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

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.

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

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.)