

Project Title: The School Librarian Investigation: Decline or Evolution? (SLIDE)

Project Summary: Antioch University Seattle (AUS) requests \$390,000 for a three-year, exploratory project to examine the nationwide decline in school librarian positions and resulting equity and access issues particularly for impoverished and racially diverse communities and to learn how school administrators make decisions on how to staff school library services for K-12 students. This investigation will triangulate information from 1) an in-depth analysis of federal employment data on school librarians, 2) a content analysis of current library-related job descriptions, and 3) interviews with school administrators in districts that have gained or lost the most school librarian FTEs per school. Led by Project Director Debra Kachel and Principal Investigator Keith Curry Lance, the project will be guided by an Advisory Council of education and library experts with assistance from school library associations/agencies as intermediaries from all 50 states (as previously committed in a IMLS grant proposal) to facilitate administrator interviews and to disseminate project information. Four major reports with infographics will be produced from the three data sources with a final executive summary. A project website will include an interactive US map of current and historical state and district data on the numbers of school librarians in relation to K-12 enrollment, community setting, race/ethnicity, poverty, and per pupil spending, providing state and national library leaders with data to inform library and information equity and access issues. Tools to assist schools in making library staffing decisions, including innovative staffing models and sample job descriptions, will be available on the website and shared with state library organizations. Project findings will further be disseminated in library and education publications and at conferences.

Statement of Broad Need: According to required data collected annually from all public schools by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the number of U.S. school librarians has decreased by 20% since 2008. Decreases continue, despite improvements in school funding, increases in other professional school positions, and a heightened need for information evaluation skills among K-12 students. Newly-created instructional positions are increasing with titles such as, “technology integration coach,” “innovation specialist,” and “digital literacy teacher”—positions that often include aspects of a school librarian’s role. Preliminary research suggests that while some school librarian jobs are being cut, other jobs are evolving or being combined with other positions. No studies to date have examined these losses to determine how the values and priorities of school leaders impact the staffing models being employed and the new or changing expectations for such staff to deliver library services. LIS universities, and school library and education leaders will benefit from a deeper understanding of how external forces are reshaping school librarianship and its impact on K-12 libraries. Findings from this project will be transformative for those who prepare the next generation school librarians and provide professional development for existing librarians.

Project Design: This project will apply the evolutionary organization theoretical framework that incorporates analysis of four generic processes—variation, selection, retention, and competition—to explain how organizations evolve (see <https://tinyurl.com/evorth>). Thus, these research questions will be investigated:

- What job titles, skills, and responsibilities are valued and sought by school decision-makers who staff library, learning resources, and technology instruction and services for students? (Variation)
- How is the distribution of school librarians affecting equitable provision of K-12 library services, considering various factors, i.e., enrollment size, community setting, race/ethnicity, poverty, and per pupil spending? (Selection & Retention)
- What factors affect how school decision-makers staff library, learning resources, and technology instruction and services for students? (Selection & Retention; Competition)
- What competitive advantages do decision-makers perceive in their chosen models for achieving district goals and teaching students to be information- and technology-savvy critical thinkers? (Competition)

Work Plan: Year 1: --Establish a project Advisory Council and begin Zoom-based meetings. --Analyze NCES data from 2000 to present, ranking districts and states by gains and losses in ratios of librarian FTEs per school; analyze associated patterns and trends—especially inequities—by enrollment, community setting,

race/ethnicity, poverty, and per pupil spending. Produce summary report of NCES data analysis and infographic. –Identify 150 districts nationally with largest ratio of losses and 150 districts with largest ratio of gains as sites for potential in-depth interviews. Identify the number of states that involves (estimated at 18). – Develop and test interviewee nomination form to be used by state associations to collect contact and scheduling information for school leaders agreeing to participate in a one-hour, Zoom-based, confidential interview conducted by project staff. Interviewees will receive incentives. –Train state association liaisons in states where interviews are sought in strategies to identify and recruit school leaders from the identified districts. State intermediary associations have volunteered and committed to recruit interviewees. Fifty districts from each extreme (most gains and losses) will be targeted for in-depth interviews. –Initiate request in every state via association listservs for job descriptions of school librarians and others providing library, learning resources, and technology services. –Begin content analysis of estimated 500 job descriptions to determine prevailing job titles, skills, and responsibilities. –Create and begin to populate project website; design interactive US map to display NCES data by state and district. –Begin the IRB process. –Update available state intermediary associations at the ALA Conference.

Year 2: --Design and pre-test interview questions for “most-gains” and “most-losses” districts with input from Advisory Council and involved state associations. –Complete IRB requirements. –Trained project staff begins interviews to explore nuances of staffing decision-making. –Share preliminary findings with Advisory Council and state associations. –Complete content analysis of job descriptions. Produce report and infographic. – Launch interactive US school district map on the project website, adding reports and infographics. Produce a training webinar on the interactive map. –Share project findings at the PTA and National Principals Conferences. Present and meet with state associations at the AASL Conference.

Year 3: --Complete interviews and analyze results. Publish a report and infographic. –Combine analyses of NCES, job description, and interview data to determine prevailing and emerging models for staffing library, learning resources, and technology functions, including ones where librarians are absent. Share with Advisory Council and state intermediary associations. –Publish executive summary report with recommendations. – Disseminate project findings and infographics in library and education publications, at conference sessions, and on social media. –Produce webinars on findings and promote reports and tools on website to schools, state associations, and LIS professionals. –Share project findings at the PTA and ASCD Conferences.

Diversity Plan: No national studies to date have documented over time the losses of school librarians in racially diverse and impoverished school districts. Through targeted interviews this investigation will explore those inequities and seek to understand the unique challenges in districts of various settings (rural, suburban, urban), financial wealth, and racial/ethnic composition, potentially uncovering new skill sets and staffing models implemented to meet needs in highly diverse schools.

Broad Impact: At the current rate of decline, within a few decades, school librarians, as currently recognized, could disappear or evolve into something quite different. If school leaders are seeking different skill sets or using alternative staffing models to provide library services, those who educate school librarians—LIS programs, state library agencies and associations, and continuing education providers need to adjust to new realities. This exploratory “Research in Service to Practice” study seeks to understand the declining numbers of school librarians through the eyes of decision-makers and to equip current and prospective librarians, LIS educators, and school leaders to make better informed decisions about how to meet the needs of K-12 students and teachers effectively and equitably.

Key Project Staff: Project Director, Debra E. Kachel, Affiliate Faculty, School Library Media Endorsement Program, AUS, and Principal Investigator: Keith Curry Lance, Ph.D., consultant, RSL Research Group, Colorado, collaborated on an IMLS-funded Pennsylvania school library impact study and have published extensively on the topic of school librarian losses.

Three-Year Budget Summary: Project Director Salary and fringe: \$78,800. Sub awards: Principal Investigator and RSL Research-\$86,600; Trained Interviewers-\$52,500; Web Design-\$30,000; Outside Evaluation-\$10,000. Materials/Supplies: \$13,000. Travel: \$24,500. Indirect: \$94,600. Total: \$390,000