Decision Results

The results of interviewee decisions about school librarian employment fell into two almost equal size groups: 28 interviewees made decisions that resulted in school librarian full-time equivalents (FTEs) being added or restored, while 26 interviewees made decisions that resulted in those FTEs being reduced to a lower level, eliminated entirely, combined with other positions, or reclassified (i.e, changed job title, different position). Notably, the 49 interviewees reported 54 total decisions, five school leaders choosing to discuss more than one decision affecting school librarian employment. (See Chart 5.)

The 28 positive decisions include 25 interviewees who each made only one decision to add or restore librarians plus three interviewees, each of whom made a positive decision as well as a negative one. The 26 negative decisions include 19 interviewees who each made only one decision to reduce, eliminate, combine, or reclassify librarians plus two interviewees who each made two negative decisions and three interviewees who made negative as well as positive decisions.

Decisions resulting in librarian positions being either added or restored were over-represented relative to decisions resulting in librarians being reduced, eliminated, combined, or reclassified. For this reason as well as the substantive difference between such decisions, much of the subsequent analysis is separated into these two groups.
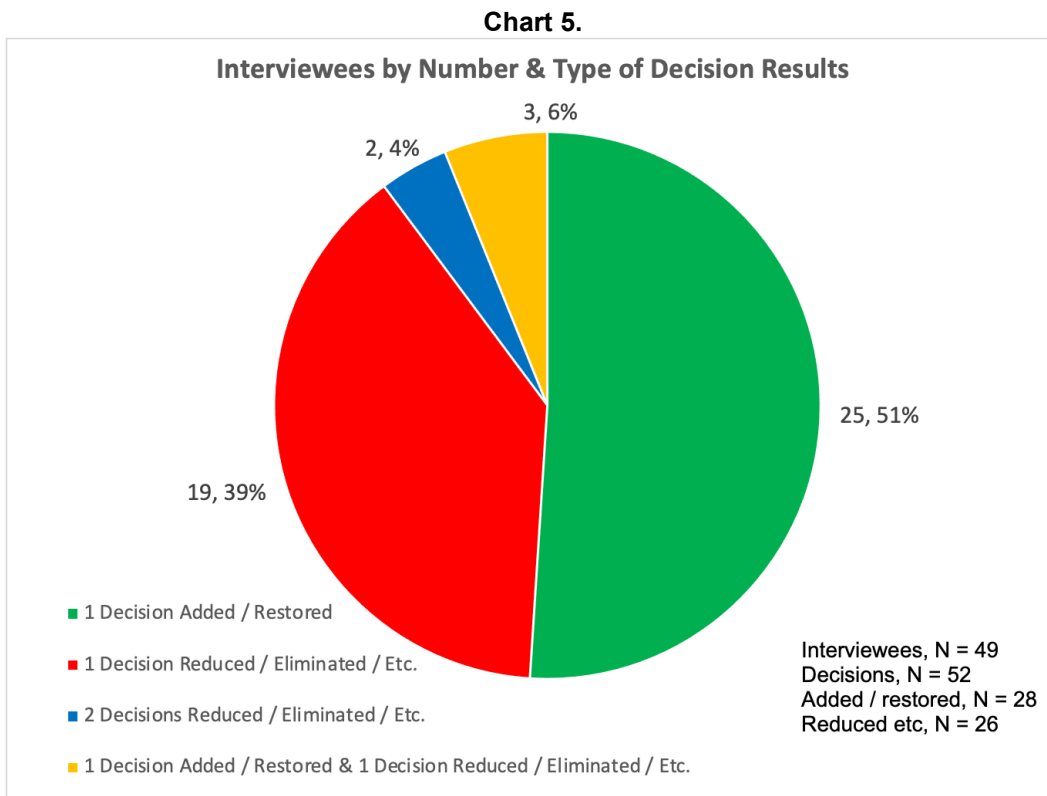
Chart 5.

Interviewees by Number & Type of Decision Results

3, 6%
2, 4%
25, 51%
19, 39%

- 1 Decision Added / Restored
- 1 Decision Reduced / Eliminated / Etc.
- 2 Decisions Reduced / Eliminated / Etc.
- 1 Decision Added / Restored & 1 Decision Reduced / Eliminated / Etc.

Interviewees, N = 49
Decisions, N = 52
Added / restored, N = 28
Reduced etc, N = 26

Decision Factors by Type

As interviews were completed and reviewed, project researchers sorted the decision factors identified by interviewees into three categories: structural, pragmatic, and strategic factors. Structural factors are pre-existing laws, regulations, or policies that drive staffing decisions automatically. Pragmatic factors are practical, often logistical problems that administrators must resolve. And strategic factors are ones initiated by leaders to advance district or school goals. **(**See pages 19 and 20 for fuller definitions and examples of these three types of factors.)

Among those who added or restored school librarians, the most frequent structural factors were new funding and opening a new school building or experiencing an enrollment increase. The lone pragmatic factor was providing for planning time for teachers. And the strategic decision-making factors that achieved double-digit mentions were change in priorities, stand-alone instruction by a librarian, and providing equity of student access to library staff. (See Table 14.)

Table 14. Factors in Decisions to Add or Restore Librarians by Decision Type in Rank Order

Structural Factors	Pragmatic Factors	Strategic Factors
New funding (8)	Planning time for teachers (7)	Change in priorities (13)
Opened a new building/enrollment increase (7)		Stand-alone instruction by librarians (11)
State government mandate (4)		Equity of student access to library staff (10)
Grant/funding requirements (2)		Change in administration (9)
		Collaboration with teachers (7)
		Standards-based testing (4)
		Special student needs (3)
		Social/emotional learning (2)
		Strategic plan (2)

Among interviewees who decided to reduce, eliminate, combine, or reclassify librarians, the most frequently-mentioned structural factor—indeed, the most frequently-mentioned factor of any type—was budget constraints. This is noteworthy, given that the question specifically asked the interviewee to think of factors other than this one. Other notable structural factors were closing a school building or experiencing an enrollment decrease and experiencing pipeline issues that made it difficult to find qualified candidates to fill librarian vacancies. Two related pragmatic factors were mentioned by several interviewees: needing staff in other positions and, in particular, needing more teachers to ensure there was one in every classroom or to manage class size. The three strategic factors most frequently cited by interviewees for their decisions to reduce, eliminate, combine, or reclassify librarians were making a change in priorities (a broad category), hiring other types of specialists or coaches instead of librarians, and believing the position of school librarian to be obsolete. (See Table 15.)

Table 15. Factors in Decisions to Reduce, Eliminate, Combine or Reclassify Librarians by Type in Rank Order

Structural Factors	Pragmatic Factors	Strategic Factors
Budget constraints (17)	Needed incumbent in another position (6)	Change in priorities (12)
Closed a building/enrollment decrease (6)	Needed more teachers in classrooms (5)	Hired other specialists/coaches (7)
Pipeline issues finding qualified candidates (4)		Position deemed obsolete (6)
Retirements/resignations (2)		Change in administration (4)
		Strategic plan (2)

Factors by Type & Decision Results

The fact that school leaders who reported 54 decisions mentioned 174 factors indicates that, on average, each decision was based on three factors. A comparison of the decision factors identified by leaders who made positive and negative decisions about school librarian employment reveals an interesting difference. The largest number of potential factors by type was strategic followed by structural. Two-thirds of those who made positive decisions about school librarians attributed them to strategic factors, while only a quarter cited structural factors. (See Chart 6.) By contrast, those who made negative decisions about librarians attributed their decisions almost equally to strategic and structural factors. Those who made negative decisions were far more likely to cite structural factors than those who made positive decisions. (See Chart 7.)

These findings raise an interesting question about how school leaders perceive their own rationales for staffing decisions. One possibility is that district and school leaders who decided to add or restore librarian jobs were more inclined to attribute them to strategic factors, because they wanted credit for making positive decisions. On the other hand, leaders who decided to reduce, eliminate, combine, or reclassify librarian jobs may have been more inclined to attribute an often-unpopular decision to structural factors that were beyond their control.

Chart 6.

**Factors in Decisions to Add or Restore School Librarians
by Factor Type**

Pragmatic, 8, 9%

Structural, 24, 25%

Strategic, 63, 66%

N = 95

Chart 7.

**Factors in Decisions to Reduce, Eliminate, Combine or
Reclassify School Librarians by Factor Type**

Pragmatic, 12, 15%

Strategic, 35, 44%

Structural, 32, 41%

N = 79
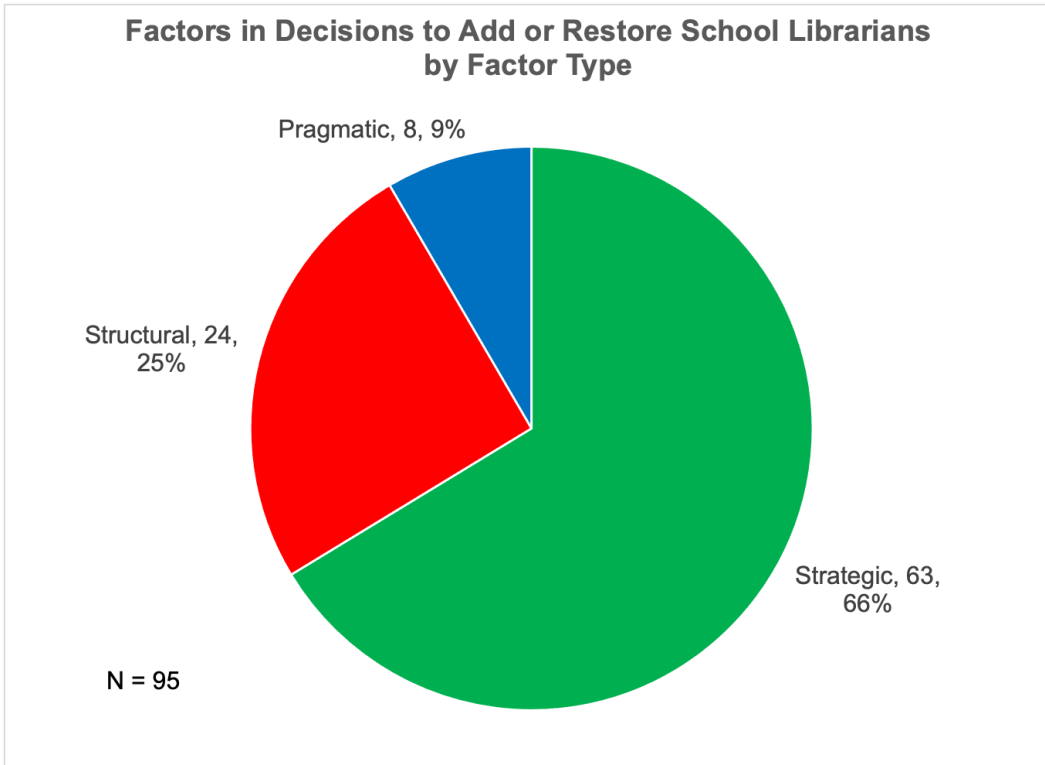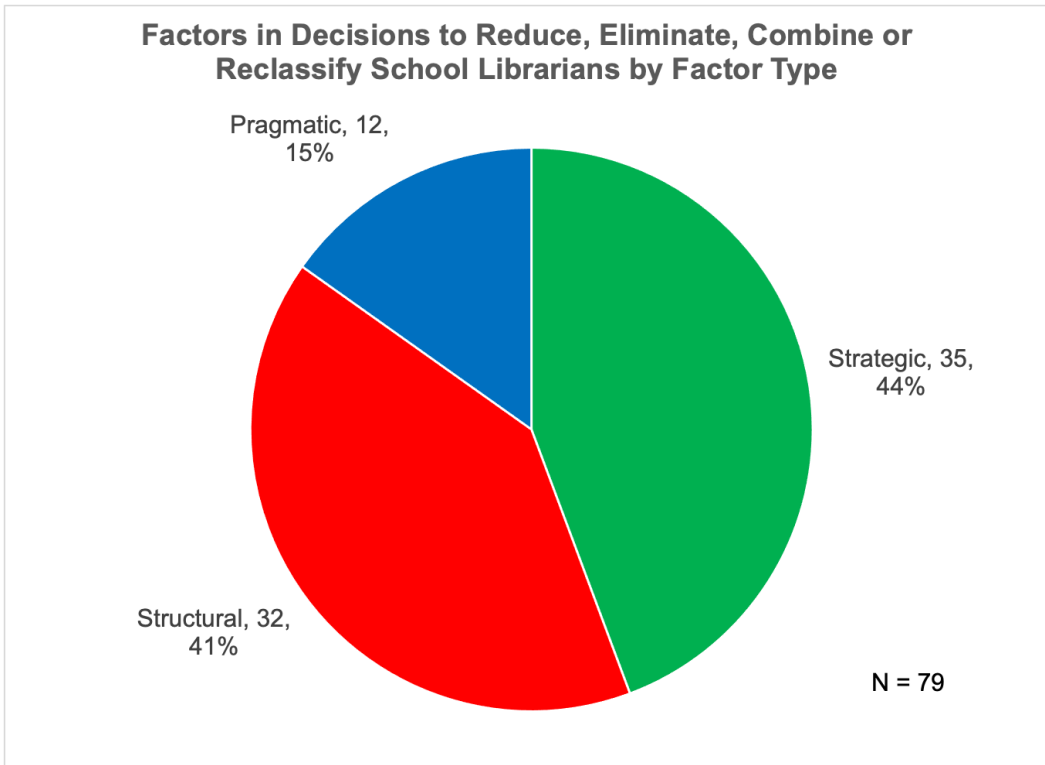
Co-occurrence of Decision Factors

Whether interviewees decided to add or restore school librarians or to reduce, eliminate, combine, or reclassify them, the factors they identified as drivers of those decisions—and the concurrence of those factors with each other—shed new light on their decision-making processes. The complexity of these decisions is evident in the fact that 49 interviewees identified a total of 174 factors that influenced their decision-making.

Factors in Decisions to Add or Restore School Librarians

Of the many factors to which interviewees attributed decisions to <u>add or restore</u> school librarians, those most frequently mentioned included: making a change in priorities; stand-alone instruction by school librarians; equity of student access to staff; experiencing a change in administration; the closely inter-related factors of stand-alone instruction by librarians, planning time for teachers, and collaboration between librarians and teachers; and standards-based testing. For each of these factors, concurrent ones indicate more about the interviewee's thinking. (See Table 16.)

Change in Priorities

Not surprisingly, making a change in priorities, the broadest and most frequently-cited factor—mentioned by 13 of the 28 interviewees who added or restored librarians—concurred with:

- 2 structural factors:
  - new funding (mentioned by 6 interviewees) and
  - state government mandates (3).
- The lone pragmatic factor: providing planning time for teachers (4), and
- 4 other strategic factors:
  - equity of access to staff (7),
  - stand-alone instruction by a librarian (5),
  - a change of administration (4), and
  - collaboration between librarians and teachers (3).

These patterns suggest that several interviewees who decided to add or restore librarians prioritized more equitable student access to a librarian, availability of new funding, the instructional role of a librarian—independently, in collaboration with teachers, or both—or some combination of those three factors. Other interviewees were motivated to prioritize adding or restoring librarians by a change of administration, the existence of a state government mandate, or their intent to facilitate collaboration between librarians and teachers.

Stand-Alone Instruction by School Librarians

Of the 11 interviewees who attributed their decisions to add or restore librarians to the stand-alone instruction provided by librarians, six also cited concerns about equity of student access to staff, and five each also cited

changing priorities, providing for planning time for teachers, and facilitating collaboration between librarians and teachers. Another concurrent factor for four of these 11 interviewees was new funding.

The concurrence of these factors suggests that interviewees who decided to add or restore librarians prioritized having more of them because of their understanding of the contributions librarians can make. Those contributions include collaborating with teachers on the design and delivery of instruction and ensuring that all students in their districts benefit equally from the presence of a librarian. And, in some cases, the availability of one or more new funding sources made possible the addition of more librarians for these and other reasons.

Equity of Student Access to Library Staff

Ten interviewees credited their decisions to add or restore librarians to a concern about ensuring equity of student access to staff. Concurrent factors with this equity factor included: making a change in priorities (mentioned by 7 interviewees), facilitating stand-alone instruction by school librarians (6), and availability of new funding sources (3). That these decision-making factors coincided suggests that a substantial block of interviewees who added or restored librarians believe that the presence of a librarian is an educational equity issue, at least in part because of the instruction librarians provide on their own. Not surprisingly, such decisions to add or restore librarians were made easier in some cases by the availability of new funding.

Availability of New Funding

Of the eight interviewees who cited availability of new funding as a structural factor in their decisions to add or restore librarians, three of them also cited state government mandates as another structural factor. In these cases, the availability of new sources of funding may have enabled a district to add librarian positions in order to comply with a state government mandate. New funding may have ranked higher due to an influx of federal pandemic relief funds known as the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds (ARP ESSER) that became available during the time period of this study. (Funds must be spent by September 2024.) The ESSER legislation allocated approximately $190 billion in aid to states and school districts ("Frequently Asked Questions," 2021).

Table 16. Co-occurrence of Factors in Decisions to Add or Restore Librarians

Factors	Structural				Pragmatic	Strategic								
	New funding	Opened new building/ enrollment increase	State government mandate	Grant/funding requirements	Planning time for teachers	Change in priorities	Stand-alone instruction	Equity of student access to staff	Change in administration	Collaborating with teachers	Standards-based testing	Addressing special student needs	Social/emotional learning	Strategic plan
Structural														
New funding	**8**													
Opened new building / enrollment increase	2	**7**												
State government mandate	3	1	**4**											
Grant/funding requirements	1	1	1	**2**										
Pragmatic														
Planning time for teachers	3	1	1	1	**7**									
Strategic														
Change in priorities	6	1	3	2	4	**13**								
Stand-alone instruction	4	2	0	0	5	5	**11**							
Equity of student access to staff	3	1	1	0	2	7	6	**10**						
Change in administration	2	2	2	1	0	4	0	2	**9**					
Collaborating with teachers	2	3	1	2	3	3	5	2	1	**7**				
Standards-based testing	1	1	0	0	2	1	2	1	2	1	**4**			
Addressing special student needs	1	2	0	0	2	1	2	1	0	1	2	**3**		
Social / emotional learning	2	0	1	0	1	2	1	1	0	1	0	0	**2**	
Strategic plan	1	0	0	0	2	1	2	2	0	2	0	0	1	**2**

Notes: Each bold number in the gray-shaded diagonal is the number of decisions in which that issue was a factor. Read to the left and down from that number to find all concurring factors. Lightest shades indicate co-occurrences of 0 to 2. Medium shades indicate co-occurrences of 3 to 4. And darkest shades indicate co-occurrences of 5 or greater. N = 28 decisions

Planning Time for Teachers, Librarian-Teacher Collaboration & Stand-Alone Instruction by Librarians

Seven interviewees attributed their decisions to add or restore librarians to providing for planning time for teachers. Seven also attributed their decisions to facilitating collaboration between librarians and teachers. Five mentioned prioritizing stand-alone instruction by librarians. For both teacher planning time and librarian-teacher collaboration, another coinciding factor for four interviewees was making a change in priorities. Another concurrent factor for providing planning time for teachers was gaining access to new funding (3 interviewees). And, for librarian-teacher collaboration, another concurrent factor was opening a new building or experiencing an enrollment increase (also 3

interviewees.) Taken together, these inter-related factors suggest that the school leaders interviewed about adding or restoring librarians understood that librarians can play an instructional role, both in collaboration with classroom teachers and independently. In the latter case, leaders valued stand-alone instruction by librarians, whether delivered in the context of planning time for teachers or otherwise. Pointedly, most leaders perceived librarians teaching students in the library while teachers had planning time as a win-win schedule. None expressed or implied a perception of the librarian's role as "babysitting." Notably, though, their support for both this kind of scheduling and collaboration between librarians and teachers—which calls for teachers and librarians to plan together—is contradictory. The opportunity to add or restore librarians for these interviewees was variously associated with changed administrative priorities, availability of new funding, and opening of new schools or increases in enrollment—all factors that may make it easier for decision-makers to staff libraries to contribute to instruction.

Opened New Building / Increased Enrollment

Of the seven interviewees who explained their decisions to add or restore librarians to having opened a new school building or experienced an enrollment increase, three also cited the need for collaboration between librarians and teachers, while two also mentioned valuing the stand-alone instruction provided by librarians and their contribution to addressing special student needs. This factor was also associated with a change in administration, a likely coinciding event when a new school opens. When a school is opened or experiences an influx of new students— particularly when that coincides with the arrival of a new administrator—it is an opportunity for school leaders to prioritize librarians.

State Government Mandates

Of the four interviewees who attributed their decisions to add or restore librarians to state government mandates, three each also associated the decision with a change in priorities and the availability of new funding, and two also identified a change in administration as a contributing factor. When a new administrator arrives, it is probably not unusual for a district or school to review its compliance with state mandates. And, when that is done and it is found that a mandate is not being met, the availability of extra funds provides an opportunity to prioritize a staffing increase to meet the mandate.

Standards-Based Testing

Of interviewees who added or restored school librarians, only four indicated that their decisions were influenced by concern about standards-based testing. Interestingly, though these numbers are obviously small, two each also mentioned providing planning time for teachers, stand-alone instruction by librarians, addressed special student needs, and a change of administration. Notably, only one of these interviewees mentioned facilitating collaboration between librarians and teachers. This pattern of concurring factors suggests that school leaders—especially new ones—who are concerned about test scores may value stand-alone instruction by librarians. Such instruction

simultaneously helps to free up planning time for teachers and gives librarians an opportunity to focus needed attention on students facing special challenges.

Factors in Decisions to Reduce, Eliminate, Combine or Reclassify School Librarians

Interviewees attributed their decisions to reduce, eliminate, combine, or reclassify school librarians to many factors. The most frequent structural factors were budget constraints, closing a building or experiencing enrollment decrease, and facing pipeline issues finding qualified candidates for librarian vacancies. The most frequent pragmatic factors were needing more teachers and needing the incumbent in another position. The most frequent strategic factors were change in priorities, choosing to hire other specialists or coaches, believing the position of librarian to be obsolete, and change in administration. For each of these factors, concurrent ones indicate more about the interviewee's thinking. (See Table 17.)

Budget Constraints

Whenever a school librarian position—or, indeed, any position—is under threat, the most predictable explanation usually offered is that it is a matter of budget constraints. As indicated by the other decision factors coinciding with that one, however, a district or school budget documents the priorities and perceptions of decision-makers. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the other factor coinciding most frequently with budget constraints was change in priorities. Eleven (11) of the 17 interviewees who attributed librarian cuts to budget constraints also cited priority changes. The next three most frequent factors coinciding with budget constraints were: hired other specialists or coaches (6), needed staff in another position (5, and 4 of those specifying the need for more teachers), and deemed the position of librarian obsolete (5). In fewer cases, attributing librarian cuts to budget constraints coincided with change in administration and "pipeline" issues finding qualified candidates for librarian vacancies (3 each).

Change in Priorities

Of the 12 interviewees who associated librarian cuts with a change in priorities, 11 also mentioned budget constraints, underscoring the earlier point about the most frequent factors coinciding with budget constraints. The kinds of priority changes most frequently mentioned were: hired other specialists or coaches (5), needed the incumbent in another position (4, of which 2 specified classroom teacher), and change in administration and position of librarian deemed obsolete (3 each).

Thus, when interviewees indicated that a change in priorities motivated their librarian cuts, the greater priorities—to the extent they were identified—tended to be preferences for hiring other specialists or coaches and other district or school positions (often classroom teachers). Notably, of interviewees whose change in priorities was hiring other types of educators, many believed librarians were obsolete. Librarian cuts attributed to priority changes also sometimes coincided with changes of district or school leadership—though, priority changes were more often not associated with such senior personnel changes.

Table 17. Co-occurrence of Factors in Decisions to Reduce, Eliminate, Combine or Reclassify Librarians

Factors	Structural				Pragmatic		Strategic				
	Budget constraints	Closed building/ enrollment decrease	Pipeline issues finding qualified candidates	Retirements/ resignations	Needed incumbent in other position	Needed more teachers	Change in priorities	Hired other specialists/coaches	Position deemed obsolete	Change in administration	Strategic plan
Structural											
Budget constraints	**17**										
Closed bldg./enrollment decrease	2	**6**									
Pipeline issues finding qualified candidates	3	1	**4**								
Retirements/resignations	1	1	0	**2**							
Pragmatic											
Needed incumbent in other position	5	1	2	2	**6**						
Needed more teachers	4	2	1	1	2	**5**					
Strategic											
Change in priorities	11	1	2	1	4	1	**12**				
Hired other specialists/coaches	6	1	1	0	2	1	5	**7**			
Position deemed obsolete	5	2	2	0	3	1	3	3	**6**		
Change in administration	3	0	0	1	2	0	3	1	0	**4**	
Strategic plan	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	**2**

Notes: Each bold number in the gray-shaded diagonal is the number of decisions in which that issue was a factor. Read to the left and down from that number to find all concurring factors. Lightest shades indicate co-occurrences of 0 to 2. Medium shades indicate co-occurrences of 3 to 4. And darkest shades indicate co-occurrences of 5 or greater. N = 26 decisions

Hiring Other Specialists or Coaches

Of the seven interviewees who attributed their librarian cuts to choosing to hire other specialists or coaches, six also mentioned budget constraints, and three expressed a belief that school librarians were obsolete.

For these interviewees, the decision was probably a more clear-cut one. If money is tight, and you believe a certain position is needed, while another is obsolete, cutting the latter position is the obvious one to let go.

Closing Building/Enrollment Decrease

For most of the six interviewees who attributed librarian cuts to one or more buildings being closed or enrollment decreases, few, if any, concurrent factors were needed to explain their staffing decision. If a school building closed, obviously there was no longer a need for a librarian. If enrollment decreased, a budget cut (2) or need for more teachers elsewhere (2) might have provided some incentive for a librarian cut. And, if the decision-maker was

already questioning whether the position of librarian might be obsolete (2), a building closure or drop in enrollment might suffice as a reason to cut a librarian job. Again, though, for most interviewees, this factor alone sufficed to justify librarian cuts.

Needed Incumbent in Other Position

Of the six interviewees who justified librarian cuts by the need to re-assign the incumbent to another position, five also cited budget constraints; four, a change in priorities; and three, the belief that the post of school librarian is obsolete. These concurring factors suggest that, when decision-makers believe money is tight, they have competing priorities, and they entertain doubts about the value of school librarianship, librarian cuts are anything but surprising.

Needed More Teachers

Of the five interviewees who cited the need for more teachers in explaining their librarian cuts, four also mentioned budget constraints—the single, most overwhelmingly concurrent factor in their decision-making. Most school leaders probably consider it a minimal expectation of their own performance to have a teacher in every classroom. It is difficult for a school librarian—or any other educator at district or school level who is based outside of a classroom—to compete with that overriding imperative.

Position of Librarian Obsolete

The most daunting threat to a school librarian's job is a school leader's belief that the position is obsolete. While there is an abundance of evidence with which to argue that such a belief is inaccurate, the fact remains that there are administrators at district and school levels who believe it. Of the 26 decisions to reduce, eliminate, combine, or reclassify school librarians, 6 of those decisions involved expressed such beliefs. Unsurprisingly, concurrent factors were budget constraints (5) as well as change in priorities, need to re-assign the incumbent to another position, and need to hire other specialists or coaches (3 each). Notably, however, none of these decisions involved re-assigning a librarian to classroom teaching or having difficulty filling vacancies after retirements or resignations. Those may be coincidental results of the small number of interviewees citing this factor. Or they may suggest that some administrators who question the need for school librarians also believe they need people in other positions (e.g., other specialists or coaches) than classroom teacher.

Change in Administration

Somewhat surprisingly, only four interviewees associated their librarian cuts with a change in administration. It is noteworthy that budget constraints and change in priorities were both identified as concurrent factors by three of the four. Two of these interviewees also mentioned the need to reassign a librarian to another position. Though the number of interviewees citing this factor was small, these coinciding factors are predictable issues that new administrators often face.

Difficulty Finding Qualified Candidates for Librarian Vacancies

Four interviewees attributed their losses of school librarians not to their own voluntary decisions to cut the positions, but to the difficulty of finding qualified candidates to fill vacancies. Isolated locale, a smaller community, a less diverse community, or a lower pay scale can make filling vacancies even more difficult. Consequently, librarian losses sometimes result from such involuntary factors, instead of a district or school leader's voluntary decision not to employ a librarian.

What Decision-Makers Said

One of the reasons interviews were deemed essential to this project was that school decision-makers' voices need to be heard. Summarizing their responses numerically, as done above, helps to assess overall trends; but, it can obscure substantive details worthy of attention. Further, references to specific circumstances and responses to them help to flesh out the numbers. To ensure confidentiality for interviewees and their districts or schools, the following quotes are paraphrased to eliminate identifying information, to simplify grammar, and to edit for conciseness and clarity.

Interviewees Who Added or Restored Librarians

Interviewees who added or restored librarians tended to explain their decision-making primarily in terms of strategic and structural factors. The strategic factors in their decisions to add or restore librarians included: accessing new funding sources, opening a new school, responding to an enrollment increase, meeting state government mandates, and finding grant funds. (See Table 18.)