

Here's What Students Miss Out on When Their Schools Lack Librarians



By Elizabeth Heubeck — November 09, 2023

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Obsolete.

That's how more than 10 percent of K-12 educational leaders tasked with deciding the fate of school librarian positions described these employees in a multi-state survey published earlier this year.

The response suggests that some K-12 decision makers perceive school librarians as little more than quaint remnants of a bygone era. And if the number of our nation's certified school librarians continues to decline as it has for the past few decades, this perception may one day become a reality. The district of Philadelphia, which serves an estimated 113,440 students, is down to four certified school librarians, from 176 in the early 1990s.

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The Houston Independent school district last summer eliminated librarian positions at 28 schools for the 2023-24 school year, repurposing former school libraries into places where students who misbehave go to watch lessons virtually. (Most schools in Houston that lost libraries serve student populations that are either majority-Black, majority-Hispanic/Latino or economically disadvantaged, according to one analysis.) And in 2018, Pennsylvania's McKeesport Area school district cut its few remaining librarians.

One of the problems with slashing school librarians is that students must meet significant academic benchmarks in their K-12 journey, from becoming proficient readers to demonstrating college and career readiness. And historically, librarians have played a role in nurturing many of the skills underpinning them.

"There's a lot of research out there that supports this," said Debra Kachel, an affiliate faculty member at Antioch University Seattle, and director of the research

project, which is known as SLIDE : The School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution? "Either district leaders don't make themselves aware of it, or they choose to turn a blind eye to it," she said.

It's difficult to quantify all the potential benefits that students miss out on when they lack regular access to active certified school librarians or library media specialists, as they are sometimes called. But research and anecdotes show the range of losses extends from basic literacy lessons and the opportunity to learn research skills to powerful collaborations that can engage students and inspire a love of reading.

Promoting a love of reading, boosting test scores

School library impact studies, which represent two decades worth of research conducted in multiple states, consistently show a positive correlation between the literacy achievement of students who attend schools with full-time, professional school librarians and well-stocked libraries compared to students whose schools do

not have access to such resources. These higher achievement levels—specifically in the reading portion of standardized achievement tests—were found among students across a range of family-income levels.

Simple enjoyment of reading may play a part in these higher test scores. Students who readily read for pleasure are more likely to achieve greater overall academic success in school and on assessments than students who don't.

Fostering a love of reading is what drove MaryAnne Mouthaan to a career as a school librarian. The former high school English teacher took advantage of a partnership between the Charleston County school district and the University of South Carolina that paid for teachers to become certified school librarians if they agreed to commit to serving five years in the district.

“I wanted to change the curriculum to make the reading more applicable and valuable,” said Mouthaan, now a teacher-librarian at the district's E.B. Ellington Elementary School. “I get to have dynamic conversations with students about what they are reading, what we have read together, and what they are reading next without any additional pressure. Obviously, the standards are always in my mind as I'm creating library lessons, but a love of reading supports every topic of exploration in the library.”

Collaborating to build skills and excite learners

School librarians interviewed for this story provide supportive and lead roles in collaborating with classroom teachers on projects as varied as basic skill building to more creative endeavors.

“I collaborate with teachers to help them incorporate additional resources to help students who may be struggling with a particular standard,” said Mouthaan. Earlier this week, she introduced students to the various databases they have access to and created a guide to help them make the most of their time online.

“School librarians are able to help curate resources, teach students how to identify and access information for a particular task, and help teach students how to navigate the complex landscape of technology,” Mouthaan said.

Supportive school leadership helps drive collaborations between school librarians and teachers.

“In our district, library media specialists are a very prominent position,” said Tim Salem, principal of Scotts Ridge Middle School in Ridgefield, Conn., and recipient of the 2022 American Association of School Librarians Distinguished School Administrator Award. “They really truly collaborate with every teacher at every single grade level and curricular area. The idea is to lift learning outside the walls of the classroom.”

In one such project, the school's library media specialist, Janine Johnson, led an assignment that started by having middle school students read the historical novel, *A Night Divided*, by Jennifer Nielsen, depicting the effects of the Berlin Wall on the families divided by it. Then students created their own music playlists based on sentiments they believed the novel evoked. Johnson, active on X (formerly Twitter), posted about the project, which received a shoutout from the author herself, who later flew across the country to talk with students about her work.

Creating a welcoming environment

Jacqueline Chaney, a 16-year 2nd grade teacher at New Town Elementary in Baltimore County, Md., describes the intangible but undeniable improvement in overall school culture with the recent hiring of a new library media specialist. Students in this majority-minority school visit the library twice a week. They are greeted with walls decorated in inspiring quotes, a child-friendly display of books and materials, and inviting seating for both staff and students, explained Chaney.

The library media specialist also works to engage parents. Last year, she and Chaney collaborated on a project where students wrote their own mysteries that tied directly into the curriculum. After binding each student's books in hardcover, the project culminated with the school inviting parents in to hear the students share their stories.

"It was a wonderful way to engage parents in their learning, and the class was so proud to showcase their work," Chaney said.

Rather than becoming obsolete, these librarians say, their roles are evolving in ways that are critical to student learning.

"About 14 years ago, our library was still fairly typical: The librarian would put a finger to his or her lips when students walked in," said Salem. But "we realized that we should have libraries focusing on opportunities to collaborate, to get students to think deeply, and to motivate each other."

