

Alaska's Journey



TO ADOPTING THE AASL STANDARDS





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School librarians in Alaska worked diligently to see the AASL Standards Framework for Learners adopted by our state board of education from December 2018 until September 2020, when they were approved by the Alaska State Board of Education. They will be formally adopted after being signed by Alaska's Lieutenant Governor. In this article, we describe the realities of school librarianship in Alaska, the impetus for having the standards adopted in our state, the process of standards implementation, and what we hope to achieve in the future.

Realities of School Libraries in Alaska

School librarians and school library staffing in Alaska have weathered economic downturns and shifting priorities like much of the country. While reliable data has been hard to come by, statistics from the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) show that staffing of school library positions in Alaska are similar to national trends.

According to the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development the number of certified school librarians employed in public K–12 schools has dropped 30 percent over the last fifteen years (2020a). As of 2019 there were 144 certified school

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librarians employed full and part time. These school librarians work in thirteen of the state's forty-four school districts and serve 77 percent of the 133,000 public K–12 students in Alaska. Almost all the positions are in the five largest districts, which are more urban and on the road system and in Juneau, the state capital. Of the remaining thirty-one districts, school library staffing is sparse. Available statistics indicate an average of one classified employee responsible for a school library per district. That leaves an overwhelming majority of these small schools without designated school library staff.

When considering school library staffing in Alaska, one must also consider the impact of position cuts over time. Those who remain employed in the role of school librarian may be covering more than one school, have additional duties as assigned outside of the library, and/or employed full time but use only part of that time in the library. There are a variety of models for classified employees serving as school library staff. These employees may work under a district librarian who provides training and oversight; they may have no training and be left on their own and tasked merely with the clerical aspects of library work. And at the very least they may be instruc-

tional aides who cover the school library for a minimal amount of time to allow check-out and maintenance of the space. There is one other model for rural school libraries and that is the combination public/school library. These libraries are either housed in a public building or in a school. Duties, hours of operation, and budget management are determined by a memorandum of agreement overseen by the public library board and the school district. Currently there are twenty-two of these public/school libraries in the state (AK DEED 2020b). In some cases, library staff provide instructional services to schools, but more often the expectation is that the staff ensure the collection is organized and available to learners.

During the 1980s many new schools were built across the state and some housed school libraries and district librarians. Accreditation was under the Northwest Accreditation Commission, which had school library standards based on staffing and collection size. Any school with more than 250 students required a certified school librarian. Districts with small schools were to employ a certified school librarian at the district level and this was the pattern for most rural districts (Northwest Accreditation Association n.d.). Not all schools were accredited. In 2012,

the state changed to AdvanceEd as an accreditation agency. This paralleled the move to outcome-based education, and library services were no longer included in accreditation.

Alaska has always faced unique challenges, particularly for its small rural schools. The state's schools must contend with higher operational costs due to remote locations, the cost of broadband access, and the high turnover rate of teaching staff, all of which can create challenges when it comes to budget decisions. In many cases, professional staff have been replaced with classified staff, the public library is relied upon in place of school libraries, and professional development and training has been cut. All these changes over time have contributed to the de-professionalization of the school librarian and an increasingly uphill battle for school librarians to justify their position. Alaska is not alone in this evolution.

AkASL's Standards Implementation Efforts

Despite these limitations, the Alaska Association of School Librarians (AkASL) has spearheaded the effort to have the AASL Standards adopted by the state and implemented in local districts. Alaska's library and information literacy standards were last revised over twenty years ago in 1999. The release of the *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* was a perfect opportunity to raise awareness of the value and function of school librarians, while simultaneously updating Alaska's library and information literacy standards to be more in line with modern needs and practice. As the only school library association in the state, AkASL began coordinating efforts to advocate for revised state standards.

In addition to advocating for the AASL Standards Framework for

Learners to be adopted as Alaska's state standards, AkASL sought to aid school librarians in standards implementation across the state. To that end, AkASL has encouraged and funded school librarians to attend conferences, summer leadership academies, and an introductory course on AASL's *National School Library Standards*. As a result, many are already using the standards in their practice, and some districts have developed lesson plans and local scope and sequence documents.

Efforts to familiarize Alaskan school librarians with the AASL Standards began in November 2017, when the standards were revealed at the AASL National Conference in Phoenix, Arizona. Thanks to a grant from the Alaska State Library through the Institute of Museum and Library Services Grants to States program, AkASL was provided funds for eight school librarians to travel to and attend the conference, which featured numerous sessions on the AASL Standards. This funding was repeated in 2019 with the AASL National Conference in Louisville, Kentucky. Nine Alaskan school librarians were able to travel to the conference to receive information and training and network with other school librarians from across the country.

Between these two national conferences, the Alaska State Library funded two additional training opportunities: a one-week school library leadership academy and a two-credit fully online course. The school library leadership academy is a tradition in Alaska. Every two to three years, the Alaska State Library hosts a one-week training in one of Alaska's three major cities during the summer. Funding is provided for ten to twenty librarians to attend the workshop and receive continuing education credits. In 2018, that training was focused on the *National*

School Library Standards and STEAM. Guest speakers addressed the six Shared Foundations of the AASL Standards, intermixed with sessions that demonstrated how to apply the standards using STEAM-based approaches, such as coding, interdisciplinary lessons, makerspace activities, STEAM-focused collection development and curation, and educator and school librarian collaboration.

Following the one-week training during the fall 2018, an online course was conducted designed to be flexible for school librarians at all levels of standards implementation. Fourteen librarians enrolled in and completed the ten-week long course. The syllabus and activities for the course are still available online for those interested in implementing a similar training course. The syllabus is available at <https://ls593.community.uaf.edu/syllabus/>, and the list of activities is available at <https://ls593.community.uaf.edu/activities/>.

At the end of 2018 and into 2019, AkASL shifted its efforts to have the AASL Standards Framework for Learners adopted as the library/information literacy standards for Alaskan educators. Alaska's school library standards were long overdue for an update! Our state standards were adopted in 1999 and did not reflect the realities facing learners in today's world. AkASL's efforts included presentations at the Alaska Principals Association Conference (October 2018), a presentation to the Alaska State Board of Education (December 2018), and sessions held at the Alaska Library Association (March 2019) and the Alaska Society for Technology in Education (February 2019) conferences. AkASL encouraged board members who lived in the conference cities to present at each of these conferences;

AkASL provided flyers and talking points to each presenter.

Following her work on the AASL Standards and Guidelines Editorial Board, Deborah Rinio initiated the state standards adoption process with a presentation to the Alaska State Board of Education in December 2018. Following the presentation, Alaska's DEED Department of Standards and Accountability directed the state library school library coordinator to start the process of formally updating and adopting a set of school library standards. Through a statewide public invitation and application process, a writing committee of eleven certified and classified school librarians with K–12 experience was selected. The writing committee had no budget to meet in person, so the group met and collaborated online in four meetings over two months from June to July 2019. Discussions started with questions to frame the conversation such as what does a successful learner look like, what do library skills look like in a high school graduate, what should a student know and be able to do, and what are educators looking for in the range of knowledge and skills necessary?

Next the writing committee explored a variety of current standards used in several states, along with the AASL Standards. They compared the standards, looked at pros and cons, their applicability to a variety of situations, and their usefulness to Alaska educators. In the end they chose the AASL Standards. To understand why they were the best option, the committee outlined how the standards could be used in a variety of situations in schools to ensure they would work for all schools. They looked at how they could be used by all educators (not just those working in a school library), how they could be addressed

in a variety of Alaskan school settings, how they helped students meet Alaska's Education Challenge (a set of measurable goals for state public schools) and other statewide priorities, and what types of professional development, documentation, and instructional support were needed for the standards to be fully adopted in our schools.

Once the writing committee determined that the AASL Standards were the best option for Alaskan schools, the standards were forwarded to the review committee. This committee was a diverse group of twenty-two individuals representing indigenous educators, school teachers and librarians, school administrators, school board members, parents, and community members. The review committee received a copy of the standards along with frequently asked questions with answers regarding staffing and implementation and a set of scenarios that were customized to a variety of Alaskan school settings to illustrate what the standards would look like in action. The writing committee also included a brief essay defining best practices in school librarianship today.

The review committee supported the writing committee's decision. Individual review committee members provided feedback, which was reviewed by the writing committee; responses were made to these individual concerns.

In early August 2019 the standards were forwarded to the DEED department of standards and assessment. This part of the process was not as transparent. Internally an Alaska DEED committee needed to review the standards to ensure they met internal standards of content and format and then forward them to the department's legal team for final review. This process took

longer than expected. It was hoped the standards would be ready for board of education review and eventual adoption by the state by September 2019, in time for the next school year. However, the standards were tabled from the September 2019 meeting until March 2020, when the DEED department of standards and assessment opened the process for initial comment. The formal comment period opened for thirty days in July and closed mid-August.

Public comment was very positive. After all our hard work, school librarians across the state were excited when the Alaska State Board of Education voted to adopt the AASL Standards Framework for Learners as our state's library and information literacy standards at its September 2020 meeting.



From this long process AkASL learned some valuable lessons:

- Stay focused on the end goal despite challenges, such as COVID-19 and the resulting upheaval.
- Be familiar with the public adoption process as well as the internal government process. Some of this is not clearly delineated.
- Know what questions to ask and who to ask. Be persistent. Building good relationships with key players both in the public arena and within state government is essential.
- Understand how to communicate the importance and role of the AASL Standards to the broader educational community.
- Understand and be able to respond to cultural perspectives.

Future Plans

Now that the AASL Standards Framework for Learners has been adopted by the Alaska State Board of Education, AkASL will renew its efforts to provide training and implementation support to schools and libraries across the state. Thus far, implementation efforts have focused on school librarians, and most school librarians are familiar with the standards. However, with the adoption of the standards at the state level, it will be important to reach a wider audience.

AkASL will renew its efforts to reach school and district administrators and provide training to educators across the state. More important than training are advocacy efforts to bring awareness of the value of the school librarian and school library to learner success. Without the presence of librarians in our schools, it is unlikely that implementation of the AASL Standards will be successful long term.

Therefore, our long-term goal is to see the adoption of state regulations that provide funding for school

libraries and mandate a minimum staffing level based on school population. Alaska is diverse, with schools as small as ten students and other schools with more than 1,500. Yet, staffing is inconsistent. Across the state, twenty school districts with populations ranging from 103 to 5,400 students operate with no district or school librarians. We support AASL's "Appropriate Staffing for School Libraries" position statement (www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org/aasl/files/content/advocacy/statements/docs/AASL_Appropriate_Staffing.pdf), while simultaneously recognizing the inability of smaller districts to provide certified school librarians (or even assistants) in each of their schools. Nevertheless, we hope to someday see each district with at least a district librarian, and each larger school with a certified school librarian running a school library in accordance with the AASL Standards.

To work toward this goal, we have discussed the following possibilities:

- **Form relationships with local legislators** and keep them informed of issues related to school libraries and how the *National*

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School Library Standards can support statewide educational goals such as equity of access and preparing students for college, career, and community.

- Continue to **communicate with administrators** by sending AkASL members to the state principals, state administrators, and state school board association conferences to promote the AASL

Table 1. 2019–2020 Alaska school library staffing.*

	Districts (n)	Districts (%)	Schools (n)	Schools (%)
No Staffing	23	43%	107	21%
Aide/Paraprofessional Only	18	33%	106	21%
Certified Librarian	13	24%	289	58%
Total	54	100%	502	100%

*Data provided by the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development Data Center. Data was only reported at the district level. School data was extrapolated based on the number of schools per district and may reflect situations where one librarian serves multiple schools.

Standards and the value of a certified school librarian.

- Develop a **collaborative training opportunity** in the form of an online training course (with appropriate CEU credits) designed to be taken together by a school librarian and their administrator. In this course, the school librarian and administrator would work together to build capacity in the school library to address a school-wide priority.
- Raise funds to **develop a PSA** about the value of the school librarian to the public to be aired on local television and radio across the state.
- The strength of our association is in the strength of its members. Members are those on the ground doing the hard work of advocacy in their communities and implementing standards in their schools. To work together we must effectively communicate, and that means encouraging school librarians to participate in our communication pathways. Therefore, we hope to continue to **promote our Facebook group and listserv** as a mechanism to get school librarians and school library supporters involved.
- **Continue to offer in-person and online training opportunities** in the form of sessions at conferences;

travel grants to attend statewide, regional, and national conferences; and the continuation of the school library leadership academy.

- **Capitalize on other statewide projects** that reach a wide audience such as “Talk of Alaska’s Libraries,” a new podcast beginning fall 2020 designed to address common issues faced by all types of libraries in Alaska (school, public, academic, tribal, etc.).

The most critical thing we’ve learned from this process so far is to be persistent. Advocacy takes time, implementing something new takes time, collaboration takes time. It’s important to set realistic goals, but also to constantly strive for improvement and to get involved wherever you can. Don’t wait for someone else to make the first move; jump on any opportunity you have to use the standards in your school, encourage fellow school librarians to do the same, and advocate for school libraries. Join your state library association or school library association; they are the ones most likely doing the work on the ground in your state. Find out what you can do to help. Every state is unique and faces a unique set of challenges.

The process that Alaska engaged in may not be appropriate for you and your state, but we hope you can learn from our example.

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