

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on relevant studies and articles about the perceptions, experiences, and factors that impact the decisions made by key school leaders relative to school librarian staffing. Forces at the school, district, state, and even federal levels are considered, as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school library staffing. While schools and districts today have some unique circumstances, sources are included that examine the common challenges and priorities of K-12 schools that shape school decision-makers' choices in staffing school libraries and library services for students.

School administrators are guided by professional standards (National Policy Board, 2015) to “develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment” (p. 12), and to “develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel” (p.14). Administrators take different approaches to meet these standards and make decisions about staffing their schools to achieve district goals. Their understanding of their staff's skills and job responsibilities contributes to how the school is staffed and how each member of the staff contributes to student achievement. The staffing choices hinge in part on the administrator's views and experiences but also on other, sometimes external, factors such as the budget, legislated requirements, and the local political climate.

Perceptions of School Librarians by School Administrators

School administrators and librarians continue to envision librarian roles differently despite state and national school library standards, guidelines, and position statements (AASL, 2018). Role ambiguity of a school librarian has been the topic of research since the early 2000s with little consensus. Hartzell's seminal work (2002, 2003) presented four interactive forces that shape principals' perceptions of school librarians which are still documented in current literature. First, principals' own K-12 school experiences in which libraries were often either absent or peripheral to the classroom instill a lasting impression. Second, a lack of formal administrative training or any knowledge of the library's role in curriculum and instruction impedes an administrator in leveraging the school library in student achievement. Third, the collaborative nature of the work of a school librarian enables others, particularly teachers, to take full credit for lesson design, inclusion of resources, and instruction, making the librarian's role “invisible.” And fourth, there is the lack of research and articles about the role of school librarians and libraries in professional literature read by administrators (Hartzell, 2002).

In addition to Hartzell's work, several studies in the early 2000s examined the extent to which the perceptions of the school principal influenced the sustainability or erosion of a library program (Church, 2008, 2010; Roberson, et al., 2005; Shannon, 2009). More recent studies indicate that Hartzell's assessment continues (Gordon & Cicchetti, 2018; Loh, et al., 2021; Newsum, 2018; Stevenson, 2018; Wright, 2022). Johnston & Green (2018) conducted a comprehensive literature review of empirical school library research studies published between 2004 and 2014. Of the 110 studies included, 52 focused on the role of the school librarian (p. 6). Many studies indicate that principals most often learn about the librarian's role from their own school librarian (Church, 2008; Taylor, 2016). When

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administrators only learn from their school librarian and do not receive formal training about the role of the librarian and how to supervise them, inconsistent expectations and varying levels of library service and instruction persist.

Barriers—some self-imposed by librarians; some, imposed by necessity of school schedules—thwart efforts for the school librarian to take on a leadership role and become an effective collaborative partner within the school (Kizzier, 2021; Loh et al., 2021; Lupton, 2016; Taylor, 2016; Stevenson, 2018). Stevenson (2018) found that principals viewed teaching as the first priority of librarians and often set rigid schedules to ensure librarian contact time with students. In some studies, leadership activities of librarians were the least visible and library program management tasks were less valued by administrators. Centerwall (2019) describes librarians being rendered invisible when they curate resources for teachers or embed librarian-developed instruction in classroom teachers' curriculum. This unwittingly leads to the librarian's work being unrecognized and absorbed into the classroom teacher's practice.

Emphasis by administrators of one librarian role over another (instructional, management, library supervisor, technology instructor, or source procurement) can weaken key areas of library practice (Merga, 2019; Shannon, 2009; Stevenson, 2018). Kizzier (2021) illustrates this point by stating "Two school administrators emphasized the school librarian's role as teacher while another administrator emphasized the librarian's role as being a support system for stakeholders" (p. 69). Lupton (2016) provides an example of a principal, who stated "My biggest beef is you pay for the 'T' part of the TL [teacher librarian] and you don't get any 'T' from the TL. That's an issue with me...So my difficulty is a teacher-librarian is employed under the same conditions as other teachers but doesn't do anywhere near the contact and face-to-face" (p. 53).

Lewis (2019) found that administrators' personal values influence their decisions to select and utilize instructional coaches or librarians to provide instructional leadership. She posits that school administrators are more apt to identify with instructional coaches than librarians because they see instructional coaches as extensions of themselves in leadership roles (p. 16). Underutilization of libraries can also be linked to "unclear knowledge about the role and work of the school librarian" (Loh et al., 2021, p. 550).

As technology demands have grown, so has the principal's view of the librarian as technology leader in their school (Baker et al., 2020; Dooney, 2021; Johnston, 2015; Newsum, 2018). Some principals place the librarian as a professional development partner to transform teacher practices, particularly in the area of technology. However, this overly narrow view of the role of the librarian excludes key areas of library practice, such as reading motivation, collection and library management, and information literacy instruction. Using librarians as technology leaders ultimately can have mixed results for the library program (Ahfield, 2019; Newsum, 2018).

Yet, school administrators who have worked with exemplary school librarians have positive perceptions of school libraries. Cellucci and Harland (2022) describe principals and superintendents who understand the value and leadership of their school librarian and programs. Kachel (2017) similarly explains that school librarians gain

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support from principals when they focus library goals on principals' priorities and contribute to school improvements.

What apparently has not influenced most school leaders in their decision-making about school librarian staffing is the several decades of school library impact studies conducted in over 30 states. This body of research found increases in reading and writing test scores in schools with school librarians compared to schools without librarians (Lance, et al., 2000, 2002, 2014; Lance & Kachel, 2018; Lance & Schwarz, 2012; Rodney, et al., 2003; Smith, 2001, 2006; Wine, et al., 2023). A Washington state study found improved graduation rates where schools had certified school librarians (Coker, 2015). In a new study, Wine et al. (2023), found students who attend schools with a full-time certified librarian score significantly higher on math and reading tests than do similarly matched students who attend schools without a full-time school librarian. Seldom published in journals that administrators read, these studies have not been widely read or accepted by school administrators. Such studies conducted at state levels often do not resonate with school leaders looking for local solutions (Hartzell, 2012; Johnston & Green, 2018).

Funding and School Budgets

A frequent explanation for eliminating or reducing school librarian positions is the budget. Interestingly, the SLIDE project uncovered two facts that put this response in question—other educator positions have increased while librarians decreased and districts that spent the least per pupil were not the districts with the least school librarians.

Between 2018-19 and 2020-21, district administrators in full-time equivalents (FTEs) increased by 6.0 percent—an increase of more than 3,200 FTEs; building-level school administrators grew by 1.6 percent—an increase of more than 2,350 FTEs. Teacher FTEs, although fairly static pre- and post-pandemic, still grew by over 16,000, an increase of 0.7 percent. In contrast, during the same time interval, the number of school librarian FTEs dropped by more than 1,800 FTEs—a loss of 4.9 percent (Lance & Kachel, 2022, p.1). Notably, these data include only 46 states and D.C. due to missing data from other states. If all states had reported data, librarian losses would have been even higher. This suggests that school decision-makers chose to put staffing dollars into other positions—mostly administrators instead of hiring school librarians.

In an analysis of per pupil expenditures, SLIDE researchers found that poorly-funded districts were more likely than better-funded districts to lose librarians after the pandemic began. However, for districts spending \$10,000 or more per student, the percentage of districts gaining librarians between 2018-19 and 2020-21 was steady at about 14 percent. For districts spending less than \$10,000 per student, almost 19 percent gained librarians (Lance & Kachel, 2022, p.7). This suggests a inconsistency in the thinking that the poorest districts are least likely to have school librarians. Clearly, school leaders are making choices not solely based on school funding.

There is no doubt that school leaders must make difficult staffing choices. According to NCES data, 80 percent of current school expenditures are spent on salaries and benefits of employees (NCES, 2023). With an average of only 20 percent discretionary spending, school decision-makers re-evaluate each position when a school employee retires

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to decide if replacement is warranted. School librarian positions are particularly vulnerable as administrators often prioritize classroom teachers to keep class size within reason. Additionally, school libraries are expensive. Beyond salaries, there are collection, technology, and facility costs (Kachel, 2018). However, other factors, such as lack of an effective library program or a need for increased staff in another department, are often cited as reasons for cutting school library programs or staff (Kachel, 2018).

The prevalence of charter schools in many areas has caused reduced enrollments in traditional public schools as students are moved into the charter system. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, there are 3.7 million students in 7,800 charter schools and campuses. Between 2019-2020 and 2020-21, charter schools saw their highest percentage of enrollment increase since 2015-16 (White, J., 2022). State funding for charters results in reduced state funding to those public schools. School leaders and school boards then need to make judicious cuts to staffing and programs while trying to preserve their identified goals and priorities. Shifting staffing dollars from professional positions to instructional support positions, often classified or paraprofessional, is one factor influencing the staffing of school libraries nationally (Kachel & Lance, 2018).

Funding is often pre-determined at the district level leaving principals to make decisions about staffing and resources with limited funds (Ahlfeld, 2019). Thus, school-based decision-making has led to inequitable access to school libraries and librarians, even within the same district (Vercelletto, 2017). Kachel (2021) found that "While funding can be a serious factor, local school priorities and site-based decisions are just as likely to determine school library staffing" (p. 50). Building principals, especially in districts that endorse site or school-based management, play a significant, if not primary, role in deciding how to allocate staffing dollars within their buildings. Principals with a strong understanding of school library programs help to clarify the librarian's role and lobby for funding and staffing (Ahlfeld, 2019; Kachel, 2018; Kachel & Lance, 2018). A key role of the building principal is to educate district leaders of the librarians' leadership role and instructional value (Baker, et al., 2020; Celluci & Harland, 2022; Kachel, 2017).

In some districts, a library coordinator or supervisor in a middle management position has influence over budget and staffing decisions. They can clarify the vision and mission for library programs, develop policies, and advocate at the school and district levels for resources and budgets (DiScala, et al., 2019; Weeks, et al., 2017). In a literature review, Massey, et al. (2016) examined the perception that district leaders hold of the role of a library supervisor. A strong and consistent district school library administrator can provide stability for staff and programming, particularly in districts with high administrator turn-over, a key factor that influences the staffing of school librarians nationally (Kachel & Lance, 2018). However, the number of district library administrators is diminishing, leading to weaker school library programs and overreliance on individual librarians to fill leadership gaps and to educate administrators with no librarianship experience (Croft, 2022).

Unpredictable Changes in Leadership

Superintendent and principal turnover is of growing concern and can be very disruptive to the continuity of district goals, initiatives, staffing decisions, and support for school improvement plans, including library staffing and library support. In a nationwide study, White (2023) determined that superintendent turnover rate over the last four years was 16.1 percent which, significantly increased over time, growing nearly three percentage points from 14.2 percent between 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 to 17.1 percent between 2021–2022 and 2022–2023. McMurdock (2022, April) reports on a 2021 Rand study of 3,000 superintendents that more than a quarter of them planned to leave their posts “imminently.” According to NCES data (2019), about 18 percent of principals leave their schools annually, for a variety of reasons and about half of new principals leave by the end of three years. Some of the highest turnover rates have been documented in larger and urban school districts (McMurdock, 2022, April; Rosenberg, 2022) and have been a chronic problem as well in small, rural districts (Ewbank, 2021). For example, the incoming superintendent for the Houston ISD decided to eliminate 28 school libraries and repurpose at least some of them as discipline centers for students, while the previous superintendent was adding one for every school. The librarians were offered to transition into other teaching jobs (Jimenez, 2023).

Superintendents and school boards ultimately set policy, budgets, and decide staffing patterns in fulfillment of district goals and priorities. Although school boards cast the last vote for staffing, positions, and budgets, D’Orio (2020) writes that school board decisions are influenced by the direction and recommendations of the superintendent and upper-level administrators. However, Ashley and Douglass (2022) report that nearly three-fourths of incumbent school board members stated that they would not seek reelection at the end of their terms. This comes at a time when school boards are being targeted by conservative groups with agendas to control what is being taught in schools and ban certain curriculum and books. “Typically, nonpartisan school boards have become increasingly polarized. Board members faced sharply divided communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Political parties and special interest groups are fueling the polarization over education” (Hetrick, 2023).

These disruptive leadership changes leave schools and their staff in chaotic, unstable situations, never sure of the support they need to implement successful programs for students.

Staffing Mandates and State Adopted Information Curricula

State regulations and mandates also drive how school district leaders and school boards allocate staffing dollars. As part of the SLIDE research, Kachel and Lance (2021, p. 30) found a clear association between state staffing mandates and school librarian staffing. According to survey data collected in Fall 2020, only 10 states and the District of Columbia required and enforced employment of school librarians; 16 more states required, but did not enforce; and 24 states had no mandates (Kachel & Lance, 2021). States with enforced, and even unenforced, librarian staffing mandates averaged more school librarians than states that had no staffing requirements. Young (2021) describes Washington state legislation that requires a specific level of school librarian staffing in every school but has not yet funded the staffing component. Thus, school officials have been ignoring this law.

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In some states, laws requiring specific curricula, believed to be within the school librarian’s purview to teach, have been passed. According to Media Literacy Now, eighteen states have enacted legislation promoting or requiring media or information literacy in schools (“Putting Media Literacy,” 2023.). New Jersey recently passed a K-12 information literacy bill that requires school librarians to be included in the committee that will develop the information literacy standards but not necessarily to teach the curriculum (Governor Murphy, 2023). Delaware also has passed a K-12 media literacy bill that may strengthen the need to employ school librarians to teach it (Kirkpatrick, 2022). At the federal level, the Right to Read Act of 2023, if passed, would acknowledge that every school needs to employ a certified school librarian (Right to Read, n.d.).

Some states have adopted the AASL 2018 *National School Library Standards* which state that every school should have a certified, full-time school librarian. Alaska (Madsen & Rinio, 2021), Arkansas (Barnett, 2021), Pennsylvania (Mackley, 2021), and Oklahoma (Lewis, et al., 2021) are among the early adopters of the standards. However, even though the AASL standards are recognized by the state departments of education, these standards, so far, have not resulted in additional school librarian positions. According to the State Profiles in the SLIDE data tools (<https://libslide.org/data-tools/>) these four states continued to show losses of school librarian FTEs between 2018-2019 and 2021-22. Thus, it appears that adoption of national standards—at least to date—has had little influence on school leaders who decide about school librarian employment.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) enacted in 2016, was the first time “effective school library programs” related to student learning outcomes was included. School library associations encouraged school districts to include school libraries in their implementation applications: to employ librarians, provide professional development for librarians, and purchase technology for libraries (Every Student Succeeds Act, n.d.). However, only 31 of 51 states included school libraries in their ESSA plans (Burress & Martin, 2022, p. 220). Burress and Martin (2022) also found that administrators were “limited by their lack of understanding of the research findings that school librarians have a positive impact on student learning and achievement” (p. 229). It is unclear how effective these plans have been in the decision-making process of school leaders.

Another factor that contributes to library staffing decisions is the “pipeline.” SLIDE researchers found that school librarians were least prevalent and most likely to experience job loss in states with no institutions of higher education preparing school librarians. As of January 2021, there were no such institutions in five states—Alaska, Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, and Wyoming. (Lance & Kachel, 2021, p. 32). More isolated, rural areas far from university programs often want to hire a certified school librarian but can’t find one or find someone willing to relocate. If a trained school librarian cannot be recruited, leaders look to other staffing options for providing library services.

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Recent Challenges

It may be too early to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public school staffing and, in particular, school librarian staffing. However, not only has there been an increase in school administrator job exits (McMurdock, 2022, April; Rosenberg, 2022), but according to a new poll, as many as “35 percent of teachers say they’re likely to quit and find another job outside of teaching within the next two years. Of those, 14 percent said they were ‘very likely’” (Will, 2023). Filling classroom teaching positions is a high priority for school leaders and likely takes precedence over employment of instructional specialists, including school librarians.

In order to ameliorate the impact of the pandemic on schools, the federal government has allocated billions for K–12 education in ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds to address learning loss and improve school health and safety concerns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Allowable uses of these funds related to school libraries include “summer literacy programs, enrichment programming, robust digital collections, additional library staff positions, reconfiguring library space for optimal learning and safety, and necessary technology and equipment” (Carroll, 2021). However, many school leaders were cautioned not to hire permanent staff fearing staff lay-offs when ESSER funds cease (Connolly, 2022; McMurdock, 2022, August). Connolly (2022) reports little evidence so far that any ESSER funding has been spent on school librarian positions. Connolly further stipulates that due to the inconsistent way data on the use of ESSER funds is reported by school districts, it may never be known how much of these federal funds were spent on professional school library staffing.

Short term positions such as tutors and paraprofessionals are more apt to be hired over more permanent teaching and librarian positions, particularly with non-recurring federal funds (McMurdock, 2022, August). According to NCES data (K. Lance, personal communication, July 29, 2023), this is a growing trend. Of districts that reported data for both school librarian and library support staff, in 2009-10, 8.6 percent of school districts employed library support staff but no librarians; in 2018-19, 12.5 percent; and in 2021-22, 13.1 percent reported library support staff but no librarians. Torres (2022) and Rowe (2018) describe how administrators are replacing certified librarians with inexperienced, emergency licensed staffing. Although this is a less expensive staffing option with less long-term commitments, this strategy presents a particular risk to low-income schools because of the high number of unqualified or untrained staff. When untrained paraprofessionals are hired to serve as or replace certified school librarians, these staffing changes erode the role of the professional librarian as an essential instructional component of students' literacy education, including protection of students' freedom to read and access to books with diverse experiences, characters, and voices.

By emphasizing the longstanding roles and responsibilities of school librarians to promote literacy, as an instructional partner, and technology leader, Wright (2022) asserts that librarians have a role in helping with students' learning loss and social and emotional needs resulting from the pandemic. Wright describes that in her study librarians struggled during the pandemic to remain relevant during remote instruction. Wright describes librarians as feeling marginalized and never integrated into the remote learning school. After the pandemic a virtual

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school option was maintained by the district but without a defined role for the school librarian. Even for librarians returning to school after the pandemic, their responsibilities had blended with other positions (education technology, instructional coach).

The only national data available at this time to document gains or losses of school librarians during the pandemic is the most recent NCES data. After years of a downward trend in school librarian losses, librarian FTEs nationwide showed a small gain between 2020-21 and 2021-22. During these two years, 27 states experienced net gains of school librarians FTEs, while 20 states experienced net librarian losses (Lance & Kachel, 2023). This may be explained by the reassignment of librarians to other teaching or technology positions during the pandemic when schools were shuttered. After schools reopened during the 2021-22 school year, school librarians may have returned to their library positions. More data is needed to confirm this.

Another factor driving the exodus of school leaders, school board members, and librarians alike has been the caustic politicized environment in which school staff are under attack by far right and conservative groups for what they teach and hold in library collections. PEN America reports, “As book bans escalate, coupled with the proliferation of legislative efforts to restrict teaching about topics such as race, gender, American history, and LGBTQ+ identities, the freedom to read, learn, and think continues to be undermined for students” (Meehan & Friedman, 2023). PEN America found that in the first half of the 2022–2023 school year, there were “1,477 instances of books banned affecting 874 unique titles,” which is up 28 percent over the prior six months, occurring in 37 states (Meehan & Friedman, 2023). In some states, laws are being passed that permit criminal prosecution of school librarians, causing many to rethink continuation in their library and education careers (Nathanson, 2023). How this will impact the “pipeline” of trained school librarians for those districts deciding to hire one is too soon to tell.

Summary

This literature review blends scholarly library and education studies with articles detailing current K-12 factors in which school leaders must weigh staffing decisions to meet district goals and student needs. Research studies continue to report on the ambiguity of the role of the school librarian, particularly as understood and enacted by school administrators versus the roles that librarians are trained to perform. In recent years, as school districts struggle to meet student, teacher, and parent needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, the job of the school librarian has taken on new dimensions, at times merging with technology, coaching, and professional development roles. Further study is required to determine its long-term impact on the status of school librarian employment.

Previous interactions with school librarians appear to influence school administrators’ perceptions of the value of school librarians perhaps more than the body of school library research that associates effective school library programs with student achievement. However, school librarian staffing mandates, whether enforced or not, do impact school librarian staffing in the states that have them. New laws requiring instruction in information or media literacy may have a future impact on the status of school librarian employment. However, it is unclear which educators will be designated at the school level to instruct such curricula.

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Although school leaders frequently tout that a lack of funds determines librarian cuts, two factors uncovered in the SLIDE research suggest otherwise. Districts that spend the least per pupil are not the districts with the least school librarians. And, while the employment of school librarians has trended down by some 20 percent over the past decade, employment of district and building school administrators and instructional coordinators has increased, sometimes dramatically, suggesting staffing dollars are spent on positions other than librarians.

Constant turnover in superintendents, principals, school board members, and even teachers has an impact on the employment of school librarians. Filling classroom teacher positions likely has priority over employing specialists of any kind. Fearing job instability and the recent toxic and politicized school environment aimed at librarians for their curation of library collections, school librarians may be leaving the profession causing a further pipeline issue. The employment of paraprofessionals instead of certified school librarians is also a trend that needs to be documented in future studies of the status of school librarian employment.