

Voices of Decision-Makers

How District & School Leaders Decide About School Librarian Employment

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.