

# School Library Media Centers: Current and Future Statistics

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Who are you? Where do you, your program, your library media center, and your state's programs and facilities fit within the national picture? You have the answers to some of those questions, of course, but you need national data to determine your place in the overall school library media tableau. In this column, ALA's lead researcher first summarizes the national data that sketch the most recent portrayal of our field and then sets the scene for an even more detailed portrait to come.

In November 1994, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a division of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education, published *School Library Media Centers in the United States: 1990-91*. This fifty-one-page report—the first national statistical report on our field to appear since 1987—provides new information about the availability of school library media centers, their staffing levels, and the role of those centers in schools. Although the report is a far cry from the detailed statistics the field needs, it provides important benchmarks against which to consider the more extensive data that will be available. This column describes the report and places it in the context of previous reports and those that are currently planned.

The U.S. Department of Education has been collecting statistics about libraries for over 100 years—since 1876. In the last twenty years, detailed statistics have been collected about school library media centers three times. In 1974, a sample of 3,500 public schools was surveyed. In 1978-79, 3,500 public schools and 1,600 private schools were questioned in two separate surveys. In 1985-86, that pattern was repeated but the sample size was increased—to 4,500 public schools and 1,700 private schools.

The final report of the 1985-86 project was an impressive compendium of data prepared for what was then the Center for Education Statistics in the Department of Education.<sup>(1)</sup> The body of the report includes approximately 117 tables in three groups. Thirty-nine tables describe public school library media centers along a number of dimensions: staff, collection, expenditures, services, usage, technology, and facilities. Thirty-nine other tables provide the same information for private schools. Thirty-nine additional tables show estimates by state for public schools on the same variables. The report also includes a lengthy introduction with fifteen figures and twenty-two tables, some of them comparing 1985-86 data with data from surveys in 1958, 1962, 1974, and 1978-79.

These data have been very useful to the school library media community. Before the report was even published, the data file was used by Howard White of Drexel University to produce

Appendix A for Information Power.(2) That appendix was based on the part of the 1985-86 questionnaire that listed twenty-two services offered by school library media centers (for example, “Offers a sequential program of library skills instruction” and “Coordinates library skills instruction with classroom instruction”). Responding schools had been asked to indicate if they offered each service “routinely,” “occasionally,” or “never.” White created a score for each responding school and ran the output variables (the service scores) against such input variables as size of staff, collection, and budget. The result—Appendix A—showed what it takes to produce high service levels in elementary, middle/junior high, and secondary schools serving various numbers of students.

The 1985-86 data are now outdated, but they still demonstrate the usefulness of national data to the field. Fortunately, several important steps have been taken in recent years that promise the collection of national data more frequently in the future. In several successive stages, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has been including questions about school library media programs and services in its general surveys about elementary and secondary education across the nation.

## **Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS)**

In the mid-1980s, NCES began work on the Schools and Staffing Survey—a set of questionnaires to be used periodically in gathering national data. SASS began as a set of four separate questionnaires: School Survey, School Administrator Survey, Teacher Survey, and Teacher Demand and Shortage Survey. The first two questionnaires were sent to administrators in a sample of public and private schools. The third went to a sample of teachers in those schools. The last went to the district office of each sampled public school. Each of the first three questionnaires had a public school version and a slightly different private school version.

The 1987-88 SASS included only one information item on our field. As part of a question on staffing, school administrators were asked for a count of “librarians and other professional media staff.” The situation improved for the 1990-91 SASS, when a series of questions was added to previously existing instruments. School administrators were asked about the existence of school library media centers and about staffing in them. Teachers and principals were asked for their opinions on several matters related to school library media centers. Results of those items were extracted from the overall data set and presented in the separate report upon which this column is based.(3)

The sample for the 1990-91 SASS included 12,856 schools and administrators, 62,217 teachers, and 5,515 local education agencies. The report of results on the school library media center questions included in that survey contains twenty tables, fourteen of them paired to display data (1) by selected school characteristics and (2) by state. The tables that display data by selected school characteristics are further divided into two parts: public school results and private school results. Public school results are reported by school level (elementary, secondary, combined); school size (less than 300, 300-599, 600 or more); and percentage of students eligible for free lunches (less than 20 percent, 20-40 percent, 50 percent or more). Private school results are reported in the same way, except that “orientation” (Catholic, other religious, non-sectarian) replaces the “free lunch” segment.

*The good news: centers are available.* The report begins with data and discussion about the number of school library media centers throughout the country, the percentage of pupils in schools with school library media centers, and the number of librarians employed from 1959-60 through 1991.

In that most recent year, 93.7 percent of schools in the sample reported having library media centers, placing 98 percent of pupils in schools with such centers. All reporting schools in five locations had library media centers: the District of Columbia and the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, and Wyoming. The state reporting the lowest percentage of schools with library media centers was West Virginia, where only 76.4 percent of sample schools reported having these facilities.

*The bad news: staff are often lacking.* Those figures look good until one reads the next section of the report, which presents text and tables on staffing levels in school library media centers. Data for this section came from the questionnaire sent to school administrators.

According to table 1, which has been condensed from a table in the full report, over a quarter of the school library media centers in this country have no librarian (25.8 percent). The percentage varies by school type and level, with private elementary schools most likely to lack librarians (61 percent) and public secondary schools least likely to lack them (9.6 percent). Furthermore, 16.7 percent of school library media centers have neither librarians nor library aides. This figure, too, varies greatly by type and level of school.

**Table 1.** Staffing Patterns in School Library Media Centers

	<b>Schools without a librarian No. (%)</b>	<b>Schools with neither librarian nor aide No. (%)</b>
Total	25,280 (25.8)	16,379 (16.7)
Public	13,700 (17.9)	6,193 (8.1)
Elementary	10,998 (20.2)	4,261 (7.8)
Secondary	1,792 (9.6)	1,288 (6.9)
Combined	910 (26.4)	644 (18.7)
Private	11,580 (54.0)	10,186 (47.5)
Elementary	8,116 (61.0)	7,046 (53.0)
Secondary	357 (15.5)	298 (12.9)
Combined	3,107 (53.3)	2,842 (48.7)

California reported the highest percentage of schools without librarians (49 percent), followed by Nebraska (46.9 percent). States reporting the lowest percentages of schools without librarians are Hawaii (1.1 percent) and Georgia (1.9 percent). Nebraska reported the highest percentage of schools staffed by neither a librarian nor an aide (43.7 percent), followed by Montana (36

percent). Hawaii reported no schools in that situation, and Georgia reported only 1.1 percent. Additional tables in this section of the full report show these staffing variables in terms of the minimum recommended by AASL and AECT—one full-time professional and one full-time aide. Of all reporting schools, 36.4 percent do not meet this standard, including 67.9 percent of the private schools.

Other tables in this section of the full report display the average number of librarians per school, the average number of aides per school, the pupil/librarian ratio, and the teacher/librarian ratio. The first two variables are tiny numbers in all cases, with the national average of librarians at .9 per school and the national average of aides at .6 per school.

The pupil/librarian ratio is more varied and ranges from a high of 1,041.7 pupils per librarian in California to a low of 360.2 pupils per librarian in Montana. Teacher/librarian ratios range from a high of 44.7 teachers per librarian in California to a low of 23.9 teachers per librarian in Montana.

Clearly, there is a shocking contradiction between the figures on school library media centers and the figures on staffing in those centers: the data suggest that almost all our nation's schools have library media centers but fewer than three-quarters are adequately staffed. An official AASL/AECT definition of school library media centers (which was used by NCES) underscores the issue: "A school library media center is defined as an organized collection of printed and/or audiovisual and/or computer resources which (a) is administered as a unit, (b) is located in a designated place or places, (c) makes resources and services accessible and available to students, teachers, and administrators."<sup>5</sup> While an unstaffed library media center might be able to make resources available, how can such a center make services available? And if the provision of services is essential to the function of a library media center, then isn't the presence of appropriate staff an essential component of the definition of such a center? In short, the question becomes, Can there be a school library media center without a school library media specialist?

## **Opinions of Teachers and Principals**

The questionnaire for teachers asked for a response of "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree" with each of the following statements:

- I plan with the librarian/media specialist for the integration of library/media services into my teaching.
- Library/media materials are adequate to support my instructional objectives.

A little over 29 percent of the teachers in the sample "strongly agreed" that they plan with the librarian/media specialist; percentages vary only slightly by school type (public or private) and level. The state with the highest percentage of teachers who reported intense planning with their librarian/media specialists is Oklahoma (40.2 percent); the state reporting the lowest percentage is Hawaii (21 percent). Thirty-five percent of reporting teachers strongly agreed that their library/media materials are adequate—a percentage that generally holds across different types and levels of schools. The state reporting the highest types and percentage of satisfied teachers is

Georgia (44.7 percent); Idaho reported the lowest percentage of teachers who strongly agree that library/media materials are adequate (21.4 percent).

An item on the questionnaire about schools asked the principals whether any of six different groups had “a great deal of influence” on curriculum planning. Librarians were identified as influential by 15.8 percent of principals, making them apparently less influential than any other group except parent associations (checked by 7.7 percent). For public schools, the most influential groups were state departments of education (61.3 percent), principals (57.5 percent), teachers (55.6 percent), and school or governing boards (41.4 percent). For private schools, the order of influence was principals (85.3 percent), teachers (70 percent), librarians (28.6 percent), and school or governing boards (26.2 percent).

Once again, these data raise interesting questions. First, the findings seem to confirm the assumption that the school library media specialist’s role as instructional consultant is inadequately understood. But should we expect more than 29 percent of teachers to be enthusiastic about planning with the school library media specialist when only 35 percent strongly agree that collections are adequate? Further, while it is not surprising that library media specialists are perceived as having little influence over establishing curriculum in either the public or the private arena, how can we increase understanding of our potential contribution in this area?

## **Coming Attractions**

The 1990-91 SASS served two important purposes for our field. First, the questionnaires gathered important national data, as noted above. Second—and even more significantly—the 1990-91 SASS tested two new questionnaires that will soon yield a more detailed and comprehensive look at school library media centers and school library media specialists.

Early in 1990, a committee of AASL members working with the ALA Office for Research and Statistics and the executive director of AASL began to design two new instruments for the 1993-94 SASS—one about the school library media center and another about the school library media specialist/librarian. The group decided to use the 1985-86 questionnaire (see Note 1) as the basis for the school library media center instrument. For the school library media specialist instrument, the group decided to stay as close to the teacher questionnaire as possible, making changes only to focus the questions directly on our field (e.g., substituting “your library media center” for “your classroom”). This approach will facilitate comparisons of teachers and library media specialists on many dimensions. Draft questionnaires created by the committee were tested on a selected group of AASL leaders, revised, and sent to NCES for testing in the 1990-91 SASS. After appropriate modifications, the two questionnaires were sent to a sample of 7,676 schools as part of the 1993-94 SASS.

Both questionnaires will provide considerable new information to the field: the school library media center instrument is a sixteen-page booklet with thirty numbered questions about the five topics displayed in table 2, while the school library media specialist/librarian instrument is a twenty-four-page booklet with thirty-eight numbered questions about the topics shown in table 3. (The numbers of data items in the tables are higher than the numbers of questions because many

questions have several parts.) Brief examples of how results from each instrument could be used will illustrate their significance.

**Table 2.** School Library Media Center Questionnaire

<b>Category</b>	<b>No. of Items</b>
Staffing	7
Collections and expenditures	40
Technology	21
Facilities	12
Scheduling and transactions	20
Total	100

**Table 3.** School Library Media Specialist Questionnaire

<b>Category</b>	<b>No. of Items</b>
Current status	8
Experience	6
Training	16
Collaborative activities	13
Perceptions/attitudes	36
Background information	8
Total	87

Results from one of the questions on “Collections and Expenditures” from the school library media center questionnaire could help to explain why only 35 percent of responding teachers were enthusiastic about school library media center resources in the 1990-91 survey. Question 8 lists fourteen areas in a school’s instructional program and asks respondents to rate both the “currentness” and the “quantity” of their library media center’s resources by checking a box labeled “excellent,” “adequate,” “poor,” or “inadequate” for each area. Results will provide a report card on school library media center collections.

One of the questions on “Collaborative Activities” on the school library media specialist/librarian instrument could help explain why only 29 percent of the teachers in the 1990-91 sample were enthusiastic about planning with their school library media specialists. Question 18b lists ten subject areas and asks school library media specialists to indicate how often they work with classroom teachers in that area: “weekly,” “monthly,” “annually,” “never,” or “not applicable.” Results will show how much collaboration is really happening.

Plans are now under way in NCES to publish, in late 1995, a set of tables displaying data collected through the school library media center instrument. AASL's School Library Statistics Committee and the ALA Office for Research and Statistics have advised NCES on which variables to include in that first report. NCES also plans to release a more comprehensive report in the spring of 1996. This second report will contain more analysis of the school library media center data plus tables and analysis of the school library media specialist data. Once these reports are published, the full data file will be released for use by others. Finally, researchers across the school library media community will have a treasure trove to explore.

## Conclusion

The 1993-94 SASS was a landmark event for the school library media community. Instead of having just a few relevant questions on survey forms sent to other educators, we became full participants in the Department of Education's national data collection effort with two questionnaires through which we can provide information on topics of great importance to us—school library media centers and school library media specialists. NCES will produce two reports using data from those questionnaires in the next year, and the files will then be available for our own research. Data presented in this article indicate that we might not be happy with what the 1993-94 SASS will reveal about the state of school library media centers, but at least we will have plenty of solid information to use when arguing for needed changes. And SASS will probably be repeated in 1997-98, giving us another—and potentially better—portrait of our national scene.

## References and Notes

1. U.S. Dept. of Education, Center for Education Statistics, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, *Statistics of Public and Private School Library Media Centers, 1985-86* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1987).
2. AASL and Association for Educational Communications and Technology, *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* (Chicago: ALA, 1988).
3. U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, *School Library Media Centers in the United States: 1990-91* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1994).
4. In this paragraph and throughout this column's discussion of specific findings in the NCES report, the titles used for library media center personnel are those used by NCES. As noted in the report, "the professional employees who are responsible for library media centers have a wide range of training, certification, and background experiences; they are also given a number of different titles. This report uses the terms librarian and library media specialist interchangeably to refer to professional school staff members who are assigned to school library media center responsibilities, such as dealing with books and other materials, as well as planning and guiding the use of the library and media services by students, teachers, and others" (p.8).
5. *Ibid.*, 8.