

# Investigating the Status of School Librarian Employment

## Feature

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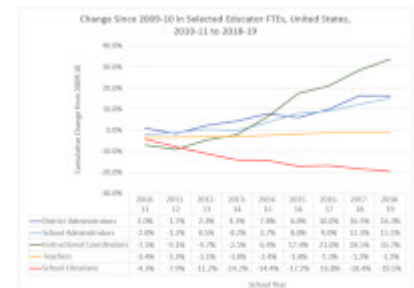
by Debra E. Kachel and Keith Curry Lance, August 2021

**N**ationally, school librarian positions declined by almost 20% between 2009-10 and 2018-19, according to district data reported annually to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). However, despite this national trend, some districts have been adding librarian positions or at least maintaining them. And in other districts where librarians have been cut, other staff positions—such as administrators and instructional coordinators—have increased by double-digit percentages. So, although many school leaders frequently state that librarian cuts are a result of inadequate funding, NCES staffing data suggest that there are other factors involved in whether schools and their students have librarians or not. Funding alone cannot be the sole reason to cut librarians.

This issue and others are being researched both quantitatively and qualitatively in a three-year Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant project called SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? The project is examining the inequities in school librarian staffing based on district characteristics and student demographics, investigating other related educator positions that may include some of the work of a librarian, and interviewing staffing decision-makers to determine their experiences, perceptions, values, and priorities.

This first year, data were examined from NCES up to 2018-19 (the most recent year published) with data from state sources to fill in some missing data. In addition to a national and state overview, school librarian staffing was examined at the district level (no school level data were available) in relation to student demographics (poverty, race/ethnicity, and English language learners) and district characteristics (enrollment, locale, and per-pupil spending).

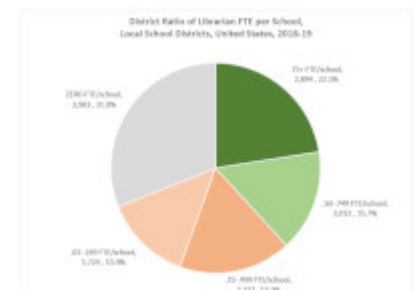
The project also surveyed a school library leader or government official with library oversight in each state and the District of Columbia to obtain information about the state context of school librarianship. The survey gathered information on school library standards and guidelines, librarian certification requirements, legal mandates for school librarian staffing, direct funding to school libraries, state-supported database access or discounts, and the number of higher education institutions preparing school librarians. Researchers wanted to learn if these state supports impacted librarian staffing.



In the upcoming component of the SLIDE project, one hundred interviews will be conducted in districts that either gained librarians or lost them between 2015-16 and 2018-19. Through these interviews, researchers hope to learn from school leaders who make staffing decisions what factors and priorities are considered when staffing the library and related information and technology services for their students. It is also hoped that the interviews shed some light on how closely the prevailing conception of school librarianship matches the perceptions and expectations of school district decision makers and how they choose to address the needs of students and teachers.

## Major Findings to Date

- Between 2009-10 and 2018-19, the number of instructional coordinators increased by 34%; district administrators by 16%, and school administrators by 15%. Teachers decreased by 1.2%; school librarians decreased by 19.5%.
- In 2018-19, out of almost 13,000 local school districts, 3,983 (31%) had no school librarians. Districts with no librarians are more prevalent in the Midwest and West.
- Fewer than 25% of districts reported enough full-time librarians for most schools (based on .75 or greater librarian FTE per school).



- Districts with no librarians were likely to have smaller enrollments and be in rural areas. Districts with high levels of librarian staffing tended to have larger enrollments and be in suburban communities.
- Districts spending the most per pupil (\$15,000+) were most likely to have high levels of librarian staffing and least likely to be without librarians. However, districts spending the least (less than \$10,000) per pupil actually had higher levels of librarian staffing than districts spending between \$10,000 and \$15,000.
- Districts with higher levels of poverty, more minority students, and more English language learners were less likely to have librarians. Majority Hispanic districts were more than twice as likely as majority non-Hispanic districts to have no librarians.
- School librarians were least prevalent in the twenty four states that do not mandate some level of school librarian staffing, and less prevalent in sixteen states that have such mandates but do not enforce them. They are most prevalent in the eleven states that have and enforce mandates.
- As of Spring 2021, forty five states and the District of Columbia have higher education institutions that prepare school librarians. Six states have five or more, twenty five states have two to four, fifteen states have one, and five states have none. Those five states are Alaska, Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, and Wyoming—all, notably, in the West.
- School librarians are least prevalent and most likely to experience job loss in states with no enforced mandates and no institutions of higher education preparing school librarians.



## Conclusion

The national data going back to 2009-10, combined with responses to a state survey, present a clear, but far from rosy, picture of the trends and lack of supports for school librarian employment. Inequities of access to library services and instruction for K-12 students are growing. In 2018-19, more than 7.5 million students—almost 1 out of 6—were in districts with no librarians. The study also determined that 9 out of 10 districts that eliminated all librarians by 2015-16 had not reinstated them by 2018-19, suggesting, once gone, librarian positions seldom return. The data also confirm the lack of access to school librarians in districts with certain student demographics. Students who live in poverty, represent ethnic and racial diversity, and/or have language barriers are less likely to have school librarians.

State supports are also lacking. Only eleven states require and enforce that districts employ school librarians, although some states only require one librarian per district. Some states have no institutions of higher education that prepare school librarians, perhaps causing districts that want to hire certified librarians to hire less-trained educators. Only thirteen states now have a full-time government official tasked with school library oversight as many such positions have disappeared or been reduced. Yet librarian certifications and standards remain high.

Through the yet-to-be conducted interviews, researchers hope to elicit the experiences, perceptions, values, and priorities of district leaders who decide how to staff library, learning resources, and instructional technology services for their students. Perhaps, during this qualitative component of the SLIDE project, researchers will learn if school librarianship is truly on the decline or—at least in some districts—if the position is evolving into a different kind of information and technology educator position. In the analysis of the planned interviews, we will seek to learn whether or not the prevailing conception of a school librarian by the library profession is what some school staffing decision makers are seeking for their schools.

### **Further Reading**

Kachel, Debra E. and Keith Curry Lance. "Contexts for School Librarian Employment." SLIDE Project (January 26, 2021). <https://libslide.org/pubs/contexts.pdf>

Kachel, Debra E. and Keith Curry Lance. "Requirements for School Librarian Employment: A State-By-State Summary." SLIDE Project (January 27, 2021). <https://libslide.org/pubs/requirements.pdf>

Kachel, Debra E. and Keith Curry Lance. "Perspectives on Employment of School Librarians in the U.S." SLIDE Project (forthcoming). <https://libslide.org/publications/>

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