



INTERNATIONAL
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ASSOCIATION

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

The Essential Leadership of School Librarians

International Literacy Association | 2022

School librarians—also called school media specialists or teacher librarians—play a powerful and essential role: promoting schoolwide cultures of literacy, partnering with teachers to enhance learning, propelling students toward lifelong reading habits, and establishing transformative learning spaces rich with print and digital resources. Nearly three decades of research shows positive correlations between high-quality library programs and student achievement (Gretes, 2013; Lance & Kachel, 2018; Scholastic, 2016). In this brief, we purposefully use the term “school librarian” —a term adopted in 2010 by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL)—as a way of positioning the professional as a leader, instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, and program administrator.

As literacy partners, school librarians serve multiple functions in today’s schools. School library media certification requires knowledge of varying genres of children’s, young adult, and professional literature. Standards set forth by professional organizations such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (2015), American Association of School Librarians (2018), the Australian School Library Association (2014), and the Canadian Library Association (2014) require expertise in education, classic and contemporary literature, and teacher–librarian collaboration. To assist students in locating accurate information, school librarians must also be knowledgeable about reference materials and various online databases. To meet the diverse needs of students’ academic and personal interests, school librarians train in collection development to expand library offerings in both print and digital media. Schools that fully embrace school librarians gain collaborators who support schoolwide technology initiatives and champion students’ rights to read.

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Clarifying the Role of School Librarians

School librarians are much more than mere keepers of books. It is not unusual for principals, community stakeholders, or even students to be unclear about the role of a librarian (Merga, 2019b). Full-time certified school librarians working in well-funded settings ensure access to high-quality, diverse books for all students. They curate culturally relevant materials and support students with various learning needs. Knowledgeable librarians stock their libraries with a variety of texts and genres,

such as manga, graphic novels, and novels or picture books addressing current social issues. Qualitative research provides valuable insights on how school librarians draw upon their skills and knowledge to enhance student literacy learning, particularly for those falling behind in reading attainment (Cremin & Swann, 2017; Merga et al., 2021). A broad view of children's literature enables school librarians to purchase texts that expand beyond the traditional classics and might not be readily available in commercial school literacy programs or traditional classroom libraries (see International Literacy Association, 2018). A school librarian sees text through the lens of the student, not via a level, label, or district-approved curriculum.

Further, with their sophisticated knowledge of databases, search engines, and digital tools, school librarians support teachers' and students' information literacy skills. School librarians teach students how to evaluate the accuracy of online content and to develop the lifelong research and critical thinking skills necessary for school-based assignments and global citizenship. In today's information age, librarians help students to learn about responsible digital citizenship.

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Maximizing the Power and Partnership of School Librarians

Three key tenets are necessary to create atmospheres in which school librarians are viewed as essential literacy partners and educational leaders.

1. Librarians as collaborators. Librarians serve as powerful partners with classroom teachers through collaborative instructional planning and resource curation (Crary, 2019). They facilitate the use of schoolwide technology and provide technology support for all members of the school community. Additional collaborative opportunities arise when librarians meet regularly with principals and/or school leadership teams to discuss schoolwide literacy initiatives (Merga et al., 2021). However, to maximize the impact of librarians, both librarians and teachers need training in collaborative instruction (Montiel-Overall & Grimes, 2013).

2. Librarians as advocates of literacy equity. School librarians support intellectual freedom—an issue that directly affects our students' abilities to contribute to and shape their communities. Librarians also promote, develop, and

foster culturally relevant and responsive environments, as they curate collections that represent the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the student population. When librarians provide texts that reflect students and their lived realities—Alfred Tatum’s (2010) idea of “enabling texts”—they empower students to see the fullness and richness of their identities on the page. These enabling texts—when presented by school librarians—have the potential to change not only children’s relationship to reading but also their lives. In their thoughtful work of collection development, school librarians select age-appropriate, diverse texts as they navigate district-based policies and school board scrutiny.

3. Librarians as providers of access. School librarians not only bring skilled expertise to schools but also literally and figuratively open the doors for libraries. Access to school libraries—facilitated by school librarians—powerfully influences students’ reading achievement and engagement (Scholastic, 2016), though adequate funding and sufficient staffing are important criteria. Librarians add value to school communities because they advocate for and facilitate regular student access to texts and digital materials found in their libraries. Importantly, research shows that the presence of school librarians is particularly powerful for students from underserved communities, students with inequitable access to resources, and students with reading difficulties (Lance & Schwarz, 2012). For a majority of students, the school librarian serves as the principal distributor of independent reading materials; a 2015 Scholastic report revealed that 67% of readers ages 6–17 find books to read for fun from libraries. Librarians are also vocal advocates for ensuring students have access to a variety of books, especially those whose content has been challenged by parents, school boards, and/or popular media.

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School Librarians During COVID-19

When schools moved to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, school librarians served as valuable literacy partners and worked tirelessly to promote book access (Zirogiannis, 2021). School librarians found themselves uniquely qualified to support educators and students, particularly those certified as

school media specialists. School librarians quickly shifted to e-book platforms, which enabled students to browse expansive book collections online and to virtually check out titles. School librarians partnered with community libraries to support access to local and state collections and assisted students in virtual applications for library cards. The innovative approaches of contactless book deliveries, curbside pickups, and home deliveries demonstrates school librarians' commitment to supporting literacy growth and fostering students' love of reading.

Valuing School Librarians as Essential Staff

Despite their critical role in schools, school librarian positions often fall prey to budgetary cuts. Qualified school librarians—those holding qualifications in both education and library/information sciences—may not be viewed as “real teachers” despite their certification and experience. A 2019 report from the American Library Association revealed that 91% of American schools have school libraries, but far fewer (61%) have full-time librarians. Between the 1999–2000 and 2015–2016 school years, U.S. public schools lost 19% of full-time equivalent school librarians, with the biggest drop occurring after the 2008 recession (ALA, 2019; Lance, 2018). If school leaders and board members do not understand the specific role that school librarians play in supporting literacy achievement, librarians may be viewed as nonessential school personnel.

Furthermore, school librarians may encounter a lack of professional recognition because of wavering leadership support, limited understanding of the instructional importance of school librarians, and a failure to recognize that literacy learning occurs in spaces beyond the classroom (Merga, 2020). Interviews from school personnel reveal that school librarians are underused because the library and librarians are not viewed as literacy resources (Loh et al., 2021). Instead, the library is viewed as a student studying space, with notions of school librarians as people who shelve books.

Limited resources often force districts to deploy a single school librarian across schools, limiting their face-to-face hours with students. Reduction in pupil contact time hinders physical access to the library and books, as school librarians serve as gatekeepers to materials housed in the library. Without

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face-to-face interactions, students miss out on school librarians modeling reading strategies and supporting them when struggling (Merga, 2019c). Further, school librarians model behaviors related to the joys of reading, build students' self-efficacy and motivation to read for pleasure, and affirm students' identities by providing them with books that serve as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990).

It is also not unusual for school librarians to serve many part-time roles in a school or invest precious instructional time trying to convince staff that the position and library are necessary. Research examining job descriptions in Australia found that school librarians are expected to perform multiple school roles, often in areas not associated with school library or media science such as running after-school programs (Merga, 2020). Multiple studies have found that test scores are higher in schools where librarians spend more time doing the following (Lance & Kachel, 2018):

- 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
- Providing reading incentive programs

To maximize the power and knowledge of librarians, librarians need extended time and singular focus on applying their diverse skills to engage with students in meaningful literacy-based instruction.

Advocating for School Librarians for All Children

In our efforts to create lifelong readers, teachers and school leaders cannot afford to overlook our partners in this work: school librarians. School librarians do much more than maintain library collections, promote literacy-related events, and help students find the right text. Rather, school librarians serve as instructional partners who work with teachers to

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positively impact student learning. Librarians add to literacy development by promoting classroom literacy practices and creating communities of readers. Whereas school libraries of days past might have been quiet study spaces, today they are vibrant learning spaces that often serve as the cornerstone of a school community. School librarians welcome students by creating safe spaces, fostering student well-being, and extending literacy learning beyond classroom walls (Merga, 2019a). In fact, school librarians have often been key pioneers in creating makerspaces within library spaces (Scholastic, 2016).

All students deserve the right to a well-funded school library staffed with full-time certified school librarians. Equitable access to school libraries and librarians is an issue of social justice, as schools in the poorest and most racially diverse communities have the least access to library services (Lance & Kachel, 2018; Pribesh, Gavigan, & Dickinson, 2011). As schools face budgetary constraints—particularly those compounded by a post-pandemic reality—school librarians must be prioritized, funded, and essential positions. When schools advocate for well-funded school libraries that are staffed with full-time certified librarians, they commit to meaningful collaboration between classroom teachers and school librarians—and advance our students’ basic rights to read. We envision and commit to school communities where teachers and librarians work together with the common goal of promoting literacy as a life-long practice.

DATA ABOUT SCHOOL LIBRARIANS

- In the 2018–2019 school year, at least 1/5 of U.S. school districts had no librarians.
- More than 1/3 of rural districts and 1/4 of urban districts lack school librarians.
- Schools in high-poverty districts are almost twice as likely than their higher income peers to not have librarians.
- Districts with high numbers of English learners and English as a second language students are more than twice as likely to lack librarians.
- Only 10 states and Washington, DC, mandate and enforce the employment of school librarians in public schools; 16 states have requirements for school librarians, but they are not enforced.

Data from Kachel, D.E. & Lance, K.C. (2021, February 1). *State contexts for school librarian employment*. <https://libslide.org/publications/>

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About the International Literacy Association

The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 128 countries. With over 60 years of experience, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *Reading Research Quarterly*, which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org.



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