

Summary of Findings & Conclusion

The dataset for this study was 49 interviews of district and school leaders who made recent decisions about school librarian employment. They were identified by state, region, and position, and their representativeness was assessed by selected district characteristics and student demographics. They were asked questions about information-related instructional topics and instructors; others involved in decision-making; the results of their decisions; factors influencing their decisions; advantages, disadvantages, and tradeoffs considered in decision-making; and their positive and negative interactions with librarians. Their answers were tabulated individually and, as appropriate, cross-tabulated with each other. This analysis addresses some of the study's major research questions, applies evolutionary organization theory to school librarian employment, and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how leaders make decisions about school librarian employment.

Research Questions & Evolutionary Organization Theory

Two research questions addressed by these interviews concerned the factors involved in decision-making about school librarian employment as well as the advantages, disadvantages, and tradeoffs of those decisions. Respectively, their answers confirmed applying evolutionary organization theory to this study, specifically three of its four processes: selection and retention (i.e., decision factors) and competition (i.e., advantages, disadvantages, and tradeoffs).

Interviewees

The 49 interviewees represented 29 states and the District of Columbia. The West, Northeast, and Midwest were better represented than the South. Few districts in Southern states were eligible for interviews due to states mandates of school librarians. Most of the interviewees were district superintendents or assistant superintendents followed by other types of district officials.

Regarding district characteristics and student demographics, interview districts over-represented districts with larger enrollments, those in cities, and those with lower levels of poverty. Interview districts under-represented districts with smaller enrollments, those in rural areas, and those with higher (but not highest) levels of poverty. Interview districts were representative of districts nationwide based on per pupil expenditures and race and ethnicity.

Instructional Topics & Instructors

Majorities of the 49 interviewees identified four major instructional topics related to information resources: information literacy (46), digital citizenship (45), educational technology (40), and use of the school library (35). Other related topics mentioned less often included makerspaces, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), media literacy, and social/emotional learning.

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Whether interviewees made positive or negative decisions about school librarians, all four major information-related topics tended to be taught together. In both positive and negative decision groups, the topics retained their overall rank order.

Overall, school librarians (including teacher librarians, library media specialists, etc.) were identified as instructors of these topics by 44 of the 49 interviewees. Notably, however, other instructors included: all teachers (27), educational technology staff (24), specialist teachers (17), paraprofessionals (11), and other staff (6).

Whether interviewees made positive or negative staffing decisions about librarians, school librarians were the most frequently reported instructors for information-related topics. Interviewees who reported making negative decisions about librarians were more likely to identify others as instructors. Those who reported positive decisions about librarians were less likely to identify others as instructors of those topics.

Other Decision-Makers

When asked who else participated in their decision-making about librarians, the most frequent responses were: district superintendent (32), school principal (28), other district official (27), and school board member (16). Other, single-digit responses were for other school official, parents / community, other school staff, school librarian, and human resources.

Decision Results

The 49 interviewees reported 54 decisions relating to school librarian employment. Of the 49, 25 reported about one positive decision, 19 reported about one negative decision, two reported about two negative decisions, and three reported about one positive and one negative decision.

Decision Factors by Type

Factors influencing interviewee decisions were aggregated into three groups: structural, pragmatic, and strategic. The most frequently cited structural factors were new funding and opening a new building or increased enrollment for positive decisions and budget constraints and closing a building or decreased enrollment for negative decisions. Pragmatic factors included providing planning time for teachers for positive decisions and needing the incumbent in another position or more teachers in classrooms for negative decisions. Strategic factors included change of administration or priorities for both positive and negative decisions; stand-alone instruction by librarians and equity of access to library staff for positive decisions; and hiring other specialists or coaches and considering librarians obsolete for negative decisions.

When the factors in positive and negative decisions about librarians were sorted by factor type, interviewees who made positive decisions were more likely to report them as primarily strategic in nature, while those who made negative decisions were more likely to report them as structural.

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Decision-Making Themes for Positive Staffing Decisions

Decision-makers identified multiple factors influencing their staffing decisions about school librarians. Several webs of co-occurrences of these factors suggest seven themes in their decision-making, four for those who decided to add or restore librarians and three for those who decided to reduce, eliminate, combine, or reclassify librarians. As the number of co-occurring factors and frequency of their concurrence with each other varied in complexity and strength, they will be described for each type of decision—positive and negative—in descending order for positive and negative decisions about school librarian employment.

The four themes which summarize most positive decisions about school librarians have been named:

- Librarians for Equity of Access,
- New Leadership, New Priorities,
- More Teaching by Librarians, and
- Opportunity to Meet Mandate

Librarians for Equity of Access

The three positive-decision factors with the most concurrences are change in priorities, stand-alone instruction by librarians, and equity of access to librarians. In turn, each of these factors had multiple concurring factors, often shared ones. Together, these factors and their concurring factors comprise the theme, Librarians for Equity of Access. (See Table 38.)

Decision-makers who made a change in priorities identified most frequently the wish for greater equity of access to librarians as the most influential other factor in their decision. Often, too, they reported the availability of new funding as a factor that made it possible to increase librarian staffing levels. Other factors, each credited for influencing their positive staffing decision included stand-alone instruction by librarians, their contributions to facilitating planning time for teachers, and their collaboration on the design and delivery of instruction with teachers. Other factors which sometimes enabled such positive decisions were a change in the district or school administration and the presence of a state mandate for having librarians.

Table 38. Librarians for Equity of Access

Change in Priorities (13)	Stand-Alone Instruction (11)	Equity of Access to Librarians (10)
Equity of access to librarians (7)	Equity of access to librarians (6)	Change in priorities (7)
New funding (6)	Planning time for teachers (5)	Stand-alone instruction (6)
Stand-alone instruction (5)	Change in priorities (5)	New funding (3)
Change in administration (4)	Collaboration with teachers (5)	
Planning time for teachers (4)	New funding (4)	
Collaboration with teachers (3)		
State mandate (3)		

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The second most frequently mentioned factor for this theme is valuing stand-alone instruction by librarians. Increasing equity of access to school librarians was also the most frequently cited factor by those placing a high value on instruction by librarians. This factor is followed by facilitating planning time for teachers and collaborating with them on instructional design and delivery. Factors sometimes associated with stand-alone instruction by librarians were a change in priorities and new funding. Finally, the third most oft-cited factor is the one that figured prominently in the two preceding groups, equity of access to librarians. Of those who mentioned that factor as a decision driver, stand-alone instruction provided by librarians was a concurring factor, while changes in priorities and new funding were factors that made it possible.

Across these three complexes of factors, change in priorities, equity of access to librarians, stand-alone instruction by librarians, and new funding are present in all three. This combination of factors suggests that leaders likelier to make positive decisions are ones to whom educational equity in general is a concern and who understand the contribution that a librarian's stand-alone instruction can have in closing equity gaps.

More Teaching by Librarians

After Librarians for Equity, the next largest complex of most frequently cited factors with the most concurring factors was named More Teaching by Librarians. This theme is comprised of four factors which tied together several concurring factors. Its four principal factors are new funding, opening of a new school building, collaboration between librarians and teachers, and facilitating planning time for teachers. (See Table 39.)

Positive decision-makers who mentioned new funding also mentioned changes in priorities, stand-alone instruction by librarians, and planning time for teachers. A state mandate for school librarians was mentioned by a few as a contributor to making decisions based on these factors.

Decision-makers who identified planning time for teachers as an influential factor were also ones who sometimes credited changes in priorities and instruction by librarians—whether on their own or collaborating with teachers. Notably, interviewees who identified teacher planning time as a factor in their decisions to add or restore librarians did not perceive librarians as babysitters; they saw sending students to the library so teachers could have a planning period as a win-win opportunity for librarians to have an opportunity to deliver instruction on their own. Intriguingly, though, they did not perceive a conflict between having teachers plan on their own and valuing collaboration on instructional design and delivery between librarians and teachers. These decisions focused on teacher planning time were also sometimes influenced by new funding.

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Table 39. More Teaching by Librarians

New Funding (8)	Planning Time for Teachers (7)	Collaboration with Teachers (7)	New Building (7)
Change in priorities (6)	Stand-alone instruction (5)	Stand-alone instruction (5)	Collaboration with teachers (3)
Stand-alone instruction (4)	Change in priorities (4)	Change in priorities (3)	
Planning time for teachers (3)	Collaboration with teachers (3)	Planning time for teachers (3)	
State mandate (3)	New funding (3)	New building (3)	

Decision-makers who increased librarian staffing were likely to credit librarian collaboration with teachers for their decisions. Of those who cited this factor, stand-alone instruction by librarians was the most frequent co-occurring factor. Three additional factors which sometimes influenced pro-collaboration decisions included changes in priorities, teacher planning time, and openings of new school buildings.

Another factor cited by as many positive decision-makers as teacher planning time and librarian-teacher collaboration was opening of new school buildings. Its lone concurring factor was valuing librarian-teacher collaboration.

Across these four complexes of factors, changes in priorities, stand-alone instruction by librarians, planning time for teachers, and collaboration with teachers were present in three of the four sets of factors. These findings suggest that leaders who are more likely to make positive decisions about librarians are those who understand that librarians not only teach on their own but support and collaborate with classroom teachers.

New Leadership, New Priorities

The next theme was named New Leadership, New Priorities, because a change in administration was its most frequently cited factor, and, for that group, the single concurring factor was change in priorities. Some interviewees who chose to add school librarians were clear that they strongly valued librarians and were in a position to act on it. They rarely felt the need to identify any other factors to justify their decisions; it was simply a high priority in and of itself. (See Table 40.) This theme emphasizes that changes of administration and/or priorities present opportunities for new administrators to act on their established beliefs in the value of school libraries and librarians.

Table 40. New Leadership, New Priorities

Change in Administration (9)
Change in priorities (4)

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Opportunity to Meet Mandate

Finally, Opportunity to Meet Mandate is the theme based on one of the least frequently mentioned factors, state mandates for school librarians. That factor has two concurring factors—new funding and change in priorities—each shared by three of the four decision-makers citing mandates. (See Table 41.)

Table 41. Opportunity to Meet Mandate

State Mandate (4)
New funding (3)
Change in priorities (3)

Decision-Making Themes for Negative Staffing Decisions

Three themes that explain the most negative decisions about school librarians have been named:

- New Priorities, More Specialists & Teachers,
- Can't Find a Librarian, and
- New Leadership, New Priorities

New Priorities, More Specialists & Teachers

Of these three themes, the first, strongest, and most complex one is no surprise. This theme is called New Priorities, More Specialists & Teachers. (See Table 42.)

Predictably, its most oft-cited factor influencing negative decisions about librarians is budget constraints. That factor has several concurring factors that reveal more about the thinking behind those decisions. Of those citing budget constraints, the majority also mentioned changes in priorities. The other factors they mentioned suggest, to some extent, what those priorities might have been: hiring other specialists or coaches (e.g., reading, literacy, STEM), needing more teachers, and needing the incumbent librarian in another position. Other factors contributing to decreases in librarian staffing blamed on budget constraints included believing librarians were obsolete—or at least, less necessary than in the past— changes in administration, and “pipeline” issues recruiting qualified candidates for librarian vacancies.

The second most frequently mentioned factor associated with this theme was changes in priorities. Of those citing priority changes, several preferred to hire other specialists or coaches. Contributing factors were priority change, believing librarians are obsolete, and changes in administration.

The third most-cited factor in this group was needing the incumbent librarian in another position. The dilemma facing many “teacher librarians” is that, if they are credentialed as both teachers and librarians, they are subject to be reassigned to classrooms. That scenario is reflected in the concurring factors: budget constraints, changes in

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Table 42. New Priorities, More Specialists & Teachers

Budget Constraints (17)	Change in Priorities (12)	Need Incumbent in Other Position (6)	Need More Teachers (5)
Change in priorities (11)	Budget constraints (11)	Budget constraints (5)	Budget constraints (4)
Hired other specialists / coaches (6)	Hired other specialists / coaches (5)	Change in priorities (4)	
Librarian obsolete (5)	Librarian obsolete (3)	Librarian obsolete (3)	
Needed incumbent in other position (5)	Change in administration (3)		
Need more teachers (4)			
Change in administration (3)			
Pipeline issues (3)			

priorities, and believing librarians are either obsolete or less necessary—and certainly less necessary than having someone in another position that is a higher priority in the leader’s thinking.

The fourth and final factor making up this theme is needing more teachers, and its sole concurring factor is budget constraints. Regardless of what other priorities an administrator might prefer, the one that usually over-rules having a professional in the library is having a teacher in every classroom.

Predictably, budget constraints are a principle or secondary factor in all four of these complexes of factors. All four also include needing more teachers, needing an incumbent librarian elsewhere, or choosing to hire other specialists or coaches. Changes in priorities and believing librarians are obsolete appear in three of these four sets of factors. When administrators believe there are not enough classroom teachers, making the case for a librarian or any other specialist teacher is an uphill battle. When their staffing choice is between a librarian and another type of specialist or coach, however, leaders might make different decisions if they had more information about the relative contributions of a librarian and some alternative specialist.

New Leadership, New Priorities

Another theme describing some negative decisions about school librarians is called New Leadership, New Priorities. It is the flipside of its positive-decision counterpart. While a small number of interviewees cited change in administration as a decision factor, most of them also mentioned changes in priorities and budget constraints. As several acknowledged, the fate of a school librarian—in most states, a position not mandated by law or regulation—is subject to being cut whenever leadership changes, priorities change, or the budget gets tight. As with “pipeline” issues, some interviewees deflected blame for negative decisions, as they felt no real choice. (See Table 43.)

The New Leadership, New Priorities theme in cutting librarian staffing may suggest that these administrators simply do not share their positive-decision counterparts’ established belief in school librarians. It is also possible, given accounts of some interviewees, that these administrators feel constrained by a lack of choice. If another position is prioritized by the state or district and a librarian is not, the solution might be to seek a librarian mandate.

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Table 43. New Leadership, New Priorities

Change in Administration (4)
Change in priorities (3)
Budget constraints (3)

Can't Find a Librarian

The final theme concerns interviewees who were forced to cut librarian staffing involuntarily due to “pipeline” issues finding qualified candidates for vacancies. (See Table 43.) Recruiting challenges were described by interviewees from districts with small enrollments and limited budgets and those in outlying towns and rural communities. They also reported that some qualified school librarians seeking jobs were unwilling to relocate to communities far from their families, lacking conveniences of urban life, or available, affordable housing. In some cases, salaries such districts could offer were discouraging. Unsurprisingly, the lone concurring factor with “pipeline” issues was budget constraints. (See Table 44.)

To avoid involuntary losses of school librarians due to such pipeline issues, decision-makers may need technical assistance in marketing and recruiting for librarian vacancies to attract applicants. Their districts or schools may also require budget increases, new funding sources, or other financial assistance to address issues such as salary, cost-of-living, and affordable housing availability.

Table 44. Can't Find a Librarian

Pipeline Issues Finding Qualified Candidates (4)
Budget constraints (3)

What Decision-Makers Said

These seven themes summarize in broad terms the prevailing decision-making patterns that are reshaping school librarian employment. In addition, this report contains a tremendous amount of detail—examples and quotes from dozens of specific situations—about the many and varied circumstances in which administrators had to make staffing decisions. Thematic analysis reveals patterns that enable us to better understand the larger patterns of this decision-making process, while their examples and quotes offer us inspiration or allow us to empathize with their unenviable positions.

Advantages, Disadvantages & Tradeoffs

Interviewees were asked about anticipated consequences of their decisions about librarians. In some cases, there were clear advantages to increasing librarian staffing and clear disadvantages to cutting it. In other cases, decisions were more difficult, tradeoffs being inevitable: gaining a librarian meant sacrificing other staff or hiring other staff meant losing a librarian. The stories interviewees told about weighing such consequences were classified into four groups: win-win, win-lose, lose-win, lose-lose. Win-win scenarios were ones in which positive decisions were

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made, because of expected positive outcomes. Win-lose scenarios were ones in which interviewees opted to improve librarian staffing at the expense of something else, most often another position or positions. Lose-win scenarios were ones in which interviewees felt they had to sacrifice librarians in order to have other staff (e.g., teachers; reading, literacy, and STEM specialists). And, lose-lose scenarios were ones in which they felt compelled to make negative decisions even though they expected negative consequences for their schools, students, and teachers.

With 49 interviewees, only some of whom felt they faced difficult decisions, their stories of these four types of scenarios ran a gamut that defied quantitative tabulation or analysis. Their wide-ranging stories included situations where options were equally good or bad as well as situations where they felt little choice. Excerpts from some of their stories will remind readers that many decisions administrators must make are unenviable ones. At best, someone will be displeased with them; at worst, someone else—a student, a teacher, a family—will suffer damaging consequences. Yet, they are responsible to make decisions, regardless of their difficulty or their consequences.

Positive & Negative Interactions with Librarians

The interviews concluded by asking about their interactions with school librarians. Most of those interactions were positive, though there were some negative ones. Many of the interactions were ones experienced as administrators; others, as classroom teachers. Most administrator experiences involved working with librarians (e.g., launching district-wide 1-1 technology, dealing with challenges to library materials). Some interactions involved supervising librarians. Experiences as teachers cited most often included working with librarians—with additional specific mentions of collaborating on instructional design and delivery, receiving instructional support, and receiving in-service professional development. Others reported a personal relationship, sometimes a mentoring one, with a school librarian who strongly influenced their perception of the field.

Volatility of Librarian Staffing

It is impossible to generalize from 49 self-selected interviewees. For some sense of the scale of the decisions administrators make about school librarian jobs, NCES's Common Core of Data is revealing. Consider the impact of these decisions on districts, school librarians, and students.

School Librarian Employment by District

During the latest one-year data interval—from 2020-21 to 2021-22—1,833 districts (15.4 percent) added librarians and 4,405 (37.0 percent) retained their librarians. Beyond that, the number of districts either gaining or losing librarians was remarkably volatile. School librarian jobs were reduced but not eliminated entirely by 1,584 districts (13.3 percent). Librarian jobs were eliminated by 304 districts (2.6 percent). And there were no librarians either year in 3,793 districts (31.8 percent). (See Table 45. These figures exclude districts run by federal and state agencies and all-charter districts as well as any districts that did not report to NCES.)

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Table 45. Local Districts Making Changes in Employment of School Librarians, 2020-21 to 2021-22

Change by district	Number of Districts	Percent of Districts
Adding librarian FTEs	1,833	15.4%
Retaining librarian FTEs	4,402	37.0%
Reducing librarian FTEs	1,584	13.3%
Eliminating librarian FTEs	304	2.6%
Having no librarian FTEs both years	3,788	31.8%
Total local school districts	11,911	100.0%

School Librarian Employment in FTEs

Between 2020-21 and 2021-22, school librarian full-time equivalents (FTEs) increased by almost 71. Nationwide, that is a negligible increase that does not counter-balance more than a decade of year-after-year net losses. It also obscures the volatility of school librarian employment by masking a combination of dramatic gains and losses. Between 2020-21 and 2021-22, districts that gained librarians added 2,110 FTEs, while districts that reduced librarian staffing accounted for a loss of 1,611 FTEs. Districts that eliminated librarians completely decreased librarian ranks by another 429 FTEs. The rest of the school librarian workforce—13,789 FTEs—were in districts that reported the same number of FTEs both years. (See Table 46.)

Table 46. Changes in School Librarian Full-Time Equivalents Made by Local School Districts, 2020/21 – 2021/22

Type of Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) / Change	Total School Librarians in FTEs		Change in FTEs from 2020-21 to 2021-22	
	2021-22	2020-21	Number	Percent
FTEs added (higher in 2021-22 than 2020-21)	13,627.28	11,516.84	2,110.44	18.3%
FTEs retained (no change, same both years)	11,785.37	11,785.37	0.00	0.0%
FTEs reduced (lower in 2021-22 than 2020-21)	12,178.13	13,788.98	-1,610.85	- 11.7%
FTEs eliminated (zero in 2021-22, > zero in 2020-21)	0.00	428.66	-428.66	-100.0%
Total school librarian FTEs	37,590.77	37,519.85	70.92	0.2%

Impact on Students of School Librarian Employment

The consequences of this volatility for students is also striking. (See Table 47.) In 2021-22, compared to the previous year, 12.7 million students were in districts that reported more librarian FTEs; 11.2 million students were in districts that reported the same number of librarian FTEs; another 12.7 million were in districts that reported having fewer, but still some, librarian FTEs; and 1.3 million students were in districts that reported eliminating librarians altogether. It is a likely consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic that, in a single year, more than 25 million students were almost precisely divided between districts that gained and lost librarians. Underscoring a major SLIDE finding (Lance & Kachel, 2021; Lance, Kachel & Gerrity, 2023), these data indicate a dramatic dimension of educational inequity.

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Table 47. Students Impacted by Changes in School Librarian Employment by School Districts, 2020-21 to 2021-22

Students	Number of Students	Percent of Students
Having more librarians	12.7 million	29.3%
Having same librarians	11.2 million	25.9%
Having fewer librarians	12.7 million	29.3%
Losing all librarians	1.3 million	3.0%
Having had no librarians either year	5.4 million	12.5%
Total students in school districts⁶	43.3 million	100.0%

The 49 administrators who reported about their decisions affecting school librarian employment shared a lot of information that should be useful to many. Those who should find this report valuable include: federal and state policy-makers; school boards and administrators; and school library associations, advocates, library and information science faculty, scholars, students, and practitioners. Pointedly, this report should be valuable to all of these constituencies, regardless of whether or not they are currently invested in school libraries and equity.

The decisions described by these interviewees were influenced by their current state and local contexts, their interactions with school librarians, and a wide array of factors. Structural factors were ones beyond their control; pragmatic factors were ones in which they had limited options; and strategic factors were ones they chose to pursue as means to specific ends. In making their decisions, they also had to weigh foreseeable consequences—advantages, disadvantages, or tradeoffs. Anyone seeking to support and strengthen school librarianship—and, more broadly, the teaching of the critical information-related topics for which they may share responsibility with other educators—should benefit from considering what these decision-makers have shared.

While a larger pool of interviewees was sought, the timing of this study in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic thwarted many recruitment efforts and limited access to, and availability of, many administrators who had expressed genuine interest in being interviewed before the pandemic’s onset. Still, this study provides input from the largest multi-state pool of decision-makers to date who have consented to such in-depth interviews. The future of school librarianship depends on more and better communication between the leaders of the school library community, the leaders of the larger education community, and public policymakers.

This is believed to be a first-of-its-kind study. May it not be the last.

⁶ Notably, the above figures reporting on 2020-21 to 2021-22 change are incomplete, due to some districts not reporting about school librarian employment, particularly in 2020-21, when there were unprecedented levels of non-reporting due to the pandemic. As indicated above, those non-reporting districts could not be included in these calculations. Based on the 2021-22 data alone, there were 7.1 million students in districts that reported zero librarians. Only 6.7 of those 7.1 million students are accounted for by districts that reported for both years.