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Changing Times

School Librarian Staffing Status

DEBRA E. KACHEL AND KEITH CURRY LANCE

Recently released data show a loss of almost 9,200 full-time equivalent (FTE) school librarians (15%) nationwide from 2009-10 to 2015-16, with more than 10,000 total losses since 2000 (Lance, 2018).

Although the losses somewhat abated from 2012-13 to 2013-14 and from 2013-14 to 2014-15, from 2014-15 to 2015-16, losses returned to earlier levels. These stark long-term losses should be a wake-up call for the profession. What is happening around the nation, and what is the impact on school library programs?

EMERGING TRENDS

Although school funding is certainly a factor, the steep losses of almost 9,200 school librarians in the 6-year period from 2009-10 to 2015-16 cannot be explained solely by school finances when, over the same time period, the number of teachers has remained fairly static and the number of instructional coordinators has dramatically increased. To determine how NCES data reflect reality, Kachel interviewed 16 school library leaders across the country. Districts selected represent large urban districts to medium size suburban to small rural schools, as well as

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) annually collects required school and staffing data as reported by each state. In the staffing classifications, the number of school librarians and library staff, as well as teachers, instructional support staff, and administrators, are reported for every public school. The most recently published data available on the number of school librarians, at the time of this publication, is for the 2015-2016 school year.

some affluent and some impoverished communities. Although every district had different circumstances that led to adding or cutting school librarian positions, the following trends emerged.

High turnover rates among superintendents and principals led to instability in school library support and staffing. Almost all the librarians interviewed indicated high levels of administrative turnover. Three out of five elementary principals, a high school principal, and the superintendent were replaced in one school year in Bedford Central (NY), a district with only seven buildings. Nationally, in 2014, the average tenure of the immediate past superintendents was 4.5 years among the largest urban school districts (Council of the Great City Schools, 2014). NCES data also reveal that at least one in five public schools (22%) lost its principal in 2012-2013 (Goldring & Taie, 2014). Yet we know that successful implementation of educational programs requires time. As Marshall Smith (as cited in Freedberg, 2014), former dean of Stanford's Graduate School of Education and a former U.S. undersecretary of education, states, “Unless you

are there for eight to nine years, you can't expect to make big changes."

In some cases, librarians who were interviewed indicated that changes in a superintendent or other district-level administrator resulted in increases of school librarian positions (Beaverton, OR; Framingham, MA; Pittsburgh, PA; and Westborough, MA). Where this occurred, incoming administrators either previously experienced strong school library programs and librarians or had a personal connection to a librarian.

However, even in districts with strong administrative support, librarians frequently commented that they were fearful whenever there were administrative personnel changes, especially in districts with site-based management (SBM), which often permits a single principal to determine the fate of the library program. SBM has often been cited as a major contributor to gross inequities in library services for students within a district (Kachel, 2018).

The implementation of school technology initiatives impacts library programs and staffing, some positively, some negatively. As districts initiate such programs as 1:1 initiatives, STEAM/STEM programs, maker education, blended learning, integrated learning systems, and Future Ready Schools, school leaders are looking for experts to coach and help teachers implement major technology-based innovations in their classrooms. In some districts, administrators leveraged the talents of school librarians and what they could "bring to the table"; in other districts, librarians were not even considered. Recent research (Johnston, 2015; Lewis, 2016) suggests that school leaders do not view school librarians as

essential technology leaders in their schools and too often still perceive them stereotypically as bookish, or that library programs are peripheral and nonessential to achieving major school initiatives.

An increased need for instructional support positions to implement school reform or improvement initiatives impacts the changing role of school librarians. Almost all librarians interviewed confirmed the increases in instructional support positions reported by the NCES data, which defines an instructional coordinator as someone who

supervises instructional programs at the school district or sub-district level, including supervisors of educational television staff; coordinators and supervisors of audio-visual services; curriculum coordinators and in-service training staff; Title I coordinators and home economics supervisors; and supervisory staff engaged in the development of computer-assisted instruction. School-based department chairpersons are excluded. (Glander, 2016)

Lance (2018) notes that "since 2000, U.S. public schools have been hiring instructional coordinators at a dramatic rate, while library staff FTEs have been steadily cut." Kachel (2018) adds that "nationwide from 2005 to 2015, for every FTE school librarian position lost on average, slightly more than three instructional coordinator positions were added."

Districts engaged in this trend appear to want coaches who can work with classroom teachers providing professional development to assist with newly adopted reading programs, Common Core curricula, digital learning, 1:1,

blended/online and flipped learning, or other initiatives. Since many elementary librarians provide contracted teacher planning time, those librarians are not free to do this work as they are almost fully on a fixed schedule, thus perpetuating their exclusion.

Librarians interviewed reported a wide range of new instructional titles for such positions, including digital learning specialist, reading interventionist, innovation specialist, technology integration coach, and library and instructional technology teachers. In most districts, teachers with special expertise in the desired area filled the positions. In some districts, librarians fulfilled these roles with changed job titles that sometimes excluded the word "library" or included additional descriptors such as "library and instructional technology teacher" (Beaverton, OR) and "library interventionist" (Burlington, VT). In some districts, librarians retained the "librarian" or "library media specialist" title with added job responsibilities. In North Reading, MA, the digital learning specialist was also assigned to manage the library but had no coursework to support library work. Overall, there appears to be a move away from the words "librarian" and "library," as perhaps those words connote an antiquated version of the type of innovative information and technology centers that administrators seek today. And, without any clear certification requirements, districts seem to be hiring whomever they believe can best deliver on the job description regardless of the credentials they hold.

Districts seeking to employ certified school librarians have difficulty finding and hiring the type of candidates they seek. This issue, and the one that re-

ceived the most consensus among the interviewees, was the difficulty in finding certified candidates. Frequently, districts hired teachers without school library certification (Beaverton, OR; Bedford Central, NY; Framingham, MA; Kent, WA; Oakland, CA; Pittsburgh, PA; Portland, OR). Mary Kay Biagini, professor and director of the School Library Certification Program at the University of Pittsburgh, one of only two Pennsylvania programs that offer school library certification, reports that there are far fewer graduates in the pipeline (personal communication, December 18, 2017). Districts frequently contact her seeking candidates, but she has very few. School library candidates enrolled in Pittsburgh's program take positions in other states, are already employed provisionally as school librarians while earning certification, or are geographically bound because of family obligations. Biagini states, "now that the economy has improved and positions become available, there needs to be a renewed recruitment effort to boost the number of certified school librarians" (personal communication, December 18, 2017).

Districts that have strong school library advocates are able to preserve and sometimes reinstate previously eliminated school librarian positions. Advocacy still works to retain and replace school library positions, even if the "school librarian" job title has changed and regardless of whether the librarians themselves, school administrators, parents and community, or others—often working together—initiate the advocacy movement. Districts that have a library coordinator/supervisor with a library background seem to do better at advocating for librarian positions

(Oakland, CA; Portland, OR; Tacoma, WA; Westborough, MA), although many of these supervisory positions have been lost in recent years as well. In Berkeley (CA), where the community is largely employed at the local university, the community insists on school librarians for their children.

While the NCES data paints a bleak picture for school librarians, perhaps the bleeding is being staunched. In the most recent data reported (2014–2015), there was only a 1.1% loss of librarian positions from the previous year. Here are some specific stories where school librarian positions have been added.

SITE-BASED TO CENTRALIZED FUNDING ADDS LIBRARIANS

Ten years ago in the Oakland (CA) Unified School District, there was a shift from central to site-based funding, which ultimately decimated school library programs and staffing. As teacher librarians retired, principals tried to make their money go further by hiring lesser-paid clerks, until there were no certified librarians working in any school libraries in a district of 86 schools (A. Cheney, personal communication, December 15, 2017). A few years ago, newly hired district administrators assessed their school libraries and determined that years of SBM had caused huge inequities for students across their large, diverse district with almost 3/4 of students living in poverty. Changes needed to be made, so the district leaders came up with a novel plan to encourage principals to hire librarians to create dynamic library programs sorely needed by their students. The district returned to centralized funding to hire school librarians in schools that had no library and no librarian. Using

funding outside of each building's allocation acted as an incentive. However, principals had to apply for this limited, grant like funding, stating their needs and how they planned to support the library program. As a consequence, three new fully functioning school libraries with provisionally certified librarians were created with plans to continue the centralized funding each year to open more school library programs. Nonetheless, as in many districts, finding certified librarians for these jobs, often in the poorest communities, remains a significant stumbling block (A. Cheney, personal communication, December 15, 2017). However, due to severe financial distress, the Oakland Unified School District has changed plans and has eliminated the head librarian's position, which further jeopardizes the ability to provide library access and equity for their students (Fernandez, 2017, December 20).

LARGE URBAN DISTRICTS COUNTER INEQUITIES

In the Portland (OR) School District, the downward librarian staffing trend has been reversed, largely due to a district vision and commitment for instructional equity for students. Years of SBM had brought about huge inequities in library programs in the district of 49,000 students and 80 schools, resulting in less than 30 school librarians in 30 schools, some only half-time, with most buildings having no teacher librarian. Library staffing was at the discretion of building administrators, many of whom had not worked with a teacher librarian and did not have a foundation for expectations. In recognition that the inequities crossed economic and racial lines, and as such were



random, the then-superintendent set a goal of at least a .5 certified teacher librarian in every school, with the library doors being open to students all day. Since that initial goal was set, more principals have now experienced working with a professional teacher librarian and have discovered the added value of librarians. They now have 65% of their schools staffed with a full-time teacher librarian. (S. Stone, personal communication, December 28, 2017).

Pittsburgh (PA) Public Schools were in a similar situation, with most librarians serving five schools, each 1 day per week, in a district of almost 25,000 students and 54 schools. With several new district-level administrators, a library leadership team was created to re-envision the school library program, resulting in 11 new school librarian positions for 2017–18, with a goal of at least a .5 school librarian in every K–8 school and full-time librarians in high schools (A. Prezioso, personal communication, December 28, 2017).

For both of these districts, the huge hurdle was finding certified school librarians. The Portland district tapped into Portland State University's (PSU's) school library certification program, recruiting both new and experienced teachers with good technology skills into the 1-year program. However, PSU's program is not promised to continue, so although Portland has hired more than 40 teacher librarians in the past 3 years, they are not yet at goal and will continue to search for qualified applicants. In Pittsburgh, the district is still trying to attract certified school librarians via a national search and filling some positions with "emergency certified" librarians (A. Prezioso, personal communication, December 30, 2017).

YA FICTION

LIFE IS CONFUSING

Matthieu, Jennifer. **Moxie**. Roaring Brook, 2017. 336p. \$17.99. ISBN: 9781626726352. Grades 8 up. In a small Texas town where football reigns supreme, Viv, 16, tries to figure out why being strong and being feminine are considered opposites. Male athletes dominate the school and administrators turn a blind eye to rampant sexual harassment. Boys can wear lewd t-shirts, but the vice principal subjects girls to an unpredictable dress code. Viv lives with her mother, whose rebellious past prompts Viv to create an anonymous zine protesting the school's sexism. Girls start meeting secretly, trading stories about sexual harassment until the administration starts punishing the rebels. Viv temporarily escapes into a romance until a sexual assault against a classmate leads the girls at school to band together again in anger. This smart, inspiring story highlights how far we still have to go to attain equality—and safety—for girls.

LaCour, Nina. **We Are Okay: A Novel**. Dutton, 2016. 240p. &17.99. ISBN: 9780525425892. Grades 8 up. Why is Marin, 18, spending winter break alone in her college dorm rather than going home to San Francisco? Why does she ignore the repeated attempts of her worried best friend, Mabel, to get in touch? The bleak, snowy New England winter reflects Marin's inner feelings as she tries to process the death of her grandfather, the only family she'd had left after her mother died when Marin was three. Secrets revealed after her grandfather's death have her frozen with pain and confusion. She also tries to sort out her romantic relationship with Mabel and where it stands. Mabel comes to visit, uninvited, with better consequences than Marin expects in this spare, moving Printz winner about how bewildering life can be.

Menon, Sandhya. **When Dimple Met Rishi**. Simon, 2017. 384p. \$17.99. ISBN: 9781481478687. Grades 9 up. All Dimple wants is to pursue her interest in coding. She's been accepted at Stanford and plans to enter the tech world after college. But her parents from India are more focused on Dimple's marriage prospects than her career. When they agree to Dimple attending a residential coding course for the summer, she's puzzled but thrilled. Meanwhile, Rishi, the son of her parents' friends, knows that he's attending the course to meet Dimple and maybe take the first steps in an arranged marriage. When Dimple realizes that her parents have deceived her, she takes out her anger on Rishi. Coursework throws them together but she resists his kindness, his good looks, and the chemistry between them. How long can she hold out against her own feelings? Told in two voices, this novel is endearing and entertaining.

Geiger, J.C. **Wildman**. Hyperion, 2017. 336p. \$17.99. ISBN: 9781484749579. Grades 9 up. What does Lance, 18, truly want? He knows that his mother and his efficient girlfriend want him to go to a local business school. But Lance wonders if he's making a mistake, abandoning his dream of being a musician. Even though it's a long shot, he auditions at a music school in Seattle. On his drive back home to Eastern Oregon, his car breaks down in a small town and Lance misses the big graduation party at home, where he hoped finally to have sex with his girlfriend. Waiting for his car to be repaired, Lance hangs out with local teens whose approach to life is the opposite of his conventional one. An elusive girl and the strangeness of the circumstances inspire Lance to try out a different, wilder version of himself, one that might just be what he's been missing in his life. A slightly dreamy atmosphere, more evocative than realistic, invites readers to consider what they might be missing in their own lives.

SMALLER DISTRICTS RESPOND TO HEAVY SCHOOL LIBRARIAN LOSSES

In an unpublished analysis of NCES data on librarian losses by district size, Lance discovered that the largest districts lost approximately 10% of their librarians between 2010 and 2015, but the smallest districts, with less than 1,200 students, had the highest percentage of losses, averaging 20% (personal communication, 2018). Medium-sized districts ranging in size from 1,200 to 4,000 lost an average of 18% of their librarians. In Burlington (VT), an impoverished school district with only 9 schools and 4,000 students, three librarians had been cut to part time until last year. After a huge combined advocacy push by the librarians, parents, and teachers, all librarians were reinstated to full time. The effort was supported by Vermont's secretary of education, who was persistent in enforcing the state's requirement to employ certified school librarians (Barack, 2014).

In Burlington, as well as Westborough (MA), a district with 3,600 students, administrators recognized the importance of librarians in implementing 1:1 and other technology initiatives. Burlington librarians work collaboratively with "technology integration specialists." Westborough reinstated certified K-3 librarians in the past 2 years for their three elementary schools after having paraprofessionals for over a decade. Now, with supportive district leaders and certified librarians, students win.

CONCLUSION

Although no two school districts included in this informal study re-

sponded to the changes in school librarian positions in the same way, some trends emerged in the constantly shifting landscape. District leaders who understand and have a vision of how school librarians can help achieve major school initiatives and priorities are critical to the maintenance of school librarian positions and catalysts for reinstating positions. Clearly, district leaders have a priority to hire staff to fulfill their district goals and objectives.

Blaming school librarian losses solely on school financing doesn't hold water based on the NCES data, especially with the dramatic increases in employment of instructional coordinators. District decision makers are choosing to put money where they perceive to get the "biggest bang for their buck." To school administrators, implementing school improvement plans and results-oriented objectives are the driving forces in the way school funds are allocated. Whether school librarians have a place in these new instructional job roles is based on many factors, some unique to specific school districts. However, as Jen Blair from Beaverton (OR) states, "We need to be librarians without walls" (personal communication, August 31, 2017). School librarians need to be recognized as instructional coordinators. The school library profession needs to examine how the roles of the school librarian are morphing or mutating and in doing so how librarians are meeting the needs of students while upholding the basic tenets of school librarianship.

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