

Voices of Decision-Makers

How District & School Leaders Decide About School Librarian Employment

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.

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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
<i>Structural</i>											
Budget constraints	17										
Closed bldg./enrollment decrease	2	6									
Pipeline issues finding qualified candidates	3	1	4								
Retirements/resignations	1	1	0	2							
<i>Pragmatic</i>											
Needed incumbent in other position	5	1	2	2	6						
Needed more teachers	4	2	1	1	2	5					
<i>Strategic</i>											
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

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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.

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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.)