

Could School Librarians Be the Secret to Increasing Literacy Scores?

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ABSTRACT

This report shows a strong connection between student access to librarians and gains in the literacy-based component of standardized tests for students in DCPS. In a survey of DCPS librarians she conducted for the report, a majority say that the support they provide to students through book clubs, author visits, reading challenges, and access to books have all contributed to the literacy gains their schools have seen. The school librarians surveyed in the report acknowledge that they could do even more to help boost literacy with even more funding and support.

Understanding the Impact of a School Librarian

Increasingly, students are becoming data points instead of young people with names, personalities, and talents. It is disheartening to watch, especially as a librarian who fosters a love of reading, creativity, and critical thinking skills development.

In an educational system that attaches value to students based on their standardized test scores, school districts, and educators find themselves scrambling to identify new tools and techniques to help increase students' math and reading scores.

Investments in online learning tools have been made throughout districts across the nation, and seemingly every year, new products or initiatives are being touted to further boost testing outcomes, with varying degrees of success. A few school districts, it seems, have chosen to invest in people, rather than only online tools, in their quest to increase test scores, at least for reading. Their secret weapon? School Librarians.

During SY19-20, administrators from my school district, the District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) system, targeted School Librarians/Media Specialists for cuts. After years of fighting for and appearing to have finally won the support needed from Central Office, we lost several positions. The battle to retain positions was over the relevance of

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librarians during budget talks.

Do we really need them? What, actually, do they do? Can't we just have mini-libraries in each classroom; why do we need a dedicated space? Why not just hire an Educational Aide to 'man' the space? These were just a few of the questions I can imagine were asked/proposed by those in the budget talks as well as some principals who didn't see the value in our positions.

"Reading and writing scores tend to be higher for all students who have a full-time certified librarian, and when it comes to reading, students in at-risk subgroups tend to benefit more than all students combined." (Lance & Kachel, 2018)

In the 2019-20 school year, the outcome of those budget talks were that School Librarians were demoted from L1 to L2s, meaning their previously mandatory position in schools was left at the discretion of the principals. This resulted in a cut of over 20 library positions, many in our most underserved, under-resourced communities.

This mind-boggling and egregious act led me to conduct my own research for the Washington (D.C.) Teacher's Union, which quantifies the importance of School Librarians in schools since, it seems, numbers are all bureaucracies understand. I wanted to see how librarians in my school district felt. I chose to use a survey that I distributed to DCPS school librarians. The school librarian survey, which garnered 35 responses, asked respondents various questions about their roles in the school, their access to students, the school's standardized test results, and the expectation the school community had of them. Survey respondents represented schools from every ward in the district.

- 49% of respondents worked as elementary school librarians
- 11% worked in either an education campus or middle school
- 29% worked in a high school
- 63% of respondents taught classes or assisted teachers with instruction
- 91% of respondents said their school saw gains in literacy-based component of standardized tests while they have been the librarian
- 69% of respondents said they have regular access to students
- 57% believe that having more access to students would further increase literacy gains
- Over 80% of respondents believe their additional support through book clubs, author visits, reading challenges, and unrestricted access to books for pleasure, reading have contributed to the literacy gains their schools have seen by fostering a love of reading
- 100% of respondents acknowledge with even more funding and support, they could do even more to help boost literacy

Excitingly, in my research, I also discovered parents had been the key to ensuring schools had fully certified school librarians in DC from 2013-2019.

In 2012, then Chancellor, Kaya Henderson, came very close to eliminating school librarian positions. Perhaps she would have been successful were it not for the advocacy of the

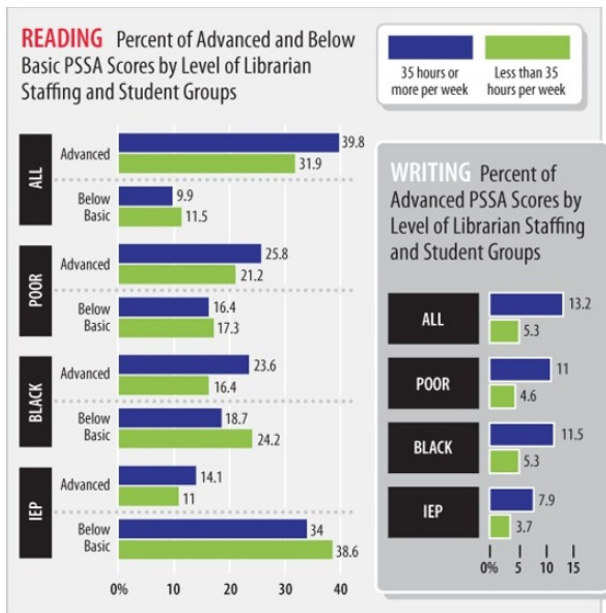
Capitol Hill Parents School Organization (CHPSPO), according to the testimony of D.C. Schools Advocate Pete MacPherson. (Jablow, 2017). Due to this organization's campaign, not only were librarian positions saved, but systemwide, there was a further push to staff all school libraries with certified librarians. A further benefit was that, for the first time, schools received an additional allotment in their budget to purchase books that allowed librarians to bring their collections up to date.

National Surveys Demonstrate Value of School Librarians

Multiple studies have shown that certified librarians and a fully-funded program play a significant role in reducing the literacy achievement gap. In the 2011 study commissioned by a group of Pennsylvania State Library organizations, it was concluded that increased reading and writing scores amongst students could be contributed to their access to a strong library program with a certified School Librarian. (Kachel & Lance, 2013).

Research has proven that librarians are a key component in the academic success of countless students. The infographic below shows a clear correlation between advanced placement on the Pennsylvania State assessments, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or native language, if students interacted with a certified School Librarian 35 hours or more per week.

Despite these findings, there has been a steady decrease in the number of Pennsylvania



Kachel, D. E & Lance, K. C. (2013). [Infographic]. www.slj.com/?detailStory=librarian-required-a-new-study-shows-that-a-full-time-school-librarian-makes-a-critical-difference-in-boosting-student-achievement.

State schools with certified school librarians. During SY 20-21, Pennsylvania saw the most cuts in the past four years to School Librarian positions. Across 500 districts, 93 positions were cut, up from 34 the previous year.

While there has not been a new study conducted to determine whether the most recent

Professional Staff: Certified School Librarians

Professional Staffing (Certified School Librarians) in 500 School Districts

Years	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Positions	1,686	1,640	1,629.05	1,536

Professional Staffing Reductions Year to Year

Years	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Positions Eliminated	31.5	58	34.95	93.05
Districts	45 (9%)	40 (8%)	33 (7%)	55 (11%)

Professional Staffing Gains Year to Year

Years	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Positions Gained	35.75	16	15.5	17
Districts	23 (4.6%)	16 (3.2%)	15 (3%)	8 (1.6%)

Professional Staffing Changes Year to Year

Years	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Net Positions Lost	-4.25	-42	-19.45	-38

Pennsylvania School Librarians Association (PSLA). (2021). [Infographic]. <https://psla.memberclicks.net/assets/Staffing%20Survey%20Results%20Summary%202020-21.pdf>

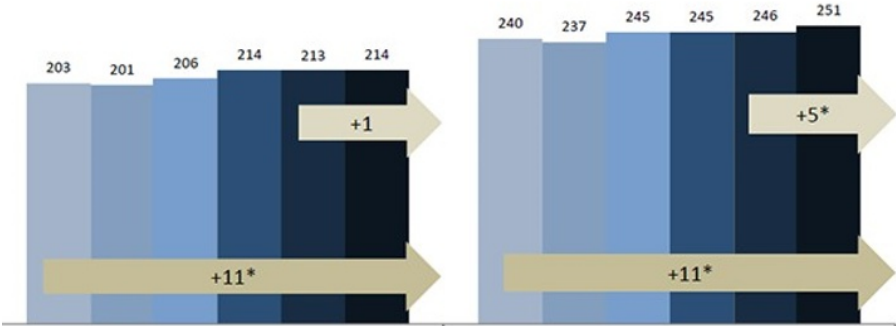
Pennsylvania State exam results were affected by the decline in Librarians, we can look to other school districts to see how having certified full-time Librarians affected their data outcomes.

A 2011 study conducted by NAEP, in conjunction with the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), found that reading scores of 4th-grade students decreased in schools that were without librarians. On the other hand, scores increased in schools that were staffed with librarians. (Lance & Hofschire, 2011a) This reinforces the idea that students who receive regular support from certified librarians produce greater gains in reading than students with no such assistance.

According to a 2019 study conducted by Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) and data collected from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) was determined to be the nation's fastest-improving urban school district (DCPS, 2019). Students in grades 4 and 8 have made consistent gains in reading. Furthermore, as can be seen in the graph below, the most consistent gains in reading occurred between 2013-2019. This was a period in which library programs in D.C. Public Schools were fully funded and staffed with certified librarians.

As previously mentioned, the level of funding and support for school library programs

NAEP TUDA Reading Scale Score Trends - DCPS



District of Columbia Public Schools. (2019). [Infographic] <https://dcps.dc.gov/release/dc-public-schools-continues-be-fastest-improving-urban-school-district>.

within the District of Columbia decreased for S.Y. 19-20 and S.Y. 20-21 but a recent budget amendment by the D.C. Council ensured School Librarians would be back in the buildings. D.C. Council reallocated \$3.25 million from an enrollment reserve to hire full-time Librarians. (Henry, 2021). Although this amendment is not yet permanent, many who support librarians in the district are hopeful it will become law.

Similarly, a 2019 bill package introduced in the Michigan State House sought to provide legislation that required all schools to have libraries and certified librarians. (Every Library, 2021).

- House Bill 4663: Requires a school district board to employ at least one certified media specialist for each school library operated by that district beginning in the 2021-2022 school year. (Rep. Camilleri)
- House Bill 4664: Requires every public school in Michigan to offer a library beginning in the 2021-2022 school year that meets certain criteria. (Rep. Koleszar)
- House Bill 4665: Requires a principal or other appropriate administrator to designate an individual to supervise students in a school library when a certified media specialist is not present. (Rep. O'Neal)

Such bills have become necessary because school districts seem to be ignoring the data they claim to hold so dear.

A study conducted by the School Library Journal showed public schools in the United States lost 19% of their full-time librarians from 2000-2016. (Rowe, 2018). The number of Librarians/Media Specialists decreased from 54,000 in 2000 to 44,000 in 2015. (Sparks & Harwin, 2018). Surprisingly or perhaps not so much so, school districts that retained

librarians were 75% white. While the districts that lost librarians were majority students of color, a whopping 78% of students lost access to a certified librarian.

Currently, Michigan ranks 47th among 50 states in the ratio of students to librarians. (Dietzer, 2019). The state's reading scores have not varied much since the mass expulsion of librarians from schools between 2000 and 2016. Over 60% of the students in Michigan are reading at Basic or Below Basic, according to nationsreportcard.gov.

The 2019 bill introduced by three Democrats in the Michigan House, which would have made certified library media specialist and instruction on literacy, information research, and technology standards; required in all public schools, as of this writing, has not yet passed. However, it shows some legislatures understand a librarian's value to students. (House Bill 4392, 2019).

To be fair, there are a few districts that see value in librarians, but budget constraints tie their hands. When we talked to districts that have chosen to put resources elsewhere, we really do see more than one who have then come back and wanted to reinstate [the librarian], said Steven Yates, the president of the American Association of School Librarians. (Sparks & Harwin, 2018).

The DCPS Connection

GRADE 8 | READING



Average scale scores, percentage at Advanced, percentage at Basic, percentage below Basic, percentage at Proficient and percentage at or above Proficient for grade 8 reading, by All students (TOTAL) and jurisdiction: 1992, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019



* Significantly different ($p < .05$) from 2019.

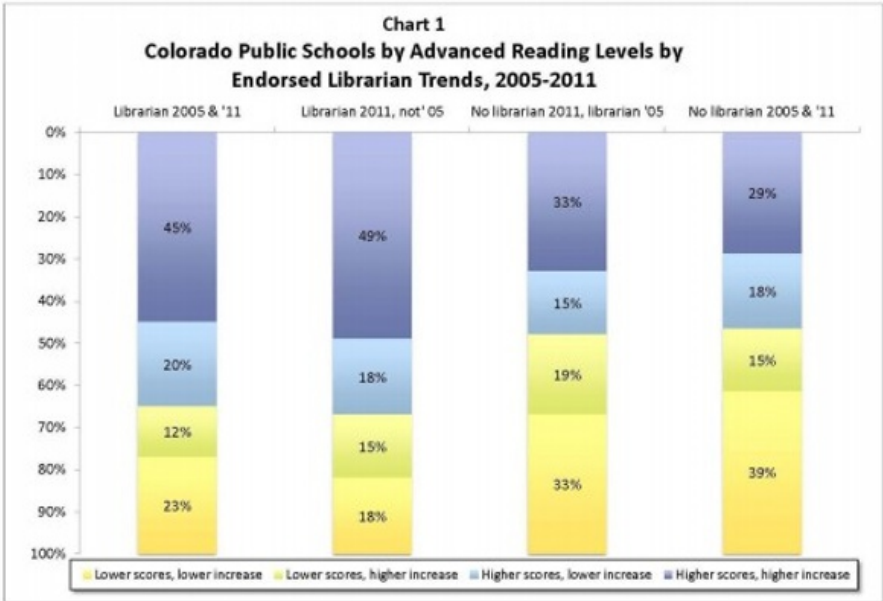
NOTE: Some apparent differences between estimates may not be statistically significant.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2019 Reading Assessment.

Nationsreportcard.gov. (2019) [Infographic].

https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/overview/MI?cti=PgTab_OT&chort=2&sub=RED&sj=MI&fs=Grade&st=MN&year=2019R3&sg=Gender%3A+Male+vs.+Female&sgv=Difference&ts=Single+Year&tss=2019R3-2_019R3&sfj=NP

A 2012 Colorado State Study which, like the Pennsylvania Study, examined the link between school librarians and reading scores and found that the loss of certified librarians in schools led to a decrease in reading scores. While “schools that either maintained or gained an endorsed librarian between 2005 and 2011 tended to have more students scoring advanced in reading in 2011 and to have increased their performance more than schools that either lost their librarians or never had one.” (Lance & Hofshire, 2012).



Lance & Hofshire. (2012). [Infographics]. https://www.lrs.org/documents/closer_look/CO4_2012_Closer_Look_Report.pdf?lrspdfmetric=no

The DCPS Connection

Year after year, from district to district across the U.S., school librarian jobs are constantly in peril. Overwhelmingly, districts across the nation have been forced to make cuts in education. The motto seems to be; if it isn't a testing subject, we don't need it. There has been a decrease in students' access to arts and music education, as well as library programs. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, the number of librarians dwindled to less than half of their previous numbers prior to 2018. (Sparks & Harwin, 2018). In Chicago, 450 librarians decreased to 150 in less than four years. (Sparks & Harwin, 2018). As evident in the charts below, the cuts in librarians and the subsequent investments elsewhere did very little to increase reading scores for these districts.

School librarians in Washington, DC, have worked diligently to increase literacy in

Test Scores at Chicago Public Schools

In Chicago Public Schools, 26% of elementary students tested at or above the proficient level for reading, and 21% tested at or above that level for math. Also, 26% of middle school students tested at or above the proficient level for reading, and 20% tested at or above that level for math. And 18% of high school students tested at or above the proficient level for reading, and 19% tested at or above that level for math.

High school college readiness 29.5

High school graduation rate 75.9%

Test score proficiency

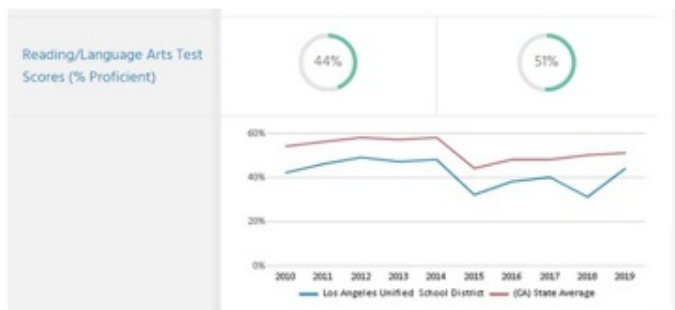
■ Elementary ■ Middle ■ High



U.S. News. (n.d.) [Infographic]. <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/illinois/districts/city-of-chicago-sd-299-110570>

Year	Test Name	Category	Group	# Students Tested	Overall ELA Mean Scale Score	% Did Not Meet	% Partially Met	% Approached	% Met	% Exceeded
2019	Combined ELA Grades 3-8	All		156,044		23.7%	23.6%	25.4%	23.7%	3.6%
2019	ELA/Literacy Grade 3	All		26,392	734	25.8%	15.8%	18.9%	33.4%	6.0%
2019	ELA/Literacy Grade 4	All		26,291	723	26.3%	25.1%	24.9%	39.9%	3.3%
2019	ELA/Literacy Grade 5	All		26,669	726	21.3%	28.0%	24.8%	22.4%	5.3%
2019	ELA/Literacy Grade 6	All		27,132	727	20.0%	26.7%	30.5%	20.8%	2.0%
2019	ELA/Literacy Grade 7	All		25,182	727	23.4%	22.8%	25.6%	22.4%	5.8%

Chicago Public Schools. (n.d.) [Infographic]. <https://www.cps.edu/about/district-data/>



Public School Review. (2021). [Infographic]. <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/california/los-angeles-unified-school-district/622710-school-district>

every school over the past several years. It is clear the role librarians play in supporting school-wide literacy gains has been overlooked by principals as well as the Central Office. Data that speaks to increased reading scores within the district do not address the correlation between fully staffed school libraries. However, this fact should not be ignored, especially since there are over 50 years of research and more than 60 studies showing that students attending schools with well-stocked libraries staffed by a credentialed librarian do consistently better academically and have higher standardized test scores. (Jablow, 2017).

While further, specific, and more up-to-date research is needed to determine the impact certified librarians have in boosting literacy scores throughout the nation, I believe a clear case has been made to, at the very least, invest in quality library programs while these studies are being conducted.

Immediate recommendations to ensure certified librarians are in every school would be advocacy. There is power in numbers. As librarians, we are some of the most informed and researched people on the planet. We know how to find answers to most questions anyone poses, so it stands to reason that we should be able to find allies in this fight to ensure students have access to us. Parents, politicians, unions, bloggers, and lobbyists need to know who we are and what value we bring to students' educational experiences.

This leads me to my next recommendation. We need to promote ourselves! Perhaps the reason central offices across the nation don't appear to value our contributions is that they don't see them. We, librarians, are, for the most part, behind-the-scenes workers. We enjoy the smile we bring to a student's face when they check out a new book, but we don't necessarily feel compelled to share that with the principal or other school staff. Perhaps we need to start. Whether via social media, newsletters, or even postings throughout the school building, we need to promote the work we do. We are running makerspaces, and book clubs, inviting interesting and intriguing guests with a plethora of skillsets into our spaces exposing students to so much more than just literature. While also fostering a love of reading, we are curating a space for students to explore the world, and very few people outside of our students know about this. That needs to change.

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