

Extending School Librarian Preparation Through Transitional Mentorship with Early Career School Librarians

Introduction: Dr. Jenna Spiering, Principal Investigator and Assistant Professor of Information Science at the University of South Carolina, requests \$379,306 for a three-year Laura Bush 21st Century Library program Early Career Research Development project, “Extending School Library Preparation Through Transitional Mentorship with Early Career School Librarians.” This project aligns with program Goal 2 and Objective 2.3 to support the long-term research agenda of untenured faculty members in LIS. It also contributes to agency-level priorities to enhance professional development that supports a diverse library workforce ([IMLS, 2023](#)). Working together with a field coordinator at the University of Iowa, the PI will implement a multiphase project that includes 1) a national survey about the challenges recent Library and Information Science (LIS) graduates face in their early years of school librarianship and 2) the use of survey data to collaboratively design (alongside veteran school library mentors), implement, and qualitatively evaluate the impact of a formal mentoring network. The mentoring network would focus on supporting school librarians (SLs) in their efforts to champion core tenets of school librarianship like equity, intellectual freedom, and collaboration. This program is designed as a transitional measure for early career SLs as they leave LIS preparation programs and enter the school library profession—bridging theory and praxis. The project will address the questions: **(RQ1)** What challenges do SLs face in the early years of their career? **(RQ2)** How does a formal mentoring network support SLs in the early years of their careers in school librarianship as they implement services related to equity, intellectual freedom, and collaboration? and **(RQ3)** How do participants perceive they benefit from a formal mentorship program in the early years of their careers as SLs?

Project Justification: School librarians (SLs) in the United States are typically working as the sole SL in their schools. They are often without support staff and are increasingly responsible for school libraries in several buildings or an entire district. While classroom teachers have embedded communities of practice in their schools, SLs are often at a disadvantage when it comes to establishing a professional network, having instead to rely on social media, listservs, and conferences for a chance to network with other SLs ([Harlan, 2009](#)). The singular nature of the school library profession can often result in professionals who feel disconnected when they face challenges and critique from their community as when attempting to build a culture of inclusivity in their school library programs. An informal survey conducted in preparation for this project in early 2023 (n=211) pointed to some specific challenges that are ubiquitous for SLs and may potentially lead to dissatisfaction in the profession, including the SLs role in managing technology, cultivating equitable policies and practices, defending intellectual freedom, establishing collaborative relationships, and time management. A mentoring network could function as a powerful support for early career SLs as they navigate increased scrutiny that is undoubtedly making for a demanding and (oftentimes) difficult work environment.

Teacher mentorship (or induction) programs are commonplace in colleges of education (e.g. [CarolinaTIP](#), [Chicago Teacher Education Pipeline](#)), as well as through local boards of education (e.g. [LACOE Beginning Teachers Induction Program](#).) Empirical data from these programs has been overwhelmingly positive; strong mentorship and induction programs lead to higher levels of recruitment and retention of educators ([Skeen et al., 2020](#)), as well as improved practice and instruction and oftentimes student achievement ([Ingersoll & Strong, 2011](#)). However, there are very few models of induction programs that are geared toward the specificities of SL positions. There is abundant support for a variety of mentorship programs for SLs in professional literature. However, the work thus far has focused on the mentoring of preservice SLs while they are in their graduate programs ([Smith, 2013, 2015; Project RUSL](#)), SLs serving as mentors for new teachers ([Soulen, 2018](#)), and mentorship networks for school library supervisors ([Project LILEAD](#)). The project will explore how a mentoring network that provides individualized support in a non-evaluative capacity would support early career SLs as they endeavor to meet professional goals by provide them with support (from highly qualified mentors) when challenges arise in their first years of school librarianship. The [AASL Standards](#) guide the work done by school librarians in K-12 schools, and they create high expectations for learners in our schools. Highly qualified and engaged SLs are essential to meeting this goal. By providing a bridge between preparation programs and early career professionals, we can support a diverse field of SLs who will serve as powerful advocates for the profession and their students.

Project Work Plan: The project employs a sequential mixed model design ([Hesse-Biber et al., 2015](#)) which includes three phases. In **Phase I (Year 1)**, the PI will design and conduct a national survey (RQ1) about the experiences of early career school librarians, particularly as they relate to their new role in cultivating equitable policies and practices, defending intellectual freedom, and establishing collaborative relationships. Descriptive statistics, as well as content analysis, will be used to analyze the results of the survey and identify themes in challenges faced that can be addressed and focused on through mentorship. The PI will use findings from the survey to inform the mentoring model employed in

Phase II. The final piece of Phase I includes aggregating and analyzing survey data, preparing a manuscript for publication, and adding the results to the project website to disseminate the findings broadly.

Phase II (Years 2 and 3) involves the design, implementation, and ongoing and responsive evaluation of the mentoring program. The two states were chosen to capture the experience of SLs working in regionally and demographically diverse settings and who have received their SL preparation in two distinct areas of the United States. The University of South Carolina's iSchool (South) and the University of Iowa School of Library and Information Science (Midwest) are both situated in states where there are statewide shortages in SLs--where measures focused on retention are of particular importance. However, these states also have distinctly different challenges. Because replicability for other SL preparation programs is an important goal of this project's national impact, testing at two different University sites, working under different state requirements, is an explicit design feature. The PI will work with six mentors (three from USC and three from UI as well as the field coordinator in Iowa to design a year-long mentoring model informed by 1) the survey results and 2) an established mentoring framework designed specifically to support mentor teachers ([Driskill, 2023](#)) and ensure that mentoring is a mutually beneficial intervention for both mentors and mentees. The model will provide a formal mentoring structure as well as on-demand individualized support to early career SLs (the 24 mentees) when challenges arise in their first years of school librarianship. That support involves three virtual meetings with all mentors and mentees (one prior to the school year, one during, and one after), a full group in-person meeting at AASL's Annual Meeting in 2025, ongoing participation in a group Discord channel, and both formal and informal mentoring conversations between mentors and their cohorts (4 mentees will be assigned to each mentor) that will be supported by the PI and the field coordinator.

Phase III (Year 3) will focus on the qualitative evaluation of the mentoring program. The PI will be working with a research assistant (RA) throughout the program to monitor its effectiveness. Data collected will include materials generated during whole group meetings, monthly mentor reports, group Discord channel transcripts, individual interviews with mentors, and focus groups with mentee cohorts. The data collection and analysis process will be ongoing throughout the mentorship program but the exit interviews and focus groups will be conducted after the program concludes during Year 3. Along with the RA, the PI will analyze the data and present findings from each phase at various national and international conference venues.

Diversity Plan: The diversity plan for this work is multilayered and considers the needs of diverse students as well as SLs. In line with many of the challenges that SLs have identified as barriers in the profession, the program aims to support SLs who are curating, promoting, and defending diverse collections, creating and implementing equitable and inclusive policies and practices, and designing collaborative instruction for diverse learners. To this end, the larger goal of this project is to support the diverse student bodies in k-12 schools who benefit from strong SLs ([Froggatt, 2015](#)). Additionally, recruitment and retention of diverse school library professionals continues to be a significant barrier to the creation of a diverse school library workforce ([ALA, 2012](#)). However, across LIS professions, the presence of strong mentors has made an impact on recruitment and retention particularly for librarians of color ([Harper, 2020](#)). Through participant support, the program will prioritize the recruitment and inclusion of diverse early career SLs and diverse mentors (racially and ethnically diverse, regionally, and across varied grade levels).

Project Results: This project will yield important empirical findings that will both inform and serve as a model for mentoring programs in other SL preparation programs well after the project's conclusion. Participants in this project will benefit from the network gained through this mentoring program and the data collected throughout will assist educators of SLs in their own planning for how to support their students after they complete their programs. The project results will be disseminated in multiple ways ensuring that not only do the findings contribute to knowledge creation in the area of school library research, but also have practical impact for the people who work with, train, and mentor SLs. The PI will publicize these findings at national and international conferences, in peer-reviewed publications, and professional publications that have a direct impact on school library practice. Additionally, a framework for mentoring new SLs as well as materials and findings from the project will be made available at the project's conclusion.

Budget Summary: The proposed budget of \$379,306 includes \$108,462 for salaries, wages, and fringe (three years of PI summer support as well as one course buy-out each year); \$48,575 for student support (RA for three years including conference travel); \$43,700 for contracts (field coordinator at University of Iowa, advisory board, mentor support); \$46,590 for other costs (participant support and incentives); \$24,640 for travel; and \$1,550 for supplies and materials. Total project costs are \$273,516. Indirect costs are assessed at a rate of 49% for a total of \$379,306.