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illinois school library media association

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In December 2015, two very important events happened for Chicago schools: ESSA, the Every Student Succeeds Act, passed the House and Senate to replace No Child Left Behind as federal education law; and hundreds of children at DuSable High School staged a successful sit-in to protest the firing of their school librarian. In August 2016, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) ignored the promise of ESSA and broke faith with their students by firing half of their school librarians.

ESSA moves federal law away from test-based accountability systems to one where the school climate matters for student success. Among many significant changes, it includes new provisions that return school libraries and school librarians to their important place on campus and in the academic lives of our students. ISBE, the Illinois State Board of Education, is currently shepherding a statewide ESSA Implementation planning process for all our schools and districts. As a stakeholder for school libraries, we believe that CPS has acted rashly and prematurely in cutting school librarians as a category of teachers and school leaders. We understand that ESSA is a new law, but CPS should look to new federal funding options in it before cutting a whole category of instructional support.

The students at DuSable did what parents and adults in Chicago often have had a hard time doing. They said "stop" to CPS's cuts. They stood up for their own academic futures by sitting down. They, who are at that school every day, knew that firing their librarian was a bad choice. They, who protested quietly in the halls by reading, knew that their librarian is a key person on faculty. The students of DuSable have inspired us to say now to CPS leadership, to the Chicago Board of Education, to neighborhood school councils and to City Hall "Stop". The choices about where you allocate the budget reflect your values. We ask you to listen to our request on behalf of tens of thousands of kids who go back to school on Tuesday. We look at the way you reversed your DuSable decision back in December and know there are options in the budget. Keeping librarians who change lives and library programs that transform schools shouldn't be a hard decision.

Now is the wrong time for CPS to fire more librarians. With ESSA as the law of the land and a robust new dialog among educational stakeholders across our state, CPS and City Hall should re-invest in school librarians because they are an investment in student success.

As the leadership of the Illinois School Library Media Association, we urge CPS to reverse those cuts and return these qualified, engaged, and effective librarians to their libraries. We know that firing half the librarians is bad education policy for Chicago schools because we know, and study after study shows, that it is going to hurt student achievement at those schools. Illinois School Library Media Association calls on CPS to look at the leverage our school librarians create as an asset instead of a cost center.