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# The School District Library Supervisor and the National School Library Standards


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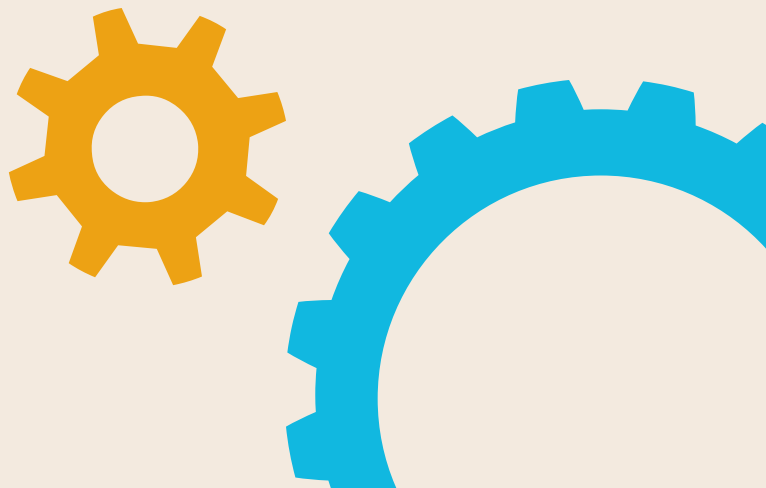
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FEATURE

THE SCSH

DISTRICT

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O O O L

L I B R R A R Y

V I S O R

AND THE *NATIONAL SCHOOL LIBRARY STANDARDS*

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## Introduction

Although they are the individuals at the district level most able to advocate and take action on behalf of school libraries, school district library supervisors are a largely understudied and misunderstood population (Massey et al. 2016). The *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* (AASL 2018) discuss the role of the supervisor more than did AASL's 2007 *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* or the accompanying *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs* (AASL 2009). However, the standards focus on what a supervisor *should* be doing even though there has been little empirical information gathered about what supervisors are *actually* doing. While it is important to aim for excellence in the standards, we must also understand what is currently happening in the field.

To learn more about school district library supervisors, we set out to collect baseline data on their roles, responsibilities, challenges, and professional development needs. This work became known as the Lilead Project (rhymes with "Gilead"). Through research grants from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, we conducted our first survey in 2012 and a second survey of roughly the same population in 2014. Through these surveys, we created a functional, working definition for the position of the supervisor. In this article we will look at that working definition and compare it to the role of the supervisor as detailed in the *National School Library Standards*. For a more complete look at the results of the Lilead Surveys, see Weeks et al. (2016 and 2017).

## Creating a Working Definition

The Lilead Surveys were distributed by e-mail to supervisors in school districts in the U.S. with a student

population of twenty-five thousand or more and to the largest district in each of the ten states in which no school district had a student population of at least twenty-five thousand. The response rates for the surveys were 61 percent in 2012 and 55 percent in 2014.

In both surveys we asked supervisors about their responsibilities and tasks performed. Respondents told us the importance of and frequency with which they carried out fifty-three tasks (among numerous other questions important to their work). We included so many tasks and risked distributing such a lengthy survey because virtually no information on library supervisors had been collected at the national level in the last forty years (Bundy, Wasserman, and O'Connell 1970). From the tasks identified as those most frequently engaged in by the respondents, we created a working definition for the role of supervisors.

## A Working Definition of the Role of the School District Library Supervisor

So what does a district library supervisor do all day? The working definition below is based on tasks from the 2012 Lilead Survey in which 75 percent of respondents stated that the task was "extremely important" or "important" to their work.

The library supervisor is the individual at the district level with responsibilities in leading school library programs, supporting personnel, developing collections, supporting teaching and learning, overseeing library facilities, providing technology for access and management of information resources, managing library budgets and

finance, and participating in professional organizations.

The supervisor exercises these responsibilities through specific tasks in the following areas:

### *Leadership—*

- advocates for library programs
- develops a vision and mission for the library program
- develops library policies and procedures
- meets with other district-level administrators
- consults with principals
- conducts action or scientific research

### *Personnel—*

- offers professional development for building-level librarians
- meets with and advises building-level librarians
- advises principals regarding personnel issues

### *Collection development—*

- selects and evaluates materials
- handles book challenges and censorship issues
- manages database subscriptions
- develops opening-day collections

### *Teaching and learning—*

- integrates standards into the curriculum, including AASL standards, technology standards, state and local standards, and national standards
- organizes special events
- writes curriculum

Table 1. Examples of matches for the role of supervisor as described in the AASL Standards and the Lilead Survey Results.\*\*

### Facilities—

- plans new library facilities and renovations
- consults with architects and project managers
- selects furnishings for new facilities and renovations
- moves library collections

### Technology—

- manages library automation systems
- provides technology training and support to building-level personnel
- develops technology plans and policies
- purchases software

### Finances—

- budgets for district-level library programs
- negotiates contracts with vendors
- prepares grant applications

### Professional organizations—

- participates in professional organizations at all levels (local, state, and national)
- presents sessions at professional meetings outside the district
- presents the results of action or scientific research

### Comparing the National School Library Standards to the Working Definition

With empirical data from across the country about tasks that supervisors identified as important to their role, we compared the Lilead Survey results with what AASL has identified as the standard for what

RESPONSIBILITIES OF SUPERVISOR IN THE STANDARDS	TASKS OF IMPORTANCE ACCORDING TO RESPONDENTS TO LILEAD SURVEYS
Develops and implements plans for presenting and publicizing school library programs and services as well as communicates goals and priorities to the staff and public (172)*	Advocates for library programs
Uses evidence-based practice and conducts action research that creates data used to inform continuous improvement (180)	Conducts action or scientific research
Develops an effective plan and process for providing school libraries that support the philosophy, goals, and objectives of the school district (174)	Develops a vision and mission for the library program Develops library policies and procedures
Designs and supervises the implementation of a learning technology curriculum for learners and staff (174)	Develops technology plans and policies Integrates standards into the curriculum, including technology standards
Fosters the development of effective building-level libraries that meet regional, state, and national standards (172)	Integrates standards into the curriculum, including local, state, and national standards
Guides school librarians in selection of materials and equipment to ensure unified ordering and taking advantage of economy of scale (177)	Selects and evaluates materials Manages database subscriptions Purchases software
Ensures standardization of technical services (circulation, classification, cataloging, processing, standard nomenclature, naming conventions, etc.) (177)	Manages library automation systems
Provides for district in-service training for school librarians to foster leadership, competence, and creativity in developing instruction, services, and programs for the library (178)	Offers professional development for building-level librarians

\*numbers in parentheses are page numbers

\*\*Please note, this table is not inclusive of all matches, but provides examples of such matches.

**SUBSTANTIAL  
OVERLAP EXISTS  
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DEFINITION AND  
THE ROLE OF THE  
SUPERVISOR AS  
DESCRIBED IN THE  
NATIONAL SCHOOL  
LIBRARY STANDARDS.**

supervisors should be doing. Substantial overlap exists between the functional definition and the role of the supervisor as described in the *National School Library Standards*. Examples of such overlap are in table 1. This overlap is not surprising, as both the Lilead Survey and the AASL Standards were influenced by documents such as AASL's "Position Statement on the School Library Supervisor" (2012) and feedback from experts and practitioners in the field (Weeks et al. 2016, 6; AASL 2018, 9–10).

### Differences between the Surveys and the Standards

While many similarities between the survey and the standards were identified, perhaps more interesting are the differences between the working definition of what supervisors do and the roles prescribed by the *National School Library Standards*.

Based on data from the Lilead Surveys, not all supervisors are fulfilling the budgetary role described in the AASL Standards. The standards indicate that the supervisor cooperates with the school librarian and the principal to plan the budget (AASL 2018, 175) and helps building-level librarians to interpret budgetary needs (AASL 2018, 172). In the 2012 Lilead Survey, while 91.6 percent of supervisors said that *district-level* budgetary responsibilities were a part of their roles as district supervisors, only 62 percent of respondents said that *building-level* budgetary planning was important to their role as supervisor. A little more than half of supervisors (52.4 percent) indicated that raising funds for building-level libraries was an important part of their position as supervisors.

Regarding the evaluation of school librarians, the *National School Library Standards* indicate more involvement in evaluation than did the

Lilead Survey respondents. From the AASL Standards: "The school library supervisor may assist with the recruitment, supervision, and evaluation of school library personnel to ensure that the school library contributes to the learning process" (AASL 2018, 172). We interpret this statement to indicate the district supervisor should in some way be involved in the evaluation of building-level librarians, without being overly prescriptive. The Lilead Surveys indicate that involvement in evaluation of building-level librarians is not part of the job for many supervisors. While it is important to some, slightly more than half (50.6 percent) indicated that the task of evaluating school librarians was "not important" or "not applicable" to their role as supervisor. Regarding those supervisors who stated that evaluation of building-level librarians was a part of their role, only 9.6 percent of supervisors were *responsible* for decision-making in the process of evaluation, while 39.8 percent indicated that they are "an advisor" on such decisions. While we agree with the *National School Library Standards* that supervisors should be a part of the evaluation process, the reality is that many school librarians are evaluated by someone who may not have a clear picture of what an effective library program looks like.

In another difference between the surveys and the standards, the Lilead Surveys did not specifically ask supervisors whether they "prepare reports about the impact of building-level libraries on instruction and the learning process" (AASL 2018, 172). It may be reasonable to assume that respondents considered this to be part of their role as "advocat[ing] for library programs," which 100 percent of survey respondents described as "extremely important" or "important" to their role as supervisor. Asking specifically about

preparing reports for the district and other agencies will be considered for the next Lilead Survey.

Expanding the supervisor's role beyond the district, the *National School Library Standards* state that a district supervisor "monitors relevant state and federal laws that impact the delivery of programs and services" (AASL 2018, 172). In addition to monitoring laws, the district-level supervisor "monitors and publicizes the status of district compliance with regional, state, and national accreditation requirements, and with library and technology standards" (AASL 2018, 175). While this may be a role played by some supervisors, no questions were asked about it in the surveys; the role was not mentioned specifically by respondents in their answers to open-ended questions about other duties they performed. The surveys were vetted by professionals in the field and piloted with a group of supervisors before distribution. Because neither group indicated participation in monitoring laws or publicizing compliance, we wonder if these are reasonable expectations of the district library supervisor.

### What's Missing from the Standards?

Some tasks that supervisors said in the Lilead Surveys were "extremely important" or "important" to their work were not mentioned in the *National School Library Standards*. The following is a list of those tasks:

- preparing grant applications,
- participating in professional organizations (local, state, and national),
- presenting sessions at professional meetings outside the district,
- developing opening-day collections,



- moving library collections when the occasion arises,
- consulting with architects and project managers for new buildings, and
- selecting furnishings for new facilities and renovations.

Some of these tasks are identified in the AASL Standards for building-level librarians, but are not discussed for the district supervisor. In addition to this list, the standards book contains nothing about supervisors' participation in professional development for their own learning and needs as managers and coordinators of district programs. If professional development isn't mentioned in the *National School Library Standards*, how can supervisors expect to get the continuing education they need to best serve the students, teachers, and school librarians in their districts?

### “Other Duties as Assigned”

Many supervisors indicated that, as district personnel, they have responsibilities outside of serving the school library program. While it would be ideal if every individual supervising libraries had no other responsibilities, it is not the reality. With these “other duties as assigned” affecting so many supervisors, not discussing them in the *National School Library Standards* presents an unrealistic view of the supervisor's current role.

One respondent reported spending 50 percent of working hours on library services, with the rest of the time being focused on the district's literacy curriculum, reading intervention programs, and professional development for English/language arts (ELA) teachers. This situation was not unique. Of those surveyed, 44 percent of supervisors said they spend a portion of their time on something other than school library services. The percentage of time spent on other responsibilities ranged from 5 percent to 95 percent with a mean average of 41.6 percent of these supervisors' time spent on responsibilities unrelated to library programs.

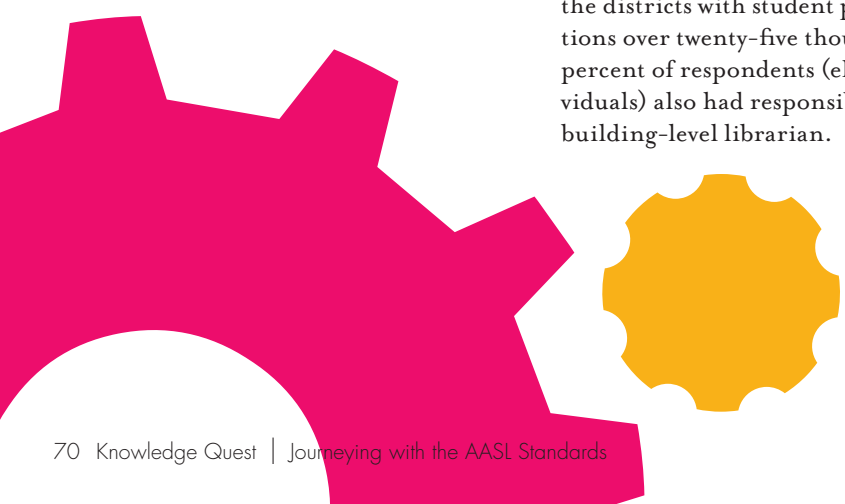
The range of activities that supervisors were responsible for outside of school library services was fairly wide. Though it was relatively common for respondents to state they were also in charge of educational technology in some way (31.3 percent of supervisors had responsibilities here) or providing professional development in areas not related to school libraries (28.1 percent), some supervisors had far more diverse responsibilities. Thirteen respondents were also charged with managing textbook acquisition and/or distribution for their school district; six respondents were also responsible for the ELA content area; four had roles in grant funding; and one respondent had duties in the human resources department. It was also interesting to note that, of the districts with student populations over twenty-five thousand, 7.3 percent of respondents (eleven individuals) also had responsibilities as a building-level librarian.

One could argue that having “non-library” responsibilities takes away from the supervisor's ability to focus on school libraries. One could also argue that these other duties make the supervisor more integral to district operations. Either or both arguments could be made, and more research is needed to determine what effect these other responsibilities have on the library supervisor's ability to effectively serve and advocate for school libraries.

### What Does This Comparison Mean? Why Should We Care?

Doing a comparison between the *National School Library Standards* and the results of the Lilead Surveys isn't an entirely straightforward endeavor. The surveys had to be broken down into very specific tasks to get a representative count of participation, while the AASL Standards are not limited to specific tasks and speak more generally about overall responsibilities of supervisors. This difference makes the working definition appear overly detailed, while the AASL Standards are able to keep things at a more general level and present ideals. But why should we care about such a comparison?

Programmatic and learning standards such as the *National School Library Standards* guide professionals across the field in working toward their ultimate potential. Standards set the bar high so learners in our schools can be served by effective school libraries that meet their needs. However, we must pay close attention to the differences between what we know supervisors are doing and what is prescribed to their role by the standards. It is vital that researchers ask questions about how the





supervisors' work is related to the standards to better understand whether the standards are being met—and if the ideas that are presented in the standards book are realistic. It is also vital that people in the fields of school librarianship and school library management understand the realities of what is possible given the difficult situations that some supervisors are in, particularly in light of the additional responsibilities many supervisors have outside of library services.

A supervisor is often the only person at the district level with professional knowledge and experience with school libraries. Therefore, it is crucial that we understand what these individuals do and what they need to successfully support their building-level librarians, enabling them, in turn, to successfully serve learners and communities.



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