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.)

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.)

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.)

Table 21. Structural Factors in Decisions to Reduce Librarians

Decision-Making Factor	Examples / Quotes from Interviewees
Budget constraints	If the principals' budgets were cut, the end result was that the library positions were cut. Certified librarians were replaced with paraprofessionals and recently-built schools haven't included school library facilities because there is no need to manage them.
Closed school building	Staffing for libraries is codified into state law; but, many schools in this district are either closing or consolidating.
Enrollment decrease	In smaller schools, principals have begun to combine the school librarian position with the computer teacher. Realistically, students in buildings with smaller enrollments are getting only half-time library instruction— half of what the larger schools with full-time librarians are getting.

Pragmatic factors influencing librarian reductions included needing staff in other positions, particularly ones addressing post-pandemic skill loss, and needing more classroom teachers. Sometimes these decisions resulted in librarians having their responsibilities split between the library and a classroom, and, in other cases, they were reassigned to classrooms altogether. (See Table 22.)

Table 22. Pragmatic Factors in Decisions to Reduce Librarians

Decision-Making Factor	Examples / Quotes from Interviewees
Needed staff in other positions: Interventionists for post-pandemic skill loss	I couldn't cut interventionists, because data showed students, especially after the pandemic, weren't learning virtually. I knew the interventionists would need to do as much catch-up work with those students as possible; so, I had to cut librarian positions.
Needed more teachers: librarian's time split between library and classroom	Instead of cutting positions entirely, our media center specialist has taught one or two classes in a split model; half her day being working in the library, making sure the resources are there, making sure everything's where it needs to be, and the other half teaching English
Needed incumbent in other position: technology teacher	With a teacher shortage, they didn't have enough teachers when school started; so, the librarians were told to teach technology classes.

Strategic factors driving librarian cuts included hiring new educational technology staff, administrator perceptions that—if the position of librarian was not obsolete—it was at least less needed than in the past, and the pressure on districts and schools to improve their students' test scores. (See Table 23.)

Table 23. Strategic Factors in Decisions to Reduce Librarians

Decision-Making Factor	Examples / Quotes from Interviewees
Hired other specialists / coaches: New tech staff added, librarians reduced	Media services were brought under the Technology department. As part of re-alignment, library staffing was reduced and new technology positions were added.
Hired other specialists / coaches: Teachers asked for more ed-tech staff	Library paraprofessionals were decreased and educational technology paraprofessionals were hired to provide teachers with more collaboration time and add a new experience for the students.
Position deemed obsolete: Teachers need less support from librarians	Demand for library spaces and librarian expertise has been declining. Circulation of library materials was falling, and librarians were spending less time teaching students and collaborating or supporting their classroom colleagues. That was not their fault: teachers have become more comfortable working with online resources and databases. These usage trends led us to cut one librarian and have the other split her time between two schools.
Position deemed obsolete: Aides needed more than librarians	When our librarians received multiple teacher requests to collaborate, they began declining some, explaining that one of them had to remain in the library for "crowd control." So, we went from 2 professional staff to 1. Our current librarian is no longer tethered to the library as a space manager. Two teacher aides took over managing the space. On paper, it looks like we cut a librarian; but, in truth, we're able to fully maximize one person, sometimes more than when there were 2 librarians.
Standardized testing: Librarians sacrificed for more intensive test prep	The pressure to improve standardized test scores left principals in a pickle. At schools with lowest enrollment, lowest socio-economic students, and most pressure to deliver on test scores, they decided they couldn't afford to have librarians anymore. They had to focus on preparing students for state tests.

Interviewees Who Eliminated Librarians

Interviewees who chose to eliminate school librarians completely felt compelled to do so by structural forces beyond their control. The opening of charter schools resulted in losses of both enrollment and funding for regular public schools (losses that sometimes activated staffing formulas). Small schools had insufficient economies of scale to justify continuing the position. And some districts and schools—particularly ones in isolated locales—had difficulties finding qualified candidates for librarian jobs, often exacerbated by retirements. (See Table 24.)

Table 24. Structural Factors in Decisions to Eliminate Librarians

Decision-Making Factor	Examples / Quotes from Interviewees
Budget constraints: Budget cuts due to charter school	The district had a charter school open and, unfortunately, its drain on enrollments of regular public schools negatively impacted their funding.
Budget constraints: Mandated positions prevail	Many principals don't want to cut librarians; but, when you have a limited budget, the most expensive thing is personnel, and, if another position is mandated, it forces the issue.
Enrollment decrease: Loss of students to charter school	The largest charter school in the state is getting some of our students. That impacts enrollment and funding for regular public schools, and costs us staff.
Enrollment decrease: Economy of scale	One thing you're looking at is how many students are my staff reaching each day? Say I have a librarian and they're only getting 15 kids a day. If I assign them as a teacher, suddenly they've got three more classes of 25. It's a small school; I don't have the economy of scale that a school of 600 or 2000 would have.
Issues finding qualified job candidates: Filled alternate position	We did attempt to hire a librarian; but, were unsuccessful. When we couldn't find one, we opted for hiring a reading specialist instead. It was who we could get.
Issues finding qualified job candidates: Need leadership of strong "21st century" librarian	If I were to add someone right now, I would need somebody really strong, someone with a vision of what the library could be. Our current librarian operates an old-fashioned library—the kind I had growing up in the '70s and '80s. We need somebody more up-to-date; a 21st century librarian who has vision and leadership skills.
Retirements	In fall of 2020, one of the two librarians retired and her position was not replaced.

The prevailing pragmatic motivation for eliminating a librarian position was needing staff in other positions (e.g., reading specialist, counselor). In some cases, librarians were re-assigned to other positions rather than laid off. (See Table 25.)

Table 25. Pragmatic Factors in Decisions to Eliminate Librarians

Decision-Making Factor	Examples / Quotes from Interviewees
Needed incumbent in other position: Shifted librarian to reading specialist	All librarian positions were furloughed; one became a reading specialist, because she had both certifications.
Needed staff in other positions: Eliminated librarian to hire COVID-era counselor	We needed to address homelessness by hiring another counselor. Also, during COVID, we had to save some money and, with kids not in school, we didn't need a librarian. Mental health support was vital. We had to make the new counseling position full-time. It's difficult to hire a half-time counselor. People want a full-time job, so they can receive benefits.

Other interviewees who eliminated librarians altogether cited strategic factors, such as a change in priorities (e.g., keeping kindergarten full-day, hiring STEM teachers) and pressures associated with standards-based testing (i.e, hiring more teachers of tested subjects). (See Table 26.)

Table 26. Strategic Factors in Decisions to Eliminate Librarians

Decision-Making Factor	Examples / Quotes from Interviewees
Change in priorities: Kindergarten and STEM	The district kept kindergarten a full-day program—rather than cutting it to half-day—instead of restoring librarian positions. When more funds became available, a STEM teacher was hired rather than a librarian.
Change in priorities: STEM	One of our elementary schools did not have a STEM teacher, and given that we're a 1:1 district now, that was seen as a higher priority than keeping a librarian.
Standards-based testing	Unfortunately, if I have to make a decision between library and math or language arts, those are tested areas. That's why I had to cut a librarian position.

Interviewees Who Combined or Reclassified Librarians

Librarian full-time equivalents (FTEs) do not decline only because decision-makers choose to reduce their hours or eliminate their positions completely. Sometimes, losses of librarian FTEs result from the position being combined with another (e.g., librarian/educational technology specialist) or reclassified in ways that may involve new job titles unrecognized as librarians (e.g., information literacy/educational technology specialist). Decisions to combine librarian positions with others or reclassify them under new titles tended to be explained mostly in terms of structural and strategic factors.

Structural factors that drove combining or reclassifying librarians included budget constraints (most notably, due to fiscal pressures from charter schools), difficulties finding qualified candidates for librarian vacancies (sometimes associated with district or school locale or cost-of-living issues), and the need to meet certain standards. (See Table 27.)

Pragmatic factors that influenced decisions to combine or reclassify librarian positions included needing more teachers to reduce class size and needing specialists to address specific academic needs (e.g., reading). (See Table 28.)

Table 27. Structural Factors in Decisions to Combine or Reclassify Librarians

Decision-Making Factor	Examples / Quotes from Interviewees
Budget constraints: Charter schools mean cuts at regular schools	We serve a lot of marginalized populations. Schools of choice have been devastating to this community. Of our thousands of school-age children, only half attend regular public schools. Consequently, the district is strapped financially. During the COVID years, we cut our full-time library positions to half-time, because we didn't have a lot of library use then.
Budget constraints: cost-of-living raises vs. adding staff	When you don't get funding increases and you're trying to give teachers a cost-of-living raise, sometimes you've got to do what you've got to do. You give the raise, and combine staff responsibilities to avoid increasing the payroll.
Issues finding qualified job candidates: High cost-of-living discourages applicants	We have a housing crisis. There's not enough affordable housing near our schools. We advertise for a certified library media specialist, and candidates got excited because of how much we pay. Then, they discover they can't find a place to live. So, we end up having to add library duties to another position.
Legislative standards	You get more points on our standards for having highly qualified teachers and librarians. Sometimes, you can get credit for both by combining positions.

Table 28. Pragmatic Factors in Decisions to Combine or Reclassify Librarians

Decision-Making Factor	Examples / Quotes from Interviewees
Needed more teachers Needed incumbent in other position	Ask a principal, would you rather have smaller class sizes, a reading specialist, or a library media specialist? They're going to choose one of those over a library media specialist.
Needed more teachers	To avoid cutting positions entirely, we decided to split some educator roles. The middle school librarian's job was split between the library and an English classroom. Our librarian is a certified English teacher, too; so half her day is in the library, and the other half is teaching English.
Needed incumbent in other position	At the elementary level, the librarian's day is split. Part of her day is spent teaching in the elementary school library. The other part of her day, she serves as a basic skills [i.e., reading and math] specialist, visiting classrooms, mostly in our kindergarten or first grade classes. Due to class sizes and basic skills instruction needs, that extra help is needed by classroom teachers.

Decisions to combine or reclassify librarian positions were also tied to specific strategic concerns, such as changing priorities to address local conditions or to fulfill a particular vision, as well as updating the responsibilities of school librarians to meet current needs. (See Table 29.)

Table 29. Strategic Factors in Decisions to Combine or Reclassify Librarians

Decision-Making Factor	Examples / Quotes from Interviewees
Change in priorities: One district librarian oversees aides in schools	We opted for one librarian for the district, overseeing an aide in each school. Is it ideal? No, but we have great people doing the work. When you're making these decisions, you have to take into account all the constraining realities and determine how to achieve goals most efficiently. You start looking at who is certified, and decide how to better utilize staff so they are working smarter and not harder.
Change in priorities: Future-ready makerspace	As a principal you can choose to have a librarian or another teacher. A lot of schools in the district got rid of the librarians. Those principals were not thinking about what the library of the future can provide students. We redesigned the whole approach and call it a future ready library, a huge makerspace combining everything together.
Position deemed obsolete: Librarian responsibilities need updating	The responsibilities for secondary librarians need to be changed and updated to be more consistent with what students need and expect today. Some librarians have not kept up to date, and some just want it the way it used to be. The job needs to be reconceived, and filled appropriately.