

School Librarian Employment in the United States Since the Pandemic, 2019–2020 to 2022–2023

Keith Curry Lance

Research Consultant, School of Information
San José State University

The status of school librarianship was the subject of a three-year research project funded by a Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to Antioch University Seattle. SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? began in September 2020 and ended in August 2023. Debra E. Kachel (dkachel@antioch.edu) was the project director, and Keith Curry Lance, Ph.D. (keithlance@comcast.net), was the principal investigator. For complete information about the SLIDE study, visit its website—<https://libSLIDE.org>—which provides access to its reports and infographics, videos and PowerPoint files for conference and workshop presentations, external links to news articles and editorials citing the study, and a powerful set of interactive data tools delivering on-demand access to user-selected data about school librarian employment from 2009 to 2010 to the present. Embedded, step-by-step tutorials make it possible to use these tools quickly and easily.

This year's update summarizes key findings from two datasets from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as well as the findings of interviews of K–12 public education leaders conducted as part of the SLIDE study:

- The Common Core of Data (CCD), which reports annual district-level counts of school librarians in full-time equivalents (FTEs), provides the data necessary to examine how trends in school librarian employment changed at national and state levels from 2019–2020—the school year during which the COVID-19 pandemic began—to 2022–2023—the latest available data. (CCD releases both state and district data files. The state data file is the basis for this report.)
- The National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) project conducts a sample survey of public schools that report head counts of full- and part-time school librarians periodically. The latest such data are for 2020–2021 but were only released in 2023. The previous data were for 2015–2016, and the next data will be for 2026–2027. Consequently, for the first time in many years, this dataset permits us to examine school librarian employment at the school, rather than district, level—an entirely different perspective. This dataset was accessed via NCES's Datalab interactive data tools.
- The final phase of the SLIDE study was a series of qualitative interviews of district and school administrators that were conducted during 2023. These interviews explored their perceptions of and experiences with school librarians as well as the factors driving their decision making about employing librarians.

National- and State-Level Patterns, 2022–2023

The latest school year for which staffing data are available is 2022–2023. Examining these data from both national and state perspectives is revelatory.

National Findings

In 2022–2023 the 50 states and the District of Columbia reported 39,310.60 FTEs of school librarians, 99,409 schools, and 49,514,913 students. Nationwide, that amounts to a librarian FTE per school of .40, and 1,260 students per librarian FTE. (See Table 1.)

As these numbers starkly illustrate, the reported number of librarian FTEs is considerably less than half the number that would be required to meet the standard specified in the American Association of School Librarians staffing position statement, which calls for a minimum of one full-time librarian in every school—traditional public, public charter, and private (American Association of School Librarians, 2019). Unsurprisingly, this deficiency means that the ratio of students to librarians—well more than 1,000—presents a daunting challenge to school librarians as teachers of information literacy and educational technology to all students and guides as well as providers of more individualized attention to students with various special needs. Yet, these national figures obscure a dramatic range of differences in the status of school librarian employment from state to state. While the status of school librarianship can be described as thriving in some states, it is more accurately described as struggling in others.

State Findings

By far, Texas reported the largest number of school librarian FTEs at 4,447.04. (See Table 1.) Almost or slightly more than 2,000 FTEs each were reported by Georgia (2,066.30), Florida (2,042.42), and North Carolina (1,983.09). Other states reporting 1,000 or more school librarian FTEs were Virginia (1,837.75), Pennsylvania (1,494.84), Tennessee (1,413.26), Illinois (1,336.22), Alabama (1,305.95), Missouri (1,299.76), New Jersey (1,184.74), Maryland (1,138.96), South Carolina (1,089.65), New York (1,080.25), and Kentucky (1,015.38). States reporting fewer than 100 school librarian FTEs were Hawaii (88.50), Wyoming (76.75), South Dakota (61.70), and Idaho (33.87).

Six states come closest to achieving the ideal of a full-time librarian in every school: Georgia (.89); Alabama, South Carolina, and Virginia (all .86); Arkansas (.83); and Maryland (.81). In half of those states—Alabama, Arkansas, and South Carolina—there are state mandates for school librarians, and those mandates are enforced. In the other three states—Georgia, Maryland, and Virginia—while mandates exist, they are not enforced. Notably, as recorded by Lance and Kachel (2021, pp. 30–31), higher levels of school librarian staffing tended to be reported by states that mandate school librarians, whether or not those mandates are enforced. States with the fewest librarian FTEs relative to schools were Idaho (.04), California (.06), and South Dakota (.09). Other states with fewer than .25 librarian FTEs per school were Oregon (.12), Indiana (.13), Minnesota (.14), Michigan (.15), Arizona and Ohio (both .19), Wyoming (.21), Utah and New York (both .22), and New Mexico and Colorado (both .23).

Table 1 / Librarians in Full-Time Equivalents, Librarian FTE Per School, and Students Per Librarian FTE, 2022–2023

State Name	Librarian FTEs	Schools	Librarian FTE per School	Student Enrollment	Students per Librarian FTE
ALABAMA	1,305.95	1,516	0.86	750,923	575
ALASKA	126.74	498	0.25	130,723	1,031
ARIZONA	451.17	2,429	0.19	1,132,223	2,510
ARKANSAS	909.43	1,098	0.83	493,130	542
CALIFORNIA	637.97	10,327	0.06	5,851,877	9,173
COLORADO	452.94	1,932	0.23	870,871	1,923
CONNECTICUT	711.85	1,013	0.70	513,513	721
DELAWARE	108.30	229	0.47	141,465	1,306
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	115.39	244	0.47	91,001	789
FLORIDA	2,042.42	4,230	0.48	2,870,527	1,405
GEORGIA	2,066.30	2,316	0.89	1,750,972	847
HAWAII	88.50	295	0.30	170,209	1,923
IDAHO	33.87	795	0.04	317,555	9,376
ILLINOIS	1,336.22	4,408	0.30	1,852,242	1,386
INDIANA	256.00	1,921	0.13	1,036,108	4,047
IOWA	383.40	1,327	0.29	511,297	1,334
KANSAS	575.00	1,355	0.42	487,978	849
KENTUCKY	1,015.38	1,542	0.66	660,029	650
LOUISIANA	892.29	1,337	0.67	718,145	805
MAINE	188.40	597	0.32	173,853	923
MARYLAND	1,138.96	1,410	0.81	889,960	781
MASSACHUSETTS	636.88	1,837	0.35	923,349	1,450
MICHIGAN	515.00	3,510	0.15	1,433,914	2,784
MINNESOTA	381.18	2,690	0.14	870,019	2,282
MISSISSIPPI	740.59	1,038	0.71	440,285	595
MISSOURI	1,299.76	2,473	0.53	892,246	686
MONTANA	363.32	826	0.44	150,733	415
NEBRASKA	512.28	1,092	0.47	329,234	643
NEVADA	366.50	748	0.49	484,192	1,321
NEW HAMPSHIRE	318.60	502	0.63	168,909	530
NEW JERSEY	1,184.74	2,562	0.46	1,383,830	1,168
NEW MEXICO	208.56	890	0.23	315,023	1,510
NEW YORK	1,080.25	4,812	0.22	2,532,888	2,345
NORTH CAROLINA	1,983.09	2,716	0.73	1,541,722	777

Table 1 / Librarians in Full-Time Equivalents, Librarian FTE Per School, and Students Per Librarian FTE, 2022–2023

State Name	Librarian FTEs	Schools	Librarian FTE per School	Student Enrollment	Students per Librarian FTE
NORTH DAKOTA	177.31	511	0.35	118,513	668
OHIO	684.32	3,632	0.19	1,680,639	2,456
OKLAHOMA	883.97	1,781	0.50	701,301	793
OREGON	159.89	1,286	0.12	552,380	3,455
PENNSYLVANIA	1,494.84	2,936	0.51	1,693,347	1,133
RHODE ISLAND	168.01	316	0.53	137,449	818
SOUTH CAROLINA	1,089.65	1,264	0.86	789,231	724
SOUTH DAKOTA	61.70	720	0.09	141,888	2,300
TENNESSEE	1,413.26	1,900	0.74	1,006,752	712
TEXAS	4,447.04	9,180	0.48	5,519,599	1,241
UTAH	239.22	1,102	0.22	691,906	2,892
VERMONT	203.86	305	0.67	83,654	410
VIRGINIA	1,837.75	2,132	0.86	1,260,351	686
WASHINGTON	854.53	2,549	0.34	1,090,227	1,276
WEST VIRGINIA	184.14	684	0.27	251,224	1,364
WISCONSIN	907.13	2,235	0.41	823,040	907
WYOMING	76.75	361	0.21	92,467	1,205
TOTAL	39,310.60	99,409	0.40	49,514,913	1,260

Only two states had fewer than 500 students per librarian FTE: Vermont (410) and Montana (415). Other states with fewer than 600 students per librarian FTE were New Hampshire (530), Arkansas (542), Alabama (575), and Mississippi (595). Two states had ratios of students relative to librarian FTEs that exceeded 9,000: Idaho (9,376) and California (9,173). Other states with ratios of students per librarian FTE between 2,500 and just more than 4,000 were Indiana (4,047), Oregon (3,455), Utah (2,892), Michigan (2,784), and Arizona (2,510).

National- and State-Level Patterns and Trends, 2019–2020 to 2022–2023

Even greater perspective on the changing status of school librarianship may be gained by examining how the status of the profession has changed, at both national and state levels, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019–2020 and during its aftermath from 2020–2021 to 2022–2023.

National Findings

For 2019–2020, the 50 states and the District of Columbia reported 39,447.36 FTEs of school librarians. The following year, 2020–2021—which began in the

Table 2 / School Librarian Employment in Full-Time Equivalents, 2019–2020 to 2022–2023

	Librarians 2022–2023	Librarians 2021–2022	Librarians 2020–2021	Librarians 2019–2020
Total in Full-Time Equivalents	39,310.60	39,285.23	39,195.28	39,447.36
Year-to-Year Numerical Change	25.37	89.95	(252.08)	
Year-to-Year Percent Change	0.1%	0.2%	-0.6%	

midst of nationwide pre-vaccine pandemic shutdowns—39,195.28 FTEs of school librarians—a decrease of 0.6 percent—were reported. Notably, however, that loss of 252.08 FTEs was one of the smallest in a decade-and-a-half trend of decline. (See Table 2.)

Intriguingly, since 2020–2021, reported librarian FTEs have risen to 39,285.23 for 2021–2022 and 39,310.60 for 2022–2023. The national net gain of 89.95 FTEs in 2021–2022 and 25.37 FTEs in 2022–2023 represents a striking change in trajectory. After a decade and a half during which annual losses of 500–1,000 or more FTEs were common, for the four latest years of data—2019–2020 to 2022–2023—employment of school librarians has leveled off at more than 39,000.

Doubtless, the reason for this dramatic change involves many complex factors, but three seem likely to be major contributors: (1) congressional appropriation in 2020 and 2021 of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund as part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act (Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, n.d.), (2) countless school librarians demonstrating their value during a crisis by stepping up to support face-to-face, blended, and distance learning in innovative ways as their schools struggled to cope with the pandemic (American Association of School Librarians, 2020; Follett, 2020), and (3) the increasing number of states—pre- and post-pandemic—adopting requirements that public schools teach media literacy (Carillo, 2023; Schwartz, 2021).

A strong signal about the role of ESSER funding in contributing to more stable employment of school librarians will be supplied by the data NCES reports for 2023–2024 and 2024–2025, when ESSER funds will no longer provide federal fiscal support to public education. The role of media literacy in bolstering school librarian employment will become clearer if and as more states mandate its teaching and school librarians in those states establish themselves as key contributors to its teaching. The permanence of pandemic-era changes to public education—including the evolving roles of school librarians—remains an open question.

State Findings

The relative stability of school librarian employment nationwide during the pandemic era obscures some noteworthy differences between states as well as varying patterns over time among groups of states. (See Table 3.)

Consider changes from 2019–2020—the school year the pandemic struck—to 2022–2023—the latest school year for which data are available—and from

Table 3 / School Librarian Employment by State, 2019–2020 to 2022–2023 and 2021–2022 to 2022–2023

State Name	Librarians 2022–2023	Librarians 2021–2022	Numerical Change from 2021–2022 to 2022–2023	Percent Change from 2021–2022 to 2022–2023	Librarians 2020–2021	Librarians 2019–2020	Numerical Change from 2019–2020 to 2022–2023	Percent Change from 2019–2020 to 2022–2023
ALABAMA	1,305.95	1,305.34	0.61	0.0%	1,305.34	1,305.29	0.66	0.1%
ALASKA	126.74	130.89	(4.15)	-3.2%	132.35	134.54	(7.80)	-5.8%
ARIZONA	451.17	464.80	(13.63)	-2.9%	415.46	419.34	31.83	7.6%
ARKANSAS	909.43	898.60	10.83	1.2%	894.33	923.81	(14.38)	-1.6%
CALIFORNIA*	637.97	591.35	46.62	7.9%	620.94	87.00	550.97	633.3%
COLORADO	452.94	474.49	(21.55)	-4.5%	468.60	511.99	(59.05)	-11.5%
CONNECTICUT	711.85	681.50	30.35	4.5%	668.10	729.65	(17.80)	-2.4%
DELAWARE	108.30	107.80	0.50	0.5%	105.30	109.00	(0.70)	-0.6%
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	115.39	100.34	15.05	15.0%	88.00	109.50	5.89	5.4%
FLORIDA	2,042.42	1,911.18	131.24	6.9%	1,923.52	1,991.14	51.28	2.6%
GEORGIA	2,066.30	2,040.00	26.30	1.3%	2,033.30	2,061.20	5.10	0.2%
HAWAII	88.50	87.50	1.00	1.1%	114.00	125.50	(37.00)	-29.5%
IDAHO	33.87	34.15	(0.28)	-0.8%	41.67	34.34	(0.47)	-1.4%
ILLINOIS*	1,336.22	1,496.14	(159.92)	-10.7%	1,496.14	1,399.96	(63.74)	-4.6%
INDIANA	256.00	458.00	(202.00)	-44.1%	522.54	596.54	(340.54)	-57.1%
IOWA	383.40	384.82	(1.42)	-0.4%	376.73	379.81	3.59	0.9%
KANSAS	575.00	600.32	(25.32)	-4.2%	602.99	618.14	(43.14)	-7.0%
KENTUCKY	1,015.38	1,026.80	(11.42)	-1.1%	1,010.54	1,023.54	(8.16)	-0.8%

(table continued on next page)

Table 3 / School Librarian Employment by State, 2019–2020 to 2022–2023 and 2021–2022 to 2022–2023 (continued)

State Name	Librarians 2022–2023	Librarians 2021–2022	Numerical Change from 2021–2022 to 2022–2023	Percent Change from 2021–2022 to 2022–2023	Librarians 2020–2021	Librarians 2019–2020	Numerical Change from 2019–2020 to 2022–2023	Percent Change from 2019–2020 to 2022–2023
LOUISIANA	892.29	922.78	(30.49)	-3.3%	926.54	956.95	(64.66)	-6.8%
MAINE	188.40	183.80	4.60	2.5%	181.70	186.70	1.70	0.9%
MARYLAND	1,138.96	1,132.63	6.33	0.6%	1,132.73	1,149.83	(10.87)	-0.9%
MASSACHUSETTS	636.88	611.52	25.36	4.1%	555.45	616.11	20.77	3.4%
MICHIGAN	515.00	516.58	(1.58)	-0.3%	479.96	509.44	5.56	1.1%
MINNESOTA	381.18	400.27	(19.09)	-4.8%	433.52	482.77	(101.59)	-21.0%
MISSISSIPPI	740.59	740.65	(0.06)	0.0%	725.03	744.18	(3.59)	-0.5%
MISSOURI	1,299.76	1,278.58	21.18	1.7%	1,302.60	1,333.84	(34.08)	-2.6%
MONTANA	363.32	370.52	(7.20)	-1.9%	362.42	372.71	(9.39)	-2.5%
NEBRASKA	512.28	519.20	(6.92)	-1.3%	532.99	535.21	(22.93)	-4.3%
NEVADA*	366.50	258.00	108.50	42.1%	258.00	278.00	88.50	31.8%
NEW HAMPSHIRE	318.60	327.30	(8.70)	-2.7%	325.80	333.10	(14.50)	-4.4%
NEW JERSEY	1,184.74	1,206.18	(21.44)	-1.8%	1,216.14	1,255.43	(70.69)	-5.6%
NEW MEXICO	208.56	207.64	0.92	0.4%	190.57	211.35	(2.79)	-1.3%
NEW YORK	1,080.25	1,043.85	36.40	3.5%	955.58	539.15	541.10	100.4%
NORTH CAROLINA	1,983.09	2,018.78	(35.69)	-1.8%	2,023.42	2,024.77	(41.68)	-2.1%
NORTH DAKOTA	177.31	179.29	(1.98)	-1.1%	174.58	177.48	(0.17)	-0.1%
OHIO	684.32	701.86	(17.54)	-2.5%	722.72	803.17	(118.85)	-14.8%
OKLAHOMA	883.97	883.39	0.58	0.1%	879.82	890.08	(6.11)	-0.7%

OREGON	159.89	158.35	1.54	1.0%	146.70	150.90	8.99	6.0%
PENNSYLVANIA	1,494.84	1,494.61	0.23	0.0%	1,521.78	1,588.63	(93.79)	-5.9%
RHODE ISLAND	168.01	169.96	(1.95)	-1.1%	176.16	183.50	(15.49)	-8.4%
SOUTH CAROLINA	1,089.65	1,091.55	(1.90)	-0.2%	1,086.40	1,099.40	(9.75)	-0.9%
SOUTH DAKOTA	61.70	64.50	(2.80)	-4.3%	66.38	69.65	(7.95)	-11.4%
TENNESSEE	1,413.26	1,372.89	40.37	2.9%	1,333.19	1,525.70	(112.44)	-7.4%
TEXAS	4,447.04	4,384.81	62.23	1.4%	4,485.48	4,563.06	(116.02)	-2.5%
UTAH*	239.22	233.80	5.42	2.3%	228.48	228.48	10.74	4.7%
VERMONT	203.86	205.48	(1.62)	-0.8%	202.80	205.43	(1.57)	-0.8%
VIRGINIA	1,837.75	1,799.00	38.75	2.2%	1,779.53	1,814.44	23.31	1.3%
WASHINGTON	854.53	820.18	34.35	4.2%	792.59	848.97	5.56	0.7%
WEST VIRGINIA	184.14	185.14	(1.00)	-0.5%	200.59	208.69	(24.55)	-11.8%
WISCONSIN	907.13	928.04	(20.91)	-2.3%	898.67	917.44	(10.31)	-1.1%
WYOMING	76.75	80.08	(3.33)	-4.2%	77.11	82.51	(5.76)	-7.0%
TOTAL	39,310.60	39,285.23	25.37	0.1%	39,195.28	39,447.36	(136.76)	-0.3%

* Data missing or questionable for this state for one or more years

2021–2022 to 2022–2023, the most recent annual interval. Between 2019–2020 and 2022–2023, nine states gained school librarians, 27 lost librarians, and 13 saw little to no change (less than plus or minus one percent). (Two states did not report credible data for at least one year during that interval.) During the latest annual interval, 2021–2022 to 2022–2023, circumstances changed substantially: 18 states (twice as many as between 2019–2020 and 2022–2023) gained school librarians, 20 lost librarians, and 13 saw little to no change.

From 2019–2020 to 2022–2023, double-digit numerical gains in school librarian FTEs were reported by Nevada (88.50), Florida (51.28), Arizona (31.83), Virginia (23.31), Massachusetts (20.77), and Utah (10.74). During the same interval, a double-digit percentage gain in school librarian FTEs was reported only by Nevada (31.8 percent). Most of Nevada’s impressive gain occurred sometime between 2020–2021, when the state reported 258 librarian FTEs, and 2022–2023, when it reported 366.50. (Total librarian FTEs were not reported for the state for the 2021–2022 school year.) The gain of 108.50 FTEs over that two-year period is likely largely (if not exclusively) explained by the Clark County School District board’s passage of P-6161, a districtwide policy that mandates a certified school librarian in every school in the Las Vegas area district (Appleton, 2021; Beer, 2024; Clark County School District, 2021).

As impressive as these pre- to post-pandemic gains are, however, more states lost than gained school librarian FTEs between 2019–2020 and 2022–2023. During that interval, 35 states reported losses of librarian FTEs. Of those 35 states, at least 22 experienced double- or triple-digit numerical losses, and, for six of those states, those losses were double-digit percentage losses. (Those “at least” figures exclude states with known or suspected reporting irregularities.) For 13 states, the percentage change was negligible (i.e., less than plus or minus one percent).

From 2021–2022 to 2022–2023, 18 states and the District of Columbia reported increases in school librarian FTEs. Double- or triple-digit numerical gains in school librarian FTEs were reported by 12 states—Florida (131.24), Nevada (108.50), Texas (62.23), California (46.62), Virginia (38.75), New York (36.40), Washington (34.35), Connecticut (30.35), Georgia (26.30), Massachusetts (25.36), Missouri (21.18), and Arkansas (10.83)—as well as the District of Columbia (15.05). During the same one-year period, double-digit percentage gains in school librarian FTEs were reported by Nevada (42.1 percent) and the District of Columbia (15 percent).

Still, despite the national total of school librarian FTEs remaining relatively stable between 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 (a gain of 25.37 FTEs nationwide), 27 states experienced declines in librarian FTEs. Of those 27 states, 12 experienced double- or triple-digit numerical losses, and, for only two of those states—Illinois and Indiana—those losses reached double-digit percentages. For 13 states, the percentage change was negligible (i.e., rounding to zero or less than plus or minus one percent).

School-Level Patterns and Trends, 2015–2016 to 2020–2021

It has only recently become possible to assess librarian staffing at the school level, due to the long interval between the two most recent datasets from NCES’s

periodic sample survey of schools. In 2023 NTPS released long-awaited 2020–2021 school-level data—the first from that survey since 2015–2016. These more precise school-level data provide a clearer picture than ever of the status of U.S. school librarianship at the beginning of the post-COVID era. In particular, these school level data provide the first clear evidence since 2015–2016 of where school librarians are absent at that level. Unfortunately, these data will not be updated again until the 2026–2027 school year at the earliest.

In 2020–2021—the first full school year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—29.5 percent of schools reported having no full- or part-time librarians, an increase from 25.4 percent in 2015–2016. This report confirms the existence of continuing inequities in access to librarians at the school level associated with charter status, region, student enrollment, locale, grade level, race and ethnicity, and students qualifying for free and reduced-cost meals (a poverty indicator). In 2020–2021:

- Seven out of 10 charter schools—compared with only a quarter of traditional schools—were without librarians, either full- or part-time.
- Of schools in the West, 37.8 percent reported no librarians. By contrast, only 22.2 percent of schools in the South had no librarians.
- Of schools with fewer than 200 students, 65.5 percent reported no librarians (up only slightly from 62.1 percent five years earlier). Of schools with 2,000 or more students, however, those without librarians grew from 10.8 percent in 2015–2016 to 16.3 percent in 2020–2021—the largest percentage increase (5.5 percent) in schools without librarians of any enrollment range.
- Of schools in cities, 34.9 percent reported no librarians (up from 30.5 percent), and, of those in outlying towns, 29.5 percent lacked librarians (up from 24.1 percent).
- Most combined schools have consistently lacked librarians—57 percent reporting none in 2020–2021 (up from 51.2 percent in 2015–2016). And primary schools saw the largest percentage increase in librarian-less schools: 25.2 percent in 2020–2021 (up from 20.3 percent five years earlier).
- Of majority Hispanic schools, 33.8 percent reported no librarians in 2020–2021—up from 27.2 percent in 2015–2016—the largest increase in schools without librarians associated with race or ethnicity.
- Of schools serving the most students living in poverty (75 percent or more of their enrollment), 32.5 percent reported no librarians in 2020–2021, up slightly from 31.7 percent five years earlier. While schools with the fewest students living in poverty (less than 35 percent) were less likely than the highest-poverty schools to be without librarians in 2015–2016 and 2020–2021, the percentage for the lowest-poverty schools almost doubled—from 16.5 percent to 29.7 percent, almost eliminating the previously sizable gap between those two groups of schools.

The caveat that applies to all of these data is that they come from a self-selected sample of schools that was weighted to represent the nation as a whole.

Because of those two factors—self-selection and weighting—NCES acknowledges the potential bias in the results that may make these findings underestimate schools without librarians (Taie and Lewis, 2022, p. B-14). That said, the relative differences over time and between groups of schools likely indicate meaningful differences that should be taken seriously. For a more in-depth presentation of these findings, see “Schools without Librarians: First School-Level Data on the Post-COVID Era: A SLIDE Special Report” (Ellis and Lance, 2024).

Voices of Decision-Makers, 2023

In the final phase of SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? grant project, K–12 school leaders from across the nation were interviewed (Lance, et al., 2023). 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. Forty-nine school leaders from 29 states and the District of Columbia agreed to be interviewed anonymously. Most were superintendents, assistant superintendents, or other district-level administrators, although some were school-level leaders.

The 49 interviewees were placed into 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 into 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 include both positive and negative librarian staffing decisions.

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 application, 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 (e.g., school board, principals, etc.)
- Decision-making factors (see below)
- Advantages/disadvantages or trade-offs to decisions made
- Interviewees' interactions with librarians that may have influenced their decisions

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 two 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 standalone instruction by librarians and changes in priorities.
- 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 trade-offs made in interviewees' decisions—whether to increase or decrease librarian positions—are presented in the full report, titled “Voices of Decision-Makers: How District & School Leaders Decide about School Librarian Employment” (Lance et al., 2023).

Interactions with school librarians that impacted the interviewed school administrators' views and perceptions about employing librarians ran an interesting gamut. Selected quotes are also included in the full report. Notably, however, most

comments were positive about school librarians, even among those who felt they had little choice but 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 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 school years revealed extreme volatility in hiring patterns likely due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. During that 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 and Kachel, 2023).

Thematic analysis revealed patterns in how administrators decide about school librarian staffing and provided interesting examples and quotes from interviewees. Those patterns offer insights to stakeholders seeking to better understand often-volatile trends in school librarian employment. This work provides 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.

Ongoing SLIDE Research

The SLIDE project’s work from 2020 to 2023 was funded by a Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian research grant from the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to Antioch University Seattle. From 2024 SLIDE’s ongoing work is being sponsored by San José State University’s School of Information and other occasional contributors. The 2024 updating of the libSLIDE.org website’s interactive data tools with 2022–2023 data was funded by LMC Source. Future research associated with the SLIDE project is expected to focus on deeper examination of federal and state data sources about school libraries and librarians, particularly in California and the Pacific Northwest. For the latest SLIDE reports, news, and data, consult the libSLIDE.org website or contact the author, Keith Curry Lance, at keithlance@comcast.net.

Notes

1. American Association of School Librarians (2019). *Appropriate Staffing for School Libraries* (position statement). <https://www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/resources/statements>.
2. American Association of School Librarians (2020). *School Librarian Role in Pandemic Learning Conditions*. <http://www.ala.org/aasl/pandemic>.
3. Appleton, Aleksandra (January 11, 2021). “CCSD Board’s Move to Bolster Libraries May Become Noisy Dispute.” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. <https://www.reviewjournal.com/local/education/ccsd-boards-move-to-bolster-libraries-may-become-noisy-dispute-2249216>.
4. Beer, Nicole (April 9, 2024). “OPINION: Book Banning Takes a Fiscal and Moral Toll on Our Schools.” *The Nevada Independent*. <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/opinion-book-banning-takes-a-fiscal-and-moral-toll-on-our-schools>.
5. Carillo, Sequoia (November 24, 2023). “California Joins a Growing Movement to Teach Media Literacy in Schools.” *All Things Considered*. <https://www.npr>.

- org/2023/11/24/1215152769/california-joins-a-growing-movement-to-teach-media-literacy-in-schools.
6. Clark County School District (2021). Clark County School District Policy P-6161: School libraries. <https://ccsd.net/district/policies-regulations/notices/policy-6161-school-librar.pdf>.
 7. Ellis, D., and Lance, K.C. (February 2024). "Schools without Librarians: First School-Level Data on the Post-COVID Era: A SLIDE Special Report." SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? <https://libSLIDE.org/publications/schoolswithoutlibrarians>.
 8. Follett, Britten (October 22, 2020). "How School Librarians Are Getting Creative in a Pandemic." eSchool News. <https://www.eschoolnews.com/innovative-teaching/2020/10/22/how-school-librarians-are-getting-creative-in-a-pandemic>.
 9. Kachel, D.E., and Lance, K.C. (2021). "Contexts of School Librarian Employment." SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? <https://libslide.org/pubs/contexts.pdf>.
 10. Lance, K.C., and Kachel, D.E. (July 2021). "Perspectives on School Librarian Employment in the United States, 2009–10 to 2018–19." SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? <https://libslide.org/pubs/Perspectives.pdf>.
 11. Lance, K.C., Kachel, D.E., Breevoort, L., Gerrity, C., and Ellis, D. (2023). "Voices of Decision-Makers: How District & School Leaders Decide about School Librarian Employment." SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? <https://libSLIDE.org/publications/voices>.
 12. Office of Elementary & Secondary Education (n.d.). Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund. U.S. Department of Education. <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/education-stabilization-fund/elementary-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund>.
 13. Schwartz, Sarah (January 20, 2021). "New Media Literacy Standards Aim to Combat 'Truth Decay.'" *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/new-media-literacy-standards-aim-to-combat-truth-decay/2021/01>.
 14. Taie, S., and Lewis, L. (2022). "Characteristics of 2020–21 Public and Private K–12 Schools in the United States: Results from the National Teacher and Principal Survey First Look" (NCES 2022-111). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2022111>.