

The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? Voices from the Front Lines

Feature



by Keith Curry Lance and Debra E. Kachel, March 2022

We have long known about issues of equity in school libraries and, more broadly, in

education. However, where the field of education has begun extensively documenting equity concerns in both practical and academic research, school libraries lack such empirical data. When a school librarian wants to go to their principal or superintendent with numbers about what is happening to the library in their school, district, or even more broadly in the nation, they have little data to present.

To get a sense of the data we need to talk about school libraries and staffing, and how that staffing may affect our efforts and impact. A team of researchers associated with Antioch University Seattle is conducting a three-year study about school librarian employment trends. SLIDE, which stands for the School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution?, has already issued several major reports, including [Perspectives on School Librarian Employment in the United States, 2009-10 to 2018-19](#) (July 2021). Many of the findings indicate that student access to librarians is a major educational equity issue, particularly for districts whose enrollments are predominantly students of color.

- In 2018-19, fewer than half as many majority Hispanic districts (10.9%) reported enough full-time librarians for each school (.75+ librarian FTE) compared to majority non-Hispanic districts (23.9%). Conversely, twice as many majority Hispanic districts (56.7%) reported *no librarians* compared to majority non-Hispanic districts (28.3%).
- That same year, the percentages of majority non-white and majority white districts with enough full-time librarians for each school were almost equal at 22.1% and 22.7%, respectively. Though the districts having librarians was close to equal, 38.0% of majority non-white districts reported no librarians compared with 28.9% of majority white districts.
- The differences in long-term school librarian employment were more extreme for majority Hispanic versus majority non-Hispanic districts. More than 3 out of 5

majority non-Hispanic districts (64.1%) had librarians between 2015-16 and 2018-19, compared with fewer than two out of five majority Hispanic districts (38.4%).

- The most egregious inequity, however, concerns districts that were without librarians for this four-year time span. Almost half of majority Hispanic districts (46.7%) were without librarians at all compared with only one out of five majority non-Hispanic districts (21.0%). **Notably, a student in a majority Hispanic district was more than twice as likely to have had little or no experience with a school librarian as their counterpart in a majority non-Hispanic district.**

Differences in the long-term employment of librarians are related strongly to the racial makeup of a district's student body. More than three out of five majority-white districts (63.3%) have had librarians consistently between 2015-16 and 2018-19, while just over half (55.5%) of majority non-white districts have experienced the same. While statistics like these tell an important story, it is one that requires context from "the front lines." In November 2021, we interviewed five school librarians. Four were from school districts in diverse, major metropolitan areas around the country with enrollments that are majority non-white. The fifth was from a metropolitan majority-white district neighboring such districts. To enable them to speak freely, they spoke with us on condition of anonymity.

We asked them three questions to learn how our statistical findings look and feel on a day-to-day basis.

1. How has librarian staffing changed for your school or district in recent years?

Of the five interviewees, one has experienced an increase in school librarian staffing; but, even that had its challenges.

It took five years to "re-educate" students, teachers, and even administrators to create a "culture of reading" where librarian staffing gains could be translated into "big change" for students.

All of the interviewed librarians talked about the many factors that contribute to librarians' being poorly utilized. A frequently mentioned factor was site-based management where staffing decisions are often made by principals. Since most librarians also hold teaching degrees, they are often given regular classroom teaching assignments—journalism, media studies, even special education—which take them away from their libraries for one or more hours per day.

District restructuring is another factor contributing to declining librarian employment. In pursuit of better test scores, some districts are downsizing schools, and, in doing so, are creating schools with enrollments so much smaller that they are no longer mandated by their states to have librarians. Principals in such schools often regard a librarian as a luxury they cannot afford and then utilize less expensive paraprofessionals or library aides, if anyone, to run their libraries. Such staff are frequently classified as "instructional aides," and thus can be utilized elsewhere as the principal deems necessary.

Our interviewees also identified workforce management issues that are not often discussed openly. Some school leaders regard a library program as a place to reassign a teacher who they want to remove from the classroom due to poor classroom management or teaching performance. The library is also often utilized as a place to send students to minimize disruptions to classroom environments. One interviewee recounted an incident of assault by one student on another that occurred in an unstaffed library.

Even where more librarians have been hired, another interviewee reported difficulty in keeping them—not because they were not compensated adequately, but because districts in neighboring states offered them more job security at lower salaries.

In too many districts, where improving reading and math scores is the priority, librarians are regarded as "prep teachers" whose major assignment is to "babysit" students in order to provide classroom teachers with release time.

Finally, even where librarian positions are more stable or increasing, our interviewees feel that they are being underutilized. In too many districts, where improving reading and math scores is the priority, librarians are regarded as "prep teachers" whose major assignment is to "babysit" students in order to provide classroom teachers with release time. And in 1:1 technology schools, the time of librarians can be monopolized by technology troubleshooting. Our interviewees agreed that all of these issues are more likely to occur in "majority minority" schools.

2. How did that staffing change affect what you were, or weren't, able to do? What was gained or lost in terms of instruction and instructional support?

Despite dramatic gains in her district, one librarian reported that, because gains were associated with newer, more modernized schools, those schools tended to attract more transfer students. Increased enrollments meant more pressure to maintain acceptable class sizes, which, in turn, resulted in the librarian's being assigned to teach an English language arts class daily. That reassignment meant that she could not serve everyone as the librarian in her school community. Another interviewed librarian reported losses of librarians in her district, not because anyone lost a job, but due to incumbents retiring and not being replaced. This librarian also had to cover regular classroom teaching assignments so numerous that she could only spend two hours per day in the library, severely limiting library access for students.

A third interviewee reported sustaining her own position as a librarian but losing a library assistant, which added to her workload and meant there was no longer anyone to help process or check out books or keep the library open during recess. The bottom line was reduced access to the library.

A fourth interviewee attributed librarian losses in her district to a combination of site-based management decisions and resulting pipeline issues. Why should people train to become school librarians if they cannot count on having jobs? And, if districts cannot count on a reliable supply of librarians to fill vacancies, why should they keep trying to find one? The problem is so acute in her district that teachers are being offered financial incentives to obtain library certification. So, as many schools no longer have certified librarians, the services of a librarian as a school leader, an information literacy teacher, an inquiry-based learning coach, and a professional development provider are, in many cases, entirely absent.

The fifth interviewee blamed the pandemic for a librarian exodus. Librarians who were close to retiring decided to opt for earlier retirement rather than face the unanticipated shift to online learning. Fortunately, pandemic relief funds have made it possible to replace most of these early retirees and even update some library spaces, but the transition from older to younger librarians means they still have a lot of catching up to do. In this district, the total number of librarians is still grossly inadequate at about 360 schools per full-time librarian. With all of the district's librarians being "circuit riders"—moving from school to school and/or supervising paraprofessional staff remotely—the teaching role of a librarian cannot be fulfilled adequately, if at all.

3. How did what you were—or weren't—able to do impact students, especially students of color?

In these districts, where librarians are absent from schools in most Black and Brown neighborhoods, interviewees reported that some students do not understand the "culture of libraries," the basics of how a library operates, and what library services they are entitled to

expect. For example, many minority students who are unfamiliar with libraries are afraid to borrow books for fear of losing them or having them stolen and having to pay for them. Where there are no libraries or inadequately staffed ones, students of color—who often need the most support—do not have access to libraries as "safe" spaces, "happy" spaces, places to escape the test preparation mentality and to get the resources and help they need to offset the disadvantages that marginalize their learning. In one case where there is at least some librarian presence, the librarian seeks to create a safe, quiet space for students of color and to select materials and create displays that will appeal to them in particular. Many of these students have returned to school from early pandemic virtual learning feeling behind, anxious, and depressed, not just from the social isolation of virtual learning, but as a result of being denied access to library materials as well as instruction and support from a librarian—resources that usually compensate at least somewhat for their socioeconomic disadvantages. These students in particular need someone to acknowledge their extra challenges and to listen to them.

In these districts, where librarians are absent from schools in most Black and Brown neighborhoods, interviewees reported that some students do not understand the "culture of libraries," the basics of how a library operates, and what library services they are entitled to expect.

Unfortunately, as several interviewees noted, schools where students of color are the majority are far more likely to be ones without librarians or ones that have lost their librarians in recent years and—for whatever reasons—not replaced them. These "majority minority" schools also tend to be inadequately funded. One interviewee reported that a predominantly white district received \$5-6 per student for library materials, while a neighboring one with predominantly non-white students received only \$1-2 per student. According to the data collected by SLIDE, those schools are also less likely to have certified librarians. Another interviewee took the long view of the implications of students of color having less access to librarians: because they do not know how to use a library, they are less likely to read for pleasure and to be prepared for college or work, and more likely to drop out. Students of color consequently suffer disproportionately from inequitable access to school librarians.

There are districts where school librarians serving students of color are able to make a difference. In one case, a school librarian established pre-pandemic partnerships with public and academic libraries that gave her students access to a wealth of databases; taught students how to learn in a collaborative, inquiry-based way; and taught them to be critical consumers of digital information. As she noted, it is no good giving students access to databases if there is nobody to teach them—and their teachers—how to use them.

In closing our conversation with these five school librarians about the challenges they face in serving students of color, they noted several distinctive assets that they feel contribute to their ability to rise to these challenges.

A common problem facing most school librarians is that they are the only librarian in their school. Their school library associations and other collaborative efforts help to compensate for that professional isolation, uniting librarians to share knowledge and resources and to help each other. This is especially important in most states, given the many poorly-funded districts, most without state-certified librarians. It is also particularly important in states where there is nobody in the state education department or state library agency to coordinate efforts to support school librarians and otherwise strengthen school library programs.

These five school librarians also talked about what a crucible and turning point the COVID-19 pandemic has been for them and many of their colleagues. While the current climate of public

education is difficult—extra-difficult due to the pandemic—it has challenged librarians to rise to the occasion. As one put it, there is "something in us that makes us tough to get rid of." As a group they agreed that school librarians, more than most educators, have had to "reinvent ourselves constantly to meet the needs of our students." When pandemic shutdowns of schools threw everyone into an online teaching environment with no notice, school librarians, being used to change, "were among the first people in most schools to say 'Bring it on.'" For example, as one interviewee noted, "we were eBook champions when nobody else was." A common concern of our interviewees is the generational turnover underway for school librarianship. One shared that her principal recently met with her and "quietly and politely told me I can't retire until I find someone to mentor"—someone to transfer the unique knowledge and skills her successor will need. Another noted strength of thriving school library programs was supportive parents. "I have parents who won't let them take resources from their kids." And finally, one librarian noted the secret to the success of school librarians in schools where their continued presence is most at risk: "A central office employee confidentially told me that decision-makers in our district are afraid of us. We are a mighty powerful group of individuals, because we read. We read the fine print, when many don't."

Next Steps for SLIDE

These stories from five school librarians in diverse metropolitan districts are just the tip of the iceberg. During its second year, 2022, the SLIDE project is recruiting one hundred school leaders who made staffing decisions that resulted in adding, reducing, or eliminating librarians completely. A team of SLIDE interviewers will be posing several questions to these decision-makers to better understand the staffing models they are choosing and the myriad factors driving their decisions. The SLIDE project was endorsed by a state library association or agency in every state as well as the District of Columbia, so we have intermediaries in every state helping to recruit these interviewees. As you can imagine, though, this is an ambitious effort, and we can use all the help we can get. If you know an administrator who made a decision about school librarian staffing who you believe should be interviewed, please contact SLIDE project director Debra E. Kachel at dkachel@antioch.edu. Visit the SLIDE website for more information at <https://www.libslide.org>.

We Need Your Help!

We are recruiting school and district leaders and decision-makers for interviews about how decisions are being made about school library staffing. We know that many of you are in positions to help us with this recruitment, and we still have more than twenty states that are unrepresented in the next phase of our study. Representation from all states is critical. Please help us to recruit decision makers in your state.

Individual interviews are conveniently scheduled to meet the interviewee's schedule, are no longer than one hour via Zoom, and will be confidential. No identifying information about the interviewee or school will be used without permission.

If you know of a school leader in a district that has added, reduced, or eliminated library staffing, please reach out to them. We are hoping that every state is represented in the interviews. Encourage such decision makers to sign up at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/P27WN38> to provide their contact info.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Keith Curry Lance, PhD, consults with the RSL Research Group as well as independently. He was the principal investigator for several statewide school library impact studies, earning him the 2013 AASL Distinguished Service Award. He and Debra Kachel collaborate regularly on research and writing about the changing status of school librarianship as a profession. His email is keithlance@comcast.net and his consulting website is KeithCurryLance.com.



Debra E. Kachel is an Affiliate Faculty for Antioch University Seattle's K-12 Library Media Endorsement program and Project Director of SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? <https://libslide.org> She serves as the Co-Chairperson of the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association's Advocacy Committee and received the 2014 AASL Distinguished Service Award. Her email is dkachel@antioch.edu. Twitter: @SchLibAdvocate and @lib_SLIDE

MLA CITATION

Lance, Keith Curry, and Debra E. Kachel. "The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? Voices from the Front Lines." *School Library Connection*, March 2022, schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2275849.

[View all citation styles](#)

<https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2275849>

Entry ID: 2275849