

Perspectives on School Librarian Employment in the United States, 2009-10 to 2018-19

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Introduction

SLIDE—The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution?—is a 2020-2023 Research in Service to Practice project funded by a Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and conducted under the auspices of Antioch University Seattle. One of the principal components of SLIDE is an analysis of the available data on school librarian employment at national, state, and district levels over the past decade. This analysis is one of the major deliverables of the first year, 2020-21. Also, during year one, a survey of the project’s state intermediaries provided background information about policies, practices, and conditions affecting school librarian employment in each state. The report on that survey is titled *Contexts of School Librarian Employment* (Kachel & Lance, 2021). These state context data are employed in the state section of this document and will inform interviews to be conducted in year two, 2021-22. School leaders for districts where school librarian staffing gained or lost .50 FTE or more per school will be interviewed. The purposes of the interviews are to verify and clarify the nature of the staffing changes made and to better understand the experiences, perceptions, values, and rationales that led the interviewees to make the decisions they did. For a fuller explanation of the SLIDE project, more details about its activities, and access to its deliverables, visit the SLIDE website at <http://libslide.org/>.

This report will be presented as a series of questions followed by their answers. Two over-arching findings dominate this analysis: 1) dramatically reduced employment of school librarians since 2009-10, and 2) extreme inequities in the distribution of school librarians related to geography (state and region), district characteristics (enrollment, locale, and per-pupil school spending) and student demographics (poverty, race/ethnicity, and language status). Delineating those inequities, however, requires beginning with national and state perspectives on the data before examining it at the district level. Before all of that, however, it is important to acknowledge recent past research on this topic and the nature of the unique state- and district-level data sets on which this analysis is based.

Recent Past Research

What do we know about the status of school librarian employment based on recent past research?

Since 2016, the National Education Association (NEA), *School Library Journal* (SLJ), and *Education Week* have published reports or articles describing the scale of recent school librarian losses, identifying some of the trends driving them, and explaining which student populations have been most at risk of losing access to school librarians.

2016 NEA Study

In 2016, the National Education Association (NEA) published *Library/Media Centers in U.S. Public Schools: Growth, Staffing, and Resources* (Tuck & Holmes, 2016). Drawing on data from the now-defunct Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), it reported that, between 2007 and 2013, the number of full- and part-time school librarians (i.e., a head count) had increased by 8.2%. A major deficiency of the SASS data is that using head counts tends to over-estimate staff. (For example, if one full-time district librarian spends 4 hours a week in each of 10 schools, SASS counted them as 10 part-time librarians.)

2018 SLJ Articles

In March 2018, Lance and Kachel (the principal investigator and project director, respectively, of this project) authored two articles in *SLJ*'s "School Librarian State of the Union" series in which they reported the precipitous decline in school librarian full-time equivalents (FTEs) in the wake of the Great Recession and the confluence of circumstances that contributed to it.

In "School Librarian, Where Art Thou?" Lance (2018) reported that, between 2009-10 and 2015-16, more than 10,000 school librarian FTEs (19%) had been lost.

In "A Perfect Storm Impacts School Librarian Numbers", Kachel (2018) identified the national, state, and local/district trends that led to those losses. National trends included: aging and retirements, changes in national school accrediting agency standards, and loss of school librarian certification programs. State trends included: public education funding cuts, lack—or loss—of state mandates that schools have librarians, absence or elimination of state school library consultants, weakening of school librarian certification requirements, and increasing numbers of charter schools. And local/district trends included site-based management, turnover of staffing decision-makers, school leader priorities, increasing focus on standards-based testing, and evolving positions whose titles no longer include the word library or librarian.

In a third article in the "School Librarian State of the Union" series—"Charter Schools, Segregation, and School Library Access"—Jessen (2018) examined data for Chicago and California, making the case that the combination of race and ethnicity and charter schools exacerbates inequities of access to school librarians.

2018 Education Week Article

On May 16, 2018, *Education Week* published "Schools See Steep Drop in Librarians, New Analysis Finds," confirming—based on their research center's independent analysis—the major findings reported earlier in the *SLJ* articles (Sparks & Harwin, 2018). In addition to reiterating that school librarian job losses since 2009-10 have been staggering, they also reported that minority students have been affected disproportionately.

About the Data

What is the SLIDE project's data source and what are its strengths and weaknesses?

Ordinarily, an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of existing data would be relegated to footnotes or an appendix. (See Appendix A for more details.) In this case, however, the available data's character and limits are such prominent issues that they must be noted at least briefly at the outset. (See Table 1.)

Since 2012, there has been no national survey of school libraries by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), or any other organization. Indeed, compared to the extensive data reported annually for public and academic libraries, the almost total data vacuum about school libraries stands in dramatic contrast. This is particularly unfortunate given the dramatic changes of fortune experienced by many school libraries over the past decade.

Consequently, the only source of comprehensive national, state, and district level data about school libraries—or, more precisely, school library staffing—is the Common Core of Data (CCD) of NCES. CCD collects data on the employment of selected professional and paraprofessional educators—including school librarians and library support staff—in full-time equivalents (FTEs) at state and district levels.

Table 1. NCES Common Core of Data: Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses
National, state & district data	No school level data
Full-time equivalents (FTEs) instead of head counts	Outdated definition of school librarian
Related data on employment of other educators	Definition silent on certification
Related data on district characteristics and student demographics	Lag time in data reporting
	Non-compliant reporting in selected states

FTE data are preferable to head counts of full- and part-time staff, as the level of part-time staffing can be extremely variable. (Someone who works as a school librarian for three hours per week is part-time, as is someone who works 30 hours per week.) The only limitation of FTE counts is that we do not know how many actual positions or individual incumbents they represent.

Another limitation of the data is its time frame. When the SLIDE project began in September 2020, the latest available data for states and districts was for 2018-19. Addressing the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for librarian employment will have to wait for the final report of this project in 2023.

Most unfortunately, these FTE data are not available at the school or building level.¹

As for the other selected educator positions for which CCD gathers FTE data, the definitions of a school librarian and a library support staff member date from the 1980s—and have never been updated (in the case of library positions, despite repeated urgings by AASL and others)—and those definitions make no reference whatsoever to the issue of professional certification.

Generally, AASL and school library advocacy groups focus on state-certified school librarians, regarding all other incumbents of school librarian positions as dubiously qualified. Again, though, NCES ignores the issue of certification for all educator positions, not just librarians.

So, in these four respects—no school level data, an old definition of “school librarian,” overlooking state certification as an essential part of the definition, the time lag, and non-compliance by states and districts—the NCES data are imperfect.

Nonetheless, these data are what we have, and, at least, NCES is a comprehensive source providing data for almost all districts, every state, and thus the nation. CCD’s other problematic weakness is state and district non-compliance (e.g., missing data, mis-reported data). Given the improvements made to the dataset by this project with help from state sources, these data are more than sufficient for this comprehensive, multi-level assessment of school librarian employment patterns and trends.²

The fact that the data we have on school librarian employment comes from NCES also provides the advantage of accompanying data on other types of school employment as well as district characteristics (enrollment, number of schools, and per pupil expenditures) and student demographics (race/ethnicity, poverty, language status, and disability status)—essential data for a thorough assessment of the inequities of access to school librarians and library support staff.

To describe these inequities of access as clearly as possible, this report examines the data from three perspectives: national, state, and district. Inequities from state to state are apparent when one compares national patterns and trends with those for individual states. And similarly, inequities from district to district

¹ Throughout this report, the term “school” refers to an individual school that is part of a regular local school district. A separate analysis was done for all-charter districts, the vast majority of which are actually individual charter schools.

² Appendix A discusses arcane issues relating to the data’s validity and reliability and how we addressed them. Suffice it to say here that the NCES data employed in our analyses have been edited for selected states to address those issues. While it is usually best to accept federal statistical data, as is—“warts and all”—there were many known, consequential, and “fixable” issues for some states that it seemed advisable to correct.

are apparent when one compares figures for that level with those for a particular state and the nation as a whole.

While it is widely acknowledged that librarian staffing levels vary by grade level (elementary, middle, or high school), the lack of school level data makes it impossible to address that important factor. As CCD provides the number of librarian FTEs and the numbers of schools, students, and teachers for the nation, each state, and each district, it is possible to calculate the librarian FTE per school ratio as well as ratios of students and teachers per librarian FTE for each level of geography. It is important to remember, however, that these national, state, and district level ratios are summary figures that may or may not represent any particular school in a specific district.