

National Perspective

How many school librarians are there in U.S. public schools, and how have their numbers changed over time?

As of 2018-19 (the latest data available), there were 42,279 full-time equivalent (FTE) librarians. In 2009-10 there were 52,545. Thus, the number of school librarian FTEs dropped by 10,266 (19.5%) over that interval. This loss cannot be attributed to declining enrollment. In 2018-19, there were 50.4 million students in U.S. public schools compared with 49.2 million in 2009-10—an increase of 1.2 million (2.4%).

In 2018-19, there were 42,279 librarians in the U.S.—10,266 (19.5%) fewer than in 2009-10.

Over the past decade, how do employment changes for school librarians compare with other key educator positions?

The CCD staffing data include FTE counts for 5 major types of educators: district administrators, school administrators, teachers, instructional coordinators, and school librarians. (See Appendix B for NCES's definitions of these positions.) As can be seen from Table 2 and Charts 1 and 2, the trends for these different positions over the past decade have been clear:

- Teacher FTEs have been relatively flat, despite minor fluctuations—usually no more than a fraction of a percentage point—from year to year;
- District Administrator and School Administrator FTEs have increased more years than not, resulting in substantial increases for those positions over the decade;
- Instructional Coordinator FTEs—particularly during the last half of the decade—have increased more dramatically than for any other educator position; and
- School Librarian FTEs—alone among these positions—have declined steadily, though at a noticeably slower rate during the last half of the decade.

The bottom-line numerical changes in employment for these different types of educators say much about the trends in public education employment. Between 2009-10 and 2018-19, numbers of district and school administrators and instructional coordinators rose steadily. Employment growth for those positions continued apace during the last half of the decade, 2015-16 to 2018-19. The trends for teachers and librarians were quite different. Compared to 2009-10, there were fewer teachers in 2018-19; but, the losses occurred early in the decade in the immediate aftermath of the Great Recession. Since 2010-11, teacher FTEs have risen, year by year, replacing almost half of the lost FTEs by 2018-19.

School librarians were the only educator group to lose FTEs in both time frames, 2009-10 to 2018-19 and 2015-16 to 2018-19.

The employment trend for school librarians is uniquely poor. Between 2009-10 and 2018-19, more than 10,000 librarian FTEs were lost. While losses between 2015-16 and 2018-19 were smaller, school librarians are the only one of these educator groups to see a sustained loss in their national FTE total during both time frames.

Who gets counted as a School Librarian?

The opposing trends for School Librarians (decreasing by almost 20% since 2009-10) and Instructional Coordinators (increasing by almost 34% during that period) are particularly noteworthy, given what we know—and don't know—about how FTEs are counted for these positions.

Most likely, the figures include everyone called a "School Librarian," no matter how much their 21st century job description may vary from NCES's 1980's definition. But, what about "school librarians" with other titles—both ones with other key words in them (e.g., librarian and information literacy teacher) as well as those excluding the "L" word altogether (e.g., educational technology-information literacy specialist, digital literacy teacher)? In the CCD instructions, data reporters are directed explicitly to sub-divide FTEs, if necessary. For

instance, if someone is perceived as a half-time School Librarian and a half-time Teacher, they would be reported as 0.50 FTE in each of those position categories.

Table 2. Numbers of School Librarian & Selected Other Educator FTEs, United States, 2009-10 to 2018-19

Position (in Full-Time Equivalents) School Year	District Administrators	School Administrators	Instructional Coordinators	Teachers	School Librarians
2009-10	63,969	168,450	74,502	3,209,672	52,545
2010-11	64,597	165,047	69,236	3,099,095	50,310
2011-12	62,884	166,416	67,711	3,103,263	48,406
2012-13	65,420	169,240	70,967	3,109,101	46,685
2013-14	66,732	168,101	72,935	3,113,764	45,106
2014-15	68,962	174,664	79,267	3,132,351	44,977
2015-16	67,778	182,006	87,495	3,151,497	43,531
2016-17	70,357	183,671	90,183	3,169,499	43,728
2017-18	74,411	189,155	95,746	3,169,750	42,882
2018-19	74,366	193,934	99,591	3,169,762	42,279
Net gain/loss 2009-10 to 2018-19	+10,397	+25,484	+25,089	- 39,910	- 10,266
Net gain/loss 2015-16 to 2018-19	+6,588	+11,928	+12,096	+18,265	- 1,252

Chart 1

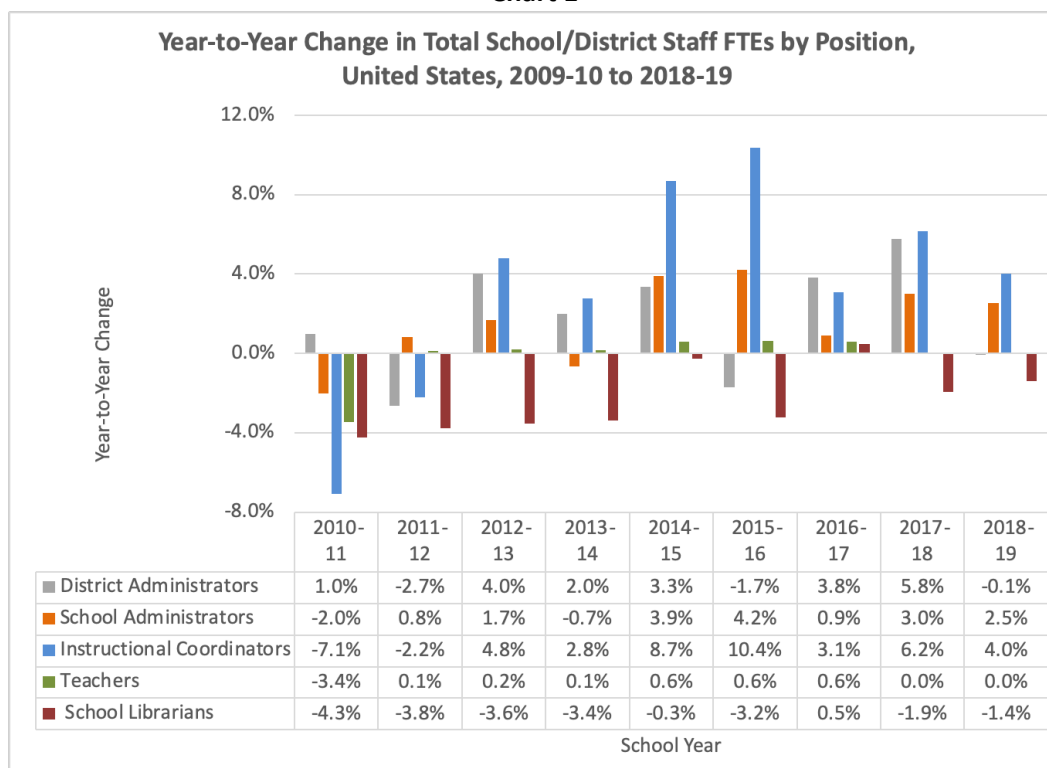
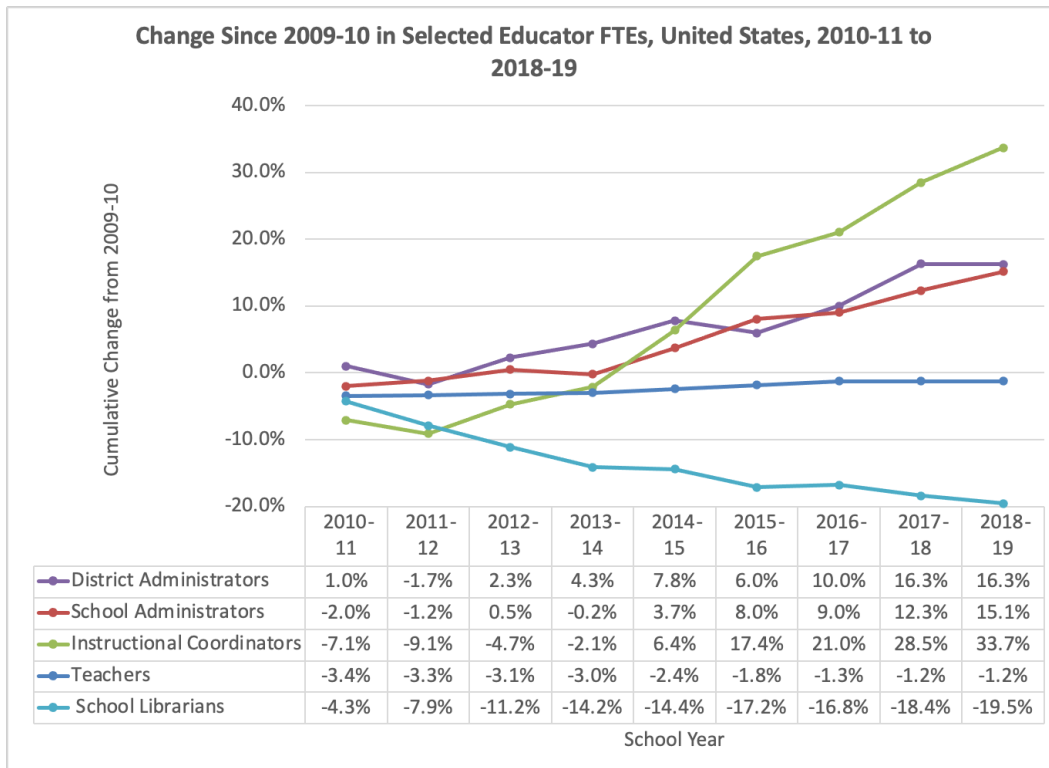


Chart 2



How else might a School Librarian be counted—or not counted?

What complicates this most of all, however, is the position, Instructional Coordinator—a position (indeed, perhaps more of a position category) more inclusive than any of the others. The inclusiveness of this position may go far in explaining its growth over the past decade. NCES’s examples of such positions could overlap with the responsibilities of present-day school librarians: supervisors of educational television staff, supervisors of audio-visual services, curriculum coordinators and in-service training staff, and supervisory staff engaged in the development of computer-assisted instruction. (See Appendix B for the full definition.) Our searches for school librarian job descriptions and announcements with alternative titles have turned up positions with titles including terms such as cultural literacy, digital learning, learning resources, information literacy, and instructional technology—positions that may have been reported to NCES as School Librarians, Teachers, or Instructional Coordinators or not reported at all.

How will SLIDE improve knowledge of how School Librarians are perceived and counted?

This potential blurring of roles between school librarians, instructional coordinators, and other staff will be addressed by another major component of the three-year SLIDE project. One-hundred in-depth interviews of staffing decision-makers from selected districts nationwide will be conducted by trained, independent interviewers during 2022.

The purposeful, extreme-cases sample of local districts will be drawn from 1) those that gained the most librarian FTEs per school between 2015-16 and 2018-19, 2) those that lost the most librarian FTEs per school during that interval while retaining some, and 3) those that lost the most librarian FTEs per school after 2015-16, leaving them with none by 2018-19. Each interviewee in the last two groups will be asked questions to determine if their district’s staffing model enables them to count librarian FTEs completely and accurately or if their staffing model now separates traditional librarian responsibilities (i.e., those included in the NCES definition) and present-day ones, such as those that involve providing access to digital and streaming media, teaching information literacy skills and STEM/STEAM classes, and facilitating inquiry-based learning. Such responsibilities might be assigned to positions now reported to NCES as instructional coordinators or teachers or perhaps not reported to NCES at all.

One of the sets of questions that will be explored with decision-makers during SLIDE's interviews is what factors accounted for decisions to increase, maintain, or decrease school librarian staffing. Conventional wisdom is that the most frequent explanation offered for cuts of school librarian positions is a lack of sufficient funding. Given the trends in employment of other types of educators, funding alone cannot explain the apparent losses of school librarian jobs. If funding alone were the explanation, how could employment of other types of educators be growing? Surely, the priorities of decision-makers, their conception of the job of a school librarian, and their perception of its relative value compared to other types of educators are factors in their decisions.

Another even more intriguing set of questions during the SLIDE interviews will explore how decision-makers have chosen to staff library, learning resources, and technology services in their districts or schools. Could it be that some school librarian positions have evolved into new ones with job descriptions so different from NCES's outdated one—perhaps even to the extent of having different job titles—that district officials who report staffing FTEs in NCES's CCD survey no longer perceive them as school librarians? Some such newer positions may even help to account for the extraordinary increase in instructional coordinators—the most likely existing job category where such “evolved” positions might be reported, if they are reported at all.

Beyond providing a comprehensive sense of the status of school librarianship as a profession, this national perspective is important for identifying the baseline against which equity of access to a school librarian will be assessed at state and district levels. Whenever equity is an issue, a fundamental question about it is equity compared to what? This question will be answered in reference to three ratios: librarian FTE per school, students per librarian FTE, and teachers per librarian FTE.

For the national perspective, each of these ratios is calculated using national figures: for librarian FTE per school, the nation's total librarian FTEs are divided by the nation's total number of schools; for students per librarian FTE, the nation's total student enrollment is divided by the nation's total librarian FTEs; and for teachers per librarian FTE, the nation's total teacher FTEs are divided by the nation's total librarian FTEs. While these ratios constitute summary data in the extreme, they answer the baseline question: what would school librarianship look like in each school and for each student and teacher, if school librarians were equally distributed among schools nationwide? While the resulting national ratio figures do not represent the status of school librarianship for a lot of states, districts, and schools, they do provide a theoretical baseline against which equity can be assessed at those levels.³

³ The national ratio of librarian FTE per school is the total librarian FTE for the nation divided by the total number of schools for the nation. The national ratio of students per librarian FTE is the total number of students for the nation divided by the total number of librarian FTEs for the nation. And, the national ratio of teacher FTE per librarian FTE is the total number of teacher FTEs for the nation divided by the total number of librarian FTEs for the nation.

National Ratio of Librarian FTE per School

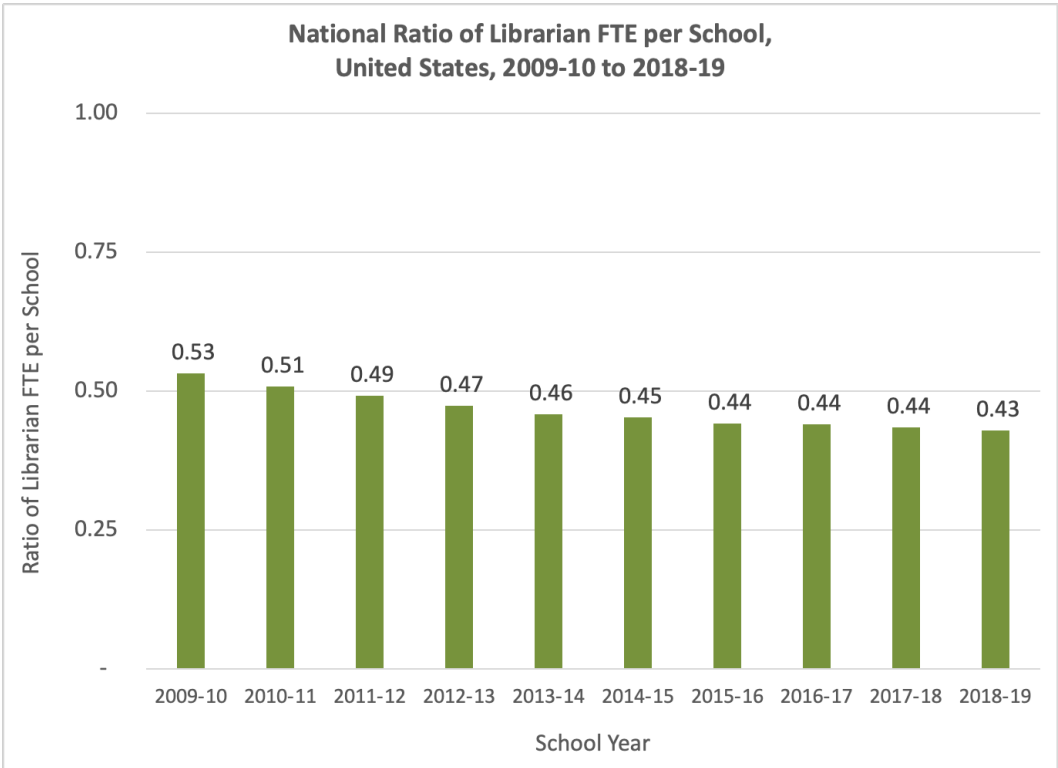
If the nation’s school librarians had been equally distributed across all schools in local school districts in 2018-19, what would have been the librarian FTE in each school?

Because NCES only reports librarian FTEs for states and districts, this study utilizes a ratio of librarian FTE per school to estimate the potential extent of a librarian’s presence in individual school buildings. As the last decade began—for the 2009-10 school year—the national ratio of librarian FTE per school was 0.53 FTE. In other words, if the nation’s 52,545 school librarians that year had been evenly distributed across all schools in local districts, there would have been just over a half-time librarian in every school. By 2018-19, when there were only 42,279 school librarians (19.5% fewer than in 2009-10), that ratio had declined to 0.43 FTE, less than a half-time librarian for every school. (See Chart 3.)

In 2009-10, there were enough school librarians to have a half-time (.53) librarian in every school nationwide. By 2018-19, there were only enough school librarians for less than a half-time (.43) librarian in every school.

Notably, this national pattern and trend stands in stark contrast to the national standards promulgated by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA). According to those standards, the minimum school library staffing requirements include a full-time, certified school librarian “in every school building at every grade level” (*Appropriate Staffing for School Libraries*, 2019). Based on the AASL standard and the 2018-19 figure of a 0.43 librarian FTE per school, the nation’s total number of school librarians should be 133.6% higher, or 98,764—an increase of 56,485 FTEs. Notably, these figures about the discrepancy between the AASL staffing standard and reality are doubtless conservative ones, given that the NCES definition of a school librarian does not require state certification for the position. If it did, NCES’s figures would almost certainly be smaller still.

Chart 3



Relative to the AASL staffing standard, current librarian FTEs nationwide are obviously grossly inadequate to meet that standard, and headed in the wrong direction over the past decade. Further, as will be seen when this ratio is examined from the state and district perspectives, the differences in reality among the states and D.C. and among districts with varying district characteristics and student demographics mean that access to school librarians is characterized by profound inequalities on the basis of multiple factors.

National Ratio of Students per School Librarian FTE

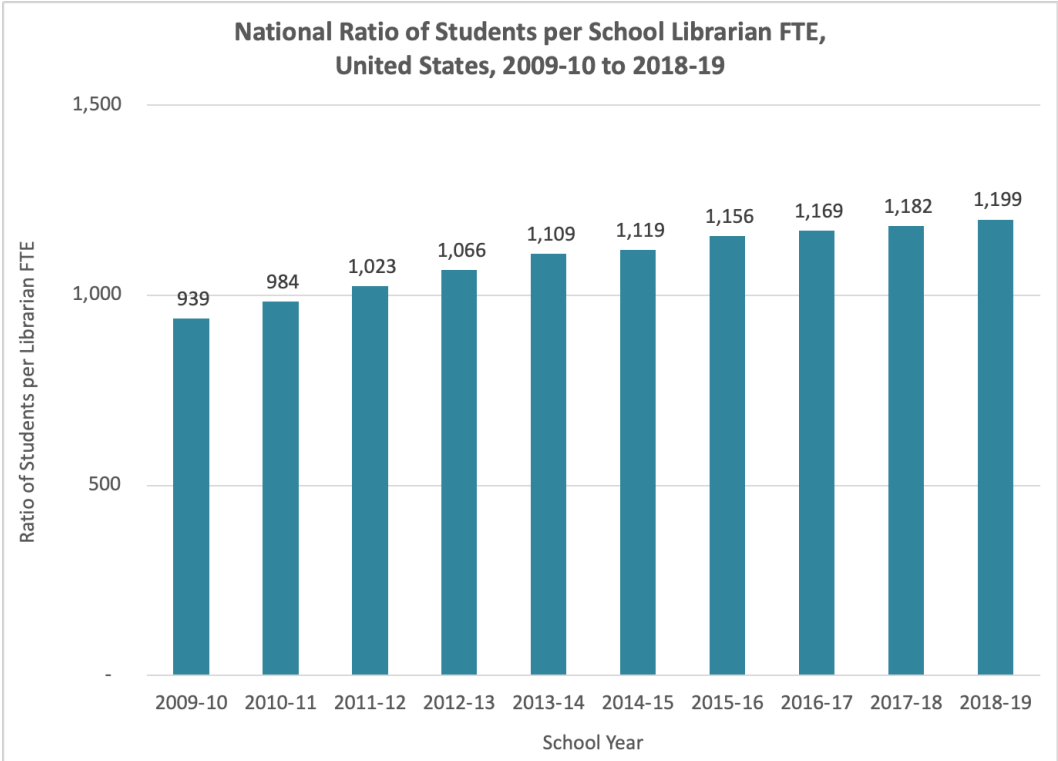
If students had had equal access to the nation’s school librarians in 2018-19, what would have been the number of students served by each librarian FTE?

Over at least the last three decades, national school library standards (AASL, 1998, 2009, 2018) have asserted and promoted the idea that school librarians are teachers of students. Indeed, in many states and districts, school librarians are now called “teacher librarians.” What school librarians are charged to teach is an ambitious, cross-disciplinary curriculum that should guarantee not only success in school, but also in college, career, and life in general. This curriculum aims to equip students to initiate inquiries, think critically, include diverse communities and perspectives, collaborate with peers, organize and share information, explore and reflect on what they discover, and create and share information ethically, both on their own and in groups. In order to meet these teaching expectations, it would be best to have a smaller ratio of students to librarians. (See Chart 3.)

In 2018-19, there were 1,199 students for every school librarian in the U.S.—an increase of 27.7% from 2009-10.

In 2009-10, the ratio of students per librarian FTE was 939:1; by 2018-19, it was 1,199:1—a 27.7 percent increase. (See Chart 4.) To lend perspective, the ratio of students to teachers was 16:1 in both 2009-10 and 2018-19. Accordingly, the ratio of students to librarians in 2009-10 was 59 times the ratio of students to teachers, and, in 2018-19, it was 75 times the student/teacher ratio (NCES, 2019).

Chart 4



In reality, of course, this national ratio does not apply to most districts, because the national ratio divides the total number of students—including those in districts and schools with no librarians at all—by the total number of librarian FTEs—who are unequally distributed across states as well as the selected districts where they are present. Unfortunately, as the subsequent state and district perspectives will illustrate, the reality is one of acute inequities. In the real world of public schools, some districts and schools have librarians—improving the students per librarian math described above considerably—while others have no librarians at all. Not surprisingly, districts that have librarians have certain characteristics in common, while those without librarians share other, contrasting characteristics.

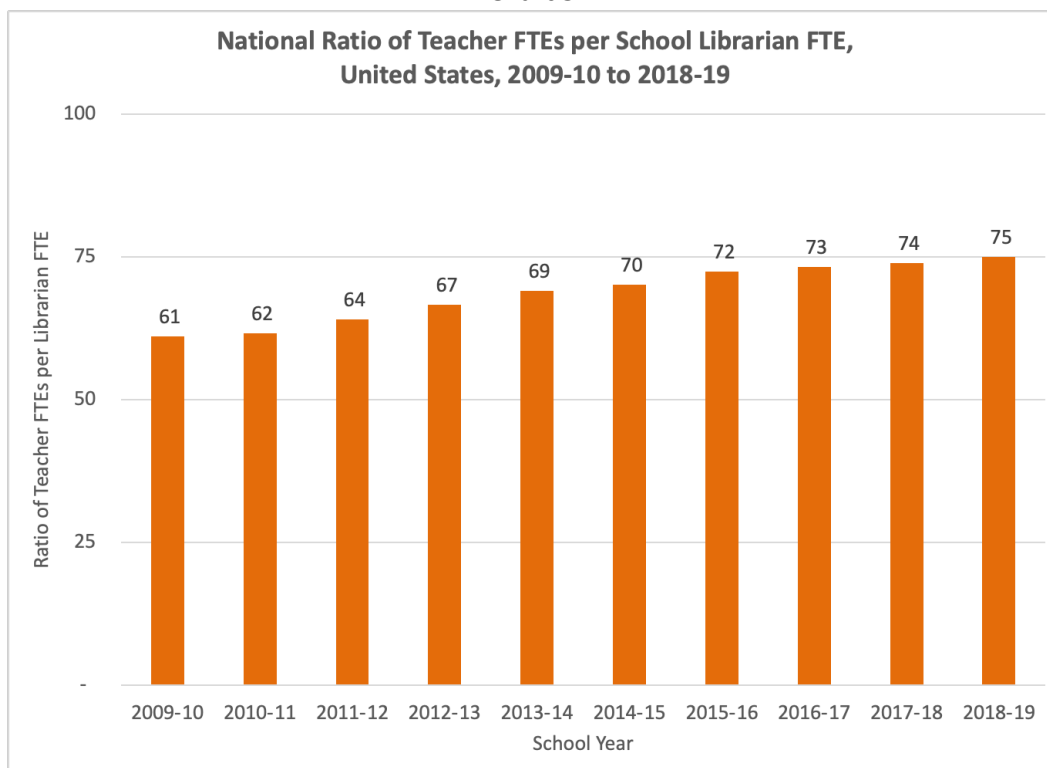
National Ratio of Teachers per School Librarian FTE

If teachers had had equal access to the nation’s school librarians in 2018-19, what would have been the number of teachers served by each librarian FTE?

Establishing as a best practice that school librarians should be “teacher librarians,” the national standards of the past three decades have promoted the belief that the success of a school librarian depends largely on collaboration with classroom teachers.

In 2009-10, the national ratio of teachers per librarian FTE was 61:1; by, 2018-19, it was 75:1. (See Chart 5.) Given a 180-day school year, that means that, in 2009-10, a school librarian determined to collaborate with every teacher in their school would have had some fraction of almost three days in which to do so. By 2018-19, the number of days into which collaboration would have had to be squeezed was reduced to less than two and a half.

Chart 5



Just as the students per librarian math is daunting, so it is for teachers per librarian. One-to-one collaboration is challenging, indeed, given the number of teachers per librarian. If that ratio prevailed at the school level, it is unlikely that a librarian, no matter how clever and energetic, would be able to collaborate intensively with every individual teacher in the school. That suggests that the best hope of librarians and teachers wishing to collaborate is to do so in groups based on grade level or subject.

In 2018-19, there were 75 teachers for every school librarian in the U.S.—an increase of 23.0% from 2009-10.

As with the students per librarian ratio, however, this national ratio belies greater inequities. Some districts are “haves”—having a full- or part-time librarian in most schools—while others are “have nots”—having no librarians at all, perhaps at best an occasional visit from one shared across the district. Some states have more “have” districts; others, more “have not” districts. Consequently, a teacher in a “have” district or school is going to receive some level of collaboration from a librarian in managing resources, designing and delivering instruction, and/or co-teaching inquiry-based learning that is entirely absent in a “have not” district or school.