

# Without Foundations, We Can't Build: Information Literacy and the Need for Strong School Library Programs

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### **In Brief**

Information literacy is an essential life skill, and learning information literacy starts when students begin their schooling in the K-12 years. However, a disturbing trend has arisen: the lack of school libraries, and librarians, in schools across the country. Without a school librarian, students are not learning the foundations they need to become information literate. This paper, written from the perspective of a school, public, and academic librarian, discusses why school librarians are essential: not only for the K-12 students, but for information professionals and users of information everywhere.

by Cara Berg, Darby Malvey, and Maureen Donohue

### **Introduction**

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Where do students learn to be information literate? Ideally, students develop the foundations of information literacy during their formative years in school. While classroom teachers play a pivotal role in a child's development, the librarian is the school's only information literacy expert, and often the only staff member with the education, expertise, and time to ensure that students are receiving a thorough education in this area. The absence or poor utilization of a certified School Library Media Specialist (SLMS) has a deep, direct impact on K-12 students and those pursuing higher education: the problems and disadvantages affecting students without access to a certified SLMS have repercussions far beyond the classroom. Without the foundation an SLMS provides, students lack opportunities to develop information literacy skills, including the ability to analyze information for credibility, use information ethically, and conduct

inquiry based research in order to seek information (Donohue & Keebler, 2016). The loss of certified SLMS not only affects students throughout their studies, but also has far-reaching, real-world consequences. Although many students may encounter other types of certified librarians throughout their lives, the loss of a strong information literacy foundation at an early age is often impossible for information professionals at the public or college library level to correct. This means that students who have had little or no access to certified SLMS face serious disadvantages as they enter institutions of higher education, the military, or the workforce. This is an issue that affects all facets of the library profession.

In the state of New Jersey, our anecdotal observations turned into actual data with the administration of a survey in 2016. The New Jersey Library Association (NJLA) together with the New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL) conducted a survey of over 1,500 school librarians in the state of New Jersey. This survey was used to determine the current staffing of school librarians in public schools and the role of school librarians as educators. It was open for three months and over 600 responses were collected.

The results determined that not only was there a severe decrease in the number of school librarians in public schools, but that the school librarians who were currently employed in a district were not being utilized for their professional expertise. According to Donohue & Keebler (2016), “There are approximately 20% fewer School Library Media Specialists (SLMS) in New Jersey than there were in 2007-2008.” Nearly 15% of elementary level schools are “without certified School Library Media Specialists” and “over 20% of High Schools have no certified School Library Media Specialist available to students” (p. 3). School librarians who were surveyed listed their additional duties throughout the day that took them away from their Media Centers and their students. Survey respondents communicated that these responsibilities included covering lunches, serving as test coordinators, teaching computer/technology classes, supplementing administrative assistants, and substituting for other classes where teachers were absent.

As a profession, it is vital that we examine the role of certified Media Specialists in the school setting, ensuring that our colleagues across the profession understand the important work School Library Media Specialists do each day. It is also important that we begin to identify the roles and responsibilities of the other information professionals too often tasked with trying to make up the difference for students without access to an SLMS. What are the challenges and obstacles these librarians face, and what are the limitations that prevent them from being able to assist those students who haven’t received the proper foundation? Assessing and understanding these issues is the first step in ensuring that all of our colleagues – not just those in the school setting – are able to successfully advocate for the reinstatement of certified SLMS in our nation’s public schools.

## **The Role of School Librarians in Schools**

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For generations of US public school students, access to a highly qualified school librarian in their K-12 schools was a given. School librarians were a ubiquitous part of a public school education, and were tasked with helping students and faculty tackle the world of information

and research. To most, getting a true education without access to a trained school librarian was an impossibility; assignments could not be completed, research needs could not be met, and students could not graduate prepared to tackle life inside or outside of academia without having gained critical information literacy skills in their formative years from their school librarians.

In recent years, school librarians – rebranded School Library Media Specialists (SLMS), as new technologies came into play – have performed equally essential roles in a rapidly evolving information environment. In fact, many argue that a fast-paced, constantly changing information landscape makes qualified librarians more essential than ever in public schools. In their Framework for Learners, the American Association of School Librarians (2018) identifies several ways in which modern students must do more than simply locate information but rather must engage meaningfully with it, from curating resources to diversifying their inquiry processes. From our youngest kindergarten students to our graduating High School seniors, today's US school children face an onslaught of media and information the likes of which no prior generation has seen.

Knowing how to locate, process, sort, and apply that information, and perhaps more importantly, knowing how to impart that knowledge to others, takes a specialized skill set unique to the training and education of a SLMS. At every stage of the K-12 educational process, qualified school librarians are one of the keys to a student's success (Kachel, 2013). In large part, this is because subject area teachers simply are not provided the time or training necessary to help students go from novices to competent researchers (AASL, 2012). When classroom teachers are able to collaborate with certified SLMS who enhance and support content-area lessons, students reap the reward.

## **Elementary School**

At the elementary school level, most commonly defined in the United States as Kindergarten through Grade 5, SLMS are responsible for helping to introduce students to the vast world of knowledge and information with which they will need to interact for the rest of their lives, and the technology that allows them to do so. This is a time of intense curiosity and rapid intellectual growth for most students – and elementary school librarians must cater with equal attentiveness to both the 5-year-old kindergarten student who is just learning to read and the 11-year-old 5th grader who is struggling to complete research on the internet for the very first time. Although promoting a love of reading and care for library materials remains a key piece of the elementary library experience, at its core even the most bare-bones modern elementary library program should seek to help students answer several difficult questions, including:

- *What are your interests and how can you find out more about them?*
- *How can you ask questions that help lead you to what you need? Once you know your questions, how do you decide who to ask?*
- *What is information and where can you go to safely look for it? What technology is available to help you?*
- *When you find information that is helpful, how can you use it?*

These questions may seem simple, but the ability or inability to answer them has a profound effect on students both inside and outside of the classroom as they complete their elementary school education, and as they move on to upper grades. The foundation provided by the quality lessons of an effective SLMS at this level supports the work of classroom teachers who strive to get their students thinking critically, making connections between units or texts, drawing on prior knowledge and experience to inform classroom learning, and developing a sense of self and an interest in personal growth (Smith, 2006). In addition, certified SLMS are often leaders when it comes to addressing new content and curriculum standards, helping to guide both colleagues and students through the ever-changing standards that shape public education. Even beyond the classroom, the skills taught by an elementary SLMS help young students begin to identify and, more importantly, articulate their interests and desires. These important benefits are compounded as students move on to upper grade levels in the Middle School with more demanding academic requirements.

## **Middle School**

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At the Middle School or Junior High level, most commonly comprised of grade levels 6 through 8, the role of the SLMS remains one of encouraging curiosity and helping students locate that which is relevant to their interests, beyond school assignments. However, the librarian at this level becomes equally concerned with helping students begin to define when, why, and how to choose and use specific information. While the elementary school librarian will often employ guided searches, limiting students' research options to ensure that they are successful in their endeavours, the Middle School SLMS and the classroom teachers with whom the SLMS collaborates face the daunting task of teaching students how to navigate the endless research options available. Much like the successful Elementary School SLMS, the Middle School SLMS will promote literacy and encourage a love of reading, but will also craft a school library program that teaches valuable skills and answers fundamental questions that simply can't be tackled in the classroom alone. These questions include:

- *What makes a source of information reliable, valuable, or authoritative?*
- *How can I determine the purpose or agenda of a publication, article, or web resource?  
How does that agenda affect whether I choose to use that resource?*
- *How can I curate a list of resources that I trust?*
- *How can I structure my search process to be most effective?*
- *Where can I turn for help when my search is not yielding useful results?*

As the questions our students must answer become more complicated, so, too, does the instruction. At the Middle School level, it becomes nearly impossible for classroom or subject teachers to provide adequate instruction in these areas, because as students begin conducting research in nearly all of their subjects, the level of expertise required to guide a student through the modern research process requires a true information professional. A rapidly changing technology landscape, an ever-growing array of available sources, and the

need to compete with what has become students' first instinct (to "Google it" or "ask Siri") means that those leading young people into the world of true research must be expertly trained and up-to-date.

It is not only in the classroom, however, that an SLMS proves to be a vital resource for Middle School students. At this stage, students begin to conduct research relevant to their home lives and personal interests. This type of research may be more casual than that conducted for a classroom assignment, but it is no less important. In fact, for many students, the searches they undertake beyond the classroom setting are perhaps the most vital. Students engage with the vast information resources at their fingertips not only to begin shaping their own beliefs and opinions – on politics, religion, social issues, and more – but in many cases they also turn to the internet for answers to questions about sexuality, personal relationships, and mental, emotional, and physical health. At these moments, Middle School students – already of an age at which much in their lives is confusing – must be able to navigate their searches by recognizing bias, identifying reliable resources, and knowing how to ask for what it is they need.

## High School

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At the High School level, typically grades 9-12 in the US public school system, students begin to face the reality of life after school. For some, this means continued education at a college, university, or trade school. For others, it means entering the workforce or joining the military. For all, it means that their ability to locate and evaluate information is about to be put to a very real, high-stakes test. Whether attempting to locate the college that meets their needs, navigate the daunting process of online job searches and applications, or sort fact from propaganda as they make important life choices, high school students carry with them all of their information needs from middle school with the added necessity of beginning to use their information sorting and searching skills in real-world situations that directly impact their lives.

At this level, the SLMS not only continues to guide students through the academic exercises and resource evaluation begun at lower grade levels but also continues to curate a robust collection of literature and nonfiction materials of interest and value to students. They also take on the very important task of empowering young people to attend college, engage in the workforce, and prepare for the realities of adult life.

The SLMS will use the knowledge students have gained over their many years of library instruction and begin teaching them to apply what they know to the decision-making process. Rather than answering broad, overarching questions, what the high school SLMS does that no classroom teacher can do is tailor the skills she teaches to students' individual needs. This is essential for students who need extra support for difficult or overwhelming research topics. As Anderson (2011) points out, real-world examples from high schools have shown that when Media Specialists are removed, over-taxed teachers often find it necessary to simply cut research projects or information literacy skills from their lesson plans (p. 16). Yet the questions students must successfully answer are simultaneously deeply personal and intrinsically tied to the realities of the outside world, requiring true information literacy skills. Some such questions might include:

- *Who will I vote for, and how will I make my choice?*
- *What factors are important to me when deciding on which college to go to, and where can I find that information?*
- *What matters to me as I decide where to rent an apartment or buy a house? Where will I look for reliable data to guide me?*
- *Which careers interest me? What kind of outlook do those careers have in terms of job availability, pay, and working conditions?*

As is evidenced by the above questions, many US high school students are facing real choices that may affect their whole lives, and some are doing so with very little guidance from trusted adults. At this point in their lives, students who have had access to a comprehensive K-8 school library program with a qualified SLMS have a significant advantage over their peers, and those who continue to have access to a 9-12 program are positioned more favorably still. This is because the high school SLMS not only helps students access databases and scholarly resources for school assignments, teaches them how to responsibly and ethically use information, and guides them through the process of finding resources that meet their personal needs, but also points them toward a future in which they will be able to employ a critical eye and a questioning mind as they interact with information through the remainder of their lives.

## **The Need for School Libraries. A Public Librarian Perspective**

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A public library and a school library are a perfect partnership, sharing many of the same goals including equity of access to information and resources for students, lifelong learning, and critical use of information and technology (NJASL, 2010). Both libraries wish for their students and student patrons to be knowledgeable and informed citizens. When one half of this partnership does not exist, students become disadvantaged and become an underserved population not ready for an information age.

A public librarian can serve patrons from an early childhood age until long into their adult lives. From board books and storytimes for infants, to adult book clubs and homebound services for the elderly, a public library plays a broad role in its community and a public librarian provides patrons with lifelong learning (IFLA, 2004). The most important role, arguably, is serving the student community. Public librarians serve students in grades kindergarten through college during after school hours, on weekends, and on school vacations. These public librarians who serve student populations rely heavily on school librarians to teach students information literacy skills so that public librarians can support their curricula during those after school hours (Abram, 2011).

In 2016, the New Jersey Library Association (NJLA) put out a call on New Jersey to support Highly Effective School Library programs, stating that “school libraries are a safe learning environment where all students have equal and equitable access to learning, support, and information for personal and educational purposes. NJLA believes that our schools must serve

as an 'equalizer' to provide all students with equal and equitable access to the resources, support and instruction necessary to succeed academically and become productive and engaged citizens in a democratic society" (NJLA, 2016).

In the 21st century world in which we currently live, students must be able to navigate the information world accurately and credibly. Without school librarians and effective school library programs, public librarians become burdened with the additional task of having to teach students basic research skills, digital literacy skills, digital citizenship skills, and many more skills that fall under the umbrella of information literacy.

### *Why a Public Librarian Cannot Replace a School Librarian*

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Legally, a public librarian should not replace a school librarian simply because a public librarian is unqualified. A SLMS in the state of New Jersey is required to take additional classes for a separate certification during their master's coursework that makes them specifically qualified to obtain a position in a school setting. According to the Rutgers Master of Information Program website (2018), this additional course plan is approved by the state and it is a requirement for School Library certification.

The school library media specialization has been designed to meet the New Jersey Department of Education requirements to become certified as a School Library Media Specialist by the State of New Jersey. With this degree librarians can work in elementary and secondary creating collections, providing information on literacy education and collaborating with teachers to provide a wide range of learning opportunities for students (Rutgers, 2016, p. 1).

These additional requirements make a SLMS a "specialist" when working with students in a classroom setting. This is a specialty that a public librarian does not have.

Public librarians who serve a student population do, however, have other specialties. One of those specialties is to act as a support for students in many other areas of their lives. The areas can range from mental health support (Takahashi, 2016) to readers' advisory support, and programming to support effective peer communication skills. These areas can be extremely broad but extremely important, leaving little to no time to replace a School Librarian and their duties. Public librarians are trained only to reinforce research skills and critical thinking skills in support of school libraries.

### *Why a School Librarian/School Library Is Important to a Public Librarian*

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When a librarian comes across a student who has not had the opportunity to access an information literacy curriculum during their education, both the student and the public librarian become disadvantaged. The short interaction that a public librarian has with a student is extremely important and will determine if the student feels their needs were met. A student who experiences a frustrating and disappointing reference interview is at risk of never returning

to the public library, resulting in a student who will lack out of school education such as homework help and access to resources for questions related to academia, health, and finances. All of which relate to life long learning.

A common reference interview between a librarian and a patron aids both parties. Not only does it allow the librarian to know exactly what the patron needs but also, by asking the right questions, it allows the patron to explore what their exact needs are. However, the interview becomes meaningless if the student does not know what to do with the information they were just given. Without school librarians and effective school library programs, public librarians will come across more and more students who cannot efficiently access and navigate databases. Students will leave the public library discouraged and angry that they could not complete their assignment and librarians will be discouraged that they cannot effectively support what is supposed to be taught to the student during school hours.

From a student's perspective, one who has been exposed to a school library and an effective school library program sees a public library as a backup, or an alternative location that can provide them assistance for their academic needs. However, a student who has not had access to either a school librarian or an effective school library program (an issue of inequity) will not only have trouble navigating resources and databases, but they will have trouble navigating the physical library. A public librarian cannot effectively do their job if a student is afraid to simply walk through the doors or approach a librarian. Public librarians rely very heavily on school librarians to set the standard for not only what students are capable of in a library but also what a librarian is capable of doing for the student.

## **The Need for School Libraries: An Academic Librarian's Perspective**

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For an academic librarian, school librarians are a crucial ally in facilitating information literate students. It begins with the AASL Standards and continues to the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (2015). Together, those two documents give us the guidance for students from K-12 and then beyond. Burke (2017) examines the 2009 AASL Standards for 21st Century Learners and discusses the linear structure versus the more fluid aspects of the 2016 ACRL Framework. Burke points out that due to the structure of both the Standards and the Framework, there might be a gap in student learning. She also provides a sample of the language of the Standards and the similar learning objectives of the Framework. Since the publication of Burke's article, the AASL Standards have undergone a revision and, while not fully nonlinear like the ACRL Framework, the Standards and Framework now share several concepts and ideas.

To get to the mastery of skills noted in the ACRL Framework, students must learn the basic skills outlined in the AASL Standards. There is a clear link between many of the frames in the AASL Standards to the frames of the ACRL Framework. The chart below matches one of the Frames from the AASL Standards to the ACRL Framework:

II. Include, B. Create

Authority is Constructed and Contextual

Learners adjust their awareness of the global learning community by:

1. Interacting with learners who reflect a range of perspectives.
2. Evaluating a variety of perspectives during learning activities.
3. Representing diverse perspectives during learning activities.

- Develop and maintain an open mind when encountering varied and sometimes conflicting perspectives
- Develop awareness of the importance of assessing content with a skeptical stance and with a self-awareness of their own biases and worldview
- Question traditional notions of granting authority and recognize the value of diverse ideas and worldviews

This table focuses on the “Include-Create” frame and the “Authority is Constructed and Contextual” frame. For students to get to a point where they have an open mind and are looking at diverse perspectives, they need to have experience with those skills. Learning to evaluate different ideas and mindsets with learning activities in K-12 will set them up to evaluate their own bias and critically look at different sources with an open mind. Threshold concepts- and the idea behind the ACRL Framework- is to, like riding a bike, permanently learn the skill. To achieve that skill, the students need the background that would come from exposure to the AASL Standards.

The ACRL Framework does not exist in a vacuum without the AASL Standards; the concepts covered in the Framework assume students have acquired the skills in K-12 to be able to perform college-level research. However, that is not usually the case. Students often come to college overwhelmed by the research process. The 2013 Project Information Literacy Study interviewed students entering college on their information literacy skills and found that many of their interviewees found college research overwhelming. In addition to struggling with the task of college level research, students arrived at a place that had, on average, 19 times as many databases as a high school library (Head, 2013).

Academic librarians find themselves unable to cover the higher-level concepts without covering the basic concepts from K-12. Many college courses have prerequisites, however there are no prerequisites for library instruction or research. For example: a popular assignment in college is for students to find sources, many times scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles. Librarians can focus their information literacy session on how to distinguish a scholarly peer-reviewed journal article from a trade publication. However, without learning what a periodical is- something that should have been learned at K-12 level, the concept of what a scholarly peer-reviewed journal article is becomes impossible.

The disconnect becomes a major issue of equity. Students who have had the instruction and the research in K-12 are better prepared – they have seen databases such as those provided

by the vendor, EBSCO and have received specific instructions on how to search. Students without that instruction have never seen the databases before and don't understand the concept of keyword searching, Boolean operators, or other information literacy skills.

Some people may be quick to say that since colleges have librarians, this is not an issue as the students will see the librarian once they enroll at their chosen higher education institution. That is not true. First, while many colleges and universities have innovative library instruction programs to ensure that all or most students in their first year attend an information literacy session, that is simply not guaranteed in all universities. In addition, if students have never interacted with a librarian before, they might not know that reference librarians exist and what they to expect if they talk to one. Finally, if librarians are trying to get the students up to speed for what they should have learned in K-12, they will be unable to bring students to the level that they need to be at for college level research. College faculty and adjuncts, unaware of this disconnect, will assign research papers based on their own learning outcomes and the course skill level.

## Why an Academic Librarian Cannot Replace a School Librarian

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An academic librarian cannot replace a school librarian in the same way in which a college professor cannot replace a first grade teacher. School librarians generally receive a different type of training than academic librarians – the coursework for obtaining their MLIS reflects this training. While academic librarians possess the MLIS, they do not necessarily take the coursework that school librarians do. That coursework prepares school librarians for the challenges they will face not only as librarians but as professionals who interacts with children and students, like a teacher, guidance counselor, or other K-12 professional. The academic librarian cannot replicate what is taught in K-12.

Instead, the academic librarian should look to work with school librarians on collaborations that enhance the students' information literacy skills. Saunders, Severyn, and Caron (2017) surveyed high school and college librarians and found a discrepancy between what high school and college librarians think each other teaches their students. They also noted the “dim view of student abilities related to information literacy” (p. 279) shared by both college and high school librarians. The recommended approach is for more collaboration between high school and college librarians. This was also echoed in Varlejs (2013), who looked at the information literacy gap between high school and college students. Finally, when evaluating her study on students' information skills as they enter college, Head (2013) states, “It was not that [the students] were not good at research- they were entirely new to research...we believe it is imperative for higher education librarians and educators to recognize the plight of school libraries” (p. 31).

## What's Next/Advocacy/Call to Action

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We have identified in the preceding paragraphs why school librarians are essential, and why librarians outside of K-12 should be alarmed about what is going on. In our home state of New Jersey, the New Jersey Library Association has formed a School Libraries Task Force to

address this issue. The task force has started campaigns, made legislative visits, and currently has two bills in the New Jersey State Assembly that, if passed, would respectively mandate a school librarian in each school based on school enrollment and integrate an information literacy curriculum to be instructed by a certified SLMS. We know in the state of New Jersey we have a lot of work to do, but we are happy that our work has raised awareness so far. We also know that the more librarians from diverse specialities who are made aware of this issue, the stronger our voices will be in addressing our needs.

We know that librarians need to advocate for themselves, but if we advocate strictly for our own specialties, we miss the bigger picture – that all libraries need each other and all librarians are essential. Whether you are a SLMS or not, advocacy can be as simple as:

- Inquiring about the school library staffing situation where you live, where you work, or where your loved ones live. Does each school have a certified SLMS? Does that SLMS have school library duties? Are students exposed to that SLMS on a regular basis?
- Contacting your legislators. Write them letters, send them an email, call their office. Let them know how important a school librarian is to our students and their future.
- Forming a partnership. Reach out to fellow librarians and start the discussion on how a strong foundation of information literacy and research skills taught by a SLMS allows the opportunity to build students who are ready for the 21st century.

No matter how you choose to participate, advocacy has been and will continue to be the key to ensuring that students in our home state and states across the nation have equitable access to the types of high-quality, professional school library programs they deserve.

While we speak from our own experiences as New Jersey librarians, this issue does not affect New Jersey alone: this is a nationwide issue. The literature we've reviewed and the studies we've examined include data and opinions from a variety of different states around the country. If we, as librarians, ignore something so vital to our profession, we'll one day find this problem impossible to rectify. The work we do as librarians is essential and meaningful to our students and communities. That work starts with the school librarian.

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