How District & School Leaders Decide about School Librarian Employment

BY DEBRA E KACHEL, PROJECT DIRECTOR, IMLS SLIDE PROJECT

The School Librarian Investigation—Decline of Evolution?—or SLIDE—was a 2020-23 project funded by a Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian grant from the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services to Antioch University Seattle. The final phase of this project was a qualitative study of interviews of K-12 educational administrators. The report entitled Voices of Decision Makers: How District & School Leaders Decide about School Librarian Employment has just been published and is available at https://libslide.org/voices-of-decision-makers/

The purpose was to learn the perceptions, factors, priorities, and experiences that led these administrators to either increase or decrease librarian staffing levels. Forty-nine school leaders from 29 states and D.C. agreed to be interviewed anonymously. Most were superintendents, assistant superintendents, or other district-level administrators.

Among administrators who increased school librarian positions, researchers identified four major themes:
- Equity of Access to Librarians
- New Leadership, New Priorities
- More Teaching by Librarians
- Opportunity to Meet Mandates

Among administrators who reported reducing, eliminating, combining, or reclassifying school librarian positions, three prevailing themes emerged:

- New Priorities, More Specialists & Teachers
- Can't Find a Librarian
- New Leadership, New Priorities

A prevailing theme among both groups of interviewees—whether librarian staffing was increased or decreased—related to changes in administration and changes in priorities. This suggests that support for school librarians is sometimes based on preconceived beliefs of new leaders about the value of school libraries and librarians. Also, both groups were influenced by previous experiences, whether positive or negative, working with or supervising school librarians.

Factors were grouped into three types. Structural factors were identified as those administrators felt little control over, including, hiring staff to address state mandates, opening/closing of buildings, and "pipeline" issues. Pragmatic factors addressed logistical issues such as having enough teachers to cover classes and reassigning librarians to meet immediate needs. Strategic factors represented district priorities, including hiring staff perceived to improve specific student performance goals or to improve equity of access to librarians.

Administrators who added librarians were more likely to report strategic factors while those that reduced librarian staffing cited more structural and pragmatic factors. Insightful quotes are included in the full report and illustrate unenviable and difficult decisions that school leaders had to make to staff library and information services to meet local needs while staying within their budgets.

To add perspective to these 49 cases, national school librarian employment data were analyzed. The last two years of available data-- 2020-21 and 2021-22--revealed extreme volatility in hiring patterns likely due to the impact of the COVID pandemic. In 2021-2022, 7.1 million U.S. students were in districts that had no school librarians—that is 35 percent of all local school districts with 57 percent of those districts being majority-minority districts. 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.