

Introduction

For at least a decade, public schools nationwide experienced net losses of school librarians—20 percent since 2009-10, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Yet, as the number of school librarian positions decreased during this time period, numbers of school administrators and instructional coordinators increased and numbers of teachers remained relatively stable (Lance & Kachel, 2021). These data also illuminated that not all districts and not all schools have been losing librarians. Between 2020-21 and 2021-22—as districts and schools began to recover from disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic—27 states experienced net gains of school librarians, while 20 states experienced net librarian losses (Lance & Kachel, 2023). Such facts suggested that interviews of school administrators were needed to understand how and why they decided to add, reduce, eliminate, combine, or reclassify school librarian positions. This study identified those making these difficult decisions and investigated the factors, tradeoffs (advantages or disadvantages), and personal interactions that influenced school leaders' decisions about school librarian employment.

The School Librarian Investigation: Decline or Evolution? was funded by a three-year Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian/Research in Practice grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and conducted under the auspices of Antioch University Seattle. Begun in Fall 2020, the project included three major phases of research:

- A survey of the states and District of Columbia to determine how states support school libraries and school librarians, including staffing mandates and the number of institutions of higher education that prepare school librarians (Kachel & Lance, 2021).
- A quantitative analysis of data on school librarian employment at national, state, and district levels over the past decade utilizing the Common Core of Data (CCD) of NCES. In particular, this analysis examined inequities of access to school librarians associated with geography (state and region), district characteristics (enrollment, locale, and per-pupil school spending) and student demographics (poverty, race, and ethnicity) (Lance & Kachel, 2021).
- A qualitative analysis of interviews of school leaders who decided how to staff librarian and other information resources-related positions to learn the experiences, perceptions, values, and rationales that motivated their decisions.

The SLIDE project's research to date has documented serious inequities in access to school librarians, particularly among those students who likely need school librarians and library services the most. Access to school librarians is strongly related to student race and ethnicity and further exacerbated for economically disadvantaged students, students living in more isolated locales, and students in smaller enrollment districts—districts where students are less likely to have access to educational resources available in other districts (Lance, Kachel & Gerrity, 2023). In 2021-2022, according to NCES data, 7.1 million U.S. students were in districts that had no school librarians—that is

Voices of Decision-Makers
How District & School Leaders Decide About School Librarian Employment

35 percent of all local school districts (Lance & Kachel, 2023). In short, access to school librarians is a major source of educational inequality.

The final phase of the SLIDE project, the focus of this report, is based on 49 interviews of school leaders from districts and schools in varied settings in 29 states and the District of Columbia. The number of interviewees was fewer than originally planned, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred during this grant project. Nonetheless, these interviews shed a tremendous amount of light on the thinking of district and school leaders and the factors driving their decisions about school librarian employment. Readers of this report will gain a deeper understanding of how and why those decisions were made by listening to the voices of decision-makers and considering what they had to say.