

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the findings from the major reports of the three-year SLIDE project encompassing both the quantitative analysis of NCES data and the qualitative results from the interviews of school decision-makers. The two previous reports referenced below are:

Equity and Accountability

With renewed attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion in education, better and more consistent data collection about school library programs and staffing is needed to accurately understand the equity of school library services to K-12 students. From NCES to state departments of education to local school districts, definitions used in the Common Core of Data need to be clarified for professional, instructional staff, including school librarian, instructional technology specialist, reading specialist, instructional coordinators, and any other instructional, non-classroom teacher educators—of which there are many today. Also, distinctions among classified staff need to be defined, including library support staff and instructional aide. More oversight is needed at state levels to ensure that data are submitted, vetted and complete. More training should occur for school officials who annually complete required data surveys. Federal and state agencies that fund education cannot make decisions on incomplete and inaccessible data sources. The publication of the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) report that focused on school libraries, last published in 2013 with 2011-12 data (NCES, 2013), should be reinstated. Such reports translate detailed NCES data and charts more understandable to the education community and general public.

NCES data examined by SLIDE researchers (Lance & Kachel, 2021) reveals two important trends: 1) the number of school districts without any librarians is increasing (pp. 35-36) and 2) replacement of professional librarians with classified staff is increasing (pp. 63-64). Unknown is what is happening with the residual library collections when librarians disappear or paraprofessionals manage their use. There need to be accountability measures in place for school library programs, including collections, technology, and the instruction by a school librarian trained in curriculum and instruction. What is happening with school library spaces and resources in the absence of librarians, and how are they being managed and used by whom? As documented in the SLIDE interviews, in order to allocate scarce staffing funds to librarians, administrators want to see value in library programs that contribute to the school goals.

National and state school library associations could assist the library profession in developing accountability tools in collaboration with school administrators that articulate the value of investing in library programs based on administrators' expectations, rather than based on librarians' expectations. Professional development is needed based on tools, collection methods, and ways to communicate findings that are meaningful to stakeholders and focused on student achievement.

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Standards, Mandates, and Expectations

National and state library associations that have developed aspirational standards, guidelines, and job descriptions for school librarians and their work need to develop best practices for school library services where there are scarce or no school librarians. According to 2021-22 NCES data, only 10.6 percent of all school districts reported enough school librarians to have the equivalent of one full time librarian in every school (K. Lance, personal communication, June 3, 2023), meeting the AASL standard. That percent dropped significantly in just a few years. In 2018-19, 23 percent of all school districts reported enough school librarians to have the equivalent of one full time librarian in every school (Lance & Kachel, 2021, p. 36). The downward trend of employment of school librarians ---now over a decade---is not likely to change, considering the NCES data. Only 1 out of 10 districts ever rehire school librarians once those positions are cut (Lance & Kachel, 2021, p.73). If the library profession is truly dedicated to helping every learner be successful and traverse the information world we live in today, then new models of school library service must be developed and aimed directly at school administrators and those who set staffing priorities, particularly in schools without any school librarians.

Through a state survey (Kachel & Lance, 2021, p. 4), the SLIDE project found that approximately half of the states mandate some level of school librarian staffing—sometimes based on a ratio of students per librarian—but, only 10 of those states enforce those mandates. However, whether staffing mandates are enforced or not, states with mandates had on average better staffing than states that had no staffing mandates (Kachel & Lance, 2021, p. 31). Based on this, if state education entities value equity, they should work to include language that legally requires school libraries and librarians in their state education statutes, code or law.

The over-reliance on librarians to educate district and school leaders about the value of library programs and the essential instructional roles of librarians is too frequently seen as self-serving. These circumstances are exacerbated by the problem of role ambiguity: administrators and librarians perceive the librarian’s roles differently. With approximately 40,000 school librarians employed in approximately 92,000 U. S. schools, it’s absurd to expect that those librarians could provide equity of library services for all students.

Simply expecting individual school librarians to do this “heavy lifting” clearly has not happened, and will not happen, without powerful supporters. If equitable access to librarians and library services are essential to quality education, then library associations, teacher unions and associations, and state government education officials need to develop a consensus about policy goals. These stakeholders need to work together toward those goals to ensure that all students have access to the information resources and teaching about them that they need to succeed academically.

Funding and Choices

Many interviewees in this project cited, quite legitimately, that budget is a major factor determining library staffing. However, NCES data revealed that employment of administrators and instructional coordinators increased, often dramatically, while librarians staffing continued to plummet over the last decade (Lance & Kachel, 2021, p. 7; Lance

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& Kachel, 2022, pp.1-3). This suggests that staffing of schools had more to do with priorities of decision-makers than school finance. Choices were made and school librarian jobs were lost. Interviewees cited various reasons for decisions to reduce or eliminate librarians, including needing more classroom teachers, often reassigning the librarian to serve as a classroom teacher, choosing to hire other specialists or coaches, deeming the librarian role obsolete, or not being able to find a librarian to hire.

Turnover among administrators is escalating, but a constant no matter where an administrator finds employment is their professional organizations. Library associations should partner with teacher unions and administrator and teacher associations to educate them as supervisors of, and collaborators with, school librarians. We know the path to becoming an administrator—one likely to be in a position of power to determine librarian staffing—is through the teacher ranks. Teacher unions, where they exist, can also be critical to negotiating working conditions, schedules, and staffing levels for teachers, including librarians, and could gain membership by advocating for library positions.

At a district level, centralized funding for school libraries and librarians would be the most effective way to ensure equity to all students. As site-based management has become a way to “kick the can down the road,” school principals have made varying staffing choices. Some schools in a district may have strong school library programs with certified librarians; others, have no library services at all. According to NCES data for 2021-22, 35 percent of school districts had no school librarians (K. Lance, personal communication, June 3, 2023). Those districts served 7.1 million students, disproportionately impacting many economically disadvantaged students and students of color. This does not include students in individual school buildings that do not have librarians, as NCES only reports librarian staffing data about school districts, not school buildings.

Although not a source of stable, ongoing funding, multi-year federal and state grants could help to launch libraries and hire librarians in districts without them, particularly districts with majorities of marginalized students. State library agencies should make Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funds available for school libraries. More districts in need could benefit from increased access to, and funding of, federal grant programs, such as Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian and National Leadership Grants (administered by IMLS) and the Innovative Approaches to Literacy grant (administered by the U.S. Department of Education).

Recruitment and Certification

Several SLIDE interviewees mentioned that they could not find “the right person” for a librarian position or that they were unable to recruit any applicants willing to move to their, often remote, location. University library programs and programs that provide school library certification for teachers are closing due to low enrollment—the pipeline is drying up. In order to earn school library certification, most states require a teaching certificate, a Master’s degree, required library science credits, and often, several years’ experience as a classroom teacher—a position also endorsed by the AASL. This advanced level of education exceeds entry-level requirements for teachers, takes longer to earn, and consequently costs more. State teacher certification agencies and teacher education universities could integrate required library courses, and possibly library content, in an undergraduate

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teaching degree. A bonus to this approach would be to educate prospective teachers about the role and advantage of instructional partnership with a school librarian. Pathways from high school to entry-level school librarian jobs need to be created. This would reduce the cost of a graduate degree and be more attractive as a post-high school career option.

Adding to the pipeline problem, established teachers who earn the school library certification after years of classroom teaching are usually unwilling to move to where school librarians are needed and sought. They have families and community connections in local areas, often earning the degree to replace a retiring librarian in the school where they work. Reducing the time and cost to become a school librarian could encourage a younger and more diverse profession willing to take jobs where needed. Other potential solutions to this problem include encouraging development of “grown your own” programs through which already-local teachers are encouraged to become school librarians and promoting the availability of online preparation programs for school librarians that such teachers could pursue without leaving their home communities.

However, if students are graduating from high schools without any school librarians, role models and career options in school librarianship are hard to envision. NCES data revealed that majority non-white and majority Hispanic districts were more likely than majority white and majority non-Hispanic districts to have no or fewer librarian (Lance & Kachel, 2021, p. 48). When Black and Brown students don’t see themselves or even anyone as a librarian in their schools, they are unlikely to consider school librarianship as a profession. This further inhibits recruitment for diversity.

Curriculum and Instruction

Many interviewees stated they valued instruction by the school librarian either independently or in collaboration with teachers. Yet, interestingly, in schools that reduced or eliminated school librarians, the instructional content thought to be “owned” as a librarian’s curriculum was still taught by other educators. Some states have articulated K-12 curricula with varying titles, such as information literacy, media literacy, library and information skills, etc. State math, science, and language arts curricula are mandated and aggressively assessed—not so for information literacy, although one could say it is because it is not a tested content area. Yet, recently, some state legislatures are passing laws to require instruction in information skills, particularly in online and media sources, as essential skills for K-12 students. This is a trend that national and state library associations as well as state departments of education should not ignore. Curricula addressing what stakeholders, such as legislators and parents, deem important should be created, integrated, and articulated with competencies that need to be taught by grade levels. State education agencies should inform school administrators of these requirements, and universities need to teach prospective librarians and teachers how to teach the content. Accreditation agencies like Blue Ribbon Schools and Cognia should include school librarians, libraries, and library curricula as factors of excellency in school evaluations.

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School Librarians

Administrators expressed concerns about hiring the “right person” for the library job. They frequently discussed wanting librarians to be up to date in technology and to share that knowledge with teachers in professional development. Technology is an important concern for administrators and an area in which librarians can demonstrate leadership. Administrators value librarians who are engaged with school goals, not managers of a “silo” program.

Many interviewees expressed high regard for librarian’s teaching both independently and in collaboration with teachers. School decision-makers also related how they learned informally about school libraries and the roles of school librarians from librarians they have worked with. This suggests the important and critical influence that individual librarians, perhaps unknowingly, exert on staffing and other library-related decisions made by district and school leaders. Regular and positive communications documenting the instruction and work of librarians to meet school priorities and student success is critical to the status and longevity of school librarian employment.

Future Data Collection & Reporting

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is responsible currently for collecting and reporting data on school libraries and librarians. Counts of school librarians and library support staff in full-time equivalents (FTEs) are collected from all school districts annually. That is the extent of annual universe data collection about school libraries and librarians. Those annual data are not reported at school level; such data are only available for a sample of the nation’s schools. The last comprehensive sample survey of school libraries—the last of one of the Schools and Staffing Surveys (SASS)—was for the 2011-12 school year. SASS was succeeded by the National Teacher and Principal Surveys (NTPS). The NTPS public school survey includes only a few relevant questions: whether or not the school has a library and head counts (notably, not full-time equivalents) of full-time and part-time librarians and library instructional aides. So far, data from these NTPS questions have been released for 2015-16 and 2020-21. At present, the interval between NTPS surveys is every three years. The library questions—like some others—are only asked in every other round. This means that the next sample data about school libraries and librarians at school level will be for 2026-27, and—going on recent reporting schedules—those data are unlikely to be available before 2029. Such limited data, released on such an infrequent basis, are grossly inadequate to inform planning, evaluation, decision-making, and policy research. NCES—or perhaps another federal agency like the Institute of Museum and Library Services—should be mandated and funded specifically to collect and report comprehensive data about school libraries and librarians at least biennially.

In addition to collecting and reporting more data on a timely basis, NCES or another federal agency should review and update—in consultation with representatives of the school library community--definitions for data presently being collected. The existing definition of a school librarian dates from pre-Internet days and does not reference issues such as e-books, licensed databases, curated free websites, information literacy, or the instructional roles of a librarian. It is highly probable that this definition is sufficiently outdated as to compromise the accuracy of the data and its consistency with data from previous years. A comprehensive review of the definitions for NCES’s Common

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Core of Data is long overdue. Notably, for the NTPS surveys, there appear to be no definitions at all for terms such as “school librarian” and “technology specialist.” The lack of such definitions seriously compromises the comparability of NTPS data from school to school.

Future Research

The following future studies are recommended on the basis of findings from the entire SLIDE project:

- Qualitative study of school administrators’ expectations of school librarians.
- Assessment of the instruction of information literacy/library curricula in the absence of school librarians—who teaches it, how consistently, at what grade levels, and how competencies are assessed.
- Review of the inclusion or absence of school libraries and librarians in the evaluative criteria of K-12 accreditation agencies and award-nominating agencies (e.g., Blue Ribbon).
- Exploration of ways in which the two major national teachers’ unions support school librarian positions (including how many school librarians are members of these unions).
- Analysis of how projects funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Innovative Approaches to Literacy competitive grant program has impacted school librarian staffing.
- Study comparing the impact on student learning when a library is staffed with a paraprofessional versus a certified school librarian.
- District studies of the average number of days/hours that school libraries are open to all students and staff at different educational levels--elementary, middle and high school (how temporary assignments of librarians to cover classes as substitutes or other duties occurs and how frequently).
- Study of the effectiveness of school library services provided by degreed and certified school librarians compared with teachers who earn school library certification by passing a test, such as the Library Media PRAXIS test (with no library coursework).
- Study of state-endorsed and enforced information/media or similar curricula, who teaches it, and how student achievement of skills is assessed.
- Study of library budgets, print collection size and age, and access to subscription-based digital resources in schools with certified school librarians versus schools without certified school librarians.
- Study of alternative and expanded uses of school library spaces in the absence of librarians and who manages them.