organisations - AEU and ASLA
- Networking and Forming an 'Advocacy Group'
- Having Meetings - Don't laugh, it's true!
- Specific Goals and Task allocation

- *Small lead group:* For the majority of the time, we've had two to four people at the lead who share the same priorities and philosophy, understand the big picture elements in the same way, and contribute equally to the workload. This keeps a balance between having too many 'cooks' and also sharing the workload with dependable people.
- *Anger leads to action:* The anger around the closure of the professional library and the difficult EBA negotiations were an important catalyst for us at the beginning of our movement. However, with the passion that most TLs feel about their jobs, that anger is probably already there for most of us. It just may be manifesting as dejection or feeling overwhelmed.
- *Professional organisations:* Working with the AEU and ASLA has been critical for us:
 - › The AEU provides tactical advice, facilitates meetings with politicians, and allows us access to resources such as Survey Monkey.
 - › ASLA has provided us with several data-focused handouts, adding to our professional credibility in meetings. ASLA also sponsored our initial data collection, which gave us legitimacy.
- *Connecting and sharing:* Networking has been very important. Our Canberra-based email network has been essential for keeping all interested parties in the loop and for recruiting new people to our advocacy group. We continuously promote TLnet to new library staff (trained and untrained) to ensure that our message is getting out there.
- *Face-to-face meetings:* Having meetings (with each other and with politicians) really moves things forward; goals emerge and the next steps become clear.
- *Identifying goals:* Finally, articulating specific goals has been essential. We started with our long-term goal and then developed realistic short- and medium-term goals to achieve from where we were. Sharing the responsibility for those

goals has become very important to avoid burn-out.

Frustrations ... challenges ... obstacles ...

This is the bit you're probably wondering about — common sense suggests that this experience hasn't been like a bubble bath after a long day, and we don't want to portray it as such.

These are some things that have been hard for us:

- *School 'autonomy'* — Our goal of having a full-time, qualified TL guaranteed for every school goes against the philosophy of 100% school-based decision-making. Also, there is no requirement that a person running a library in the ACT government sector must have any library qualification at all. Acknowledging this, however, helps us to remember to be patient and to make choices that will allow us to be in this for the long haul.
- *Many hands make light work:* We want more people to help us in these efforts. It's unclear to us, who feel so passionately about the importance of TLs in students' education and who are willing to give our time and energy for the cause, why others would not also do so. We can only guess at the possible reasons: Some people seem to not think about the 'big picture' — only seeing their own situations. Or they seem to think there is nothing they can do. Or maybe they think there is nothing they need to do since we're doing it. Or maybe they have other things in their life taking up their extra energy. Or maybe they are not willing to put themselves out at all.

On the bright side, we've got enough people that we're making progress and we



Figure 1: Top 10 tips for meeting with politicians

are able to share the load. The people who have put their hands up to do things over these few years have remained largely the same but also we have had some people come and go. This is good — it's a nice balance of consistency and freshness. We remain positive because what we're doing so far is working. It's good enough.

- *Politicians:* Dealing with politicians can be stressful and frustrating. But, for us, it has been essential. Therefore, this topic deserves its very own Top 10 list!

Top 10 tips for meeting with politicians

Tip 1: Be patient, professional and passionate at all times.

Tip 2: Keep your message simple. Identify your main message before the meeting and

target all talking and information towards that message.

Tip 3: This is critical: *Bring hard data*. Local, national, international — bring it and be able to summarise it.

Tip 4: Bring the ASLA handouts — this increases your legitimacy and professionalism.

Tip 5: Identify yourself as an AEU member in all communications.

Tip 6: Bring a small group to the meeting. Many heads will make the best presentation on the day. Include different sectors (primary, high school) and also bring a supportive executive teacher, if possible.

Tip 7: Remember their perspective: which is probably 'These people want me to spend more money and where am I going to get that money from?' and 'Why should I spend money on this?' It's worth doing some research first into departmental and political priorities and also to identify, if possible,

the individual political interest areas of the person you are meeting with. Then tailor your data and messages accordingly.

Tip 8: They like to talk. Make sure you let them talk and that you really *listen* to them in the meeting. You need to be able to respond to what they say on the day.

Tip 9: Make a plan for how you want the meeting to go, but also be flexible while still emphasising your essential points.

Tip 10: Be prepared to be thrown some 'curve ball' questions — especially right at the beginning. Contrary to the way politicians are portrayed by political cartoonists, all of the ones we've met with have been highly intelligent and probing.

Where to from here? — for us

- This year, we are targeting principals and parents.
- We will make a presentation to the ACT P&C council in June and we are seeking

Where to from here?

For us...

- TL claim for EBA - liaise with AEU about progress with ETD negotiations
- Action Research Project(s)
- Spread our message to parents via P&C and Board network meetings
- Continue to push the message to principals - evidence of TL impact in schools
- Update data about staffing levels

Where to from here?

For you...

- Recognise that you have something to offer!
- Be willing to give it a go
- Use your professional networks (colleagues, AEU, ASLA, ALIA, others?)
- Become active in your professional network:
 - Call a meeting
 - Make some goals
 - Gather and share data

permission to make a presentation to the ACT School Board Network later this year.

- The AEU has endorsed our submission of important TL issues to be included in this year's EBA negotiations, for example re-establishing a weekly time allocation for TLs to undertake collection development and management duties, something ACT TLs lost in an arbitrated EBA ruling several years ago.
- With the knowledge of the power of hard data and following on from a professional learning workshop about evidence-based practice (Hay 2013), we are hoping to organise a medium- to large-scale study across multiple schools this year. This study will quantifiably measure the impact TLs have on student learning outcomes. We will look to present this data to school principals well ahead of the transfer and recruitment round for 2015.
- Get current data for library staffing numbers in ACT government schools.
- Encourage more people to join our advocacy group.

Where to from here? — for you

Well, hopefully you already have your synapses firing about what you might do in your setting.

Our suggestions for you are:

- Be willing to be the first 'trailblazer' or, indeed, the all-important first follower in starting some kind of action in your local area. Watch this video for a giggle, if not for inspiration: <http://sivers.org/ff> (Sivers 2010).
- Call a meeting. Discuss what the current state of affairs is for TLs in your area and make some goals. Our Dropbox from the ASLA XXIII Conference has helpful resources (Godfree & Neilson 2013).
- Use your union membership to contact people for help.
- Use your ASLA membership to contact people for help.
- Gather data in your own school. It doesn't have to be fancy or big. It just has to be hard data that shows your impact.

- Share your data! With your school, with Lyn Hay and Ross Todd's Evidence-based practice group (Hay & Todd n.d.), with principals, with politicians, with the newspaper.
- Consider becoming active in the AEU and ASLA by taking on a role at school, regional or national level. Doing this really does reap rewards in broadening your understanding of what to do and how to do it.

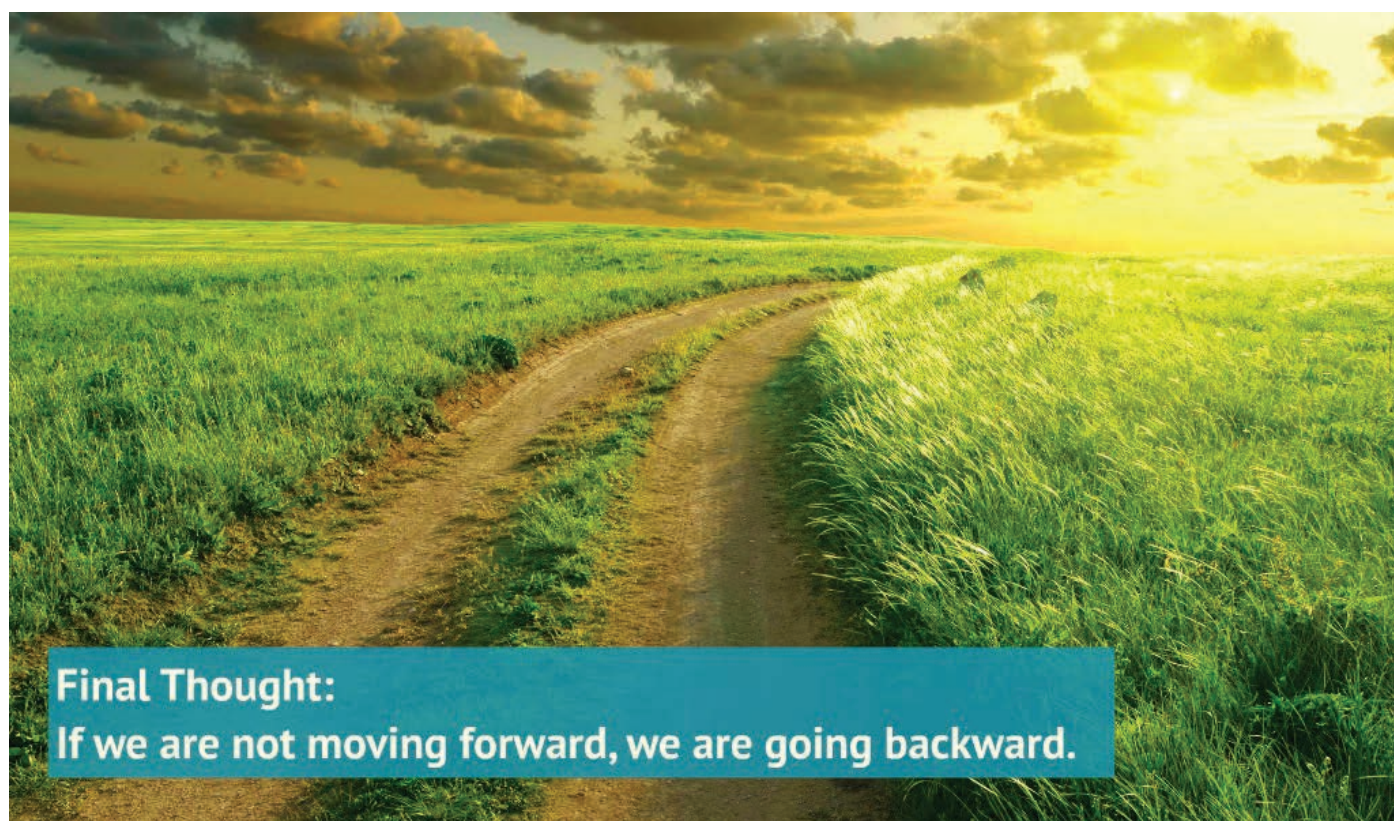
In conclusion

Penultimate thought: Be mindful and aware of whingeing. To clarify: we have found that 'complaining' is an essential part in this process in order to identify issues. However, people can get stuck in the whingeing phase and never move beyond it.

What we would advise is to give a chunk of time to whingeing with the intention of using it to identify broad concepts and then look

at them through the next level of Bloom's Taxonomy. Use your higher order thinking skills to evaluate the situation from a bird's eye view. We are not doing ourselves, our colleagues or our profession any favours by getting *bogged* in negative thinking. There are factors beyond our control in these situations and people can be very stressed about what is happening, but we must take the complaining to the next level. We must be brave, look honestly at ourselves and our colleagues, and basically pull our socks up and be grown-ups in how we approach this.

Final thought: Teacher librarians are on a journey, and, if we are not moving forward, we are going backwards — we *need to advocate for ourselves*. The title 'We are the weather makers' is intended to remind ourselves that we have the power to seed the clouds and make it rain. Every little bit makes a difference. Take an idea, and just do *something*!



Final Thought:
If we are not moving forward, we are going backward.

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