School Library Staffing Ratios and Student Outcomes: Challenging the Conventional Wisdom

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ABSTRACT

This report is an analysis of the current data available on the impact of school libraries and librarians and media specialists within their school communities. It includes a broad diagnosis and establishes general goals for all advocates to be effective.

Across the US, access to school librarians is uneven and varies greatly. In states with staffing requirements for school librarians, access is better. Yet, it is clear that most school districts cannot meet the national standard of a full-time librarian in every school, regardless of enrollment size.

This report is an analysis of the current data available on the impact of school libraries and librarians and media specialists within their school communities. We use a broad diagnosis and establish general goals to be effective for all advocates, as every state has varying differences in socioeconomic, racial, environmental, and generational inequities. Additionally, every state has different laws on school librarian staffing, their responsibilities, and any certification requirements..

Determining the measurable impact and potential of school libraries and librarians requires a bottom-up approach to cut through the statistical noise created by the increasingly granular data factors used to assess the effects of micro- and macro-sociological institutions. Therefore, the first dataset that will serve as the statistical foundation of this report is an assessment of how many school librarians and media specialists currently are employed across our states and school districts.

Does Your State Have Enough School Librarians?

Data on school librarian staffing levels district-by-district nationwide come from the Common Core of Data (CCD) of the National Center for Education Statistics.[1] The latest data are for the 2021–22 school year. To anybody who has been monitoring the status of the profession over the past two decades, it will be no surprise to learn that no state has enough school librarians to meet the needs of all K–12 students and teachers. This limits the effectiveness of the data available as there is no current "role model" state with fully staffed school districts and corresponding data to exemplify.

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[1]https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/files.asp

But what constitutes "enough"? First promulgated in 2016 and revised in 2019, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) has an official position statement on "Appropriate Staffing for School Libraries." That statement specifies that an effective school library structured to transform teaching and learning throughout the school community requires "one or more certified school librarians working full-time in the school library to ensure access to resources and teaching and learning opportunities that engage all learners." Further, it is stated that "Every learner, classroom educator, and administrator in every school building at every grade level should have access to a fully staffed school library throughout the school day."[2]

Access to librarians significantly varies from state to state, but staffing shortages remain consistent. In 2021–22, only one state, Arkansas, had a majority (58.3%) of local districts with enough school librarians to have one in every school. Between one-quarter and one-half of districts were comparably staffed in each of nine states: South Carolina (47.5%), New Hampshire (42.6%), Connecticut (40.9%), Georgia (38.9%), Alabama (36.1%), Vermont (30.2%), Virginia (29.0%), Tennessee (28.6%), and New Jersey (28.2%). Those districts served between 20% and 60% of students in each of those states. On the opposite side of the staffing spectrum, in the District of Columbia and ten states, no districts met this staffing standard, leaving all students in those states without adequate access to school librarians based on this standard. Those ten states were Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, and West Virginia.

What Do These Data Tell Us?

While these data reveal the inequities of students' access to school librarians by state, what may be more revealing is access at the district level. Which students are most impacted by the lack of school librarians and adequately supported school library resources? An examination of CCD data from 2020–21 found that access to school librarians is strongly related to race and ethnicity.[3] This is further exacerbated for students living in extreme poverty, in more isolated locales, and in the smallest districts, where students are less likely to have access to the educational resources available in large urban areas. That school year, three million students in majority non-White districts were without any librarians, constituting 54% of the 5.6 million students in all districts without any librarians. Unfortunately, this gap between students in districts with a "library privilege" and those without librarians continues to widen.

Although inequitable access to libraries and librarians exists within states and school districts, standardized test scores from understaffed districts do not show a consistent and considerable correlation between librarian staffing and literacy scores. This finding conflicts with other research that posits that well-stocked, well-funded, and well-used school libraries managed by certified school librarians correlate consistently and positively with students' academic achievement.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) recently released the Nation's Report Card, a snapshot of state standardized test scores. When comparing the NAEP's available data on student literacy rates to library staffing rates, using the singular viewpoint that librarians consistently and positively correlate with higher academic achievement

[2]https://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org.aasl/files/content/advocacy/statements/docs/AASL_Appropriate_Staffing.pdf
[3]https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/data_tables.asp

becomes problematic. The assumption would be that the states with the highest librarian staffing rates (Arkansas, South Carolina, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Georgia, Alabama, Vermont, Virginia, Tennessee, and New Jersey) would have higher literacy test scores than the states that have the least number of school districts meeting librarian staffing requirements (Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Minnesota, New Mexico, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, and West Virginia). However, this assumption would be wrong, as there is no correlation between state-level standardized literacy scores and librarian staffing averages.[4]

Arkansas, the only state with a majority of its school districts meeting school librarian staffing requirements, was below average for student literacy.[5] Average student scores were even lower if the students were Black or Hispanic (with average scores 20 to 33 points lower than White students) and particularly worse for students of lower socioeconomic status. Students eligible for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) in 2022 had an average score of 34 points lower than those who were not eligible. This performance gap was wider than in 1998 when average scores differed by 25 points between these same groups of students.

Given these facts, a new assumption must be made when comparing the available NAEP data to the CCD data. If librarians are as effective as some studies claim, other factors are lessening their statistical impact. One reason for this discrepancy may be that those studies that asserted the positive correlation between librarians and test scores considered what librarians do that can make a difference under "ideal circumstances." These best practices, each of which may only exist under ideal conditions not typically present in school districts, include:

- Instructing students, both with classroom teachers and independently;
- Planning collaboratively with classroom teachers;
- Providing professional development to teachers;
- Meeting regularly with the principal;
- Serving on key school leadership committees;
- Facilitating the use of technology by students and teachers;
- Providing technology support to teachers; and
- Providing reading incentive programs.

As this report highlights, fully staffed libraries are a rare ideal that few school districts achieve. Even when librarian staffing requirements are met, school districts seldom implement best practices, which limits the potential benefits a librarian can provide their school. Additionally, when compounding environmental, socioeconomic, racial, and generational inequities build, the daily impact of a school librarian is further mitigated.

When analyzing data from a broader societal level, determining how to improve scores in districts where disparities exist becomes paramount when acknowledging the lack of a consistent correlation between librarian staffing and literacy scores.

[4]https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile?chort=1&sub=RED&sj=AL&sfj=NP&st=MN&year=2022R3
[5]https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/overview/AR?
cti=PgTab_OT&chort=1&sub=RED&sj=AR&fs=Grade&st=MN&year=2022R3&sg=Gender%3A%20Male%20vs.
%20Female&sgv=Difference&ts=Single%20Year&tss=2022R3&sfj=NPhttps://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/
overview/AR?cti=PgTab_OT&chort=1&sub=RED&sj=AR&fs=Grade&st=MN&year=2022R3&sg=Gender%3A%20Male%20vs.
%20Female&sgv=Difference&ts=Single%20Year&tss=2022R3&sfj=NP

Overcoming the Barrier of Poverty on Literacy

Based on the findings of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which measured children's reading ability in numerous countries over several decades, poverty is the most consistent and leading factor that impacts reading ability in children.[6] Using a multiple regression data analysis of measured factors, the positive effect of having access to a library on a child's reading ability is nearly as large as the negative effect of poverty. This finding can provide insight into why some states and school districts with comparatively high rates of poverty and adequately staffed school librarians (like Arkansas) report below-average literacy test scores.

Supporting other factors that boost reading comprehension alongside the adequate staffing of libraries and librarians is required to compensate for the negative effect of poverty on reading ability. The PIRLS revealed that simply having access to books (in the home or the community through a library) creates "pleasure reading" habits. The PIRLS also found that a healthy reading habit is the most positively impactful factor in developing a child's reading comprehension. Related to developing reading habits, a parent's reading in the home directly improves children's reading ability. However, parent reading rates directly correlate with socioeconomic status.

Consequently, improving access to books and inspiring a love for reading remain the most effective methods of developing reading comprehension for parents, children, and future generations.

School district staffing rates, standardized test scores, and poverty rates are not the only metrics to determine the long-term educational outcomes of students. An immediate area for advocacy and improvement is summer reading programs hosted by local libraries in conjunction with schools.

The Importance of Summer Reading

Numerous childhood development studies have measured differences between test scores from the beginning of the summer to the end and have unsurprisingly discovered that students did not retain information during the summer, specifically in reading ability and reading comprehension. A Rhode Island study and meta-analysis of summer learning studies found that, on average, students lose up to two months of grade-level equivalency in math during the summer when not engaged in learning.[7] For low-income students, that two-month loss also occurs in reading. A longitudinal study of a Baltimore, Maryland, summer program found that up to two-thirds of the achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers could be attributed to unequal access to quality summer programming.

Increasing equitable access to literacy resources requires promoting and expanding the availability of after-school and summer literacy programs run by libraries. Poverty remains the largest barrier to literacy as it reduces access to reading materials, and libraries should continue to be championed as one of the most effective vectors of disseminating free resources to communities.

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[6]https://blogs.ifla.org/literacy-reading/files/2021/05/Krashenpredictors-of-PIRLS.pdf
[7]https://nasbe.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/2018/11/Standard_Jan2015_FINAL.pdf

Why Librarians Matter: What State Test Results Don't Tell Us

This macro view of data can be seen as minimizing the impact a librarian has within their school, but even in the most dire school districts, today's school librarians provide students with innumerable skills, including information literacy and how to interpret and analyze media. Each state has its regulations regarding school libraries, with many states not requiring a librarian. Numerous studies have shown that having a librarian in schools improves students' performance, but many states and communities are quick to cut funding for these programs. This section lists reasons why school librarians are necessary, the current status of school libraries throughout the country, and recommendations on school library policies.

Professional or certified school librarians are specifically trained to work with students and have extensive librarian-related experience like research, information literacy, book recommendations, and technology on top of their teaching experience. They work with students and other teachers to ensure everyone can access information in various formats and that reading is integrated across the curriculum. School librarians are leaders within their schools and help develop important skills in students from a young age because they focus on learning outcomes and individual discovery. Each state has different requirements to become a certified school librarian, with most requiring a teaching license and many requiring a master's degree. Many states prefer that those who obtain a master's attend an American Library Association (ALA) accredited school. This shows that the librarian has met certain standards in their education to receive the degree.

The School Library Investigation – Decline or Evolution? (SLIDE) found that "in 2018–19, there were more than 42,000 school librarians in the U.S. – almost 20% fewer than in 2009–10. Over the same interval, Instructional Coordinators increased by almost 34%, District Administrators by more than 16%, and School Administrators by more than 15%." There was a slight reduction in teachers of over 1%. Librarians have suffered more cuts than other teachers and education professionals.

More than 60 state-level library impact studies have been conducted in 26 states over the past two decades. In "Why school librarians matter: What years of research tell us," authors Keith Curry Lance and Debra E. Kachel synthesize the studies and conclude that quality school library programs result in higher student achievement, graduation rates, and mastery of academic standards. These benefits are more pronounced for at-risk students, including students of color, students from low-income households, and students with disabilities. In a Pennsylvania study, nearly 8% more students scored at the advanced level in reading on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) in schools with a full-time, certified librarian than in schools without.

The effect of library staffing on writing scores was even greater: Students with full-time librarians were almost three times more likely than those without librarians to have advanced writing scores. On average, Black and Latino students whose schools had larger library collections (versus those who did not) more than doubled their percentages of advanced writing scores and cut their risk of below-basic writing scores in half. In a 2015 Washington State study, the presence of a certified school librarian was also a predictor of higher

8 "Requirements to become a school librarian by state," EveryLibrary Institute. https://www.everylibraryinstitute.org/requirements_to_become_a_school_librarian_by_state?gclid=CjwKCAiA2fmdBhBpEiwA4CcHzbvrWzt-rm6_DVhXB3J7AybF8yKor2CuHNw0G7xwQFm_JihFkafYwRoCspwQAvD_BwE

9 "Perspectives on School Librarian Employment in the United States, 2009-10 to 2018-19," SLIDE https://libslide.org/pubs/Perspectives.pdf

elementary and middle school math scores. While these studies emphasize the need for certified school librarians, staffing is only part of the solution. To ensure an effective school library program, budgeting and resources, scheduling, and support personnel must also be considered.

Media literacy is not a new subject, but now it is more important than ever. Media literacy skills are critical for higher education and many professions. Libraries are helpful places to learn about the many different types of media (i.e., articles, social media posts, infographics, and reports), and librarians can help answer questions about unfamiliar media and become better media consumers. Being a savvy consumer and producer of media is increasingly vital and challenging in the ever-evolving media and technology ecosystems of the twenty-first century. School librarians help students know what to ask and what to look for when encountering different types of media and information, particularly online. Librarians have a formal background in digital literacy and are therefore qualified to teach students how to find and interpret media.

Librarians do more than increase test scores, and increasing staffing ratios is not the only answer to improving the impact of the profession and the literacy of our future generations.

Advocacy Goals

Although it remains a relatively easy and understandable goal to meet, simply increasing librarian staffing rates is not the catch-all solution for improving the impact and success of library programs. As highlighted in the report, the professional and community circumstances librarians find themselves in and the barriers to providing services to children are the most mitigating factors of the profession.

A librarian cannot singlehandedly change a community's socioeconomic and generational inequities. Still, they can help mitigate key problems affecting their locale by expanding school library services and implementing best practices. To reiterate those best practices, librarians must have the means to:

- Instruct students, both with classroom teachers and independently;
- Plan collaboratively with classroom teachers;
- Provide professional development to teachers;
- Meet regularly with the principal;
- Serve on key school leadership committees;
- Facilitate the use of technology by students and teachers;
- Provide technology support to teachers; and
- Provide reading incentive programs.

The role of school librarians extends beyond books, focusing on student well-being, whole-child policy, and school climate. School library leaders should actively define and communicate the librarian's role to nonlibrarians within the educational community, highlighting their contributions to addressing learning loss, social-emotional learning, and school climate. Collaboration with other stakeholders, such as school counselors, art educators, and special education professionals, can strengthen support systems for students and promote a holistic educational environment.

Therefore, the most achievable advocacy goals that would significantly improve the positive effect of having a librarian are:

- Encouraging academic libraries to have school library professional development collections within their School of Education collections and programs.
- Encouraging the creation of a new AASL/ALISE task force focused on integrating school librarianship into preservice teacher practicums and conducting outreach to schools of education to promote adoption.

As previously stated, data-based solutions are the most effective tool for creating meaningful and compelling advocacy. The most pertinent advocacy goal then would be pushing for the commission of new studies, surveys, and reports to inform administrators, education policy stakeholders, educator preparedness programs, and school boards about the role and impact of school librarians.

School library leaders should embrace data-driven advocacy, collecting and utilizing data to demonstrate the impact of school libraries and librarians on student success. Engaging in collaborative efforts and aligning their work with existing frameworks and initiatives, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Whole Child legislation, can enhance support for specific student populations and foster inclusive educational environments.

Librarians, like teachers, cannot change the circumstances of the lives of their students outside of school, but they can be more effective within their roles. As administrators relay information, training, and priorities to school staff, the most important advocacy goal should be the development of a model curriculum for programs that certify school administrators to educate and inform emerging administrators about school librarians and the design and use of library spaces.

School library leaders should leverage these to plan and advocate for school libraries' continued relevance and value. By addressing students as individuals, promoting student agency, and actively engaging with stakeholders, they can ensure that school library programs and spaces effectively meet the needs of students and contribute to their long-term success.

Although staffing ratios remain important factors in long-term literacy outcomes, particularly for schools in low-income areas, advocates must highlight the necessity of expanding and restoring effective school librarianship in districts that lack proficient school library programs. Ratios are not a panacea. The number of school librarians is material, but so is the quality of the collection and the ways school librarians are embedded in the school ecosystem.