

What's behind the SLIDE? Administrator Interviews Begin

Feature



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

The *School Librarian Investigation: Decline or Evolution?* (SLIDE) project is a three-year,

IMLS-funded study of the almost 20% national decline in the number of school librarian full-time equivalents (FTEs) over the last ten years. The major goal of the project is to learn what is behind these declining numbers. We are specifically seeking to learn how school decision-makers are choosing among staffing options to develop and deliver learning resources and instruct students and teachers about using them.

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.

Building Context

To date, researchers have completed an examination of national school librarian employment data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) database from 2009 to 2019. NCES data are the only available data source that is annually reported from every school district in the United States, and are thus, the best source of data for this project. However, we discovered that the data from some states were clearly misreported. For example, in some cases, states did not maintain accurate data that aligned with the NCES definitions of specific positions,

including school librarian, teacher, and instructional coordinator. Keith Curry Lance, principal investigator, was able to correct some states' data with the assistance of state government offices. During the first year of the grant, we also completed a state-by-state report to provide context. This survey included staffing mandates, funding to school libraries, and the number of higher education institutions preparing school librarians in each state. (All reports can be found at <https://libslide.org/publications/>.)

The Next Step

In years two and three of the three-year grant, trained project interviewers will interview school or district administrators who made decisions about how library, learning resources, and instructional technologies were staffed and the factors in those staffing decisions. Such school leaders may include district or cabinet-level administrators, superintendents, principals in site-based managed schools, or school board members, even if they are retired, as long as they had decision making power concerning staffing decisions at some time since 2015. Specifically, researchers are interviewing school leaders in districts that meet one of these three categories:

1. GAINED librarians since 2015-16
2. LOST SOME librarians since 2015-16
3. LOST ALL librarians since 2015-16

We've set an ambitious goal of interviewing one hundred school leaders, representing all fifty states, between January 2022 and winter 2023.

Thus far, a school library leader in each state has greatly assisted in recruitment as they are often well-informed about library staffing in their states. These state intermediaries are often the president of the state's school library or library association or a school library official in the state's government, and their assistance is key to reaching our goal. Other recruitment strategies include reaching out via school and library listservs, utilizing our NCES data report to identify districts that meet one of the three categories, and using the data tools on the project website (<https://libslide.org/data-tools/>) to identify additional districts.

Qualitative Study

This qualitative study is critical to learning why school librarian positions are decreasing or vanishing in some districts and increasing in others. And it is clear, that not all districts are cutting librarian positions. By examining the NCES data from 2015-16 to 2018-19 (the most recently published NCES data at the time), we discovered that 270 districts in 31 states added 0.5 librarian FTE or more per school; 190 districts in 29 states lost 0.5 librarian FTE or more per school, but not all librarian positions; and 168 districts in 29 states lost 0.5 librarian FTE or more per school, thereby eliminating their last librarian positions.

Our qualitative interviews with school librarians have already revealed the crucial impact that site-level management decisions can have on school library staffing and access ([link to article2](#)). Our next step incorporates the voices of decision makers involved in school library staffing changes.

During the interview, interviewees will be asked:

- What instruction is provided on topics such as information literacy, educational technology, use of the school library, digital citizenship, or the like?
- What staff positions teach students these skills and what are their titles (i.e., librarian, ed-tech specialist, STEM coach, computer or makerspace teacher)?
- How this staffing has changed (i.e., added, reduced, eliminated, or combined positions)?
- Who else has participated in staffing decisions?

- Beyond budget, what factors motivated the staffing change (i.e., changes in personnel, policy, priorities, organizational restructuring, or legislation or regulations)?
- Which single factors you identified as the most important in making a staffing change?
- What tradeoffs had to be made if positions were cut?
- What, if any, previous interactions (positive, negative, or both) with school librarians, media specialists, and/or ed tech staff influenced your perception of the importance or value of this staff to the student learning experience?

In addition, interviewees will be asked to provide a copy of current job descriptions, if available, that illustrate the changing role and responsibilities of a school librarian or combined positions among staff that provide library and educational technology instruction to students.

Part of the interview process may uncover that new job titles and job descriptions are being created or combined to include some of the traditional work of a librarian under a job title that does not identify the individual as a librarian. These positions may not be reported to NCES as a "librarian" but some other staff category such as "teacher" or "instructional coordinator." For example, because NCES has not updated the definitions of its job classifications since the 1980s, there is no classification for instructional technology staff. These positions may be lumped into the "instructional coordinator" class and some of them may be doing library work. In other cases, staff lacking school librarian credentials may be doing the work of a librarian and are thus reported as such.

Conclusion

A final report called "Voices of Decision Makers about Employment of School Librarians and Other Learning Resources Staff" will be published summarizing the qualitative research gained through the interviews before the three-year project ends in October 2023.

Ultimately, we hope the findings from the interviews will provide a new understanding from the perspective of those who create and hire staff for library, learning resources, and instructional technology positions. Interviews will uncover what skills and competencies school leaders desire and value, as well as the practical realities of school staffing today, to meet the needs of their students and teachers. By drilling down into their priorities, experiences, and factors that drive staffing decisions at the school or district level, this IMLS grant project will shed light on how school librarians need to be prepared for the realities of the job as seen from those who set staffing patterns.

Project Overview

Antioch University Seattle is conducting this nationwide study called SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? <https://libslide.org> Antioch's Debra E. Kachel is the project director, and Keith Curry Lance of the RSL Research Group is the principal investigator. This project's goal is to better understand current realities, not to advocate for any particular position or staffing model. Questions? Email dkachel@antioch.edu.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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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.

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