

Dear Joint Committee on Appropriations:

I am very concerned with several aspects of the Governor's Proposed Budget for FY26. I apologize that this letter is long; I felt it was important to provide my perspective on these items I care deeply about.

First, I'd like to express my adamant opposition to adding \$4 million dollars to fund the Education Savings Account/School Voucher program, which provides \$3,000 to qualifying students to attend parochial schools or homeschool. I feel that this is a national conservative agenda item that would be detrimental to the students of South Dakota. I am a registered Republican and am conservative on most issues, but I, like most South Dakotans, care deeply about our public schools. I think politicians are misreading the public will if they think that most taxpayers and voters in our state support this program – a program which would eventually undermine our public school system.

I have lived in South Dakota for almost 14 years, serving as the Custer County Library Director for 11 years and currently serving as the Custer School District Library Coordinator. I have seen the good and bad sides of homeschooling. At the county library, I worked with dedicated homeschool families who participated in our story times and summer reading programs and made great use of our state-provided electronic resources and interlibrary loan program. They provided their children with a quality education and used their library to its fullest extent to help in those efforts. I have also seen the other side of homeschooling while working in the Custer School District over the past three years and in previous school positions in Williams, Arizona. Families send their students back to school after "homeschooling" them for months or years. The school then has the challenge of catching those students up to their peers because they often test at the grade level of when they left the public school. This is a daunting task; It is hard for both the students and the teachers. Giving \$3,000 to qualifying students will just exacerbate a problem that we have already been facing as we try to get students who moved here from out-of-state caught up after their homeschooling.

I'd much rather see this \$4 million spent to fund existing programs that South Dakotans have grown to count on, such as

- having an effective State Library and all the statewide resources they provide,
- continuing to support dual credit classes at the current level, and
- providing continued support to South Dakota Public Broadcasting, specifically to produce and broadcast South Dakota-focused shows and South Dakota high school sports.

Since I'm a librarian, I'd like to focus on how much we lose if we lose the State Library. I think if you were made aware, you would never agree to reduce the State Library to just a Braille and Talking Book Service. I'm sure you already know this, but I want to point out that by cutting

approximately \$1 million from the General Fund for the State Library's budget, you would give up approximately \$1.4 million that they receive from the Federal Government in the form of IMLS and LSTA grants. This is money that must go through a state library and is used to help all the libraries, schools, communities, and residents of our state. The State Library provides so many resources and services with these funds. They use economies of scale to broker deals with subscription services on behalf of all the libraries in our state. Small and medium-sized libraries cannot afford these subscription services on their own.

Some of these services include [Electronic Resources](#), such as

- World Book Encyclopedia (without which school and public libraries will need to resume ordering physical sets at \$900+ and replace them regularly),
- Ancestry Library (genealogy research),
- ProQuest Research Library (curated newspaper, magazine, and professional journal articles for research),
- BookFlix (a resources used by teachers to pair an animated story based on a picture book with a non-fiction read-aloud),
- Learning Express Library (a career readiness resource providing test prep resources for those preparing for the GED, ACT, ASVAB, GRE, and various trade careers, as well as guidance on resume writing, interview skills, etc...), and
- SWANK (a K-12 video streaming resource that allows educators to stream videos free and legally)

They also use these federal funds to develop and host free websites for over [50 libraries](#) in our state. These libraries had no websites or inadequate websites before the State Library offered this service. If you cut out the State Library, these libraries would either lose their websites or have to find local funding to maintain them.

The State Library provides WhoFi to 84 library outlets within our state. This service is used by public libraries to not only monitor WiFi use, but also to provide a Community Calendar, and a Room Reservation system. Small and medium-sized public libraries would either lose these services altogether or pay for them out of local funds. Without the economies of scale provided by bargaining as a state, most would just have to give up these services because they are unaffordable.

Without the State Library, we would also lose our interlibrary loan and courier system -- which is such a shame. With our current system, patrons of Custer County can request books, not only throughout our state, but also throughout our nation. This service is used and greatly appreciated by homeschool families, among others.

In my opinion, one of the most critical losses with the reduction of the State Library would be the training and professional development opportunities. Only 14% of the library staff in public libraries of South Dakota have an MLS degree. No college in our state even offers a degree in library science. The South Dakota State Library steps in and fills that gap. They provide the South Dakota Library Training Institute, which I completed to be certified as a Level 2 Library Director. I received so much valuable training in areas such as administration, collection development, programming, and youth services, just to name a few. This training enabled me to provide high-quality library services to our community. For example, I used the grant-writing skills I gained to pursue grants to purchase technology equipment, fund summer reading programs, fund our 1,000 Books Before Kindergarten Program, and fund the purchase of children's books. I used the advocacy skills I learned to broker a partnership between the county commission and the library foundation to build an addition to our library to provide meeting rooms, study rooms, office space, and a book sale room. The training helped me develop better programs and services to meet the needs of my community. Institute and the other professional development opportunities I have received on both the public and school library sides have been priceless.

The State Library provides so much. Here are just a few resources/services that come to mind:

- Summer reading program materials, coordination, and grants;
- Library accreditation and librarian certification oversight;
- South Dakota Titles to Go, a downloadable e-book and audiobook collection provided through the Libby app. (Small libraries would not have been able to afford a downloadable library if the State Library had not brokered a deal with OverDrive.);
- Digitization services for small libraries;
- Virtual monthly meet-ups for public and school librarians across the state to collaborate, and
- Opportunities for various federal and local grants, and
- The State Park Pass program.

The people of South Dakota are counting on you to realize that funding a new school voucher program while cutting the State Library and other existing programs is bad for South Dakotans. Since these changes have been presented in the state budget rather than being presented as a bill, it all rides on the Budget and Appropriations Committee's ability to discern the wise and correct course for South Dakota. I know you will do the right thing.



Doris Ann Mertz