

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Interview

In the PaLRaP Spotlight: Glenn Miller

*Deputy Secretary of Education and State Librarian, 2015 to present
Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Library Association, 1995-2015*

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After so many years of dedicated service as PaLA Executive Director, you have transitioned to State Librarian. What has changed and what has remained the same?

First, the similarities. I remain in touch with many of the same wonderful people with whom I worked from my beginning days at the Pennsylvania Library Association (PaLA) in 1995. Library folks in this state are dogged, determined, and dedicated—prerequisites for survival through the ups and downs of our business. So I am delighted to find that in my new work here, I stay in close connection with many great library people from my previous work.

And, of course, many of the issues remain the same—visibility, viability, and funding, to name a few. So even though my office location changed, I still work to resolve the challenges before us. That is, in fact, one of the driving forces behind my decision to apply here—to see whether I could make a first-hand difference in the context of a new administration whose top goal is to improve education.

What has changed is that I am now part of a much larger team with a broader mission. As such, I am able to take a more active, hands-on role in making the case for public, academic, school, and special libraries. Also new—I am sinking my teeth into issues that affect school and special library services, and I am becoming keenly aware of the importance of being involved in discussions about the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the new federal education law, for example.

Being a part of a larger organization brings with it some limitations; however, at the same time, it brings many, many more opportunities to include library services in ongoing conversations about education policy. In this respect, I hope *Pennsylvania Libraries: Research & Practice* readers will know that Education Secretary Rivera leads the department in a style that invites open dialogue, encourages critical thinking, and seeks collaborative solutions. These traits are reflected across the department's leadership team, and I feel enormously blessed to be a part of this very talented and committed group.

What do you consider your greatest accomplishments at PaLA?

I take great pride in the organization's growth in size, influence, respect and, most of all, professionalism. During my years, we were blessed with a small but mighty and committed staff. Kim Snyder Wise, Ellen Wharton, and Kathy Silks were—and are—at the center of PaLA's success. Their dedication never wavered. But more than that, I think I am most pleased by how each of them grew into their positions and tackled problems with a can-do attitude. Kim and Ellen guided PaLA from a paper-based, pre-Internet era into the brave, new digital world, no small feat considering PaLA's limited resources. Kathy took a concept and a plan—PA Forward—and brought it to life.

Some will recall that in the early 2000s, we made progress with funding which provided libraries with better resources, greater access, and enhanced professionalism across the state. In the process, I believe we established a more credible voice for libraries through grassroots involvement and a stronger Harrisburg presence. Through the Platform for Twenty-First Century Libraries, Best Practices in Early Learning, the PaLA Academy for Leadership Studies (PALS), and PA Forward, I believe that PaLA built some strong foundations for library services in Pennsylvania.

Yes, two waves of funding setbacks occurred subsequently despite PaLA's best efforts, the second one directly attributable to the Great Recession of 2008. We hung in there together and redoubled efforts to sharpen the library message and strengthen our relationships with state and local decision-makers. I remind myself that nurturing relationships takes time and that Rome was not built in a day (nor was the Public Library Subsidy). So while peak funding stood at \$75.7 million prior to the Great Recession, the \$55.6 million that Governor Wolf proposed for next year stands in sharp contrast with 1995's funding level of \$23.8 million.

I greatly valued PaLA's strong connection with its members in the field, and I think it is a real testimony to the strength of the organization that leadership continues to be shared on a rotating, voluntary basis between public and academic members.

Looking back, I believe that some portion of PaLA's success traces to the simple avoidance of self-inflicted disaster. Every year brings new opportunities for good decisions as well as bad ones. Thanks to many strong board leaders over the years, wise counsel was always at my fingertips. I trusted them, and they trusted me. As a result, I am convinced that we avoided some bad decisions that could have been costly and counterproductive. I am grateful to have had these great listeners and advisors.

Do you have any advice for the future PaLA executive director?

In no particular order, I would advise: Be present as much as possible. Understand that communicating is a two-way street so listen brilliantly. Be open to new relationships, and, when they occur, nurture them. Find and build on common ground. Keep your focus on the long-term. Do not rush. In an age of instantaneous social media reaction, value thoughtfulness, reflection, and accuracy over what might feel good in the moment.

And most of all, be brief....

What are the greatest challenges facing Pennsylvania Libraries?

Libraries of all types face the ongoing challenge to counter the misperception that the Internet and “The Google” have made them obsolete. We know—but much of the rest of the world does not fully understand—that, while some of the delivery mechanisms have changed, the value and need for library services is greater than ever. Persistence on this point will be essential. Libraries should encourage their users to be their advocates. These third-party testimonials serve as the strongest voices about the value of well-trained, professional librarians and the first-rate library services they provide. Candidly, these personal storytellers sharing library experiences carry the highest degree of credibility with decision-makers and funders.

This much is clear; we live and work in Penn’s Woods, a complicated, fragmented, crazy-quilt of local decision-making. I expect that funding will continue to be a challenge, especially for public libraries at the local level. By the same notion, I am confident that the great works done in and through libraries will stand us in good stead as knowledge grows about our multi-faceted roles—in self-directed learning, in early learning, in improving literacy on all fronts, in transitioning from childhood to adulthood, in advancing citizenship, and in bringing communities together. Libraries serve in this unique space, and Pennsylvania’s libraries have blazed the trail from the very beginning.

What are your goals as State Librarian?

First, my goal is to show up as much as possible, to be present and listen. I think it is vital that we raise our visibility here in Harrisburg and, at every opportunity, explain how well-resourced libraries can help to solve some of Pennsylvania’s biggest challenges. Libraries support the work of K-12 education, of early education, and of postsecondary and career education. As such, engaging in regular conversations in each of these areas yields new two-way understandings and opens doors of opportunity for libraries to solve problems and advance literacy and learning.

Secretary Rivera continuously encourages the senior leadership team to seek out new and creative solutions. One of my goals is to make sure that libraries are fully integrated in the department’s planning so that academic, school, and public libraries are leveraged to the greatest extent in support of every facet of literacy and learning activities. With libraries as full-fledged partners, I believe that education across Pennsylvania can flourish in new and vibrant ways.

Finally, I hope that, working together, we will be able to rebuild and restore the capacity and services at the State Library of Pennsylvania. Budget cuts have exacted a toll on services and morale at what should be the Capital City’s crown-jewel library. I salute the folks who, under trying circumstances, continued to do great work on behalf of the citizens of the Commonwealth. I am heartened by the resiliency and spirit of the staff here, and I hope that we have turned a corner to sunnier days ahead.