

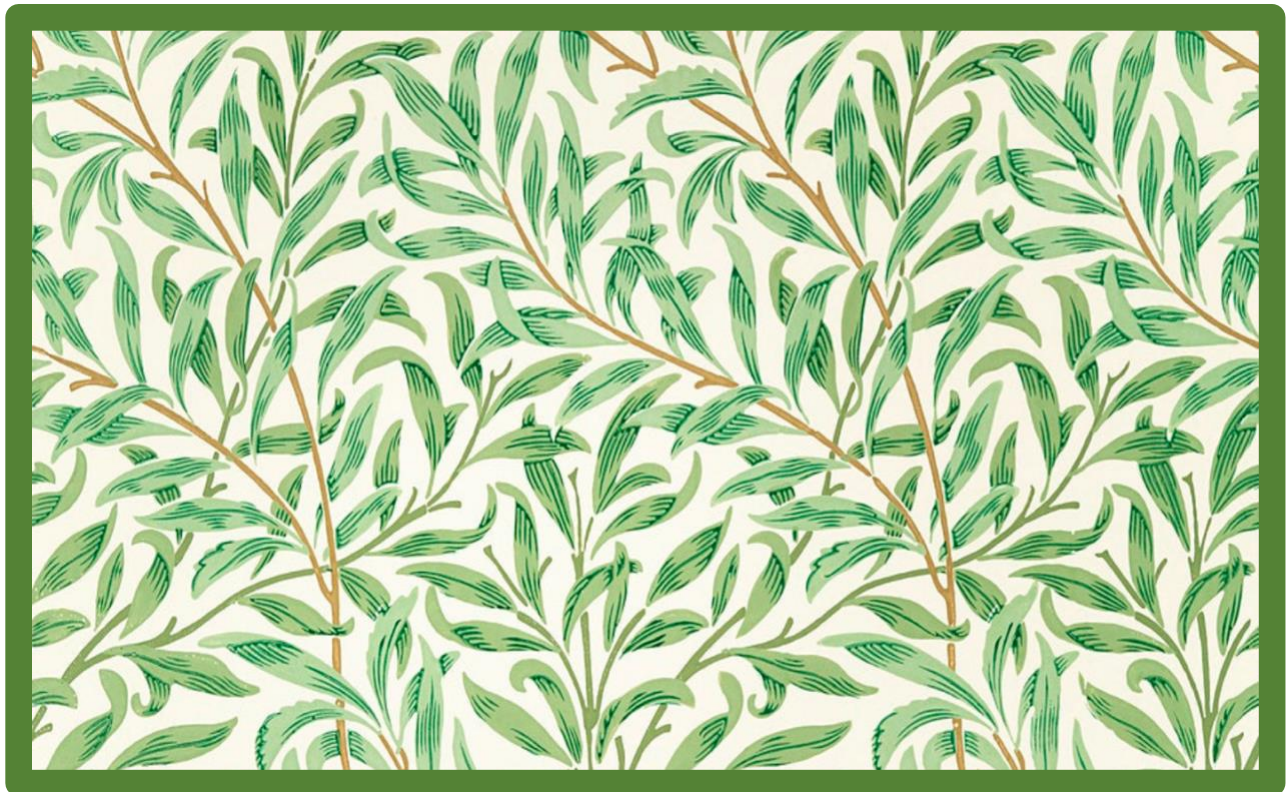


Schools Without Librarians

First School-Level Data on the Post-COVID Era

A SLIDE Special Report

Deeth Ellis & Keith Curry Lance



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the Post-COVID Era

A SLIDE Special Report

Deeth Ellis
Head Librarian, Boston Latin School
Doctoral Student, Simmons University

Keith Curry Lance
Consultant
RSL Research Group

February 2024

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Executive Summary

It has only recently become possible to assess librarian staffing at school level, due to the long interval between the two most recent datasets from NCES's periodic sample survey of schools. In 2023, the National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) released long-awaited 2020-21 school-level data—the first from that survey since 2015-16. These more precise school-level data provide a clearer picture than ever of the status of U.S. school librarianship at the beginning of the post-COVID era.

In 2020-21—the first full school year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—29.5 percent of schools reported having no full- or part-time librarians, an increase from 25.4 percent in 2015-16. This report confirms the existence of continuing inequities in access to librarians at school level associated with charter status, region, student enrollment, locale, grade level, race and ethnicity, and students qualifying for free and reduced-cost meals (a poverty indicator). In 2020-21:

- Seven out of 10 charter schools—compared with only a quarter of traditional schools—were without librarians, either full- or part-time.
- Of schools in the West, 37.8 percent reported no librarians. By contrast, only 22.2 percent of schools in the South had no librarians.
- Of schools with fewer than 200 students, 65.5 percent reported no librarians (up only slightly from 62.1 percent five years earlier). Of schools with 2,000 or more students, however, those without librarians grew from 10.8 percent in 2015-16 to 16.3 percent in 2020-21—the largest percentage increase (5.5%) in schools without librarians of any enrollment range.
- Of schools in cities, 34.9 percent reported no librarians (up from 30.5 percent), and, of those in outlying towns, 29.5 percent lacked librarians (up from 24.1 percent).

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- Most combined schools have consistently lacked librarians—57.0 percent reporting none in 2020-21 (up from 51.2 percent in 2015-16). And primary schools saw the largest percentage increase in librarian-less schools, 25.2 percent in 2020-21 (up from 20.3 percent five years earlier).
- Of majority Hispanic schools, 33.8 percent reported no librarians in 2020-21—up from 27.2 percent in 2015-16—the largest increase in schools without librarians associated with race or ethnicity.
- Of schools serving the most students living in poverty (75 percent or more of their enrollment), 32.5 percent reported no librarians in 2020-21, up slightly from 31.7 percent five years earlier. While schools with the fewest students living in poverty (less than 35 percent) were less likely than highest-poverty schools to be without librarians in 2015-16 and 2020-21, the percentage for lowest-poverty schools almost doubled—from 16.5 percent to 29.7 percent, almost eliminating the previously sizable gap between those two groups of schools.
- The five states with the highest percentages of schools without librarians—ones where half or more had neither full- nor part-time librarians—were: Alaska (55.2 percent), Minnesota (50.6 percent), Hawaii (50.2 percent), West Virginia (50.0 percent), and Michigan (49.9 percent).

There is an urgent need for more data and research to identify prevailing models of school librarian staffing (ranging from a librarian in every school to having no librarians at all), the relative adequacy of those models in meeting the needs of students and teachers, and how school library advocates and public policy-makers can respond appropriately to ensure educational equity.

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Introduction

Antioch University Seattle’s SLIDE study—The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution?—assessed levels of school librarian staffing between 2009-10 and 2018-19 based on district-level data from the Common Core of Data (CCD) of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Pointedly, CCD collects and reports data on librarian staffing from more than 13,000 local school districts nationwide but does not disaggregate that data by school (Lance et al., 2023, p. 1). That early statistical analysis from the 2020-23 SLIDE study funded by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services revealed that, in 2018-19, 31 percent of local U.S. school districts reported no school librarians at all, and 23 percent of such districts had had no librarians since at least 2015-16 (Lance & Kachel, 2021, p.vi). Further findings indicated that districts without librarians differed in character from districts with librarians. Librarian-less districts were more likely than districts with librarians to have smaller enrollments, to be located in central cities and rural areas, to serve poorer communities, and to have more students of color.

The fact that CCD’s annual counts of librarians in full-time equivalents (FTEs)¹ are limited to district-level data left open the question of what librarian staffing looks like at school level. Only if a district reported zero librarian FTE, could one know that every school in that district was without a librarian. If a multi-school district reported any librarian FTE, it was impossible to know how many and which schools in that district did and did not have librarians.

¹ NCES (n.d.) defines an FTE as required time on the job as a proportion of the time required for a full-time position. For example, if a district considers full-time to be 38 hours per week and someone works 19 hours per week, they are 0.5 FTE.

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It has only recently become possible to assess librarian staffing at school level, due to the long interval between the two most recent datasets from NCES’s periodic sample survey of U.S. public schools.² In mid-2023, the National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) released long-awaited 2020-21 school-level staffing data—the first from that survey since 2015-16.

These released-but-unpublished data were accessed and analyzed via NCES’s DataLab using its PowerStats interactive data tools. These more precise school-level data provide a clearer picture than ever of the status of U.S. school librarianship at the beginning of the post-COVID era. This analysis compares the newly available 2020-21 data with the previous 2015-16 data. It also examines equity differences among schools associated with charter status, region, student enrollment, locale, grade level, race and ethnicity, and students qualifying for free and reduced meals (a poverty indicator). While most of these equity variables are the same ones used in SLIDE’s district-level analyses, grade level is a new variable only possible now that school-level data are available.

Also included in this report is a table reporting the percentage of schools without librarians in each state as of the 2020-21 school year.

The report concludes by asking several questions raised by the findings of its analysis of the latest NTPS dataset and the changes over the five-year interval between the two latest NTPS datasets.

² The 2020-21 National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) is based on a sample of about 9,900 public schools, stratified by school classification, enrollment, locale, grade level, and poverty status. Sampling was also designed to ensure the accuracy and representativeness of state estimates (Taie, Lewis & Spiegelman, 2022, p. 1). The 2015-16 NTPS was based on a sample of about 8,300 public schools, stratified similarly to the 2020-21 version, though not designed to generate state estimates (Taie, Goldring & Spiegelman, 2017, p. 1).

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Literature Review

This literature review includes data analyses and research on school librarianship during the 2015-21 time period to provide context for the most recent NTPS data. It is divided into three sections: early research leading up to 2015, the 2015-21 period, and literature post-2020 that addresses the pandemic. Key themes in the literature are a growing inequity of students' access to school librarians and the paradox that despite a body of research that demonstrates access to school libraries improve student learning outcomes, there has been a downward trajectory in the number of school librarian positions. Also included are studies that examine the underutilization of librarians and explore how to better define the role and leverage positions at the school or district level.

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Pre-2015 Research

The key trend in the early 2000's was a shift toward data-driven decision-making codified into law with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 (Klein, 2015). During this time, a number of states commissioned quantitative studies to explore the impact of school libraries on student achievement. After 2003, state impact studies integrated qualitative methods to “identify more deeply the nature of the learning outcomes enabled through the school library” (Todd, 2012, p. 2). Lance et al. (2000) articulated the need to expand previous studies that focused on the library as a space with information resources to focus on:

“Specific activities of certified school librarians;
principal and teacher support of school library programs; and
information technology, particularly licensed databases and the Internet.” (p. 10)

The library and information science field adopted evidence-based practice in response to the U.S. Department of Education's emphasis on it. A number of earlier studies squarely focused on examining this practice (Todd, 2012; Todd & Kuhlthau, 2005a & 2005b; Hughes, 2014).

One of the final state studies, which was conducted in South Carolina, is notable for finding a quantitative connection between library-specific learning outcomes and activities and librarian interventions. Lance et al. (2014) conclude that the findings “are consistent with previous available-data research in revealing associations between the academic performance of students and a variety of school library characteristics [and] librarian teaching activities [that are] predictably positive in direction and statistically significant” (p.76). Despite this new emphasis on evidence-based practice, Johnston and Green (2018) uncovered in their systematic literature review that research between 2004 and 2014 was focused more often on defining the role of the school librarian and less often on the library media center's contribution to student achievement,

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how information resources are used, and the impact of new AASL Standards issued in 2007 (p. 6).

Tuck and Holmes (2016) analyzed 2000-01 through 2013-14 sample survey data on schools from NCES and identified a downward trend in staffing ratios and “substantial differences in student access to public school library/media centers, to librarians/media specialists, and to up-to-date library/media resources” (p.1). Their analysis identifies trends of inequity between “the wealthiest schools [that] have multiple times more librarians/media specialists per school than the poorest schools in districts with high ethnic minority status” (p. 5). This decline was corroborated by Kachel and Lance (2018) in their comparison of 2009-10 and 2015-16 NCES data for the universe of local school districts that showed a 15 percent national decline of school librarian positions (p. 14). They explain possible reasons, such as turnover in school and district administrators making staffing decisions, challenges in finding qualified candidates, changes to site-based funding, competition with alternative staffing, such as instructional support positions. The bottom line is that “To school administrators, implementing school improvement plans and results-oriented objectives are the driving forces in the way school funds are allocated” (p. 18).

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2015-21 Research

Earlier findings and the revised AASL position statements (2018) focus on the librarian's role in reading, instruction, and leadership. Despite this, studies continued to focus on differing perceptions of the role of the school librarian (Kizziar, 2021; Lewis, 2019; Loh et al., 2021; Lupton, 2016). Loh et al. (2021) explain that there remains inconsistent understanding of a librarian's professional role as an active leader, collaborator, and instructor of information literacy which can lead to administrators not recognizing school librarians as a necessity to support student learning (p. 552). Lewis (2019), in her more narrowly focused study, addresses the principal's view of the competing roles of librarians and instructional coaches. She explains that there can be a diminished understanding of the role of school librarians and a stronger professional connection with instructional coaches who administrators view "as an extension" of themselves (p. 25). There may be bright spots in states that have adopted or partially adopted the AASL Standards as their state curriculum (Barnett, 2021; Ehler-Hansen & O'Meara, 2019; Mackley, 2021; Madsen & Rinio, 2021; Northern & Gardner, 2019). However, more research is needed to examine to what extent the new AASL Standards (2018d) influence decision makers' support reinstating or sustaining school librarian positions.

Kachel (2021) reports on the 2018-19 NCES staffing data analyzed as part of SLIDE that shows a 20 percent loss of librarian positions between 2010 and 2019 (p. 49). Key data points reveal inequitable access to school libraries. Students are less likely to have access to a school librarian if they qualify for free or reduced meals, if they are Hispanic, or if they are English Language Learners (pp. 49-50). She emphasizes the continuing need to study data points related to librarians' instructional role and students' visits to the library, moving away from circulation statistics and similar administrative metrics (p. 49). Gordon and Cicchetti (2023) emphasized in

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their 2018 Massachusetts study of school libraries that access to a school library and librarians is inequitable based on students' race and location of schools. They identified a number of “systemic barriers ... to the school librarian’s capacity to deliver equitable access to library resources” that include differences in staffing, opportunities for instruction, and levels of funding (p. 110). Three years after the Massachusetts study (Gordon & Cicchetti, 2018) and a year into the pandemic, the school committee in Boston voted to reinstate school librarians in all schools by 2026 (Bauld, 2022, p. 62). It is not known to what extent this is an anomaly or indicates a new trend toward adding positions. Around the same time period, Loh et al. (2021) finds that “despite clear evidence for the important role played by qualified school librarians, the policies and practices with regard to staffing school libraries [are] uneven across countries and school districts” (p. 550).

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Pandemic Research

The 2020-21 school year marked the beginning of the pandemic era in which schools' staffing decisions were informed by new realities. Changes in staffing and instructional practice were adopted with the aim of meeting the needs of virtual teaching and learning. How administrators viewed, supported, and used the school librarian position during the pandemic has yet to be fully researched. Some early studies have begun to paint a picture. One theme that emerges is that while librarians saw an opportunity to expand their roles as information specialist, leader, instructor, and collaborator; school leaders did not hold the same views. Teachers, who were overwhelmed with daily demands of virtual teaching also made decisions that, perhaps unintentionally, reduced student access to librarians and library resources. Baker et al. (2020) examines the perceived role of librarians to collaborate and lead change. She finds that "principals do not include librarians in their definition of instructional leaders or leadership team members" (p. 15) even after the pandemic "ushered in a new level of importance for meaningful, goal-oriented educational leadership" (p. 1).

Valenza et al.'s (2023) qualitative study selected exemplary library programs and examined the shifts of responsibility during the pandemic. They also found a difference between librarians' self-described roles and perceived roles during the pandemic. While some were regarded "to be the glue between different groups" and received high-profile recognition, others felt that their "leadership efforts ... might not have been recognized by their communities" (p. 30). They found a shift toward curating and supporting teachers' technology use (p. 7) and that "information literacy and inquiry instruction during this period ... [was] greatly compromised" (p. 32). Soulen and Tedrow (2022) explore the drop in students accessing library materials. They

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found lower access across grade levels and that students from lower-income families were less likely to use library resources during the pandemic (p. 635).

Pentland (2022) presents the work of school library professional organizations in five states that have long advocated for school librarians. Each case paints a picture of fully voluntary groups of school librarian advocates organizing to make the case to stakeholders and legislators about the value of school librarians. Information about the decline of positions and changes in staffing laws is included to illustrate the continuing need for this type of work. To what extent this work has yielded increases in positions is not yet clear.

In the 2000s, many research studies demonstrated the impact of school libraries on student achievement. This led to a call for more research on how school librarians themselves, and their actions and practices, shape learning outcomes. Although some research followed that examined librarian practices, more often studies were undertaken that examined librarians' roles or perceptions of librarians held by stakeholders, in particular teachers and administrators. Research indicates a lack of consensus between school librarians and those who employ them regarding a school librarian's roles and their value, suggesting the need for dialog and professional development to close that gap. How and to what extent this research has impacted school librarian employment is not yet known.

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School-Level Findings About Librarian Staffing

The most recent National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) data analyzed here was collected during the height of the pandemic in 2020-21. The story it tells will become clearer as future NTPS datasets are published. To what extent will school librarian positions continue to be cut? Will school librarian staffing increase with growing concerns about equity? The matter of staffing is inextricably linked to long-unsettled questions of how to leverage school librarians to improve student learning, consistently define and use the school librarian as leader, and convince school and district administrators of the value of the position.

In 2020-21, 29.5 percent of schools reported having no full- or part-time librarians, an increase from 25.4 percent in 2015-16. This is consistent with the long-term national decline in district counts of librarian full-time equivalents (FTEs) reported from 2009-10 to 2018-19 (Lance & Kachel, 2021). In this analysis, however, the emphasis must be on schools which have neither full- nor part-time librarians, as the NTPS survey collected head counts of full- and part-time librarians rather than FTEs.

The extent to which access to librarians in schools is inequitable nationwide is evident when one considers several characteristics of schools for which NTPS data are available: charter status, region, enrollment, locale, grade level, race and ethnicity, and poverty.

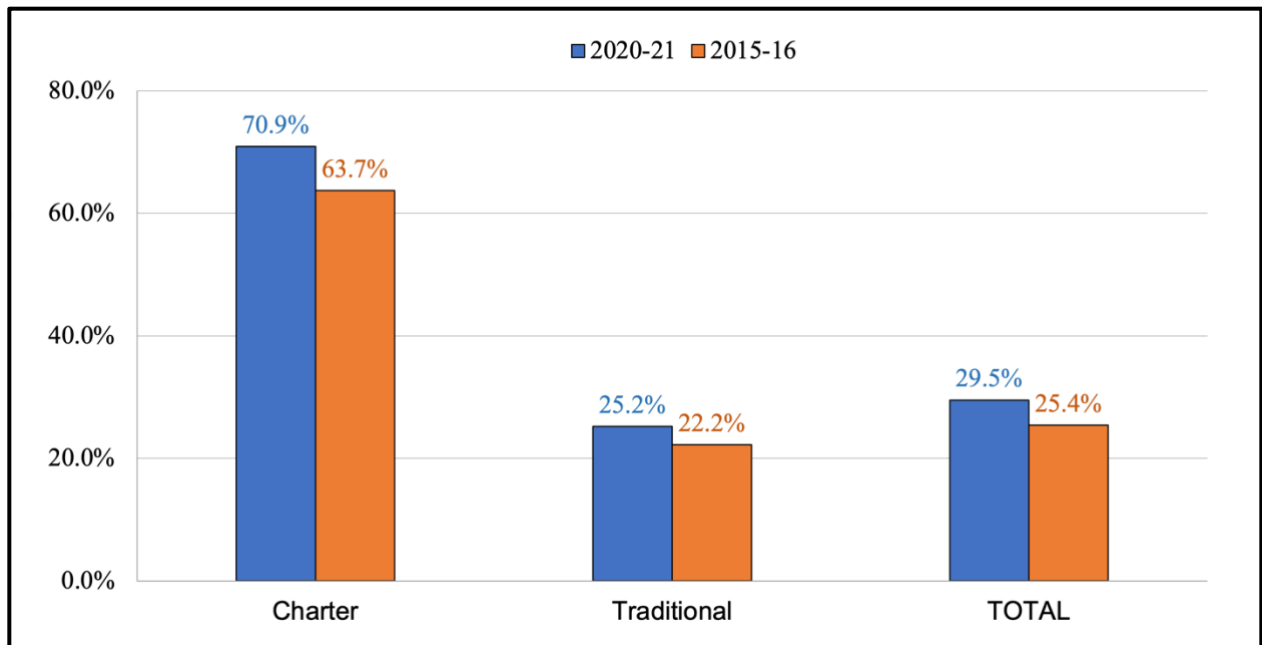
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Charter Status

Arguably the most fundamental distinction between public schools today is whether they are charter schools or traditional ones. The number of charter schools in the U.S. is growing at an impressive rate. In 2015-16, 6,855 (seven percent) of the nation’s 98,277 public schools were charter schools. By 2020-21, 7,847 (eight percent) of the nation’s 98,577 public schools were charter schools. While the total number of public schools grew by only 300 during that interval, the number of charter schools grew by almost 1,000—more than three times the overall school growth rate (Korhonen, 2023; NCES, 2023).

Whether a public school is a charter or a traditional one is a major predictor of whether or not it will have school librarians. In 2020-21, seven out of 10 charter schools—compared with only a quarter of traditional schools—were without librarians, either full- or part-time. The differences were similar in 2015-16, though smaller percentages of both reported no librarians.

Chart 1. Schools with No Full- or Part-Time Librarians by Charter Status



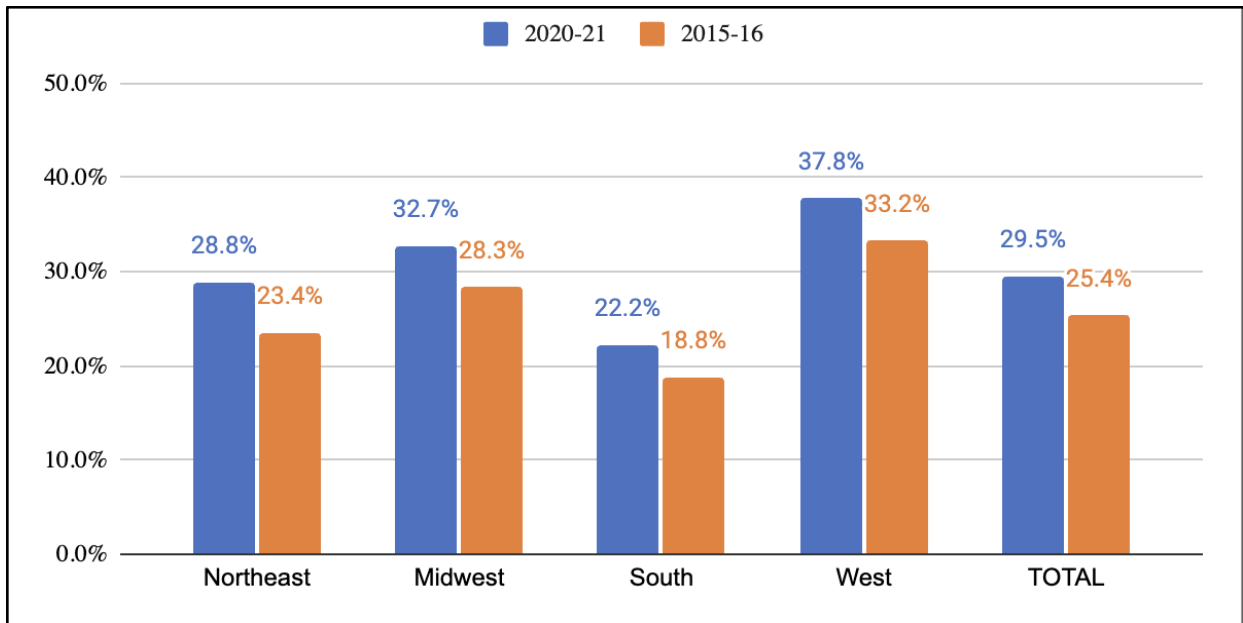
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Region

Regional differences in the percentages of schools without librarians have remained consistent and grown over time (Chart 2). In 2020-21, schools with no librarians at all were most prevalent in the Midwest (32.7 percent) and West (37.8 percent), a trend that grew by just over four percent in those regions since 2015-16. The South, in which many states mandate that schools have librarians (Kachel and Lance, 2021), has the fewest schools without librarians (22.2 percent in 2020-21, up from 18.8 percent in 2015-16).

Notably, despite these variations, more schools in every region were without librarians in 2020-21 compared to 2015-16.

Chart 2. Schools with No Full- or Part-Time Librarians by Region

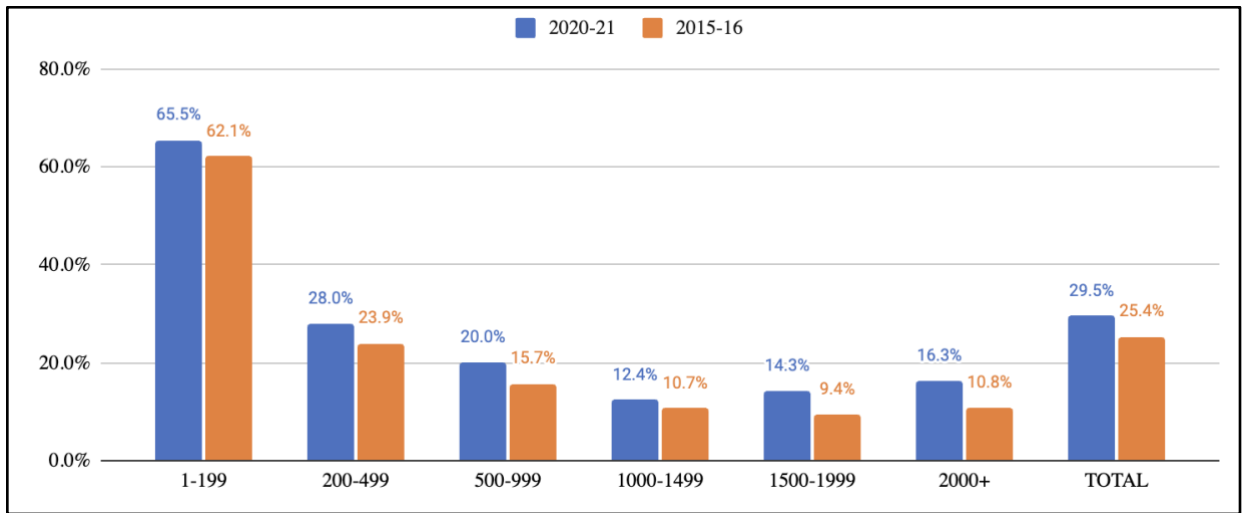


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Enrollment

The percentages of schools with neither full- nor part-time librarians increased in all enrollment groups between 2015-16 and 2020-21 (Chart 3). There was more than a 30 percent difference between schools of less than 199 students (65.5 percent) without full- or part-time librarians and those with enrollments of 200-499 students (28.0 percent). Schools with larger enrollments (1,000 or more) were far less likely to report no librarians. Of schools with 2,000 or more students, 5.5 percent more reported no librarians in 2020-21 than in 2015-16 (10.8 percent in 2015-16 to 16.3 percent in 2020-21). Thus, schools with the largest enrollments had the highest percentage decline of all enrollment groups.

Chart 3. Schools with No Full- or Part-Time Librarians by Enrollment

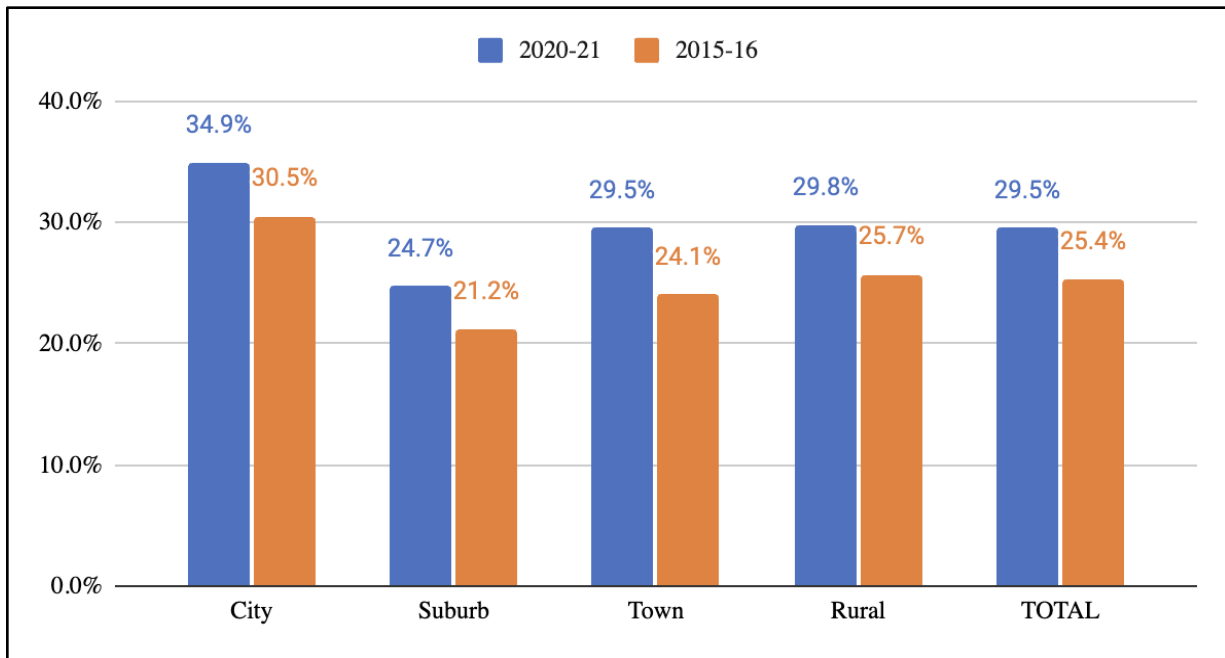


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Locale

Locale of school continues to be a factor in staffing libraries. Between 2015-16 and 2020-21, schools without a full- or part-time librarian increased by three to five percent in all locales (Chart 4). Of city schools, 34.9 percent reported no librarians in 2020-21, while only 24.7 percent of suburban schools lacked librarians that year. Between 2015-16 and 2020-21, 5.4 percent more schools in towns and 4.1 percent more schools in rural areas reported no librarians. City schools were most likely to report no librarians in both years.

Chart 4. Schools with No Full- or Part-Time Librarians by Locale

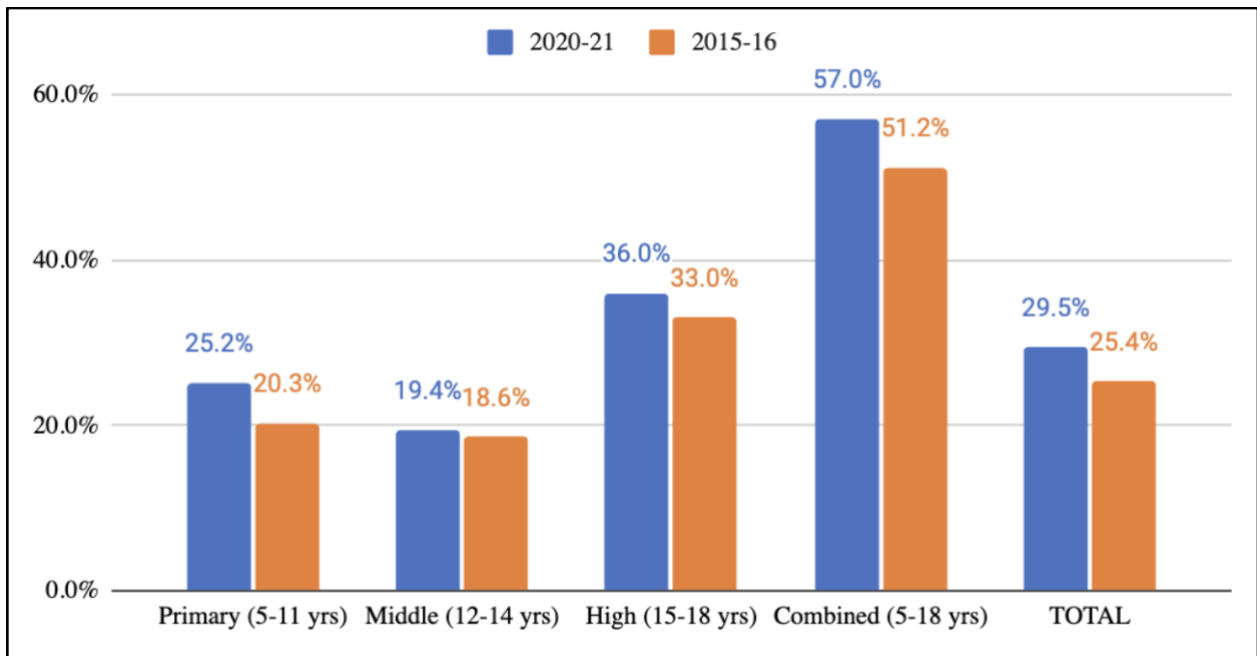


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Grade Level

Combined grade-level schools were least likely to have librarians with 57 percent reporting neither full- or part-time positions, a nearly six percent increase in no-librarian schools from 2015-16 (Chart 5). The mixed-grade level usually represents smaller schools, which unsurprisingly tended to report lacking librarians more frequently. At the other extreme, middle schools were more likely to have librarians and more consistently kept their librarians. Primary and high schools also lost librarians, almost five percent more for primary schools, and three percent more for high schools. Middle schools were least likely to report no librarians and experienced the smallest decline over time—19.4 percent in 2020-21 and 18.6 percent in 2015-16. After middle schools, high schools reported the smallest percent change over time, with the percentage of high schools without a librarian increasing from 33 percent in 2015-16 to 36 percent in 2020-21.

Chart 5. Schools with No Full- or Part-Time Librarians by Grade Level

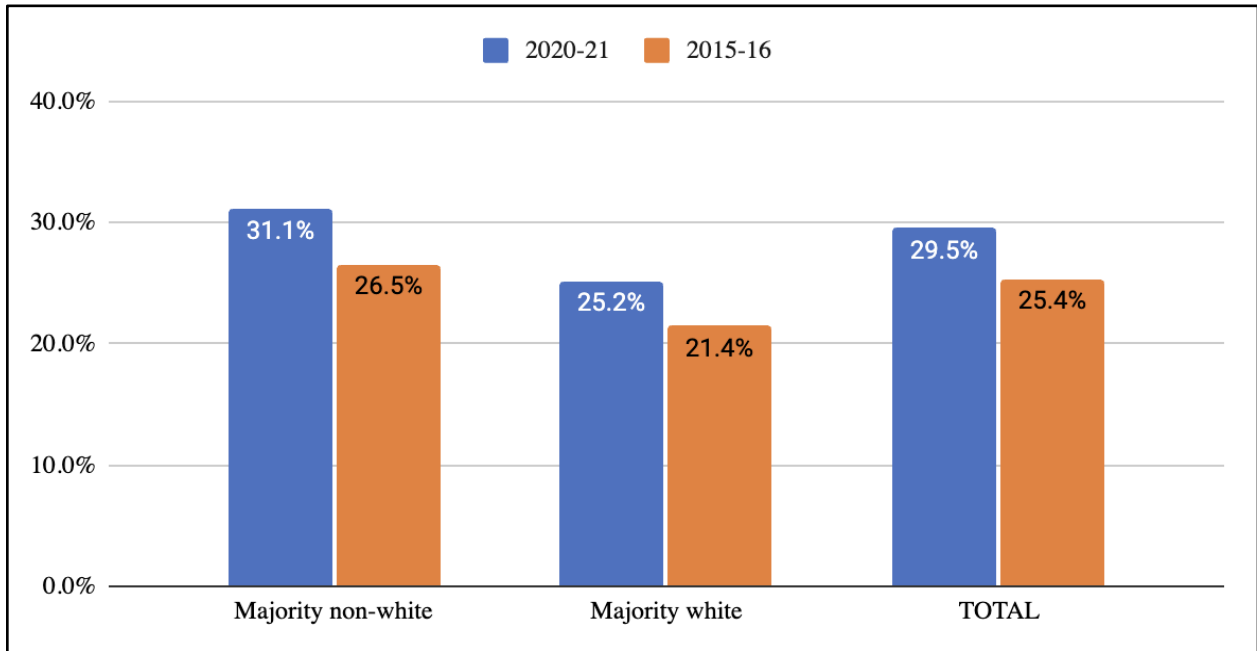


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Race & Ethnicity

Overall, students were less likely to have a librarian at their school in 2020-21 if their schools were majority non-white or majority Hispanic (Charts 6 & 7). These disparities existed in 2015-16 and persisted five years later. In 2020-21, more majority non-white schools (31.1 percent) reported no librarians at all compared to majority white schools (25.2 percent). That more than 31 percent of majority non-white schools lacked librarians in 2020-21 was an increase of 5.9 percent over 2015-16. For the same interval, the increase in majority white schools without librarians was only 3.8 percent. So, in addition to majority non-white schools being more likely than majority white schools to lack librarians in 2020-21, they were also more likely to report lacking librarians than in 2015-16.

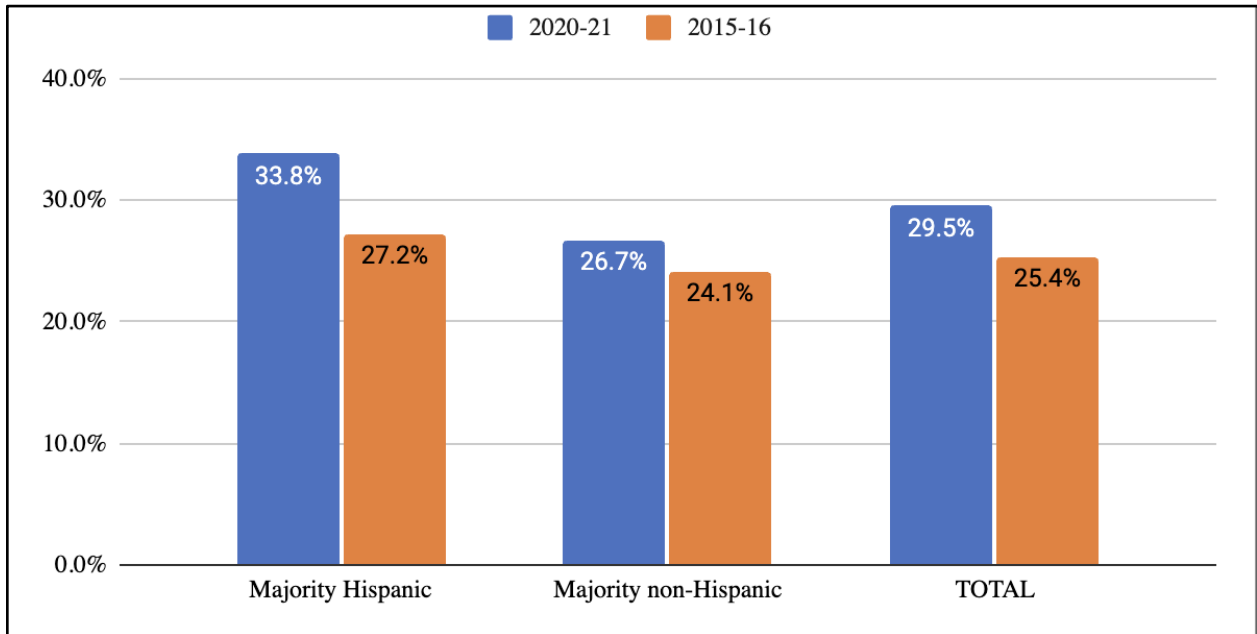
Chart 6. Schools with No Full- or Part-Time Librarians by Race



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Of majority Hispanic schools, 33.8 percent reported no school librarians in 2020-21, compared to 26.7 percent of non-Hispanic schools. Consequently, the ethnicity-related gap that year was over seven percent. Compared to 2015-16, about six and a half percent more majority Hispanic schools reported no librarians in 2020-21 (from 27.2 percent to 33.8 percent). Majority non-Hispanic schools were also more likely to report no librarians over that interval (24.1 percent to 26.7 percent); but, at less than half the rate for majority Hispanic schools (2.6 percent).

Chart 7. Schools with No Full- or Part-Time Librarians by Ethnicity

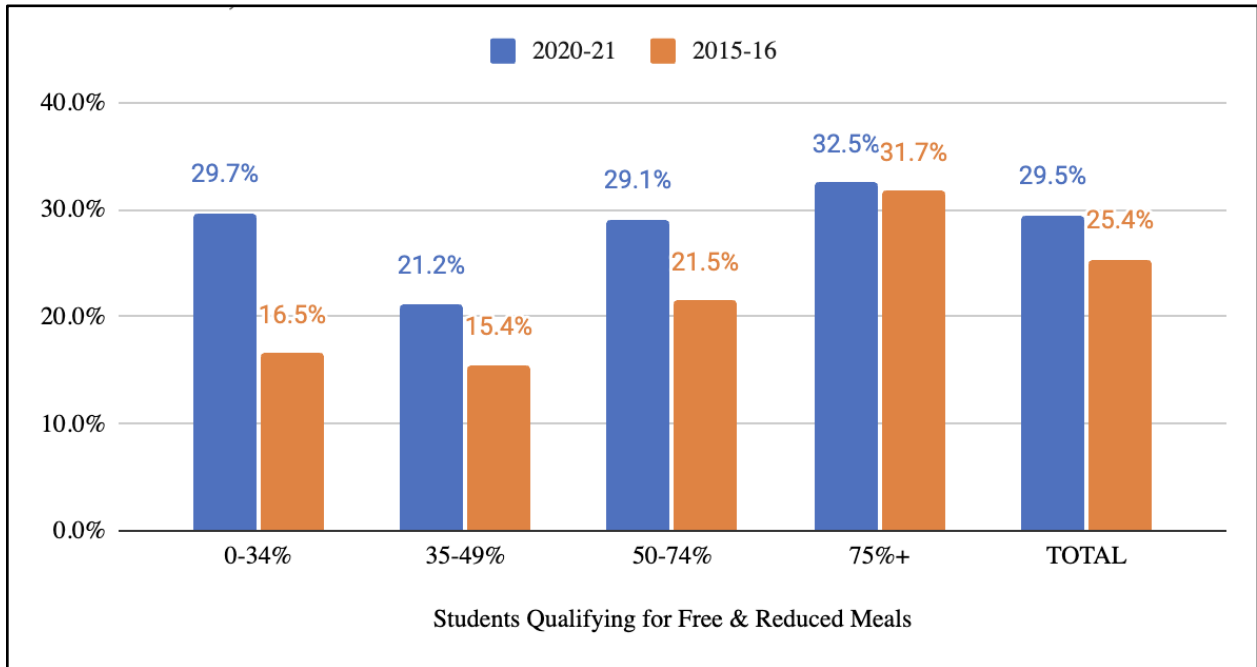


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Free and Reduced Meal (FARM) Qualifying Students (Poverty Measure)

While more schools at all levels of poverty reported no librarians between 2015-16 and 2020-21, the declines over that interval were concentrated among schools in wealthier communities where there were more librarians to lose (Chart 8). Of schools with the lowest levels of poverty (less than 35 percent FARM students), 29.7 percent reported no librarians in 2020-21 compared with only 16.5 percent in 2015-16—the largest increase at 13.2 percent. Of the poorest schools (those with 75 percent or more FARM students), the change in percentage of schools reporting no librarians was less than one percent. However, that group reported the highest percentage of schools with no librarians in both years. It is not clear, particularly among schools in wealthier communities, to what extent decisions were influenced by the pandemic—perhaps, librarians were re-assigned to other roles, temporarily or permanently.

Chart 8. Schools with No Full- or Part-Time Librarians by Free & Reduced Meal (FARM) Qualification (Poverty Measure)



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Schools Without Librarians by State

The foregoing national analysis demonstrates that inequities in access to school librarians associated with region, enrollment, locale, grade level, race and ethnicity, and poverty long known to exist at district level are also present at school level and have persisted from at least 2015-16 to 2020-21. Librarian staffing levels are also known to be associated positively and significantly with state factors, such as the number of universities that prepare school librarians and the presence of a mandate for school librarians in state law or regulations (Kachel & Lance, 2021). Consequently, it is no surprise that the percentage of schools without librarians—that is, with neither full-time nor part-time librarians—varied dramatically from state to state in 2020-21.³

For the 2020-21 school year, the five states with the highest percentages of schools without librarians—ones where half or more had neither full- nor part-time librarians—were: Alaska (55.2 percent), Minnesota (50.6 percent), Hawaii (50.2 percent), West Virginia (50.0 percent), and Michigan (49.9 percent).

Fewer than one in five schools lacked librarians in eight states: Alabama (18.4 percent), Tennessee (18.1 percent), Virginia (17.8 percent), South Carolina (16.7 percent), Georgia (12.9 percent), Vermont (12.1 percent), Arkansas (11.0 percent), and Iowa (8.3 percent). Notably, however, for six Southern states—Alabama, Tennessee, Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, and Arkansas—estimates of the percentages of schools without part-time librarians were not available. This was most likely the case because schools without full-time librarians in those states were too rare to estimate the presence of part-time librarians. In such cases, it is possible

³ The 2015-16 NTPS was not designed to generate state estimates (Tai, Goldring & Spiegelman, 2017), so it is not possible to compare the status of states between 2015-16 and 2020-21 as it was for other characteristics of schools.

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that schools with libraries, but no librarians, have assigned minimal library responsibilities to teachers, library or instructional aides, or perhaps even volunteers.

Notably, for half of the states (and the District of Columbia), a third or more of schools (33.3 percent or more) were without librarians. This is consistent with the fact that, nationwide, three out of 10 schools (29.5%) had neither a full-time nor a part-time librarian.

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Percent of Schools Without Librarians by State, 2020-21

State	Percent of Schools Without Librarians	State	Percent of Schools Without Librarians
AK	55.2%	DE*	31.6%
MN	50.6%	MA	29.9%
HI	50.2%	MO*	29.7%
WV	50.0%	CT	28.6%
MI	49.9%	ME	28.3%
DC*	48.5%	IN	28.0%
AZ	45.8%	KS*	28.0%
WY	45.4%	PA	27.4%
NH*	43.6%	KY*	27.1%
CO	43.3%	TX	26.0%
OH	43.2%	MD*	25.6%
NE*	41.6%	SD	25.4%
RI*	41.4%	NJ	24.9%
OR	40.7%	MS*	24.7%
ND*	40.1%	UT	22.8%
FL	39.0%	NC	22.7%
CA	37.8%	WI	20.1%
MT*	36.2%	AL*	18.4%
IL	35.8%	TN*	18.1%
LA*	35.6%	VA*	17.8%
OK*	35.1%	SC*	16.7%
NY	35.0%	GA*	12.9%
NV	33.8%	VT	12.1%
NM	33.8%	AR*	11.0%
ID	33.4%	IA	8.3%
WA	32.3%	Total	29.5%

* A state estimate of the percentage of schools without part-time librarians was not available. Hence, the figure for this state is the percentage of schools without full-time librarians. Part-time librarians were too rare to estimate based on limited sample data.

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Conclusion

While the SLIDE project’s analysis of CCD district-level data on librarian FTEs revealed that 31 percent of U.S. local school districts reported no librarians during the 2018-19 school year (Lancet et al., 2023, p. 2), this analysis of 2020-21 NTPS school-level data found that 30 percent of U.S. schools reported no librarians that year, up from 25 percent of schools with no librarians in 2015-16. Both of these facts are important, each in their own way.

The fact that three out of 10 districts had no librarians in any of their schools—almost a quarter of them long-term—tells us that students in those districts were unlikely to have any experience with school librarians throughout their K-12 years. The fact that three out of 10 schools have no librarians tells us that lack of access to school librarians cannot be minimized by assuming that it is being driven largely by smaller, more isolated, more diverse districts. To be sure, both the previous CCD district-level analysis and this NTPS school-level analysis confirm that such conditions increase the likelihood of students and teachers not having access to librarians. Nonetheless, in this NTPS analysis of staffing levels by multiple school characteristics, the percentages of schools without librarians increased for every category of schools between 2015-16 and 2020-21.

Of particular note is this analysis’s findings about access to school librarians by grade level. Of combined schools (e.g., K-12, junior-senior high), 57 percent reported no librarians. Of the three major grade-level categories, 36 percent of high schools, 25 percent of primary schools, and 19 percent of middle schools reported no librarians. And notably, all of those percentages were substantially the same or increased compared to 2015-16. Considering the SLIDE finding that, once lost, librarians are rarely restored (Lance & Kachel, 2021, p. 73), all of these figures

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taken together suggest that the ideal model of a full-time librarian in every school is out of reach for many schools.

While the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) has a formal position statement recommending a minimum of one full-time librarian per school, that one-size-fits-all standard is at stark variance with the realities of school librarian employment. The absence of school librarians from such substantial minorities of districts and schools—particularly those sharing certain characteristics—suggests that school administrators and school boards have a variety of perspectives on the need to employ school librarians and the specific models for employing them (e.g., librarian in every school, librarians shared by schools, part-time librarians, district librarian with aides in schools). With such large proportions of districts and schools lacking any librarians, a number of urgent research questions beg for attention:

- In schools without librarians, to what extent are topics such as information literacy, educational technology, digital citizenship, and use of a library taught? Findings from the SLIDE interviews of administrators indicate that most of them believe these topics are being taught, even in the absence of a librarian. (Lance et al., 2023, p. 31). Indeed, in charter schools—large majorities of which reported no librarians via NTPS in both 2015-16 and 2020-21—recent research reinforces the belief that administrators do not perceive librarians as essential to teaching those topics (Klein, 2023).
- In schools without librarians where such topics are taught, by whom are they being taught—by technology specialists, reading specialists, language arts teachers, all teachers, some combination of these, or others? Findings from the SLIDE interviews of administrators indicate that most of them believe others, besides librarians, can teach these topics (Lance et

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al., 2023, p. 31). There is no extant research, however, weighing the relative effectiveness of librarians and other educators as teachers of information-related topics.

- When schools with and without librarians are compared, how well are students learning and utilizing information skills? Most school library impact studies have correlated the presence of a librarian with reading, writing, or language arts scores on state tests. There is a need for more studies—like the one in South Carolina (Lance et al., 2014)—correlating librarian presence with standard-specific measures of student performance on particular information-related instructional topics.
- How do students perform academically under different models of school librarian employment (e.g., a librarian in every school vs. a district librarian with aides in schools vs. school libraries run by aides or others without librarian supervision)? The SLIDE research suggests that several different models are now in use (Lance et al., 2023, p. 78). It should be possible to assess their relative merits. While the data available from NCES are limited and imperfect, those datasets probably offer sufficient detail to assess at least some of these alternative models.
- To what extent is it a matter of “librarian privilege” for some and not for others, and to what extent has the profession been restructured in ways inconsistent with AASL’s librarian-in-every-school position statement? What are the ramifications of this restructuring for students and their teachers as well as for other educator colleagues of librarians (administrators, classroom teachers, educational technology specialists, curriculum specialists, reading specialists, data coaches, etc.) and educators of school librarians?

For at least a decade, the school library community has had remarkably little data with which to monitor changes in the status of the profession of school librarianship. Now there is some,

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and it tells us a lot about the changing status of the profession, while raising many provocative questions. To answer those questions, researchers need more data to be collected at the federal level, and such data need to be reported more frequently, more quickly, and in more detail than in the past. But, for now, it is time to face what facts we have and for both school library advocates and public policy-makers to collaborate in deciding how to respond appropriately to ongoing changes and inequities that are impacting students and their teachers as well as librarians. As long as there is inaction—or at least insufficiently large-scale and well-targeted action—in reaction to this state of affairs, experience provides little reason to expect that isolated efforts in particular states, districts, or schools can address sufficiently ongoing national trends in school librarian employment that contribute to educational inequity.

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