



Bucking the trends

How urban school
districts are adding
school librarians

DEBRA E. KACHEL



It has been well documented that the number of school librarians has decreased by 20% since 2010. But in recent years, data show a slight increase nationwide (Lance et al. 2023, 75). Are we finally moving in a positive direction and improving school library services for K-12 learners?



DEBRA E. KACHEL
dkachel@antioch.edu

Deb Kachel is an online Affiliate Faculty of Antioch University Seattle's School Library Endorsement program and has over 30 years' experience as a high school librarian and district library coordinator. She has written and administered several federal grants, including SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? examining the status of school librarian employment nationwide. She is also a core planning team member of the Philadelphia Alliance to Restore School Librarians and an active member of the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association's Advocacy Committee. She earned the American Association of School Librarian's Distinguished Service Award in 2014.

IN A RECENT GRANT PROJECT, school library leaders were interviewed to learn how their districts reinvested in school librarian positions despite many obstacles prevalent in large urban schools with high poverty that primarily serve learners of color. What can we learn from them?

Background

With funding from a Laura Bush 21st Century Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), in partnership with the Philadelphia Alliance to Restore School Librarians (PARSL), received almost \$150,000 to develop a five-year strategic plan to increase school librarian positions in Philadelphia, as well as to offer a model for others. PARSL is a grassroots group of over 1,400 supporters working with SDP to improve library services for the 218 district-operated schools that have only five (some part-time) librarians for its 215,000 students. One hundred percent of the learners are classed as economically disadvantaged, with 86% learners of color. The grant, entitled "The Urban School Library Restoration Project," has three components: (1) to learn how other similar districts are adding librarians, (2) to develop pathways for school librarian certification to build a pipeline of candidates, and (3) to develop a model plan for districts to restore librarians and library services to their schools.

The Interviews

In the fall of 2024, 12 school library leaders from 11 districts were recruited to participate in Zoom interviews to learn what conditions and supports made it possible for their districts to add librarians. They were given discussion topics to reveal barriers and challenges, as well as enabling factors (see insert). The public school districts represented were Boston, Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC), Chicago, Dallas, District of Columbia, Eugene (OR), Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York City, Oakland (CA), and San Francisco.

The Challenges

As frequently reported, having a principal who understands the role and contributions of a school librarian and an effective library program is critical to library staffing and support. Even though most of these districts had either a district library director or a strong, sometimes self-appointed, librarian who led other librarians in an advocacy campaign, it was ultimately the building principal who made final employment decisions. According to interviewees, the principal was seen as the primary focus of advocacy efforts and the most challenging, particularly in large districts where there are many schools and principals.

Most of the districts involved operated with a decentralized budget, meaning each principal had a building budget and determined which staff could be funded. Thus, whether a school had a librarian depended on the experiences and knowledge that the principal had about school libraries and professional librarians. As documented in the SLIDE project (Lance et al. 60), the interactions that school leaders have with librarians affect their decision-making about employing school librarians, whether positive or negative.

The turnover of superintendents and principals was also seen as a challenge, causing uncertainty and instability in the longevity of librarian staffing. Between 2019-20 and 2023-24, more than 40% of districts nationwide witnessed a superintendent departure (Ward). And, between 2020-21 and 2021-22, approximately 20% of principals either moved to a principal role at another school or left the role altogether (Blad). Building support of libraries requires developing professional relationships and trust, which takes time.

Another issue of great concern is the dwindling pipeline of potential candidates to fill school librarian positions. Each state has its own certification requirements—some only require a bachelor's degree with passage of a library science test; others may require a master's in library science, passage of a test plus several

DISCUSSION TOPICS & QUESTIONS

BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS	STAKEHOLDERS	CANDIDATES	ADVOCACY	SUPPORT	FUNDING
<p>What barriers existed to adding school librarians and how were these mitigated/ removed?</p>	<p>Who were the key influencers who you reached out to? (unions, city governments, school boards, school administrators, etc.)</p> <p>Which groups of stakeholders were the most helpful?</p>	<p>Was it difficult to find credentialed librarians (pipeline issues)?</p> <p>How did you attract and hire qualified candidates?</p>	<p>What resources were used to advocate for more librarians? (social media, handouts, websites, presentations, etc.)</p> <p>Which advocacy tools had the most impact?</p>	<p>How did you build support within the district and in the community?</p>	<p>How were new positions funded? What funding streams were tapped? (grants, local government, district)</p>

years of teaching experience. Additionally, many universities have been eliminating school library preparation programs due to low enrollment and their financial feasibility. In this study, for example, California has only four such institutions; Oregon, has none (Kachel and Lance 9-10). Although there are online library and information science (LIS) options, reciprocity of certification credentials among the states is another hurdle for prospective school librarians.

The financial investment to add school library certification to their teaching degrees is also an impediment to potential candidates, particularly in a state that requires a master's degree in

library science (often a second advanced degree for some teachers). Although most districts offer a salary increase based on credits or degrees earned, the amount seldom equals a return on the educational investment. Candidates must consider tenure and job security, where they will be placed on the salary schedule, where jobs might be located, and whether extensive travel or relocation is required. Several interviewees remarked that they were unable to fill positions due to the high cost of living in their cities. Earning the required education and taking a school library position today has its financial risks.

Candidates must consider tenure and job security, where they will be placed on the salary schedule, where jobs might be located, and whether extensive travel or relocation is required. Several interviewees remarked that they were unable to fill positions due to the high cost of living in their cities. Earning the required education and taking a school library position today has its financial risks.





The Strategies

Not surprisingly, having the support of superintendents and the central office was a key factor in the 11 districts studied. When administrators valued quality libraries and their staff, they set district priorities accordingly. As found in the SLIDE interviews of administrators (Lance et al.), changes in district leadership resulted in changed priorities that, in turn, affected whether school library staffing was supported or not. All the interviewees agreed that having a central district budget for library staffing enabled more equitable staffing or prioritized staffing for the neediest learners and school. A central budget removed the decision to have or not have a librarian from the principal. With site-based budget management, schools in wealthier communities tend to have librarians and well-stocked libraries; not so in the poorer communities.

District library leadership was essential in advocating for librarian staffing with school decision-makers. Library directors in this study gathered data, produced and shared reports, and provided oversight of library purchases, contracts, the automated systems, and the curriculum, as well as providing professional development for librarians. Although in some cases, library directors vetted potential hires, principals ultimately decided who to employ and evaluated their job performance. Thus, some library directors engaged in educating principals in setting expectations and schedules and using appropriate librarian observation and evaluation tools.

Districts without a library director had either a lead librarian or a librarian who volunteered to organize the district librarians, specifically in cities where the library director was a government

When other principals see and hear the difference a librarian is making with learners and teachers, they want that in their buildings. In this way, individual librarians show and sell, join and lead, and engage and influence beyond their buildings. District librarians can band together, build partnerships with parents and teachers' unions to advocate for equitable library staffing for all learners, as was done in several of these urban districts

appointee not able to lobby or advocate. These self-appointed library leaders recognized that even though their schools had adequate staffing, other district schools did not. They fought for equity for all learners, which was so inspiring. In some cases, the librarians actively participated in their teachers' unions and lobbied for language in contracts for staffing ratios and equitable working conditions.

Funding staff positions is always a challenge. These districts utilize varying strategies and sources. In California, tax levies were passed to assist in library funding. The D.C. City Council found and contributed funds for mandated school librarian positions. Some districts either provided central office funding or mandated that a librarian be employed using building staffing dollars. In one district, federal pandemic relief funds were tapped to kickstart hiring of librarians.

But ultimately, funding depended on the priorities set by the central office, usually the superintendent. Interestingly, in the original SLIDE project report (Lance and Kachel 46), the notion that districts spending the least per pupil would also have the least school librarian staffing was unsupported. Combined with the *Voices* report conducted in the SLIDE project (Lance et al.), interviews suggest that the priorities of key decision makers tend to be more of a deciding factor than purely a matter of school funding.

To help candidates afford the necessary education, several districts created partnerships with universities or nonprofit foundations or secured grant funds to offer scholarship support. In New York City, the Teacher2Librarian program (<https://advance.newvisions.org/teacher-2-librarian/>) garners outside, nonprofit funding and negotiated LIS education pathways with Syracuse and St. John Fisher universities. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg district funds tuition for teachers to earn an MLIS in partnership with University of North Carolina Greensboro. Chicago Public Schools and the University of Illinois iSchool jointly fund school library certification for qualifying teachers.

What Individual Librarians Can Do

Although having a designated district library leader is critical in staffing district libraries, building-level librarians are essential to “sell” the need for professional librarians to principals, classroom teachers, parents, and the community. As found in the SLIDE project (Lance et al.), when administrators had an open library position, they sought candidates who were enthusiastic, collaborative, and had strong interpersonal skills. To administrators, these qualities were often as important, if not more so, than the required education credentials.

Building-level librarians are the “boots on the ground” and their good work must be evident and seen. It’s not self-promoting when you are advocating for the best possible library service and staffing for kids—this is learner-centered advocacy. When other principals see and hear the difference a librarian is making with learners and teachers, they want that in their buildings. In this way, individual librarians show and sell, join and lead, and engage and influence beyond their buildings. District librarians can band together, build partnerships with parents and teachers’ unions to advocate for equitable library staffing for all learners, as was done in several of these urban districts. Using social media and other media outlets, they were able to reach the community beyond their school to share what all learners deserve—an effective school library program led by a qualified, dynamic school librarian.

As Ballard and Johns present in their book, *Elevating the School Library*, school librarians need to develop a service culture where the customers—our learners, classroom teachers, administrator and parents—seek our libraries and our services having positive and satisfied interactions and experiences that build continued support and expectations. A school library visit needs to feel like a treat, and when “customers” leave, they can’t wait to return. This breeds ongoing use and support needed to ensure the continued presence of certified school librarians. Building support for school librarian staffing is perhaps the most challenging advocacy and leadership work required of our profession. However, it can be done with success, as modeled in these 11 districts.

Special thanks to the following library leaders interviewed for the “Restoring School Librarians” report: Felicia Humphries, assistant director of library services, Boston Public Schools; Deborah Lang Froggatt, outreach director, Massachusetts School Library Association; Kimberly Ray, director, digital learning & library, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools; Sarah Steiger, library digital media manager, Chicago Public Schools; Patricia Alvarado-Barnes, library media director, Dallas Independent School District; K.C. Boyd, District of Columbia Public Schools; Amy Page, district librarian/library services, Eugene School District 4J (OR); Kimberly Balala, administrative coordinator, Division of Instruction/Library & Textbook Support, Los Angeles Unified School District; Mandy Bellm, library/media K-12 content lead, Minneapolis Public School; Melissa Jacobs, director, New York City School Library System; Samia Khattab, teacher librarian, Oakland Unified School District (CA), and Brad Williston, supervisor, K-12 libraries, San Francisco Unified School District.

WORKS CITED

- Ballard, Susan D., and Sara Kelly Johns. *Elevating the School Library: Building Positive Perceptions through Brand Behavior*. ALA, 2024.
- Blad, Evie. “What New Data Show About Principal Turnover.” *Education Week*, 31 July 2023, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-new-data-show-about-principal-turnover/2023/07>.
- Kachel, Debra E. “Restoring School Librarians: Challenges and Strategies.” *Philadelphia Alliance to Restore School Librarians*, 3 Feb. 2025, https://www.restorephillylibrarians.org/pr_districtlibrariesreport
- Kachel, Debra E., and Keith Curry Lance. “Contexts for School Librarian Employment.” *SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution*, 26 Jan. 2021, <https://libslide.org/pubs/contexts.pdf>.
- Lance, Keith Curry, and Debra E. Kachel. “Perspectives on School Librarian Employment in the United States, 2009–10 to 2018–19.” *SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution*, July 2021, <https://libslide.org/pubs/perspectives.pdf>.
- Lance, Keith Curry, et al. “Voices of Decision-Makers: How District and School Leaders Decide about School Librarian Employment.” *SLIDE: The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution?*, August 2023, <https://libslide.org/publications/voices>.
- Ward, Micha. “What the Data says about Superintendent Turnover in 2023–24.” *District Administration*, 9 Jan. 2024, <https://districtadministration.com/briefing/what-the-data-says-about-superintendent-turnover-in-2023-24/>
-
- To read the full “Restoring School Librarians: Challenges and Strategies” report, go to https://www.restorephillylibrarians.org/pr_districtlibrariesreport

Copyright of Knowledge Quest is the property of American Library Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.