

Voices of Decision-Makers

How District & School Leaders Decide About School Librarian Employment

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.)

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Table 18. Structural Factors in Decisions to Add or Restore Librarians

Decision-Making Factor	Examples / Quotes from Interviewees
New funding: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Funds	Adding three certified library positions over the last few years was made possible by recent federal ESSER funds. It is important for administrators to braid together new sources, like ESSER, and core funds in order to make positive changes work long-term.
Opened new school building	With two new buildings opening, we'll be adding two more library media positions in the new school year.
Enrollment increase	As enrollment grew and classrooms were being added, we had a need for more time in the library.
State government mandate: Graduation requirements for educational technology	This district has expressed a commitment to support both media specialists and technology teachers. The state does not dictate staffing for library media positions; it is up to districts to determine.
State government mandate: Working toward a mandate	In the past, library positions were often traded out for reading specialists or classroom teachers. Now there is an amendment to make all library positions full-time and mandatory, requiring a master's in library science or education. Candidates for these positions are expected to complete appropriate coursework from an accredited library program, so they qualify for an additional certification.
Grant funding: scholarships	I applied for and received funding for multiple new hires to go to graduate school to earn their MLS degree and school library certification.

Pragmatic factors cited by those who added or restored librarians included facilitating planning time for teachers—in some cases, providing coverage while teachers planned in isolation; in other cases, planning collaboratively with teachers, especially when responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pandemic response efforts also included supporting students and parents during remote learning. (See Table 19.)

Table 19. Pragmatic Factors in Decisions to Add or Restore Librarians

Decision-Making Factor	Examples / Quotes from Interviewees
Planning time for teachers	Adding a librarian helped to fill out the “specials” rotation that facilitated our providing prep time to teachers. We wanted to provide consistent prep time for all teachers across all elementary schools.
Planning time for teachers: Part of broader COVID-19 pandemic response	Library media specialists were critical in helping the district pivot from in-person to fully remote and then hybrid because they worked continually with students, teachers, and parents. They also provided basic technical support to ensure that students were able to use technology for learning.

Most decisions to add or restore librarians were explained in terms of strategic considerations. These factors included: changes in priorities (e.g., becoming a 1-1 technology school), having librarians do more stand-alone instruction (e.g., critical thinking skills), addressing educational equity concerns (e.g., information literacy skills gaps), having librarians collaborate more with teachers (e.g., digital citizenship), and expanding their role in preparing students to meet state standards (e.g., digital literacy). (See Table 20.)

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Table 20. Strategic Factors in Decisions to Add or Restore Librarians

Decision-Making Factor	Examples / Quotes from Interviewees
Change in priorities: 1:1 Facilitating iPad/Chromebook initiative	Library media specialists led this initiative, including ensuring the devices were inventoried, adding them to the online catalog, and managing circulation of these assets.
Stand-alone instruction: 1-1 device-specific digital citizenship instruction	Librarians implemented digital citizenship instruction at the beginning of the year, so all students received instruction specific to the type of device they received.
Stand-alone instruction: Increasing library instruction	Use of the library was transformed. Before, staff checked things in and out and did read alouds. Now, there is a librarian to teach digital literacy and research techniques as well as integrate information resources with content areas.
Stand-alone instruction: Information literacy skills	Librarians bring to the table more than circulating books: information evaluation skills are needed and they are the ones who teach them.
Stand-alone instruction: Need for certified professional to teach	Before retiring, she made a pitch to me about why her position should be retained as a certified role. When it was time to hire, I emphasized to the superintendent and HR that we needed to hire someone with certification, not a paraprofessional.
Equity of student access to library staff: Critical thinking skills	Assessment is a key piece because when you're trying to get approval for more positions, you have to have a compelling argument. "This helps critical thinking skills" isn't enough; it has to be "some of our students don't have any of these skills."
Equity of student access to library staff: Low-income students	Librarians are resourceful people. They help provide a high-quality education—especially for low-income students—by collaborating with teachers and helping them source information for their classrooms. They make learning fun and interesting.
Collaborating with teachers: Digital literacy needs	Librarians worked with teachers to develop the digital citizenship curriculum; so the increase in staffing didn't happen because of the library, it happened because of technology.
Standards-based testing: Added responsibilities	The librarians have more time with students to teach library as well as digital literacy standards.
Social / emotional learning	Our counselor and librarian implement our social-emotional curriculum. There's some co-teaching, so they work closely together.
Strategic plan	Teachers expressed the need for a librarian during the district's annual review and improvement process.

Interviewees Who Reduced Librarians

Interviewees who reduced librarians explained their decisions in terms of a variety of structural, pragmatic, and strategic factors. Structural factors in these decisions included budget constraints, closure of school buildings, and enrollment decreases that activated district staffing formulas. (See Table 21.)