

# Data Speaks

## Addressing Equity of Access to School Librarians for Students

Debra E. Kachel

School librarians have traditionally collected data including the number of books circulated, resources used, number of student visits, and classes taught. These data are used in reports, newsletters, and job performance reviews, highlighting the work of the librarian. While providing this data is certainly good practice, how else might data be collected and used to highlight equity (or inequities) of library service to students? Do all students receive information and inquiry instruction? Do all students have equal and adequate access to libraries and librarians? Beyond your school building, do you advocate for equity in library services? Thinking more globally and outside one's own school building, how can we use data to advocate for school librarians in all schools for all students?

### WHY DATA MATTERS

Many librarians are shocked when their positions are cut or reduced, knowing that they have strong programs and work hard to ensure that students and teachers receive the services and instruction they need. Too often, the school library is viewed as an extravagance, rather than a necessity, for student learning. Reasons abound to cut school librarians (Kachel & Lance, 2018), and library programs are especially vulnerable when a librarian retires. What librarians sometimes don't realize is that school decision makers frequently share and adopt budget practices that neighboring districts have instituted. When school administrators try to figure out how to fund a new district math or reading program without increasing local school taxes, they often look at the big-ticket items in the budget. School libraries clearly fit in this category—with salaries, resources, technology, and facility maintenance. Add it all up and multiply by the number of buildings, and it's a considerable chunk of the district bud-

get. Likened to the domino effect, when one district begins to eliminate librarian positions, neighboring schools take note and often follow suit. After all, only 10 states and the District of Columbia require and enforce that public schools employ school librarians (Kachel & Lance, 2021). Therefore, there are few—if any—legal consequences to cutting librarian positions.

However, in our current socioeconomic environment, librarians and library advocates do have an opportunity. The inequities of race, ethnicity, and poverty abound in today's news. There is a renewed surge of protests against these social injustices, particularly in the education of K-12 students. The school library profession can take advantage of this movement and use data to illustrate how black and brown students, students in poverty, and other underrepresented groups are being disserved in our public schools through a lack of librarians or inadequately funded school libraries.

### NATIONAL DATA

The U.S. Department of Education annually requires every school district in the nation to report information to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). This includes school and student characteristics and employment of school staff, including school librarians. As part of a federally-funded research project called SLIDE (see inset), principal investigator Keith Curry Lance, renowned for his lifetime contribution to school library impact studies, is using NCES data to analyze the continuing decline in school librarian positions. This employment trend is being examined in relation to district size, geographic setting (city, suburb, town, rural), poverty (per pupil expenditures and the FRPL program), race and ethnicity, and students with limited English proficiencies. Lance (2021) revealed the following preliminary findings (based on NCES data from 2009-10 to 2018-19).

- For 2018-19, at least twenty percent of all school districts had no librarians (charter schools excluded), impacting at least seven million students.
- Only one out of every ten charter schools reports employing a librarian.
- Larger urban and suburban districts have more librarians than small rural districts. Small, rural districts are most likely to have no librarians.
- Districts with more students eligible for FRPL are more

likely not to have librarians. Districts with fewest FRPL students are most likely to have substantial librarian presence in every school.

- Majority Hispanic districts are twice as likely to have no librarians in any district school as districts that are majority White, non-Hispanic.
- Districts with more ELL/ESL students are more likely to have no librarians in their districts.

Many people are quick to say that these conditions are solely financial. And it is true that school funding varies greatly with clear inequities (Education Law Center, 2021) that obviously impact school staffing. However, a deep examination of the NCES data does not totally support that thinking. There is

not a linear relationship between school funding and librarian staffing. In some cases, districts that spend less are more likely to have librarians.

Also, according to NCES data, other educator full-time equivalents (FTEs) have been increasing, while school librarian FTEs are the *only* ones that have steadily decreased. Since 2009-10, instructional coordinator FTEs have increased dramatically by 34 percent, and school administrator FTEs by 15 percent, while teacher FTEs have declined by a little over 1 percent (SLIDE Advisory Council Zoom PowerPoint file, slide 18, December 3, 2020). While funding can be a serious factor, local school priorities and site-based decisions are just as likely to determine school library staffing.

## STATE AND DISTRICT DATA

“Big picture” national data may not be meaningful at the local level, and traversing complicated spreadsheets on the NCES site (<https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/>) to extract district and state data is laborious and tedious. Therefore, as a major initiative of SLIDE, interactive data tools will enable users to create customized tables, charts, and maps of data for the nation by state or for a selected state or states by district. Via these tools, employment of librarians and selected other staff, as well as district characteristics and student demographics, can be analyzed. In addition, state school library information about employment requirements, standards, certification, and other supports will

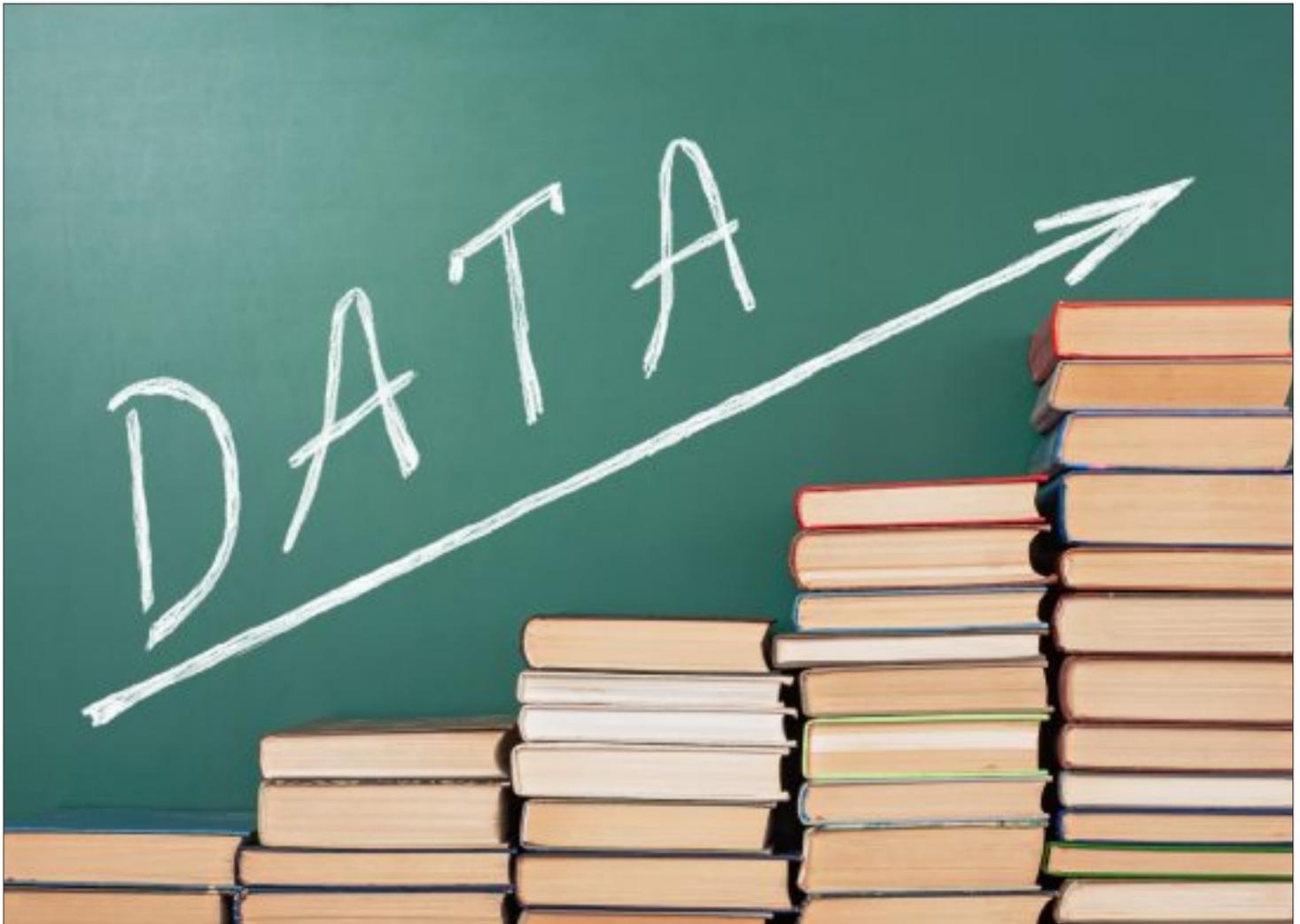


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be integrated to provide further context for the NCES data. This combined information will help school and library professionals to assess equity of school library services and staffing, provide information for advocacy efforts, and offer comparisons to selected districts and states. School leaders and decision makers, as well as state legislators who care about how their schools and states rank, will be able to view and use the following data points.

1. Average number of students per librarian in your state or region
2. District ratio of librarian FTEs to schools
  - To compare to the AASL standard of one full-time school librarian per building (AASL, 2019)
3. District characteristics, including enrollment and locale (city, suburb, town, rural)
4. Student demographics, including race/ethnicity, eligibility for FRPL, and Limited English Proficiency/English Language Learners (ELL)
5. State requirements for librarian staffing
  - 10 states plus DC have legal requirements (Kachel & Lance, 2021).
6. State school library standards and/or guidelines that often include recommended staffing levels
  - 14 states have standards; 9 states have guidelines; 12 states have both (Kachel & Lance, 2021).

## LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT DATA

How can you tell the equity story at the local school and district levels? First, even if your district does not have a designated school library coordinator or department chairperson, school librarians need to unite and work together

## SLIDE: THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN INVESTIGATION – DECLINE OR EVOLUTION?

- Three-year, grant project, September 2020-August 2023
- Funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services
- Awarded to Antioch University Seattle
- Project Director: Debra E. Kachel
- Principal Investigator: Keith Curry Lance
- Website: <https://libslide.org>
- Twitter: @lib\_slide

### Project goals:

- Analyze and report school librarian employment trends from NCES data, factoring in school district characteristics and student demographics;
- Create a website with interactive tools allowing users to select various geographic views of school librarian staffing and associated variables;
- Compile and report state contextual data regarding school librarian certification, requirements, and support for school library programs;
- Examine job descriptions for librarians and related positions to determine if job titles and responsibilities are evolving; and
- Interview decision-makers in school districts that have reported the greatest librarian gains and losses.

to ensure adequate staffing not just for their school but for all schools in the district. *As stated in an interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights, “It is the responsibility of school librarians to implement district policies and procedures in the school to ensure equitable access to resources and services for all students” (Appendix E2, p. 242).* Here are some data points worth collecting and sharing for each school in your district:

1. Average number of students per librarian
  - Use this to assess equity across buildings.
  - Compare librarian staffing ratios of schools with more and fewer students receiving special services, such as Free and Reduced Price School Meals (FRPL) and ELL.

- Compare librarian staffing ratios for schools with students of different races and ethnicities.
2. Average number of classes visiting the library per week
    - This can be disaggregated by grade to determine if all grades appear to have equal access.
    - This can be disaggregated by time of day, school periods, or before and after school usage.
  3. Number of hours the librarian instructs students by grade level
    - At elementary level, these hours can be divided into story times and information and inquiry instruction.
    - At secondary level, these hours can be compared by the number of periods and/or subject areas.
  4. Number of days/hours per school

year that the library is not open and accessible

- Examples: testing days, holidays, librarian used as a classroom substitute, etc.

#### 5. Library resource budgets per student

These data may indicate situations that are difficult to discuss. It may become apparent that some schools and certain students are receiving less than others. Parents may be concerned to learn how few hours a library is open and available to their children. The number of hours per school year that a librarian directly engages with students in a building can be surprisingly small, especially if a librarian is assigned multiple buildings, the librarian has other duties, and the library is frequently closed.

There may be political implications, perceptions by individual principals, and some site-based decisions that cause inequities. However, these inequities need to be examined, discussed, and remedied by stakeholders, including district and building level administrators, parents, teachers, and possibly legislators. Unless you know and acknowledge the facts, you can't begin to remedy the inequities.

## CONCLUSION

NCES data is the only source of annually required and reported educational data from all public schools. It indicates a twenty percent decline in school librarian positions over the past decade (Kachel & Lance, 2020). Great disparities exist in the employment of school librarians in public schools across our nation. More importantly, the NCES data allow researchers to examine school librarian employment

over time by states and school districts, documenting inequities in relation to the size of school districts, geographic setting, poverty, race and ethnicity, and students with limited English proficiencies. Preliminary findings from the SLIDE project challenge the notion that school funding alone suffices to explain these inequities. In years two and three of the SLIDE project, a deeper investigation of how school districts decide to staff library, learning resources, and instructional technology services for their K-12 students will be examined through confidential interviews with school decision makers. These findings may ultimately help us to better understand ways we can all work together to ensure that all students have equal access to librarians and library services.

## REFERENCES

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**Debra E. Kachel** is an Affiliate Faculty for Antioch University Seattle's K-12 Library Media Endorsement program and Project Director of SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? She serves as the Co-Chairperson of the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association's Advocacy Committee and received the 2014 AASL Distinguished Service Award for her school library advocacy work. Her email is [dkachel@antioch.edu](mailto:dkachel@antioch.edu). Follow her on Twitter [@SchLibAdvocate](https://twitter.com/SchLibAdvocate)