

COVID Impact on Access to School Librarians in the United States

BY DEBRA E. KACHEL, SCHOOL LIBRARY ENDORSEMENT PROGRAM, ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY SEATTLE, KEITH CURRY LANCE, RSL RESEARCH GROUP, COLORADO

SLIDE - The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? recently released a report comparing pre and post COVID impact on the access to school librarians in the United States. Using the Common Core of Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the data show a continued decline in the number of school librarians from 2018-19 to 2020-21. Previous SLIDE research (Perspectives, 2021) indicated that between 2009-10 and 2018-19, the U.S. had lost almost 20 percent of school librarians. This new report documents another 5 percent loss. Here are some of the findings from *The COVID-19 Pandemic & Inequities in Access to School Librarians: A SLIDE special report*. (<https://bit.ly/3EyKRR6>)

- Inequities based on factors like race and poverty were exacerbated by growing inequities within specific categories like majority Black/African-American districts and districts with the most students in poverty.
 - Majority Black/African-American districts were almost twice as likely as other districts to lose librarians. Refer to Chart 1.
 - Districts with the most students living in poverty (i.e., 75 percent or more eligible for free and reduced-cost meals) were most likely to lose librarians.
- For districts in every enrollment range, the percentage of districts losing librarians exceeded the percentage gaining librarians—in some cases, on an order of two-to-one. For example, of districts with enrollments of 10,000 to 24,999, almost half lost librarians

while only about a quarter gained librarians.

- For every locale type (city, suburban, town, rural), the percentage of districts gaining librarians was consistently smaller than the percentage losing them. For example, two out of five city districts lost librarian FTEs, while only about a quarter gained FTEs.
- More than a quarter of districts spending less per pupil (\$10,000 to \$11,999 and less than \$10,000), lost librarians while fewer than one in five gained them.
- Nationwide, the fact that school librarian FTEs decreased while other educator positions increased or remained relatively stable suggests that the loss of librarians is not merely a matter of school funding. Refer to Chart 2. These data illustrate that, as the pandemic set in, staffing dollars were more likely to be targeted toward administrators than toward educators who have more direct contact with, and instruct, students—teachers and librarians.

To select and examine—by district or state—specific NCES data concerning employment of school librarians and others as well as district characteristics and student demographics, please use the interactive data tools posted on the project website libslide.org.

In the next phase of the project, over 50 interviews of superintendents, principals, and school board members will be analyzed to determine the priorities of school leaders that impact the staffing of school

library, technology, and information instruction and services for K-12 students. The report will be titled *Voices of Decision-Makers About School Librarian Employment* to be published in Spring 2023. A peer-reviewed manuscript titled *The School Librarian Equity Gap: Inequities Associated with Race and Ethnicity Compounded by Poverty, Locale, and Enrollment* will be published in the Peabody Journal of Education in February 2023. This 2020-2023 study is funded by a Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian/Research in Service to Practice grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and conducted under the auspices of Antioch University Seattle. Project Director Debra E. Kachel and Principal Investigator Keith Curry Lance, are leading the project.

