Conclusion

This report contributes to the school library literature and knowledge base by offering a multi-faceted look at the status of school librarian employment from 2009-10 to 2018-19. Based on this deep analysis of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, the researchers summarize the findings at national, state, and district levels, discuss their implications, and pose questions for future research about existential issues facing school librarianship as a profession.

National Perspective

The most recent decade of data indicates that 1 out of 5 school librarian full-time equivalents (FTEs) was lost in the aftermath of the Great Recession (i.e., since 2009-10). When school boards and school administrators eliminate or reduce librarian positions or replace them with paraprofessionals, the most common rationale is that the school or district can no longer afford to have librarians, especially full-time ones. Generally speaking, this claim cannot be substantiated with the data. During the past decade, when so many school librarian positions were lost, instructional coordinators increased by a third and district and school administrators increased by double-digit percentages. Unquestionably, school leaders must make many thankless decisions about staffing and budgets. Plainly, however, the employment of school librarians is not merely a matter of money. It is a matter of the values and priorities of school decision makers based on their perceptions of the importance of a professionally-trained school librarian in the education of students.

If school librarians (regardless of job title) are to have a long-term future in U.S. public education, the school library community needs to better understand the perceptions, values, and priorities of those who make staffing decisions. For at least a decade, school leaders have been making major decisions about how to staff library, learning resources, and technology services in public education. In many cases, those decisions have been reshaping the future of school librarianship with little input from the profession. That lack of input is a challenge to the school library community to acknowledge more fully seismic changes in public education over recent decades and to engage in dialog with school leaders about the implications of those changes for school librarianship. Initiating such a dialog will likely require a concerted effort by state and national library agency and association leaders, institutions that prepare school librarians, and practitioners themselves.

At the national level, there is a stark gap between the professional standards and job performance expectations of school librarianship and the current realities of the status of school librarian employment. The 2018 American Association of School Librarians (AASL) national standards are predicated on the association's position statement on library staffing, which states that every school, regardless of grade level or enrollment, should have at least one full-time, state-certified librarian. The CCD data clearly illuminates that the existing contingent of school librarians is not equitably distributed across states and school districts. And, even if they were, there would not be enough to provide for even a half-time librarian in every school. This reality means that, for far too many districts and schools, the AASL standards about teaching and working with students and teachers are at best aspirational, at worst, unachievable.

Consequently, the challenge facing the school library community is to recognize and understand these sobering national realities and develop a new consensus about how to calibrate the profession's expectations to real-world circumstances. These data suggest that many school librarians are being placed in the position of over-promising and under-delivering on the expectations of a school librarian as defined by national and state standards and guidelines. The problem is not necessarily a lack of knowledge, will, or personal energy, but simply that the cards are stacked against them. In other words, how can part-time librarians, many with multiple school and teaching assignments, implement the profession's performance standards and expectations? Are school librarian positions more likely to be lost when school leaders detect the discrepancy between their expectations and what incumbent librarians—especially part-time ones—are able to accomplish? And, how are students, teachers, and their schools impacted when districts have no librarians at all? Is some other position or positions filling this gap? Notably, the answers to these questions will vary dramatically from state to state, based on region and specific state conditions, and district to district, based on district characteristics, student demographics, and specific local conditions.

State Perspective

The CCD data examined at the state level highlights regional differences in the inequities of access to school librarians. School librarians were most prevalent in the South, specifically the Southeastern states. Both total librarian full-time equivalents (FTEs) and librarian FTE per school demonstrate this pattern. Likely the simplest explanation for the prevalence of school librarians in the South is that they are legally mandated in 10 of the 16 states in that region, and, in 6 of those 10 states the mandates are still actively enforced.

Generally, school librarians were more prevalent in the eastern half of the country than the western half. The most obvious structural difference between the eastern and western halves of the nation is that states in the eastern half are more likely to have multiple higher education institutions that prepare school librarians, while states in the western half are more likely to have 2, 1, or none. These two data points—state mandates and number of preparing institutions—were the two state-context variables associated with both 2018-19 librarian staffing levels and their change over time. Further research might investigate how the "pipeline" and ease of access to entry-level, certified school librarian positions impacts the number of employed school librarians.

District Perspective

While school librarians were inequitably distributed among the states, it was at the district level that the most concerning inequities appeared. There are concerning differences in access based on several district characteristics and student demographics.

District Ratio of Librarian FTE per School

By 2018-19, 3 out of 10 districts in the U.S. reported no school librarians. Fewer than a quarter of them reported enough librarian FTEs (.75+ FTE per school) to provide a full-time librarian in all or most schools.

Districts with smaller enrollments and those located in rural areas were more likely to have no school librarians. Districts with larger enrollments and those located in suburbs and cities were more likely to have the highest level of librarian staffing—a full-time librarian in all or most schools. Likewise, districts serving more poor students, more minority students, and more English Language Learners were less likely to have librarians, while districts serving fewer such students were more likely to have librarians. Inequities were quite pronounced based on ethnicity. Twice as many majority Hispanic districts reported no librarians compared to majority non-Hispanic districts. While losses of librarian positions are often attributed to inadequate funding, this analysis does not support that explanation. Surprisingly, better-staffed districts were those that spent the most, and the least, per pupil.

Districts with Any and No Librarians, 2015-16 Through 2018-19

What is of even greater concern is how long many districts have been without school librarians. While 3 out of 5 districts employed librarians consistently between 2015-16 and 2018-19, almost a quarter of districts had no librarians from 2015-16 through 2018-19.

Districts without librarians long-term were concentrated in Western states and the northern tier of the Midwest. In 15 states—all in the West or northern Midwest—more than a quarter of districts had no librarians. In 7 of those states, half or more of districts were librarian-less—California, Alaska, Michigan, Oregon, Arizona, and Washington.

Not surprisingly, the district characteristics and student demographics associated with the 2018-19 status of school librarians also apply to districts that either have or haven't had librarians consistently since at least 2015-16. Districts lacking librarians between 2015-16 and 2018-19 tended to be those with smaller enrollments, those located in rural areas, and those serving more students in poverty, more minority students (particularly more Hispanic students), and more English Language Learners. Districts with more consistent librarian staffing during this time interval tended to be those with larger enrollments, those located in suburbs

and cities, and those serving fewer poor students, fewer non-white and fewer Hispanic students, and fewer English Language Learners.

A comparative impact study of districts that have been without librarians long-term and districts that have had a sustained librarian presence would be a substantial contribution to future school library research. Even more could be learned if future studies conducted comparative interviews of teachers in districts with librarians and those without them long-term, or observed students' information-seeking and inquiry-based learning behaviors in those two sets of districts.

Replacement of Librarians with Library Support Staff

This study revealed the extent to which school librarians in some areas are being replaced by paraprofessionals or library support staff. In 2018-19, almost half of librarian-less districts relied on library support staff working alone to operate their libraries. The implications of this staffing model are obvious. Library support staff may suffice to maintain and circulate physical collections and equipment—perhaps even to maintain basic technology access—but, they are not qualified (unless they are under-employed) to select materials for library collections, to collaborate as professional colleagues with classroom teachers, to integrate educational technology resources into instruction, or to teach information literacy and inquiry-based learning skills to students.

This staffing model—districts relying on library support staff without librarians—is a growing, if still isolated, problem, when one examines the percent of districts involved. As of 2018-19, more than 2 out of 5 districts employed library support staff, but no librarians, in Oregon, Minnesota, Idaho, and Colorado. Between 3 and 4 out of 10 districts followed this model in Alaska, Michigan, Kansas, and Ohio. And more than a quarter of districts had library support staff, but no librarians, in Indiana and Wyoming.

When examining the sheer percentage of library support staff who worked without school librarians (rather than the percentage of districts), the highest percentages in 2018-19 were in 9 states: Alaska, Arizona, Delaware, Idaho, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Oregon, and South Dakota. In Arizona, South Dakota, and Michigan, large majorities of library support staff were working without school librarians, while substantial minorities of library support staff were working without librarians in the 6 remaining states. Notably, this analysis was only able to examine situations where an entire district was without librarians. Data limitations prevented examining individual schools with library support staff without librarians. A study comparing what happens in a school library program when there is a librarian and a support staff person versus when there is a library support staff person alone would be illuminating about the price of this staffing model.

Probability of Reinstating School Librarians Once Eliminated

This study also discovered that, in most cases, once librarian positions were eliminated, they were not reinstated. By 2015-16, almost 3 out of 10 local districts had eliminated all school librarians, and, by 2018-19, 9 out of 10 of those districts had not reinstated them. A study of the almost 10% of districts that lost, but later reinstated, librarians could be informative regarding factors contributing to such reinstatements.

Ratios of Students per Librarian and Teachers per Librarian

Even where there are librarians, the ratios of students per librarian and teachers per librarian are daunting for any practitioner attempting to fulfill the profession's standards. In 2018-19, 1 out of 6 districts had a students per librarian ratio of at least 1,250 to 1 and a teacher per librarian ratio of at least 90 to 1. Considering that NCES does not report librarian staffing per school, only per district, many librarians may also have had multiple building and teaching assignments that further increased the number of students and teachers per librarian. A study comparing the teaching and collaboration activities of librarians in districts with the lowest (best) and highest (worst) ratios of students per librarian and teachers per librarian would help to elucidate for school leaders and school library leaders how these ratios impact learning opportunities for K-12 students.

Future Ready Schools Districts

One set of encouraging findings involves one of this project's national partners, Future Ready Schools (FRS)- and may help to explain their involvement with SLIDE. In 2018-19, FRS districts were more likely than non-FRS ones to have the highest level of librarian staffing (.75+ FTE per school), less likely to have no librarians, and-since 2015-16-more likely to have retained them and less likely to have been without them. FRS districts, by definition, seek to be innovators in education. A study comparing school library programs in FRS and non-FRS districts would almost certainly identify proven innovations already tested by FRS districts.

Schools, Students & Teachers Without School Librarians

As a result of school librarian losses, the numbers and percentages of schools, students, and teachers now without librarians-many for several years- presents a clear problem for the future of school librarianship.

- In 2018-19, almost 17,200 schools—almost 1 out of 5—were in a district with no librarians. And of those schools, more than 12,000—almost 1 out of 8—was in a district that had been without librarians since 2015-16.

- The same year, more than 7.5 million students—almost 1 out of 6—were in districts with no librarians. And of those students, more than 4.8 million—1 out of 10—were in a district that had been without librarians since 2015-16.

- Also, that year, more than 385,000 teachers—almost 1 out of 8—was in a district with no librarians. And of those teachers, more than 246,000—1 out of 12—was in a district that had been without librarians since 2015-16.

Notably, these are figures representing whole districts. As NCES does not report school librarian staffing per individual school, it is impossible to know how many more schools, students, and teachers have no librarians or part-time librarians within their schools.

In schools without librarians, those most affected by their absence are still there: students, teachers, and administrators. When attempting to study these districts and schools, the focus must shift toward remaining school staff who might be fulfilling part of the role once played by librarians. Such staff might include educational technology specialists, reading or language arts teachers, or others. When assessing the long-term impact of librarian losses, special attention should be given to types of students most likely to be affected: students in poverty, minority students, and English Language Learners.

The numbers of such students at risk of no access to librarians are sufficiently daunting to demand both study and action.

In 2018-19, 1.9 million students were served by districts with the highest poverty levels (75% or more of students) and no librarians. Those students were 25%—1 out of 4—of all students in districts with no librarians. More than 4.4 million students were served by districts with higher poverty levels (50% or more of students) and no librarians. Those students were 59%—3 out of 5—of all students in districts with no librarians.

The same year, almost 4.8 million students were served by majority non-white districts with no librarians. Those students were 64%—more than 3 out of 5—of all students in districts with no librarians.

Also, that year, almost 3.1 million students were served by majority Hispanic districts with no librarians. Those students were 41%—more than 2 out of 5—of all students in districts with no librarians.

Charter Districts

Nowhere in the public education universe is the existential crisis of school librarianship so advanced as in the charter sector. Because of the lack of school level data about librarian staffing, this study had to focus on charter districts-sometimes multiple charter schools, but the vast majority are single independent charter schools that are not part of regular local school districts. Nine out of 10 charter districts reported no school librarians. Research is needed to learn how these charter districts meet the information and related needs of their students and teachers.

Topics for Future Study

As with most research, this study led researchers to ponder several issues beyond the scope of this project. To recap, the issues that beg for further attention from school library researchers include:

- The gap between the AASL standards and the realities facing school librarians and how to address them;

- How—and to what extent—higher education institutions are preparing school librarians with the leadership skills needed to close the gap between the AASL standards and the realities of public education;

- National and state "pipeline" issues that create challenges in recruiting and hiring school librarians;

- The learning loss of students in districts without librarians, particularly those without them long-term;

- How the FTE level of school librarians relates to job performance, particularly in relationship to numbers of schools, students, and teachers;

- What library support staff are able to accomplish in the absence of school librarians;

- How the information-seeking behavior and inquiry-based learning of students are affected by the presence and absence (especially long term) of school librarians;

- The differential long-term impact of inequitable access to school librarians on at-risk students (students in poverty, minority students, and English Language Learners) and others;

- Why districts that spent the least per pupil had better librarian staffing than districts that spent more;

- How librarians work in more innovative ways when participating in efforts such as Future Ready Schools (FRS); and

- How, in the absence of school librarians, charter schools meet the information needs of their students and teachers.

As part of the three-year SLIDE project, this report offers an historical view of the status of school librarian employment based on the most comprehensive data available for national, state, and district levels from 2009-10 through 2018-19. Over the next two years, interviews in purposefully-selected districts, based on CCD data, will be conducted to further describe and learn how district decision makers choose to staff library, learning resources, and instructional technology for their K- 12 students. The reality check of those interviews will also make it possible to assess the data quality issues described in Appendix A. In addition, a website with interactive tools will permit interested parties to generate tables, charts, and maps of specific data they select. As data on school librarian employment, district characteristics, and student demographics for subsequent years become available, they will be assessed, edited for completeness and accuracy, and added to the website's database (https://libslide.org/data-tools/) The description offered in this report will be updated in whole or in part in a series of articles over the next two years and, ultimately, in the SLIDE project's final report.

Of course, beginning late in the 2019-20 school year and continuing through 2020-21, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted public schools—and school libraries and librarians—dramatically. While the long-term consequences of changes necessitated by the pandemic are uncertain, it seems inevitable that the consequences for school librarian employment will be substantial—one way or another. In some districts, school librarians may have become more essential than ever during and after the pandemic while, in other districts, the pandemic may hasten the loss of school librarians altogether. Serendipitously, the timing of this study—which concludes in late 2023—will make it possible to track at least some of these consequences through the 2022-23 school year.