Standards—Our Earliest History

The importance of information literacy for students has been recognized from the earliest formation of libraries in schools. This issue looks at information literacy across the spectrum of K–20 and at the importance of a continuum from libraries in schools to libraries in higher education. AASL, in partnership with the Association of College and Research Libraries, formed an interdivisional committee to institutionalize the K–20 concept in our standards and programming. At the recent AASL conference in Kansas City, the committee presented a program “Your Seniors Are Our College Freshman”; it couldn’t have been said better.

Recently, in response to an inquiry regarding school libraries’ history, I reviewed school library standards from their inception in the early 1900s—a fascinating task. From the size and format of the standards, to the basic mission of a school library program, to the description of a quality library, to the list of must-have materials, the standards show that our basic mission remains the same, while such items as the type and quantity of resources needed changed over time. Some issues, particularly the need for qualified librarians, have not changed.

Let me share with you early school library standards’ history.

1918

Present-day concepts of school library media program standards have evolved gradually since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Ideas about the requisites of a good library program and how it can be developed underwent constant modification, along with changes in concepts of teaching and learning. What appears to be the first formal report on school library standards was presented and adopted at a Symposium of the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools in 1917. These standards, with minor revisions, were formally presented at the National Educational Association (NEA) meeting in 1918 and adopted by the Secondary School Department. They reflect a growing interest in the status of school library development, built on the premise that all junior high and high schools should have libraries. Earlier published reports in New York City, Chicago, and New York state contributed to these standards. C. C. Certain, chairman of the NEA committee and a high school librarian in Detroit, and Mary E. Hall, librarian at Girls High School in Brooklyn and first president of the ALA School Library Section, were both library advocates involved in school library standards work during the early 1900s.

The NEA Library Committee organized in 1915 and carried out two purposes. First, it investigated actual conditions in high school libraries throughout the United States through a series of surveys; second, it made these conditions known to school administrators to secure their aid in improving existing conditions. The findings were reported at a national meeting of high school principals, teachers, librarians, and state and city superintendents, who discussed problems relating to high school libraries. A new concept of the status of the school library grew out of this meeting. The action of these organizations gave school administrators the first national standards for school library development. The administrators wanted and needed official, definitive library standards.

Commonly known as the Certain Standards, they were endorsed by the American Library Association in 1920 and separately published by NEA as a thirty-eight-page booklet. These early quantitative standards set the stage for future school library program development and presented important concepts that are still in use. This small booklet emphasized the importance of setting standards in order to achieve goals: “...we are likely to get what we want if we know what we want.” Their goal was to have “...administrators [see] that the library is the very heart of the high school,” which they believed was “...attainable in the high schools of the U.S. within the next five years.” The standards include: scientific planning; importance of being an integral part of the school organization; including freedom of access; seating and collection size; equipment; library classroom; and qualified librarian (one year postgraduate library school and one year internship). The librarian in these standards was seen as a professional and “...under no circumstance should be expected to do clerical work” and “...should have the ability to work for and with teachers.”
1925
Changes in schooling for elementary school children began to take place in the 1920s:

Modern demands upon the public school presuppose adequate library service. Significant changes in methods of teaching require that the school library supplement the single textbook course of instruction and provide for the enrichment of the school curriculum. Children in the school are actively engaged in interests, which make it necessary for them to have the use of many books and a wide variety of materials, such as pictures and lantern slides. An essential consideration is that the books and materials be readily available when needed, and under the direction of a library staff which is part of the school organization.8

The 1925 Elementary School Library Standards, developed by a joint NEA and ALA committee, also chaired by C. C. Certain, developed the concepts and importance of a library program for younger children. These standards defined aims, scope, and use, as well as a scope and sequence of instruction and instructions for starting and maintaining a library. It also listed a core elementary library collection of 212 books. All in thirty-six pages! It is interesting to note, even with a very small library, the emphasis on the vital importance of a trained librarian. The aim and scope (mission) of the elementary library in 1925 included: teaching children to like to read; supplementing instruction; using reference materials easily and effectively; and serving as an integral part of the school.8

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1945
The two sets of Certain Standards were used extensively until the end of the 1930s. Schools continued to change, and the need for more qualitative standards emerged. The Certain Standards’ emphasis on integrating libraries into the school’s curriculum seemed to have an effect; school libraries appeared to be part of the fabric of the changing school curriculum.

In response, the regional accrediting associations began to develop qualitative standards in the late 1930s. The Middle States Association developed its Evaluative Criteria in 1939 to evaluate school library programs, variations of which were used through the 1950s.9 During this period, many state education departments also developed standards based on the Certain Standards or the accrediting agency standards.10

ALA published School Libraries for Today and Tomorrow in their Planning for Libraries post-war series in response to these needs.11 This was ALA’s first development and writing of school library standards and the first K–12 school library standards. It combined both qualitative and quantitative standards and was based on a statement of principles developed by an NEA and ALA joint committee (1941).12 These principles are remarkably consistent with our current professional standards:

- The school library is an essential element in the school program.
- School library service is the responsibility of the Board of Education [rather than haphazard fundraisers, bake sales, etc.].
- The distinctive purpose of the school library is that of helping children and young people to develop abilities and habits using books and libraries in attaining their goals of living.
- The school library should share in the whole school program.
- Three essential factors without which a school library does not exist are:
  - the librarian;
  - the book collection; and
  - the library quarters.
- A school library does not become effective without the informed and constructive participation of the superintendent, the principal, and classroom teachers.
- School and public libraries should work together to provide coordinated service.
- State leadership is essential.
Chapters are devoted to various aspects of these principles, including service to pupils and teachers; standards for personnel, such as size of staff and education; the book collection and other resources; facilities; and administration. This forty-three-page booklet guided future development of quality school library programs.

Conclusion
The advent of ALA’s standards for school library programs coincided with the strengthening of AASL within ALA. AASL officially moved from section to division status in 1951. Leaders recognized the need to update and address standards periodically in response to the changes in educational philosophy and technology. In response, AASL, under the auspices of ALA, developed and published standards in 1960, 1969, 1975, 1988, and 1998, endorsed by a variety of educational professional associations.13

For those who enjoy reviewing our history as I do, I have included citations for all of the above school library standards documents in the references below.

This journey through our earliest standards history strengthened my understanding of the basic concepts of my profession. It is enlightening and inspiring to know that those early pioneers in school libraries had the same philosophical underpinnings for their programs as we do today.

References and Notes


5. Ibid., 4

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 12.


12. American Association of School Librarians, Standards for School Library Programs (Chicago: ALA, 1945); American Association of School Librarians and the National Education Association Department of Audiovisual Instruction, Standards for School Media Programs (Chicago: ALA, 1960); American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communications and Technology, Media Programs: District and School (Chicago: ALA, 1975); American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communications and Technology, Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs (Chicago: ALA, 1975); American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communications and Technology, Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning (Chicago: ALA, 1998) [includes Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning].