# LIBRARIES.TODAY **FINAL** REPORT



Convening for Action: Final Report and Recommendations to the School Library Sector from Libraries.Today

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**JULY 2023** 

# Introduction

The final Libraries. Today Convening was held in Rochester, NY., on June 8-10, 2023 with the goal of providing actionable recommendations to the school library sector concerning the ongoing development, growth, and sustainability of our programs and profession. The members of the national steering committee gathered to review learnings from the previous Libraries. Today National Forums and to reflect on several topics that aggregated the issues from the Forums. The aim of each topic review was to assess the current state of school librarianship, discuss practical activities that the sector could undertake to either correct or improve the current situation, and develop a consensus set of recommendations that would support or encourage the growth in the sector. The recommendations presented in this report aim to assist library and education policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels, as well as library and education sector associations and organizations, and training and formation programs for school librarians.

The Convening was chaired by project lead Dr. Christopher Harris. National steering committee members in attendance were Jen Cannell, Kathy Carroll, Priscille Dando, Erin Hollingsworth, Julie Hengenius, Melissa Jacobs, Amanda Kordeliski, Julie Miller, Craig Seasholes, Emilee Williamson, and Tara Zimmerman. John Chrastka from the EveryLibrary Institute participated in the discussions and was present to create this final report. Participants were able to meet and collaborated in person.

Libraries.Today is funded by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the primary source of federal support for the nation's libraries and museums, and is supported by the School Library System of the Genesee Valley BOCES. Project staff are Dr. Christopher Harris, Project Director, Julie Hengenius, and Emilee Williamson of the Genesee Valley BOCES (NY) School Library System with evaluation by Dr. Patrick Whipple, Genesee Valley (NY) BOCES.

# **High-Level Challenges and Opportunities**

The national steering committee was charged with defining actionable recommendations for the sector using three rubrics: What recommendations are the most important over the long term? What recommendations are the most timely given the current state of education in post-COVID America? And what recommendations are most able to be addressed given organizational and funding support?

School library programs and school librarians play crucial roles in the education ecosystem by developing student literacies, research and inquiry competencies, and individual social-emotional growth. As the Libraries. Today steering committee looks forward, it is necessary to anticipate the internal and external challenges that may impact the sector's ability to sustain effective school library programs. Throughout the National Forums and this Convening, the steering committee has noted several significant challenges and issues for our sector:

Lack of Mentorship for New Librarians and Fatigue Among Long-Time Librarians

One of the critical challenges facing the school library sector is the absence or
insufficiency of mentorship opportunities for new school librarians. Without support for
new professionals, the sector may wither. Without a generational transfer of knowledge
and skill, the sector's progress is slowed. Additionally, long-time librarians often
experience fatigue and frustration, leading to a decreased interest in mentoring new
professionals. This challenge hampers the development and growth of the next
generation of school librarians, posing a threat to the sustainability of school library
programs.

Fragmentation and Lack of Unity Within Education Ecosystem
School libraries serve as the proverbial canaries in the coal mine, reflecting broader issues within the education system. A lack of unity across areas of specialization in education and school libraries hinders the sector's ability to address challenges effectively. The fragmented approach limits collaboration, resource sharing, and the implementation of innovative practices, thereby impeding the advancement of school library programs.

Low Level of Inclusion of School Librarians in Library Ecosystem Building
State and national library associations have a crucial role in shaping the library
ecosystem and advocating for the needs of various library sectors. However, there is a
need to improve the inclusion, consultation, and collaboration with school librarians,
education stakeholders, and unions across state and national library associations. By
actively involving and legitimately collaborating with school librarians, state and
national library associations can better understand their unique challenges and develop
policies and initiatives that cater to their specific needs.

## Advocacy Integration in Librarian Training Programs

While there are exemplars, most school library formation programs lack formal classwork and practicums in advocacy training and education policy issues. These skills are critically important to the ability of new school librarians to navigate the challenges they face. By incorporating advocacy skills early on, aspiring school librarians can effectively articulate the value and impact of school library programs, engage with stakeholders, and advocate for adequate resources and support. If the sector becomes more skilled and experienced with advocacy and education policy, it will empower school librarians to overcome challenges and contribute to the long-term sustainability of the sector.

## Collaboration Among Library Associations

Consideration should be given to exploring alliances, integrations, or even mergers between library associations to strengthen the collective impact and advocacy efforts on behalf of the school library sector. Such collaborations would foster resource sharing, encourage knowledge exchange, and amplify the sector's collective voice, leading to more significant advancements in policy, funding, and support for school library programs.

Dedicated Positions at State Education Agencies and Boards of Education
As highlighted in the SLIDE reports, the current count of positions at state Departments of Education that are dedicated to school libraries is in decline. To address this issue, state education agencies (SEAs) should return to staffing dedicated positions that focus on supporting school libraries. Federal funds and state funds can be utilized to fund these positions. Expanding the number of state-level positions would ensure adequate support and expertise within SEAs to address the unique needs of school libraries.

Integrating School Libraries into Educator and Administrator Training Programs

Training programs for teachers and for administrators lack formal engagement by school library stakeholders. This means that our professional colleagues neither understand our work nor have experience collaborating for student success. At the undergraduate level, very few Schools of Education offer prospective educators training and insights on school librarianship as a career pathway. Likewise, information about the nature and impact of school librarians is generally missing from programs that train and certify administrators.

Strengthening the Training Pipeline for School Librarian Support Roles

To sustain a vibrant school library sector, attention must be given to the training pipeline for professional positions that support school librarians. By investing in specialized training programs that equip individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively support school library programs, we can ensure a continuous supply of well-prepared professionals who can contribute to the sector's growth.

# **Topics on the Final Forum Agenda**

The steering committee is making a series of recommendations intended to inform and encourage stakeholder groups to act in the best interests of school librarianship as a profession and in support of the revitalization of school library programs in the United States. Our recommendations are intended to inform funders and grant makers, particularly IMLS, about new or successor projects to the Libraries. Today project, alert incumbent organizations in the library and educational space about projects that should involve their members and competencies, and encourage the profession to consider and integrate our findings into their praxis and policies.

The steering committee considered five topics and came to a consensus on recommendation with four topics, which will be detailed in the section that follows:

- Awareness/Advocacy for School Libraries
- Space/Resources/Staffing
- Pre-Service and In-Service Pipelines
- Future of School Libraries

The steering committee also considered the topic of book bans and censorship in school libraries. While this topic is salient to the sector, it is also rapidly evolving and difficult to respond to in the systems-focused framework of the Libraries. Today project. No consensus recommendations were reached on the topic.

Our consensus recommendations are grouped within three categories: Those recommendations most able to be addressed by the sector without significant investments of new resources; those recommendations that need to be addressed in a timely way in order to seize a moment or avert a future problem for the sector; and those recomendations that are likely critical to the future existence of school libraries and the profession.

## **Topic: Awareness and Advocacy for School Libraries**

School library leaders play a critical role in advocating for the value and impact of school libraries. The presentation on "Awareness/Advocacy for School Libraries" focused on ways to encourage educational stakeholders to support school libraries. School library leaders must focus on building a sustainable workforce pipeline through formal training programs and communities of practice. The sector should also employ strategies to influence unions, administrations, principals, and superintendents by demonstrating value, fostering collaborations, understanding certification requirements, leveraging data and research, and exploring opportunities with tribal libraries.

School libraries need better visibility within the broader education training, formation, and certification ecosystem. Academic libraries at Schools of Education should be very active partners in supporting the future of the profession. Libraries at Schools of Education should be encouraged to curate collections focused on school library professional development within their School of Education collections and programs.

A sustainable workforce pipeline is crucial for the long-term success of school library programs. Formal training and credential programs are essential components in attracting and preparing individuals for careers as school librarians. Examples include the NYC Teacher2Librarian program and the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point's program. Additionally, the establishment of communities of practice, such as the Future Library Information Professionals (FLIP) program, was highlighted as a means to foster collaboration and professional development among school librarians.

The pandemic presented opportunities for school librarians to showcase their value by providing vital remote learning support. Sustaining the attention and recognition gained during this time is essential for continued support and resource allocation to school libraries. The presentation emphasized the importance of conducting research to demonstrate the positive outcomes associated with having a school librarian and an effective school library program. This includes investigating the impact on student success, graduation rates, and the need for remedial classes. Such data-driven evidence can be influential in advocating for increased funding and support.

School library leaders should focus on building a sustainable workforce pipeline through formal training programs and communities of practice. Engaging in strategic efforts to influence unions, administrations, principals, and superintendents by demonstrating value, fostering collaborations, understanding certification requirements, leveraging data and research, and exploring opportunities with tribal libraries are key factors for success. By implementing these insights, school library leaders can strengthen the presence and impact of school libraries in the educational landscape, ensuring that they remain vital components in promoting student success and lifelong learning.

## **Recommendations Around Awareness/Advocacy**

In light of this discussion, the steering committee makes the following recommendations for consideration and action by the school library sector:

## Most Able to Be Addressed

- Encourage academic libraries to have school library professional development collections within their School of Education collections and programs.
- Encourage the creation of a new AASL/ALISE task force focused on integrating school librarianship into pre-service teacher practicums. Conduct outreach to schools of education to encourage adoption.

## **Most Timely**

• Commission new studies, surveys, and reports to inform administrators, education policy stakeholders, educator preparedness programs, and school boards about the role and impact of school librarians.

## Most Important

- Develop a model curriculum for programs that certify school administrators to educate and inform emerging administrators about school librarians and the design and use of library spaces.
- Engage in ongoing consultation with the Department of Education and the Institute of Museum and Library Services about school library issues.

## **Topic: Space/Resources/Staffing**

The presentation on "Spaces, Resources, and Librarians" highlighted the need to consider physical and digital library spaces, manage resources effectively, and embrace the multifaceted role of librarians in promoting student well-being, agency, and positive school climates. The discussion covered the evolving role of librarians in supporting student well-being, amplifying student voice, and leading educational change. The first and second Libraries. Today Forums collected numerous stories from school librarians about their experiences facilitating teaching and learning during COVID. The sector needs to conduct a formal collective impact review of wellness initiatives, social emotional learning, and school climate projects developed by school librarians. This will inform both local praxis as well as broader policy, funding, and legislative decision-making.

The COVID crisis highlighted strengths in the design and adaptability of school library spaces, particularly when spaces were able to be reconfigured and programs able to be deployed into classrooms without sacrificing the integrity of the core library program. However, our Forum discussions and later investigations have revealed a surprising lack of training and skills building for school librarians about the basic skills of space design.

School library leaders should consider the transition from physical to digital spaces while recognizing the unique opportunities offered by physical library spaces. By actively participating in the design of library spaces and engaging with architects specializing in school design, librarians can ensure that these spaces are safe, inclusive, and tailored to meet the needs of the school community. Collecting data on the presence of school library facilities and collaborating with organizations like the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) can provide valuable information for advocacy efforts.

The role of school librarians extends beyond books, with a focus on student well-being, whole-child policy, and school climate. School library leaders should actively define and communicate the librarian's role to non-librarians within the educational community, highlighting their contributions to addressing learning loss, social-emotional learning, and school climate. Collaboration with other stakeholders, such as school counselors, art educators, and special education professionals, can strengthen support systems for students and promote a holistic educational environment.

School library leaders should embrace data-driven advocacy, collecting and utilizing data to demonstrate the impact of school libraries and librarians on student success. Engaging in collaborative efforts and aligning their work with existing frameworks and initiatives, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and Whole Child legislation, can enhance support for specific student populations and foster inclusive educational environments.

School library leaders should engage in collaborative efforts, collect relevant data, and align their work with existing policies and initiatives to maximize their impact on student success.

School library leaders should leverage these to plan and advocate for the continued relevance and value of school libraries. By addressing students as individuals, promoting student agency, and actively engaging with stakeholders, they can ensure that school library programs and spaces effectively meet the needs of students and contribute to their long-term success.

## **Recommendations About Space/Resources/Staffing**

In light of this discussion, the steering committee makes the following recommendations for consideration and action by the school library sector:

## Most Able to Be Addressed

- Commission a "collective impact review" of wellness initiatives across schools and school libraries and publish a white paper on the topic with recommendations that can be integrated into policy and legislation.
- Convene conversations across the sector between school librarians, architects, and space designers to model best practices for school library design.

## **Most Timely**

• Participate in discussions across the education sector about school climate. Bring state school library associations into coalition conversations with allied professions like school counselors to focus on policy and legislation.

## Most Important

- Train school librarians on the professional vocabulary of MTSS frameworks to help position libraries and librarians within the broader frameworks, processes, and models.
- Advocate with data collection projects such as NCES to include school library components in various national and state data sets, in collaboration and support of the SLIDE project.

## **Topic: Pre-Service and In-Service Pipelines**

The presentation on "Pre-Service and In-Service Pipelines" provided valuable guidance in understanding and preparing for the future of school library pre-service and credentialing. The discussion emphasized the need for new and early career school librarians to have diverse pathways to education and training, the significance of rebranding the profession, the importance of understanding state credentialing requirements, securing funding and support, promoting career development and leadership opportunities, and engaging in collaboration and advocacy efforts.

School library leaders should actively address the uneven distribution of school librarians to ensure sufficient coverage across schools. Approximately 15,000 positions are expected to turn over through 2035 due to retirements. Positions that come open due to retirement should be refilled. It is important for the sector to continue to explore and evolve different pathways for individuals to enter the profession, such as teachers transitioning to librarianship or public librarians transitioning to school librarianship. This can enhance recruitment strategies and facilitate the growth of the workforce.

School library programs are fundable by a formula of local, state, and federal funds. Unfortunately, only 13 states provide a per-pupil funding allocation as direct aid (see SLIDE https://libslide.org/pubs/contexts.pdf). However, federal funding is available to LEAs in every state across a wide range of Title programs. Some Title programs are recurring funding sources that are allocated at the SEA and/or LEA level according to a regular planning process. Other Title funds are annual or multi-year competitive grants that are only available if successfully applied for. In all cases, it should be a priority for LEAs to access Title funds for school library programs and school librarian PD, and for SEAs to support the furtherance of school libraries through Title-eligible programs.

The presentation also discussed the need to rebrand the profession as an essential driver to attract diverse populations to school librarianship. School library leaders should leverage the diverse books movement, partner with historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and tribal colleges, and tap into multi-language populations can help foster diversity and representation within the profession. It is essential that we overcome these challenges and promote the profession as a career of choice. School library leaders should work to counter the stigma associated with certificate programs and ensure that accreditation is recognized as an indicator of the value and quality of school library education.

School library leaders should actively engage in collaborative efforts and advocate for legislation to strengthen the workforce and address staffing shortages. As a sector, we need to understand and engage with state-specific certification requirements and advocate for robust school library standards. Likewise, the sector should emphasize a focus on federal funding opportunities and support initiatives such as the Teacher Quality Partnership and the Educators for America Act.

Establishing career development pathways and leadership positions within educational organizations is important for retaining and nurturing school library leaders. Mentorship programs, coaching opportunities, and leadership development programs should be promoted to support the growth and advancement of school librarians. Collaboration and advocacy efforts are crucial for marketing librarianship and raising awareness about the profession. School library leaders should engage with districts, library schools, associations, and individual advocates to ensure qualified staff, attract qualified candidates, increase association membership, and promote the profession among peers.

These strategies are for developing and sustaining the pipeline of school librarians. By embracing these insights, school library leaders can proactively address the challenges and opportunities related to pre-service and in-service pipelines. They can shape the future of the profession, foster its growth and relevance, and ensure that school libraries continue to play a vital role in supporting student success and 21st-century learning.

## **Recommendations for Pre-Service and In-Service Pipelines**

Based on this discussion, the steering committee makes the following recommendations for consideration and action by the school library sector:

## Most Able to Be Address

- Develop training and technical assistance for school librarians and school administrators regarding how libraries can be funded and positioned within existing funding sources like Title block grants.
- Support initiatives that highlight and promote the image of school librarianship, especially within and across diverse communities.

#### Most Timely

- Support the development of robust professional pipelines which engage students as young readers through their undergraduate years.
- Engage with stakeholders outside the library sector including educators, authors, publishers, and community-based organizations about the need for diversity in school librarianship.

## Most Important

- Commission studies to evaluate and quantify the impact and importance of district-level school library coordinators on the effectiveness of school library programs.
- Interface with education unions to find common cause on issues like the dignity of work, educational funding, and student support.

## **Topic: Future of School Libraries**

The discussion on the future of school libraries focused on the integration of school library programs into disaster response and mitigation plans, along with a conversation about the implications of AI technologies for school librarians.

Given the role of schools as local anchor institutions, school library leaders should work to include their programs and facilities into disaster response and mitigation plans. School library programs can play a multifaceted role in supporting students, families, and the community during crises. By providing access to reliable information, creating safe spaces, engaging in community support, and facilitating educational continuity, librarians can contribute to the resilience and well-being of their school communities.

School libraries serve as vital hubs of information and resources for students, families, and the broader community. During a crisis, such as a natural disaster or climate emergency, access to accurate and reliable information is crucial. School librarians can curate and disseminate relevant resources, provide guidance on emergency preparedness, and ensure that individuals have access to essential information needed for their safety and well-being.

School libraries can be designed and utilized as safe spaces within school buildings during emergencies. They can serve as shelters or gathering areas, providing a secure environment for students, staff, and community members. Librarians can collaborate with emergency management personnel to develop evacuation plans, establish communication systems, and coordinate resources within the library space.

School librarians can actively participate in local emergency planning and collaborate with relevant stakeholders, including emergency management agencies, community organizations, and public libraries. By being part of the planning process, school librarians can contribute their expertise in information access, resource management, and community engagement to ensure that the needs of students, families, and the community are effectively addressed during emergencies.

By integrating school library programs, spaces, and librarians into local disaster response and mitigation plans, educational institutions can enhance their preparedness and resilience. The resources provided by the ALA Sustainability Resources, ALA Sustainability and Libraries LibGuide, and the College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security & Cybersecurity (CEHC) at Albany University can further inform and guide school librarians in their efforts to support students and their families during short-term and long-term crises.

In anticipation of the changes brought about by AI technologies, school librarians should stay informed, utilize available AI resources, consider copyright law implications, embrace the role of answer engines, collaborate and advocate for AI integration in education, and engage in continuous learning. These steps will enable school librarians to effectively navigate the AI-

driven landscape, integrate AI-related topics into information literacy instruction, and prepare students to be responsible users of AI technologies.

School librarians should actively stay updated on the resources and initiatives provided by the IMLS Federal Information Literacy Taskforce. This will help librarians develop strategies to address the challenges and opportunities presented by AI technologies in education. Likewise, school librarians should familiarize themselves with ongoing developments in generative AI and copyright law. Our sector will be called on to provide guidance to students and educators on the responsible use of AI technologies while respecting copyright laws.

Librarians should actively engage with professional development opportunities and networks focused on AI in education and information literacy. They can participate in workshops, conferences, and webinars that provide insights into AI technologies, their impact on education, and strategies for integrating AI into information literacy instruction. This will ensure that school libraries remain valuable educational resources that support student learning, well-being, and success in the evolving educational landscape.

## **Recommendations about Future of School Libraries**

Based on this discussion, the steering committee makes the following recommendations for consideration and action by the school library sector:

#### Most Able to Address

Develop and share resources with school librarians around the topic of AI that empower
the sector to be well-informed collaborators about the challenges and opportunities of
emerging technologies with their instructional and administrative colleagues.

## Most Timely

 Consult with the Department of Education and Institute of Museum and Library Services about new research and collaboration on the role and impact of AI on education to ensure that school librarians and school library stakeholder organizations are integral to the work.

## Most Important

• Convene around the role of school library programs in emergency preparedness and on resilience, adaptability, and sustainability across the education sector.

# **Libraries. Today Call to Action for the Sector**

As the number of school librarians continues to decline across the country, our sector loses an important current reference to the image of school librarians among education stakeholders, policymakers, parents, and voters. It becomes increasingly difficult to advocate and argue for the restoration or expansion of school librarian positions without a current reference point. While a concerted and coordinated national marketing program about the profession of school librarianship would be an ideal way to address the awareness and perception shortfalls, it is not realistic within the current library ecosystem. Instead, relevant stakeholder organizations should make a concerted effort to reintroduce school librarians into the national media landscape. This should include stories about school librarians from diverse backgrounds in education, trade, and general media, with a particular emphasis on the impact of professional librarians staffing effective school library programs.

Since the early 1990s, numerous studies and reports have found that the presence of a school library with adequate to appropriate staffing leads to better scores and outcomes for students. Libraries. Today suggests that relevant funders support the development and publication of current robust evidence-based research to qualify and quantify the COVID-era impacts or deficits on students to inform administrators and education policymakers about the sector. Funders should also support the development of long-term impact studies which control for school library programs in P-21 settings.

Even before the COVID crisis, issues around school climate, social-emotional learning, and student self-determination were front and center for school librarians. The COVID crisis laid bare not only inequities in education but also the grave shortfalls in systems of support for student well-being. Libraries. Today urges school library stakeholders at local, state, regional, and national levels to engage relevant stakeholder organizations outside of the library sector who are focused on these issues as common concerns. These should include school counselors and administrators as well as institutional funders across government, non-profits, and the private sector. There are tremendous opportunities to integrate school librarians more closely into educational praxis and set the stage for better policy frameworks and funding outcomes through collaboration and coalition.

The rapid development and deployment of LLM and AI tools like ChatGPT will disrupt key aspects of what school library programs do for and with students. As we have witnessed in the rise of search engines, as society quickly shifts from search engines to answer engines, the school library sector must not only keep up but lead. Libraries. Today calls on relevant national and regional library organizations develop and share resources that allow school librarians to be informed partners for their instructional and administrative colleagues around the topic of AI. This rapid up-skilling by librarians will allow us to leverage new abilities and expertise in adapting practices to meet the challenges and opportunities of emerging technology.

One key takeaway from the Libraries. Today Convening was a realization that school library programs and issues are not solely within the purview or domain of any federal agency. There is a professional Catch 22 where both the US Department of Education and the Institute for Museum and Library Services can both claim and deny responsibility for the current health and future well-being of the sector. This creates unfortunate situations where technical assistance and direct support concerning our programs and professionals may be benignly neglected. Libraries. Today requests that IMLS and DOE undertake an inter-agency dialog concerning agency-level domains and adopt an inter-agency MOU or other operative agreement to provide clarity to the sector. Libraries. Today would like to also encourage equivalent state-level interagency dialogs between state library agencies and state departments of education to demarcate support for the sector when appropriate.

Finally, the Libraries. Today steering committee recognizes that our colleagues with the SLIDE project have created an invaluable source of current information about the structure of the school library ecosystem. It is vitally important for the restoration and strengthening of school library programs to have current, accurate, and robust data about the school library workforce, the funding formulas that support programs and positions, the conduction of facilities, and the relevance of the collections to students. Libraries. Today recommends that state and national stakeholder organizations engage with federal and state agencies like NCES and IMLS to encourage the continued improvement of depth and breadth of data collection, dissemination, and utilization.

## Conclusion

Throughout its lifecycle, the Libraries. Today initiative has underscored the vital need for collective efforts to restore school librarians into the national consciousness while supporting their essential role in educational systems. A broad collaborative approach is necessary to address the declines in the sector. Our incumbent organizations at the state and national level must engage media landscapes to highlight the impacts of professional librarians and the importance of school library programs. Ongoing investments in contemporary research is crucial to assess the impacts of the post-COVID school libraries on students and understand the role libraries play in enhancing educational outcomes.

With new and strengthened strategic collaboration across all library stakeholders while involving relevant organizations outside of the library sector, school library leaders can tackle the pressing issues of our day. We urge continued collaboration, innovation, and commitment to the betterment of school library programs – and the students we serve – across the nation.

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The School Library System of the Genesee Valley BOCES, established by Commissioner's Regulations in 1985, is a state-funded program dedicated to improving the libraries of our Western New York region's 22, small, rural districts and non-public schools. Our programs have been recognized nationally as exemplars of the next generation of library services. Genesee Valley BOCES was honored to receive this IMLS National Leadership Grant for Libraries.

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