

Investing in School Libraries and Librarians to Improve Literacy Outcomes

by Tania Otero Martinez

ABSTRACT

More than 50 years of research show that students with access to well-resourced school libraries with certified librarians consistently perform better academically and score higher on standardized assessments. While underserved students see even bigger gains from robust library services, they are less likely to have access to these resources. Yet since 2000, there has been a nearly 20 percent drop in school librarian positions, which translates to 10,000 fewer fulltime school librarians across the country (Lance 2018). This article was previously published by the Center for American Progress.⁵

Since a shocking plunge in math and reading scores on the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), educators, administrators, and policymakers have grappled with how to address learning challenges following the pandemic.¹ One factor that has largely escaped notice, however, is the role school libraries and librarians play in academic performance. School libraries are too often treated as a luxury rather than an essential part of the public education system with a proven impact on learning. It is time to turn around years of disinvestment in school libraries and librarians, taking steps to measure and report school library quality within holistic systems of accountability that can reflect the resources—or lack thereof—that underpin student outcomes and thus test scores.

More than 50 years of research across more than 60 studies show that students with access to well-resourced school libraries with certified librarians consistently perform better academically and score higher on standardized assessments (Esad 2022). While underserved students see even bigger gains from robust library services, they are less likely to have access to these resources. Meanwhile, information literacy is becoming increasingly important in an age of misinformation and disinformation. Yet since 2000, there has been a nearly 20 percent drop in school librarian positions, which translates to 10,000 fewer fulltime school librarians across the country (Lance 2018). While more than 90 percent of schools in the United States have school libraries, only about 60 percent have full-time librarians,

according to a 2019 report from the American Library Association (ALA) (Ness et al. 2022).

Likely the most extreme example to date of this disregard for libraries came last fall when the state-controlled Houston Independent School District (HISD) shuttered 28 school libraries and laid off their librarians. The former libraries were repurposed as “team centers,” (Heubeck 2023) where, among other uses, students experiencing behavioral issues could

watch their lessons virtually (Prose 2023). Meanwhile, book bans and gag orders on topics such as race, LGBTQ+ themes, and other identity-related subjects have limited librarians’ abilities to do their jobs and students’ access to important material (Alleyne 2022).

Educators, administrators, and policymakers have increasingly recognized that test scores do not exist in a vacuum; they are often influenced by school environmental factors. Some states have established more holistic systems of accountability to better capture this picture—an approach well-suited for helping to shine a spotlight on the importance of school libraries. This article offers an overview of the role and impact of school libraries, followed by recommendations to increase school library funding at the local, state, and federal levels as well as to require the presence of a full-time librarian in every school. It also looks at mechanisms to collect and report data on school library resources as holistic measures of accountability.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL), a division of the ALA, developed standards for effective school libraries to fulfill their role supporting college, career, and community readiness (AASL 2018). These standards include a full-time state-certified school librarian, up-to-date print and digital materials, and

frequent professional development and collaboration opportunities between classroom teachers and the school librarian. While states have varying standards for school librarian certification, many require a bachelor's or master's degree, a teaching license, and a passing score on a designated state exam.

Beyond promoting strong reading habits or serving as a quiet place for students to study (D'Orio 2023), school libraries build research skills and digital literacy (Oakland Literacy Coalition 2023). They also offer many students their first experience with civics. Engaging in community service projects, encouraging fact-checking, and teaching students how to detect misinformation are just a few of the ways that school libraries promote civic literacy (Lester 2022).

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These benefits are primarily set in motion by the school librarian. Over time, there have been efforts to move away from thinking about the school librarian's role as simply a "keeper of books" and view them as more of a "chief information officer," to fully capture their responsibilities in a school ecosystem (Lance and Kachel 2018). While books certainly play a role in a school library, school librarians ignite the sparks of interest in reading within their students by making students feel included through their library collections, helping increase reading stamina, and encouraging students to explore new genres (D'Orio 2023). This is especially important because reading for pleasure has been shown to contribute to improved literacy outcomes (Krashen 2004).

DATA ON THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL LIBRARIES

For decades, studies have shown a positive correlation between strong school library programs and student achievement (Lance and Kachel 2018). These measures

of student achievement include, but are not limited to, increased standardized test scores in both reading and math (Coker 2015), higher graduation rates (Lance and Kachel 2018), and academic mastery (Lance et al. 2014). Newer studies have also corroborated the link between strong school libraries and measures of student achievement. These findings persist even when controlling for socioeconomic status (Lance and Kachel 2018).

Diverse library materials are also essential to student achievement. State-by-state data released in 2007 from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) showed a significant correlation between NAEP reading scores and public libraries' circulation of children's reading materials available in their catalogs, in other words, the amount of books accessible for checkout (Lance and Marks 2008). Similarly, research has historically demonstrated that a quality school library book collection is a strong predictor of student achievement. Time after time, the evidence has indicated that access to print reading material helps drive improved literacy outcomes.² School libraries can increase access to reading materials, though their impact reaches beyond the books that line their shelves.

The School Librarian Effect

To truly invest in student literacy, it is necessary to treat librarians as indispensable staff members. In one study, when a full-time certified librarian was present, about 8 percent more students saw advanced reading scores in the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (Lance and Schwarz 2012). And this number rose to almost 9 percent when part-time support staff were added to support the full-time librarian. Meanwhile, the absence of school librarians has been shown to negatively affect student achievement. Indeed, a nationwide study using NCES and NAEP scores found that losses of school librarians are associated with decreases or lack of substantial increases in scores (Lance and Hofschire 2011).

Student Populations Seeing the Greatest Impacts

Although school libraries are advantageous to all students, vulnerable populations of students see even greater benefits. Reading data from the PA School Library Project showed that where schools had full-time certified school librarians, fewer Black students, Latino students, and students with disabilities tested below basic levels in reading—at 5.5 percent, 5.2 percent, and 4.6 percent, respectively (Lance and Schwarz 2012). The same study showed that, on average, Black and Latino students who

had access to larger school library collections saw their percentages of advanced writing scores more than double and their likelihood of scoring below basic levels cut in half, compared with their peers in schools with smaller collections. While it is important to examine the positive impact of the presence of school librarians, the negative impacts of their absence must also be taken into consideration. For instance, where states lost librarians between testing cycles, average NAEP scores for English-language learner (ELL) students decreased by about 3 percent (Lance and Hofschire 2011).

Limiting, defunding, or imposing unnecessary bureaucratic challenges on school library programs—as book bans have done in recent years—risks taking away these academic benefits, particularly for students residing in high-poverty (Pribesh et al. 2011) and racially diverse communities, who already have reduced access to school library services (Lance et al. 2023).

HOW HOLISTIC ACCOUNTABILITY CAN HELP ADVANCE SCHOOL LIBRARY QUALITY

School-based indicators are measurable conditions that take place in classrooms or school buildings (Reeves 2002). These indicators can help national and state leaders better understand whether schools are working effectively on a local level to advance national education goals. States and districts also use these measures to better understand school-level needs and address them using evidence-based interventions.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires states to gather data on at least one school-based accountability indicator in its “Opportunity Dashboard.” But some states have embraced holistic accountability more fully. For example, in its Next Generation Accountability Dashboard Connecticut has been measuring several variables, including chronic absenteeism, college and career readiness, and arts access since 2016. Over that time, the state has seen a major bump in students taking college and career readiness courses, such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), Career and Technical Education (CTE), or dual enrollment, as well as a small improvement in arts access. Chronic absenteeism, which has skyrocketed nationally in the wake of the pandemic (Modan 2023), went up, although it dropped 5.5 percent

THE RIGHT TO READ ACT

The Right to Read Act was introduced in April 2023 by Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI) and Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ) to increase access to effective school libraries, especially in underserved communities, and to combat censorship. The bill proposes to reauthorize and boost funding for both the Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grants program at \$500 million and the Innovative Approach to Literacy program—the primary federal source of school library funding—at \$100 million.⁶ Previously, the Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grants program was funded at \$194 million for fiscal year 2023 and the Innovative Approach to Literacy Program was funded at \$30 million in 2023 (US DOE 2024). In addition to providing increased funding for school libraries, the act would codify official school library definitions in order to improve data collection standards.

This bill is a step in the right direction to expand federal investments in school libraries, but it is not a replacement for state and local funding. Given that the majority of school library funding is concentrated at the state and local level, state and local policymakers need to increase funding levels for school libraries in order to ensure that all students have access to a well-resourced library and certified librarian (Lieberman 2023).

for students with high needs in Connecticut in the most recent year available.³

Documenting holistic accountability measures alone is not a panacea for all of the struggles schools experience. For one thing, it is necessary to grapple with the results and take action when needed. But Connecticut’s results thus far suggest that it can be a helpful way for leaders to take a more nuanced look at what is happening in schools.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increase Funding for School Libraries

Some school libraries receive direct funding from the state, while others receive their funding from the district or from the budget of the school they serve (Lieberman 2023). Regardless of the available funding sources, school libraries tend to fall victim to budget cuts (Ness et al. 2022) or, in the case of under-resourced schools, a lack of overall funding (Kulina-Washburn 2022). A 2021

survey by the *School Library Journal* reported that 15 percent of school librarians said they did not have access to funding to purchase new materials during the 2020–21 school year (Kletter 2021). In order for school libraries to be considered effective, funding streams should, at minimum, cover basic requirements, including:

- A full-time state-certified school librarian
- Up-to-date physical and digital materials, including, but not limited to, current books of interest and research databases
- Professional development and collaborative opportunities for school librarians

2. Require the Presence of School Librarians

Some states, such as Maryland and Nebraska, require school districts to have certified school librarians at all of their schools (Kachel and Lance 2021). Data show that states employ more school librarians when they have school librarian mandates (Lance et al. 2023). Codifying the importance of school librarians, and ensuring that adequate funding is provided to staff their positions, would encourage more schools and districts to employ certified school librarians and thus increase the impact of their school libraries. To maximize their impact, policymakers should also ensure that their state mandates include the full-time presence of certified school librarians.

3. Require Federal School Library Data Updates with Appropriate Definitions

Currently, NCES uses an outdated definition of who qualifies as a school librarian that has the potential to negatively affect data accuracy (Lance et al. 2023). This has created situations where schools or districts report having a school librarian, but they actually just have a noncertified school staff member running the library. NCES should update its definition to clarify that a librarian must be state-certified.

There is also a need for survey data measuring librarians' views on how their work is supported, offering additional perspective to what federal and state statistics can convey. Between 2007 and 2012, the AASL published a series of national longitudinal school library surveys titled "School Libraries Count!"⁴ These surveys are an example of thorough, national school-library data collection that provides information on the number of hours school librarians have spent collaborating with teachers, the number of books available for checkout, and the number of class visits to the library per week, among many other relevant variables (AASL 2012).

4. Include School Libraries as School-Based Indicators in State Accountability Plans

While having access to a qualified school librarian or media specialist can serve as a school-based indicator in ESSA's Opportunity Dashboard, it is seldomly used. Michigan, however, has incorporated school librarian data as an accountability measure in its dashboard (US DOE 2023). This has allowed the state to acquire data on student access to school librarians and set workable goals for future school years (Michigan DOE n.d.).

To better assess how school libraries serve their students and create actionable, measurable plans for improvement, more states should include school libraries and librarians as Opportunity Dashboard indicators. States should also include additional school library indicators that speak to resource availability and services, including, but not limited to, quantifying the number of books available for checkout, research database subscriptions, and instances of library lessons that are directly related to what students are doing in their classrooms. By including these indicators, states would be better equipped to provide interventions that address any disparities that surface in the data.

CONCLUSION

School libraries, and the librarians that run them, offer a haven for students to establish or regain their passion for reading, study in a quiet environment, improve their digital literacy, enhance their research skills, and, in the process, improve in core academic skills. It is time to recognize their crucial role in educating strong and civically engaged students by investing in them and including them in systems of holistic accountability.

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NOTES

- 1 The Nation's Report Card, "NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics," <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ltr/2023/>
- 2 US Department of Education, "Access to Reading Materials," <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/bookaccess/index.html>
- 3 CT.GOV, "Next Generation Accountability Dashboard," https://public-edsight.ct.gov/overview/next-generation-accountability-dashboard?language=en_US

- 4 American Association of School Librarians, "School Libraries Count! AASL's National Longitudinal Survey of School Libraries," <https://www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/research/slc>
- 5 <https://www.americanprogress.org/>
- 6 Right to Read Act of 2023, H.R. 2889, 118th Cong., 1st sess. (April 26, 2023), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/2889>; combat censorship: American Association of School Librarians, "Right to Read Act," <https://www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/right2read>; funding levels: Office of Rep. Raul M. Grijalva, "Right to Read Act," <https://grijalva.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FINAL-Right-to-Read-Act.pdf>

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