

# The Advocacy Efforts for School Library Staffing during the Pandemic

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Amid the ongoing pandemic, school librarians across the country have been facing a different kind of battle, one that has been going on for years in some cases: the fight for every student to benefit from the instruction and carefully curated resources a certified school librarian can provide. Several states are working to introduce or retain legislation that requires a certified school librarian in every school building. We've seen some recent victories in places like Washington, D.C., but many state school library associations are continuing to see a great need to advocate for staffing school library positions as districts continue to cut positions despite calls and additional funding for literacy and learning supports stemming from the COVID crisis.

States across the country have seen a decrease in certified school librarian staffing. In some districts, positions have been reduced dramatically or cut entirely despite research showing the benefits students, staff, and the entire school community receive from these specifically trained educators. State school library associations are working diligently with lawmakers, fellow state-level education organizations, and national-level partners to advocate on behalf of their students.

Below are stories from Arizona, Michigan, Nebraska, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania about their states' fights for the right of every student to receive the services provided by a certified school librarian.



*In June 2021, Washington, D.C., school librarians staged a read-in on the steps of the building that houses the mayor's office to advocate for a school librarian in every public school. In early August 2021, the Washington, D.C., council passed a budget amendment that would guarantee a certified school librarian in every public school building.*

## Teacher Librarian Division, Arizona Library Association

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**Background:** Arizona ranks near the bottom in every possible measure of school librarianship, as indicated in the Arizona School Librarian Data from the SLIDE Research Data, which compares all fifty states along various criteria (Lance and Kachel 2021).

In 2020 members of the Teacher Librarian Division (TLD) of the Arizona Library Association (AzLA) had a unique opportunity to take action with Arizona education associations and advocacy groups. Proposition 208, a citizens' initiative with the goal of increasing funding for public education, will generate funds from a state income tax surcharge. The majority of this permanent funding stream would be used to recruit and hire classroom

Criterion	Ranking
State-Level Ratio of School Librarian (SL Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) per School	46
Student to SL FTE Ratio	46
Teacher to SL FTE Ratio	44
District Ratio of SL FTEs per School	47
% of Districts with Any Librarians	47
States with the Largest % of No School Librarians	46

Table 1. Arizona school librarian data from the SLIDE research data.

teachers, counselors, nurses, school librarians, and social workers. TLD members helped collect signatures to add the proposition to the ballot.

**Strategy:** Once the proposition was on the state ballot, TLD leadership lobbied the AzLA Board to officially support Proposition 208. The AzLA president, TLD leadership, and John Chrastka, executive director of EveryLibrary, met with Prop. 208 leaders to express interest in a partnership to increase ballot box support. Every-

Library, a nonprofit organization dedicated to library advocacy, created a "Pledge to Vote Yes" webpage (<[www.saveschoollibrarians.org/yeson208](http://www.saveschoollibrarians.org/yeson208)>), TLD members participated in phone banking, and voters passed the proposition in November 2020. Since then, Prop. 208 has survived a number of lawsuits challenging its legality.

**What We Learned:** The political forces in Arizona that seek to continue to underfund public education are strong. On party-line

## Michigan Association

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**Background:** Michigan educational laws do not include school library staffing requirements. As such, as education budgets were reduced and accreditation requirements were relaxed in the early 2000s, Michigan school districts began to cut their certified school librarian positions. The number of certified school librarians in Michigan dwindled by 70 percent (from 1,429 to 429) between 2004–2005 and 2016–2017. Michigan ranks 47th (48th when including Washington, D.C.) in the nation in the ratio of students to certified school librarians (Lance and Kachel 2021).

**Strategy:** In 2013, the Michigan Association for Media in Education (MAME) began strong advocacy efforts to get support from the Michigan legislature for equity of access to effective school libraries. This advocacy work involved reaching out to legislators, building partnerships with other organizations, and working with the Michigan Department of Education. The first set of school library bills were introduced in 2018. The bills have been reintroduced twice as legislation sessions ended and legislators left office due to term limits. The latest versions of the bills (HB 4663, HB 4664, and HB 4665) were introduced in April 2021. The bills would require every school building have a school library staffed by a certified school librarian and have the library staffed when the certified school librarian is not present.

**What We Learned:** Michigan is a “local control” state, which means each school board makes decisions on how best to meet the needs of students with its state funding. In addition, there is strong opposition to unfunded mandates. Thus, it has been difficult



*Judi Moreillon, in front of the Kirk-Bear Canyon Library, collecting signatures in support of adding Proposition 208 to the ballot.*

votes, the legislature passed three bills in June 2021 that would undermine the intent of Prop. 208: SB: 1828 Flat Tax; SB: 1827 Tax Cap; and SB: 1783: Prop. 208 Attack. These proposed bills would cut taxes, leading to millions of dollars in lost revenue for the state that will directly impact the amount of funding made available to schools (Moreillon 2021).

Although Arizona school librarians understood that the health of school librarianship was tied to the overall health of public education, we have gone to the mat for K–12 students and educators. We know we can accomplish more when we work with other public education organizations and advocates. We also know we must raise awareness and invite the support of our academic, public, and special librarian colleagues to address the critical school librarian gap in the Arizona library ecosystem.

**Next Steps:** School librarians in Arizona are signing and circulating petitions to put referenda on the November 2022 ballot to ask voters whether they want to rescind the three tax cut bills. TLD presented data from the SLIDE study to the AzLA Board and solicited their support to sign referenda petitions. When signatures are collected and verified and these measures are placed on the November 2022 ballot, TLD members again will take action alongside our colleagues and advocates to help rescind these cuts that undermine public education funding and ensure a more positive future for K–12 students and educators, including school librarians, in our state.



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## for Media in Education

to get full legislative support for the school library bills. To address the funding issue, MAME has been advocating for grant funding to encourage school districts to hire certified school librarians.

Partnerships are important. MAME collaborates with the Michigan Education Association, the Michigan Reading Association, the Michigan Library Association, EveryLibrary, and others. This work has helped to educate stakeholders on the key role of the certified school librarian in the school community. The relationship and involvement with the Michigan Department of Education has also been important in strengthening guidelines (which are not requirements) and distributing information to school districts.

Advocacy is not a short-term project. It needs to be a regular part of the work of all school librarians and all state school library organizations. We often remind ourselves of the five Ps of advocacy: present, prepared, polite, positive, and persistent.

*MAME members Kathy Lester, Katherine Pfeiffer, and Lisa Brakel in Lansing to meet with legislators in November 2019.*



*MAME graphic used in advocacy publications*

**Next Steps:** MAME is pushing for a legislative hearing on the current school library bills this fall. We are also working to advocate for funding for school libraries/librarians. As part of this work, we will continue to build partnerships and work with the Michigan Department of Education.

Although the school library bills have not yet become law, there has been a slight increase in the number of certified school librarians in Michigan beginning in 2018–2019. We believe that this small success is due to the publicity around the bills and the work with MAME's partner organizations including the Michigan Department of Education.



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## Nebraska School Librarians Association

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**Background:** On April 22, 2021, the Nebraska School Librarians Association (NSLA) was made aware of a draft of state rules up for public review relating to accreditation. In the current state rule, at least one half-time certified school librarian is required per school system for accreditation, with additional staffing requirements based on individual building populations. The proposed rules removed the population-based staffing requirements while keeping the half-time certified school librarian per system. This change would mean that a school system of 53,000 students and one of 185 students would have the same staffing requirements.

**Strategy:** NSLA's strategy was two-fold. First, we sought to understand why the staffing requirements by population were removed. Conversations with a representative from the Nebraska Department of Education took place via Zoom and e-mail throughout the draft review process. By understanding the motivation, NSLA was able to address questions and concerns. Second, NSLA sought to inform school librarians and their stakeholders of this proposed change. Before doing so, members of the NSLA Board sought guidance from ALA and AASL. AASL leadership met with NSLA leadership to discuss possible strategies including what information to share, who to share



The “Nebraska Needs Librarians” shirt was designed a few years before the proposed changes to the state rule and has become a helpful advocacy tool. It was inspired by the “America Needs Librarians” shirts sold by Raygun and was created with their permission as the NSLA shirts were sold at cost.

One of the images created to show the potential inequity of staffing in Nebraska if specific requirements were removed from the state accreditation rule.



it with (state leadership, stakeholders, and media), and how to share it most effectively. NSLA then shared detailed information about the proposed rules and how it could affect Nebraska students through its website, listserv, and social media channels that folks could share out with others. In addition, a representative from NSLA sent press releases to media outlets across the state targeting online, print, TV, and radio. As a result, the issue was featured in several print and online news articles, a TV news segment, and a couple of podcasts.

**What We Learned:** We learned that you are never really “safe.” If your state has a rule in place requiring school librarians as part of every school, that rule can be changed. As such, advocacy and outreach can never stop. While many supporters were outraged and sent in direct feedback through the review system and contacted members of the Nebraska Department of Education and state board of education when they learned about the possible removal of staffing requirements from the state rule, we realized key decision makers were unsure of what a modern school librarian does every day to support their school community. In addition to making advocacy a priority within our own schools/districts, we learned how

important it is for advocacy to reach those with the power to enact change at the state level. We also learned how important it is to be connected to other associations in our state that support teachers and education as they may reach folks we do not.

**Next Steps:** On August 10, 2021, we learned that the second draft of state rules is being delayed to afford more time for overall discussion. The rules cover more than just school librarian staffing, though we did hear that the volume of responses received about school librarian staffing made that section a priority for review. NSLA, the state-level Future Ready Librarians Committee, and other stakeholders will continue to work with the state department of education throughout the second draft process. Based on preliminary conversations, we are hopeful that school librarian staffing requirements by population will be included in a way that works best for all involved.



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## New Jersey Assoc

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**Background:** School librarians, parents, and teachers have been alarmed by cuts to school library positions since 2008. New Jersey is participating in the national SLIDE study (Lance and Kachel 2021), and preliminary data currently shows that up to one in five of New Jersey school districts do not have a certified school librarian. The New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL) was surprised when one school district's board of education completely removed the position of school librarian in all schools in March 2021.

**Strategy:** NJASL established an advocacy team to help communicate with districts that are eliminating positions. The advocacy team attends ongoing meetings with legislators, the New Jersey Department of Education, the New Jersey State Board of Education, the New Jersey Parents/Teachers Association, Computer Science for New Jersey, and the New Jersey Principal and Supervisor Association, as well as other New Jersey stakeholders. Various templates, infographics, and slideshows have been created to highlight the role of school librarians and to address position loss. School librarians and advocates were asked to write to both the Quality Single-Accountability Continuum, a branch under the department of education that monitors and evaluates public school districts, and the New Jersey Department of Education to request changes to standard language that would support better staffing requirements. Language changes would state that school librarians are “available in each school building” versus “each school district.”

# iation of School Librarians

NJASL has also joined forces with EveryLibrary to help build support for school library positions and preserve library space. Members of the NJASL Advocacy Team have met with legislators throughout the year to advocate for certified school librarian positions and were able to gain bipartisan support for two legislative bills. NJ A 248/S 3464 requires instruction on information literacy in the curriculum for students in grades K–12. NJ S 1586 requires certain ratios of school librarians to students in public schools. NJASL also worked closely with New Jersey Education Association representatives to learn more about navigating the legislative environment successfully after attending a NJEA conference session in February 2021 for folks interested in learning more about policy. Connections made during that session led to several articles published this past year, including two articles on politico.com, “Lawmakers, School Librarians Say Now Is the Time to Teach Information Literacy” and “‘Vital’ School Librarian Positions Disappearing, State Board of Education Told,” and another in

*NJASL Board Members met with NJ legislators to discuss a disturbing trend in NJ schools: districts cutting school librarians.*

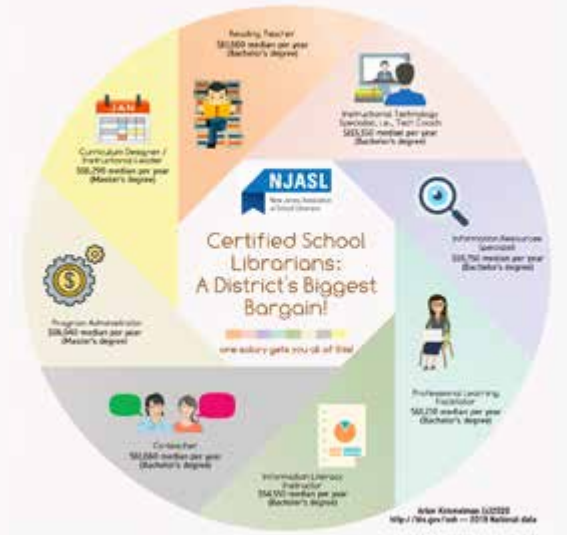


*NJ Spotlight*, a local independent news source, “School Libraries Help Students Recover from Pandemic.”

In addition, NJASL developed a statewide school librarian job description to share with administration, stakeholders, and school districts.

**What We Learned:** We learned that every school interprets educational code language differently, which means staffing is not consistent across the state. Multiple school librarians reported that they may be titled in position but not working in the role of a librarian. Also, some school districts maintain compliance by having librarians cover several schools as current language requires only one school librarian “per district.” For example, in one district a school librarian serves six high schools for more than 10,000 students. This is an equity issue. Every student should receive the same opportunities, but do not. One urban school district has no librarians for more than 7,000 students, whereas an affluent neighboring district employs twenty-one school librarians for

nineteen schools. We also found when discussing the position with stakeholders and legislative consultants, most were not familiar with the scope of what a librarian does and the impact they have on students.



*NJASL infographic used in advocacy materials about the bargain provided by hiring a certified school librarian.*

**Next Steps:** Moving forward, NJASL will continue to strengthen relationships with stakeholders, including developing partnerships with Computer Science for New Jersey to meet curriculum standards for K–8 grade. We will support school librarians in our state by creating an advocacy toolkit for members and developing workshops to offer advocacy-focused professional development. We will continue to advocate by attending and presenting at annual conferences aimed at various stakeholders, writing op-eds for local, state, and national news outlets, and continuing to work with EveryLibrary to collect data from elected officials and gain sponsorships for the two legislative bills.



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# Pennsylvania School Librarians Association

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**Background:** The Pennsylvania School Librarians Association (PSLA) created a standing advocacy committee five years ago. This committee works with the association's operations committee to conduct an annual self-reported staffing survey of Pennsylvania school librarians. In addition to overseeing the staffing survey, the committee also creates training sessions for school librarians and meets regularly to discuss proposed legislation requiring a certified school librarian in each public school. In May 2021 House bill 1168, "One Certified Librarian per Public School," was introduced. It would require every public school employ at least one professional certified school librarian. The bill has bipartisan support and is awaiting action in the House Education Committee. PSLA has worked closely with the representative who introduced the bill. PSLA members are encouraged to contact their local legislators and invite them to visit their school libraries. Throughout this process, we have found that legislators are wowed by the impact school librarians make on their students. The hope is that with enough cosponsors, the bill will move out of the education committee and be brought to the full House

floor for a vote. We look at this as a marathon and not a sprint. Each year we gain more exposure, resulting in more co-sponsors for the bill.

A companion bill in the Senate is collecting cosponsors before it will be formally introduced. We are working on introducing a bill to codify a current state department of education regulation that requires every school district have at least one certified school librarian. The education department does not enforce this policy and as of the 2020–2021 school year, there were forty-eight public school districts in the state without a single school librarian, impacting nearly 90,000 students.

**Strategy:** The PSLA Advocacy Committee implemented a strategy to train school librarians on ways to engage with their legislators to promote the importance of school librarians and urge legislators to support the House and Senate bills. We hold a variety of training sessions throughout the year in person at our annual conference and virtually to help school librarians gain the confidence to schedule an appointment with a legislator. We also provide those school librarians with infographics and talking points to take with them to these meetings. Another strategy we put in place involves support for school librarians who have been notified that their

position may be eliminated. The PSLA website has a page dedicated to school librarians who may be in jeopardy of losing their position. This page features the "PSLA Position Statement in Response to School Library Program Cuts," along with a checklist to follow when positions are in jeopardy of being eliminated. The advocacy committee's co-chair also is available to consult with school librarians to create a strategy.

Over the last few years, we have forged two vital partnerships. First, PSLA works with Quantum Communications, a Pennsylvania-based public relations firm, to assist us in building relationships with our state's lawmakers. Second, PSLA has a strong relationship with EveryLibrary, a national political action committee for libraries. Together with Quantum Communications and EveryLibrary, we conducted a candidate survey for those running for state legislative positions. The candidate survey was a paper survey mailed to all legislative candidates. The survey used a Likert scale to gauge the candidate's feelings on and knowledge of school libraries. It also provides background information on Pennsylvania's education guidelines regarding school libraries and what academic standards school librarians teach. One question asked if legislators have visited a school library and encouraged them to do so to see the valuable teaching that happens in school libraries every day. The results from the survey are featured on our association's webpage. With these survey results we were able to measure the support for school librarians from elected officials and those running for the legislature.



*Pennsylvania school librarians joining arms in support of school libraries at the March 2019 Annual PSLA conference.*

**What We Learned:** We've learned that developing relationships with other organizations that support educators and students in our state is vital to our success in equitable staffing of school librarians for all schools. We have also found that crafting a shared message from stakeholders is needed. As such, we will be hosting a stakeholder meeting this year to continue building these partnerships.

**Next Steps:** We are currently working with EveryLibrary on another candidate survey for the upcoming school board elections. Our goal is to ask the opinion of school board candidates in the forty-eight school districts without a school librarian about their opinions and thoughts on school libraries. Similar to the state legislative candidate survey, this will allow us to measure the support for Pennsylvania school librarians from any new school board members. This survey was mailed through the postal service and e-mailed to school board candidates. Both mailings provided a QR code that took candidates to the online survey. The results from this survey are published on the PSLA "Take Action" legislation webpage along with the results from the legislative survey results. We also plan to continue our work with school librarians in any way they need, whether it is advocacy training or help fighting for a position. Additionally, we encourage members to invite their local legislators to visit school libraries to further showcase the positive impact school librarians make on students every day.



**Laura Ward** is the PSLA President and past advocacy committee co-chair. She's on Twitter @snarkybookgal

## Where Do We Go from Here?

There is much to learn from the challenges faced by each of these states. Advocacy is never ending. Laws and rules, even once they are established, can change. There will always be new staff members, lawmakers, board members, parents, and community members who may not be aware of the vital services provided by a modern-day certified school librarian. A continued effort to connect with all stakeholders, but especially those with influence over staffing regulations, is paramount to succeed in not only making sure there is a school librarian in every building but in keeping them there doing the work they are meant to be doing.

Most state association boards are made up of volunteer members that rotate in and out frequently, making it difficult to maintain momentum or to even know where to start or continue advocacy work. Prioritizing an advocacy committee that keeps records and members for longer time periods could strengthen advocacy efforts as the association wouldn't need to start from scratch with each change in board leadership. Equally important are the relationships the association builds with other state-level organizations that support students and teachers as well as with partners at the national level. School librarians cannot be the only voices heard in the call to regulate staffing. Fellow educators, students, parents, and community members must make some noise as well as they are the ones who benefit from the services of a certified school librarian and who would also lose if those services are lost.

As educators, our first priority is always students. Until decision makers really and truly understand what students will lose without an adequately staffed certified school librarian in every building, the struggle to meet our students' needs will continue. If anything, the stories

from these five state associations show that as information professionals trained in advocacy, school librarians are more than well equipped to work together and in conjunction with allies to champion change. The struggle will continue, but we can learn from and support each other as we fight for our students' right to a quality education that includes the benefits of a certified school librarian.

*\*Note: For updates on these state chapters' efforts visit the Knowledge Quest website.*

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