

Executive Summary

In this final phase of the School Librarian Investigation—Decline of Evolution? grant project, a multi-state, qualitative study of interviews of K-12 school leaders was conducted. The purpose of the interviews was to shed light on the declining numbers of school librarians as documented in the previous work of the SLIDE project. 49 school leaders agreed to be anonymously interviewed from 29 states and D.C. Most were superintendents, assistant superintendents, or district-level administrators.

The 49 interviewees were placed in two groups for analysis—those that added or restored school librarians (28) and those that reduced, eliminated, combined, or reclassified librarian positions (26). (Five made both types of decisions.) The decision factors they identified were further categorized in three groups. Structural factors include pre-existing laws, regulations, or local circumstances that drive staffing decisions, like difficulties finding qualified candidates. Such factors leave decision-makers with little choice. Pragmatic factors are practical, often logistical problems that administrators must resolve, such as providing coverage for teacher planning time or reassigning a librarian to a classroom due to a teacher shortage. Strategic factors are discretionary ones initiated by leaders to advance district or school goals and included both positive and negative librarian staffing decisions, i.e., cutting a librarian position to fund a needed specialist.

Based on three processes of the evolutionary organizational theory, these research questions were addressed:

- What factors affected how school decision-makers chose to staff library/information resources? (Selection and Retention)
- What advantages or disadvantages did decision-makers perceive in their chosen models for staffing library/information resources compared to other alternatives they considered? (Competition)

Interview questions were developed and vetted by the project staff and the Advisory Council. Interviewers were trained and conducted practice interviews to ensure consistency. An interviewer's report form was developed with initial, anticipated responses that were later developed into codes. Dedoose, a qualitative coding app, was used to code recorded transcripts and produce co-occurrence tables for a deeper analysis of how decision responses were interconnected. Questions sought information about:

- Formal/informal instruction provided (e.g., information literacy, digital citizenship, etc.)
- Staff providing the instruction (e.g., all teachers, ed tech staff, etc.)
- Nature of the librarian staffing changes (e.g., added, reduced, etc.)
- Other positions involved in staffing decisions (school board, principals, etc.)
- Decision-making factors (see below)
- Advantages/disadvantages or tradeoffs to decisions made
- Interviewee's interactions with librarians that may have influenced their decisions

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Interviewees who reported adding or restoring school librarian positions were more likely to report strategic factors that shaped their decisions than their counterparts who cut librarian positions. Among those who increased librarian positions, decision factors clustered in these four themes, based on frequently cited factors and factors that co-occurred with them.

- For the theme of Librarians for Equity of Access, factors co-occurring with equity were stand-alone instruction by librarians and changes in priorities.
- For the theme of New Leadership, New Priorities, co-occurring factors were change in administration and change in priorities.
- For the theme of More Teaching by Librarians, co-occurring factors were priority changes, stand-alone instruction by librarians, planning time for teachers, and librarian-teacher collaboration.
- For the theme of Opportunity to Meet Mandates, co-occurring factors were new funding and changes in priorities.

Interviewees who reported reducing, eliminating, combining, or reclassifying school librarian positions were more likely to report structural factors that shaped their decisions than their counterparts who made positive decisions about librarians. These three prevailing themes emerged from this group.

- For the theme of New Priorities, More Specialists & Teachers, co-occurring factors were budget constraints, change in priorities, needing an incumbent librarian in another position, and needing more teachers;
- For the theme of New Leadership, New Priorities co-occurring factors were change in administration, change in priorities, and budget constraints.
- For the theme of Can't Find a Librarian co-occurring factors were finding a qualified candidate and budget constraints.

A prevailing theme among both groups of interviewees—whether librarian positions were increased or decreased—related to changes in administration and/or changes in priorities. This suggests that changes in support for school librarian staffing are sometimes based on preconceived beliefs of new leaders about the value of school libraries and librarians.

Examples and selected quotes gathered about the advantages, disadvantages, and tradeoffs made by interviewees' decisions—whether to increase or decrease librarian positions—are presented in the full report. Interactions with school librarians that impacted the interviewed school administrators' views and perceptions about providing school librarians in their schools ran the gamut of responses defying meaningful analysis. Selected quotes are also included in the full report. However, most comments were positive about school librarians, even among those who decided to reduce librarian positions.

Since 49 cases cannot be used to generalize, NCES data on school librarian employment were also analyzed to add perspective. Comparing the 2020-21 and 2021-22 years revealed extreme volatility in hiring patterns likely due to

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the impact of the COVID pandemic. During this one-year interval, 15.4 percent of U.S. school districts added librarians, while 15.9 percent, reduced or eliminated librarians. In 2021-2022, according to NCES data, 7.1 million U.S. students were in districts that had no school librarians—that is 35 percent of all local school districts (Lance & Kachel, 2023).

Thematic analysis revealed patterns in how administrators decide about school librarian staffing and provided interesting examples and quotes from interviewees. Those patterns provide insights to stakeholders seeking to better understand often-volatile trends in school librarian employment. This work offers a glimpse into the thinking of K-12 leaders who must frequently make unenviable decisions that impact educational opportunities for students and academic support for teachers. In short, access to school librarians continues to be a major source of educational inequity driven by the circumstances and often unique realities of today's K-12 environment and the priorities and values of key administrative school leaders.