



Studying the Independent School Library by Ellysa Stern Cahoy and Susan G. Williamson

# Studying the Independent School Library

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*In 2005, the American Association of School Librarians' Independent Schools Section conducted a national survey of independent school libraries. This article analyzes the results of the survey, reporting specialized data and information regarding independent school library budgets, collections, services, facilities, and staffing. Additionally, the survey results highlight the current state of the independent school library environment and identify distinct differences between specific types of independent schools as well as differences with public school libraries. In this study, the authors show that the greater number of resources in these independent schools over public schools correlates with a higher success rate for students attending these independent schools.*

## Introduction

Independent schools are typically private schools governed by an elected board of trustees. Most independent schools are funded primarily through tuition, donor contributions, or endowments (Alt and Peter 2002). The most recent report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) on private schools in the United States, *Characteristics of Private Schools in the United States: Results from the 2005–2006 Private School Universe Survey*, defines private schools as those that are “not supported primarily by public funds, provide instruction for one or more of grades Kindergarten through Grade Twelve (or comparable ungraded levels), and have one or more teachers” (Broughman, Swaim, and Keaton 2008). In the NCES survey, the sample was divided into three primary school types: Catholic, other religious, and nonsectarian. For the purposes of this study, we have used a slightly different set of categories corresponding to the school governance and specialization of programs. The school types used in this study include independent, religious, independent religious, alternative, and military. Religious schools (Catholic and Jewish in this sample) are governed by religious bodies. This is a focused analysis of these types of schools, providing data delineating the current independent school library environment and identifying comparisons among the school types. Having these data available will assist independent school librarians and administrators in assessing their own library resources and determining allocations for services, resources, and staff.

## Independent Schools—Statistical Background

Some statistical data on independent schools and their libraries have been gathered over time. The NCES conducted intermittent surveys of independent schools from 1890 until 1989, when the data began to be collected on a biennial basis. In addition, since 1987–88, a series of NCES surveys have specifically targeted school libraries in both public and private schools—the most recent report on all schools is titled *Public and Private School Library Media Centers in the United States: 1999–2000* (Holton et al. 2004). According to NCES, these reports are derived from the *Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS)*, an extensive and recurring survey of U.S. public and private schools (Broughman, Swaim, and Keaton 2008). The more recent report on characteristics of private schools for 2005–06 identified a total of 28,996 private schools (Broughman, Swaim, and Keaton 2008).

# Survey Profile

In 2005, a study of independent school libraries was conducted by the American Association of School Librarians' (AASL) Independent Schools Section (ISS). The study included independent, independent religious, alternative, military, and religious schools from throughout the United States. In addition, information was gathered from day, boarding, and combined day and boarding schools. No attempt was made to create a statistically random sample balancing small schools versus large schools, geographic or regional representation, or day versus boarding schools. The sample shared in this study differs from the general private school population in several ways. Not only is it a small percentage of the total private schools reported with libraries in 1999–2000, approximately 3 percent, but the recruitment of participants was initiated through the AASL ISS and was singularly focused on that organization (Holton et al. 2004). The authors' goal was to create benchmarks for the independent school population known to have libraries and known to be associated with the AASL community or the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) community. Many regional associations of independent schools were contacted and encouraged to ask members to participate in the survey. Respondents were not all members of the ISS.

## Survey Method

A sixteen-question, Web-based survey was conducted to collect data from independent school librarians. This survey was created by the AASL ISS Data Committee and mounted on the American Library Association's (ALA) AASL website. The survey was conducted without password protection to gather as many responses as possible. Dissemination and promotion of the survey was managed primarily through electronic discussion lists and regional independent school library associations. Postcards announcing the survey and inviting participation were sent to AASL ISS members in May 2005, and the NAIS included the survey announcement in an e-mail newsletter to members as a link to the online survey. The survey remained open through September 2005.

The survey compared different types of independent school libraries. The data were also coded according to five school categories: independent, independent religious (where governance is controlled by an elected board), religious, alternative (e.g., Montessori), and military. Because the numbers of alternative and military schools were small relative to the first three categories (alternative N = 5, military N = 3), this study focuses on a comparison of the first three primary groups (independent N = 235, independent religious N = 45, religious N = 71). The survey is missing group category information for 36 schools because those librarians answered the survey without revealing their school names.

Responses were also coded by geographic region and city size. Geographic regions were determined by the regional categories used by the United States Bureau of the Census (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). City size was determined using NCES locale codes: Central city—population of 250,000 or more; Midsize city/Urban fringe/Large town—population of less than 250,000 but greater than 25,000—Rural area: population of less than 25,000 (NCES 2002).

## Survey Results—General Data

The following is a summary report of the statistics gathered from the 420 responding independent schools. The summary report of the statistics was initially made available on the AASL ISS website (AASL ISS 2006). A total of 420 schools from 43 states and some international countries responded to the survey, with the largest number of responses coming from California (11 percent), Texas (10 percent), Massachusetts (8 percent), and New York (7 percent). All other states had a responding rate of 6 percent or less. Day schools made up most responses (79.8 percent) to the survey, while 2.4 percent of the responses were from boarding schools and 14 percent were from day and boarding schools (referred to in this article as combined schools). Separate from day school or boarding school status, respondents identified their school as coed (70 percent), single-gender girls (9 percent), or single-gender boys (8 percent). Geographically, 29 percent of responding schools were located in the Northeast United States, 36 percent were in the South, 20 percent were in the West, and 14 percent were in the Midwest. 53 percent of responding schools served sixth through twelfth grades; 26 percent served pre-kindergarten or kindergarten through sixth grade; 19 percent served first through twelfth grades; and 2 percent of respondents were missing information on grades served. Responding schools also reported the number of teaching faculty. The largest response group (38 percent) reported 25–50 teaching faculty members, 26

percent had 75 or more faculty, 21 percent had 50–75 faculty, and 15 percent of schools had 25 or fewer faculty members.

## Staffing and Hours

School librarians participating in the survey were asked to quantify the ratio of students to degreed (usually an MLS degree) library professionals and the ratio of students to total library staff (including paraprofessionals). A majority of respondents reported a ratio of 300–400 students per degreed library professional. The ratio of students to total library staff was most frequently reported as 101–200 students per library staff member. Combined schools and boarding schools reported a higher level of total library staff (an average of 3 FTE staff members) compared to day schools (1.9 FTE). Schools located in the Northeast had a higher mean of total library staff (2.36 FTE) than the Midwest (1.91 FTE) and the West and South (both 1.86 FTE). Schools located in central cities also had a higher level of total library staff (2.12 FTE) than midsize cities (1.94 FTE) and rural small towns (1.93 FTE). The highest level of staffing in schools was exhibited by those located in Northeast, midsize cities (2.72 FTE).

The mean number of hours the library was open for use each week was 49.3, with 44 percent of libraries reporting they were open 40–50 hours per week. Boarding schools reported more hours open per week (79.5) than combined schools (57) or day schools (41.5). Schools located in rural areas also were open more hours (a mean of 52) over midsize cities (46) and large cities (41.5).

## Library Budget

Schools were asked to provide the approximate dollar amount spent per student on library collections and to define the library budget as a percentage of the total school operating budget. The latter question received a lower response rate (81 total responses) on the survey. The mean amount spent per student on library materials was \$69. The mean for the library's budget as a percentage of the total school operating budget was 1.5 percent.

There were striking differences in the number of dollars spent per student on library expenditures by geographic region. In the Midwest, \$47 per student was the average, compared with \$69 in the Northeast, \$65 in the South, and \$63 in the West. When the size of the city or town in which the school was located was taken into consideration, the differences became even more apparent. Schools in Northeastern, Southern, and Midwestern rural areas spent an average of \$78 per student on library expenditures (Western rural schools spent significantly less—\$64 per student). This striking difference may be because many boarding schools (exhibiting higher budgets overall) are located in more rural areas. When viewing city size in general, the differences in budgetary allocations are also apparent: Schools located in central cities spent an average of \$57 per student, schools in midsize cities spent \$53, and schools in rural areas spent \$74. There were also budgetary differences evident by type of school, with boarding schools spending significantly more per student in library services and collections. Day schools and boarding schools both devoted approximately 1.7 percent of the total school operating budget to library expenditures while combined schools allocated only 0.6 percent.

## Collections

The extent and details of independent school libraries' print and nonprint collections were explored in the survey. The collections predominantly ranged between 6,000–20,000 items, with the largest percentage (24 percent) housing 10,000–15,000 collection items, including books, periodicals, and audiovisual materials. More than 44 percent of libraries indicated that they house an average of 25–50 collection items per student. Nonprint items (audiovisual media, equipment, etc.) were not heavily collected by responding libraries—29 percent reported 0–200 nonprint items in their collections. Print periodical subscriptions followed a similar reporting pattern: 38 percent of libraries featured 0–25 subscriptions. Boarding and combined schools had markedly more print periodical subscriptions than responding day schools. Only combined schools boasted a higher number of nonprint items in the collection (see figures [1](#), [2](#), and [3](#)). Northeastern schools reported the highest number of collection items per student with a mean of 2,296 items, followed by Midwestern schools (2,035 items), Southern schools (1,592 items), and Western schools (1,364 items). Schools in rural areas also reported a higher number of collection items, with a mean of 2,198 items, followed by central cities (1,646 items) and midsize cities (1,622 items). Looking at geographic area and city size

together, Midwestern schools located in midsize cities presented the highest number of collection items per student with mean of 3,789 items, followed by Northeastern, rural schools (3,705 items), and Southern schools in central cities (3,104 items). Schools reporting the lowest number of collection items per student included Western schools in midsize cities, with a mean of 50 items, followed by Midwestern schools in central cities (267 items). Information about the age of collections was not gathered. While publication date or copyright year is an important marker of collection quality, the authors felt issues of quality were difficult to measure and would have required more questions than ALA allowed.

## Library Facilities

A large percentage of schools (46 percent) identified their facility as 3,000 square feet or less in size. The highest percentage of responding libraries (34 percent) also averaged between 26–50 seats in their facilities. Boarding schools reported the largest facilities with a mean of 17,030 square feet, followed by combined schools (11,864 square feet), and trailed by day schools (4,754 square feet). Boarding schools also had the most seating of all library types. Schools with larger collections and more staffing also were, not surprisingly, more likely to have larger facilities. Regional and geographic data comparisons did not yield significant correlations.

## Technology

Combined schools featured the highest number of computer workstations (either desktop or laptop) with an average of 21.9 computers. Wireless access was spread evenly across all three types of school environments with 71 percent of day/boarding schools, 65 percent of day schools, and 60 percent of boarding schools featuring Wi-Fi in the library. Combined schools were much more likely (90 percent) to provide remote (off-site) access to library subscription databases.

Among all respondents, 2.4 percent of libraries explicitly identified themselves as “laptop schools.” While this question was not on the survey, multiple respondents explained that because their institutions were “laptop schools” (each student had his or her own computer), the library had very few (or no) workstations. This might help explain the very high percentage of schools with few workstations or laptops. Approximately 45 percent of libraries featured 10 or fewer workstations or laptops.

A total of 63 percent of the school libraries provided wireless access to users, while 75 percent provided remote access to databases. Some 73 percent of responding libraries had a library webpage, and 94 percent had an automated library catalog; additionally, 52 percent of all libraries indicated that they provide remote access (off-site) to the catalog. Combined schools were more likely to have a library webpage (82 percent) and an online library catalog (98 percent) than day schools (73 percent) and boarding schools (70 percent). While online catalogs were prevalent, remote access to the catalog (online, off-campus access) was more varied by type of school. Boarding schools were most likely to feature remote access to the catalog (70 percent), followed by combined schools (66 percent) and day schools (51 percent). Regional and geographic data comparisons did not yield significant correlations.

## Differences between School Groups

While religious schools (Catholic or Jewish) have by far the largest mean number of students (553), as well as a large mean number of faculty (63), their library collection size in terms of total items, number of print periodical subscriptions, and number of nonprint items is considerably less than the average for the other two school groups (see figures [4](#), [5](#), and [6](#)).

With respect to their total library staff FTE, religious schools fall below both the independent and independent religious schools. Independent schools have a mean of 2.30 library staff while religious schools have a mean of 1.7 staff. Correspondingly, the number of hours the library is open per week (41.3) is lower than either the independent school group (47.5) or the independent religious group (45). The facilities' square footage is also the lowest of the three groups (see figures [7](#), [8](#), and [9](#)).

Regarding access to technology, religious schools provide fewer workstations in the library but they are second in terms of wireless access. They are the least likely to have an automated catalog.

Perhaps because student enrollments at religious schools are higher on average than independent and independent religious schools (553 versus 428 and 473 respectively), the mean library budget per student is lower (\$29 versus \$77 and \$55). This may also be because of differing tuition levels between religious and independent schools. Independent religious and religious schools are also less likely than independent schools to have a summer program or an endowment, both of which provide additional school funding.

## Overview of the Independent School Environment

The independent school environment differs from that of public schools, particularly in measures of achievement. Approximately 74 percent of the schools responding to this survey are members of the NAIS, the flagship organization for independent schools. According to a 2005 comparison made by the NAIS titled *NAIS and Public Schools: How Do They Compare?*, “the 2004 combined verbal and math SAT scores showed significantly higher scores for students that attended NAIS schools compared to those students that attended public schools, irrespective of family income” (NAIS 2005). Looking at NAIS students’ verbal and math SAT test scores over the past thirty years compared to the combined national public and independent school scores, it is apparent that not only do NAIS school students have consistently higher scores in both categories, but also there is a dramatic increase in NAIS student scores while the national average scores have changed little in the past 30 years (NAIS 2008). With respect to Advanced Placement (AP) courses, “a total of 85 percent of NAIS member schools offer AP courses, compared with 51 percent of public schools” (NAIS 2006). According to a report from the NCES, “Private high school students typically have more demanding graduation requirements than do public high schools students” (NCES 2002). The rigorous environment typically found in NAIS member schools may correlate with the greater availability of library resources and services than those found in public schools.

## Differences—Public School Studies

There are some interesting differences between public and independent schools that have come to light as a result of the most recent 2007 and 2008 AASL surveys on school libraries, *School Libraries Count!*, which were conducted by Keith Curry Lance’s RSL Research Group and presented on the AASL website (AASL 2007, 2008). The statistics provided in the 2007 survey were derived from a sample of close to 4,000 public schools (95 percent) and more than 200 independent schools (5 percent). The statistics for independent schools (the report uses the term “private” for this group) are averaged across different categories and not broken out into separate types such as day, boarding, or combined or religious, independent, or alternative. While it would be desirable to compare public school data with only day school data from our sample and the AASL private school samples, the figures for school types were not provided in either of the reports (day schools are the most similar independent school cohort to traditional public schools).

Despite the disparity in sample sizes between the AASL data and the ISS data, comparisons can be made on the basis of answers to similar survey questions. For example, the average number of hours school library facilities were open per week differed between public schools (31) and independent schools (40) in the AASL 2006 survey, but was even longer for the schools in the ISS survey (49.3).

According to the 2007 survey, the total number of items differed in each library collection between public schools (12,800) and independent schools (16,200). The average total number of items found for independent schools in the ISS results was 18,647. The average number of print periodical subscriptions in public school libraries was 22, while the average for private schools was 35. The average number of print periodical subscriptions in the ISS sample was 56 subscriptions. Perhaps the most significant disparity showed up in the library budgets calculated as expenditures per student. For the public schools, the average amount spent was \$15 per student, and the average total budget was \$11,000. For the independent schools in the AASL sample, the average expenditure was more than \$40 per student and close to \$20,500 for the total budget. The average amount calculated for library budget per student in the ISS survey was considerably higher at \$64 per student. (Total budgets were not requested in the

ISS survey.) These figures may very well reflect the differences in student populations between public and independent schools. Public schools typically have larger student bodies and budgets that are spread over larger populations.

With respect to access to technology, the figures presented compare more closely between public and independent school libraries. According to the AASL 2007 survey, the average number of computers found in both the public school and the independent school libraries was 16, while the average in the ISS survey was 17. The AASL 2007 survey data for remote access to databases was somewhat closer to the ISS figures. While 66 percent of the public schools offer remote access, 75 percent of the independent schools do so, but in the ISS survey 79 percent of the schools do so. The figures provided for the AASL 2008 survey indicate similar patterns of difference between public and private school library resources. In comparison, the ISS sample represents schools that invest more heavily than the public schools in their library collections and access to technology.

A publication by the NAIS indicates some of the outcomes associated with attendance at independent schools that may link to a difference in library resources and usage. These outcomes were gleaned from the Freshman Survey Trends Report, “a longitudinal study of the American higher education system that charts national normative data on the characteristics of students attending colleges and universities as first-time, full-time freshmen. The survey is conducted annually by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), based at the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.” According to a comparison of key findings from this report, “NAIS graduates were three times more likely than the group as a whole to report that they spent more than 11 hours per week studying or doing homework during their final year of high school (48 percent of NAIS students, compared to 15 percent of all students).” In addition, “85 percent of NAIS students go on to attend ‘very high’ or ‘highly selective’ colleges and universities” and “more than two-thirds (67 percent) of NAIS students expected to make at least a B average in college, compared to 58 percent of all students.” In terms of educational aspirations, “86 percent of NAIS school graduates planned to pursue a postgraduate degree, versus 74 percent of all students” (Bassett 2004). Furthermore, according to the NCES 2005–06 SASS, 98.3 percent of students who attended NAIS schools graduated in 2004, compared to 88 percent of public high school students. Some 57.6 percent of NAIS students went on to a four-year college, compared to 35 percent of all public high school students in the fall of 2005 (Broughman, Swaim, and Keaton 2008).

By all of the measures stated above, the independent school students show higher levels of academic rigor and success than public school students. The authors argue that the school experiences and environments in independent schools are important in shaping student success, including the level of available library resources. John H. Pryor, director of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program’s Freshman Survey states that “a large part of the success that students have in college comes from accomplishments and academic habits they acquired in high school” (Pryor 2007). The independent schools in this study’s sample provide library environments that contain more resources and are available for longer periods than the public schools surveyed in the most recently reported AASL survey of school libraries (AASL 2008). Although this survey did not ask for measures of overall student achievement such as graduation rates or matriculation in prestigious colleges and universities, the overall picture for independent school students in the NAIS cohort is that of higher levels of success in SAT scores, higher rates of graduation, and greater enrollment in AP courses.

## Conclusion

This study provides access to comparative data sought from independent school librarians across the United States about staffing, collections, budgets, facilities, and access to technology. Comparisons between day, boarding, and combined schools show that boarding school libraries tend to have larger staff numbers, longer open hours, and larger print collections. Comparisons between the three primary school types (independent, independent religious, and religious schools) suggest that religious schools provide smaller budgets per student, have smaller collections, and have fewer computers available in their libraries.

While individual school environments may dictate sizes of collections, staffs, and facilities, this initial report provides comparative data that may help independent schools assess their standing relative to their peers or advocate for more resources where there is great disparity. This study provides a first step toward reporting and sharing data on the independent school library environment focusing on separate regions and types of schools.

The comparison between this study's independent school library sample and the AASL public school samples reveals important differences in library resources, both in terms of total collection size and budgets spent on collections as well as in terms of access to the library and to electronic resources. Given the overall higher rates of achievement that have been reported for independent school students in NAIS schools, we can suggest that having greater library resources might contribute to higher rates of independent school student success. Future studies might analyze the success rates of students in those public schools that provide library resources greater than or equal to those in this article's independent school sample.

For a list of survey questions, please see the [appendix](#).

## Acknowledgments

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Studying the Independent School Library (Figures) by Ellysa Stern Cahoy and Susan G. Williamson

Figure 1.

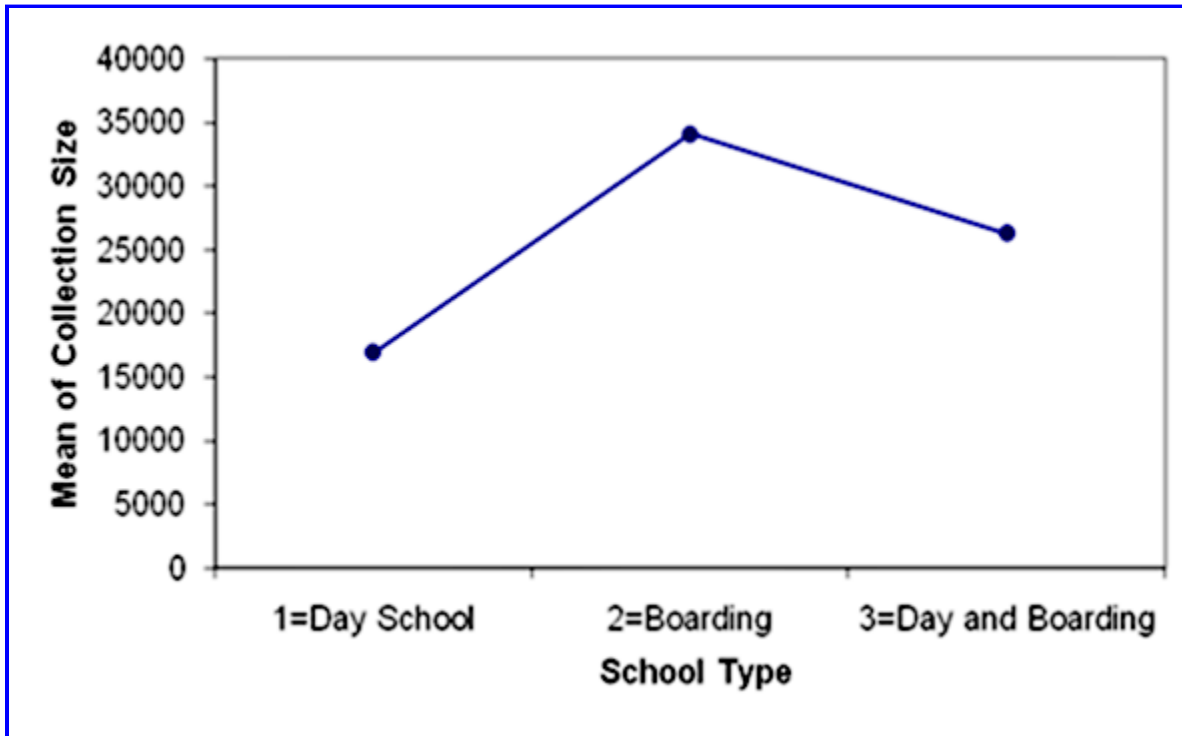


Figure 2.

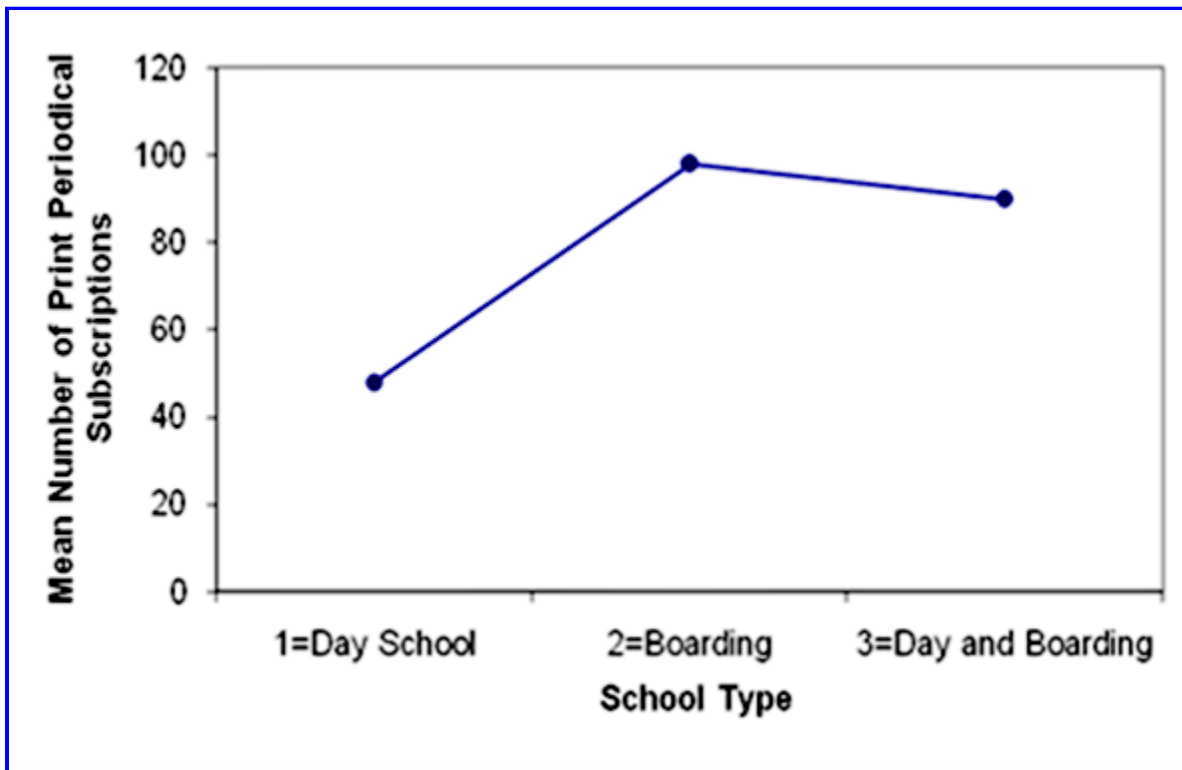


Figure 3.

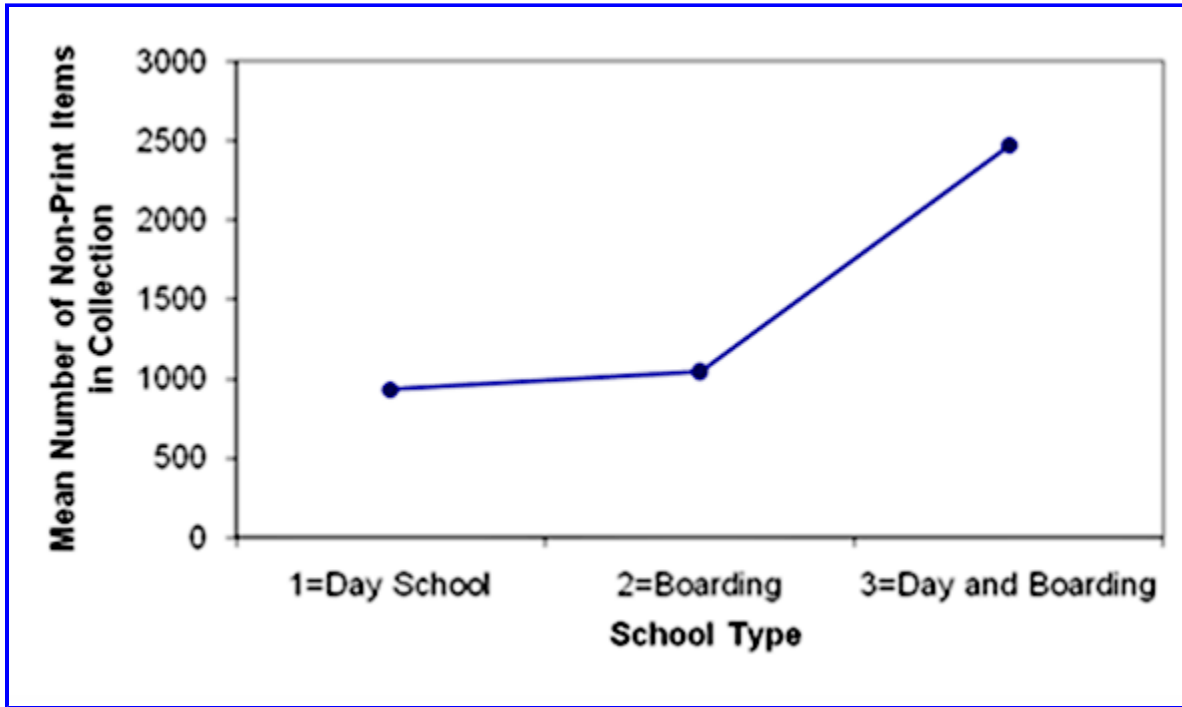


Figure 4.

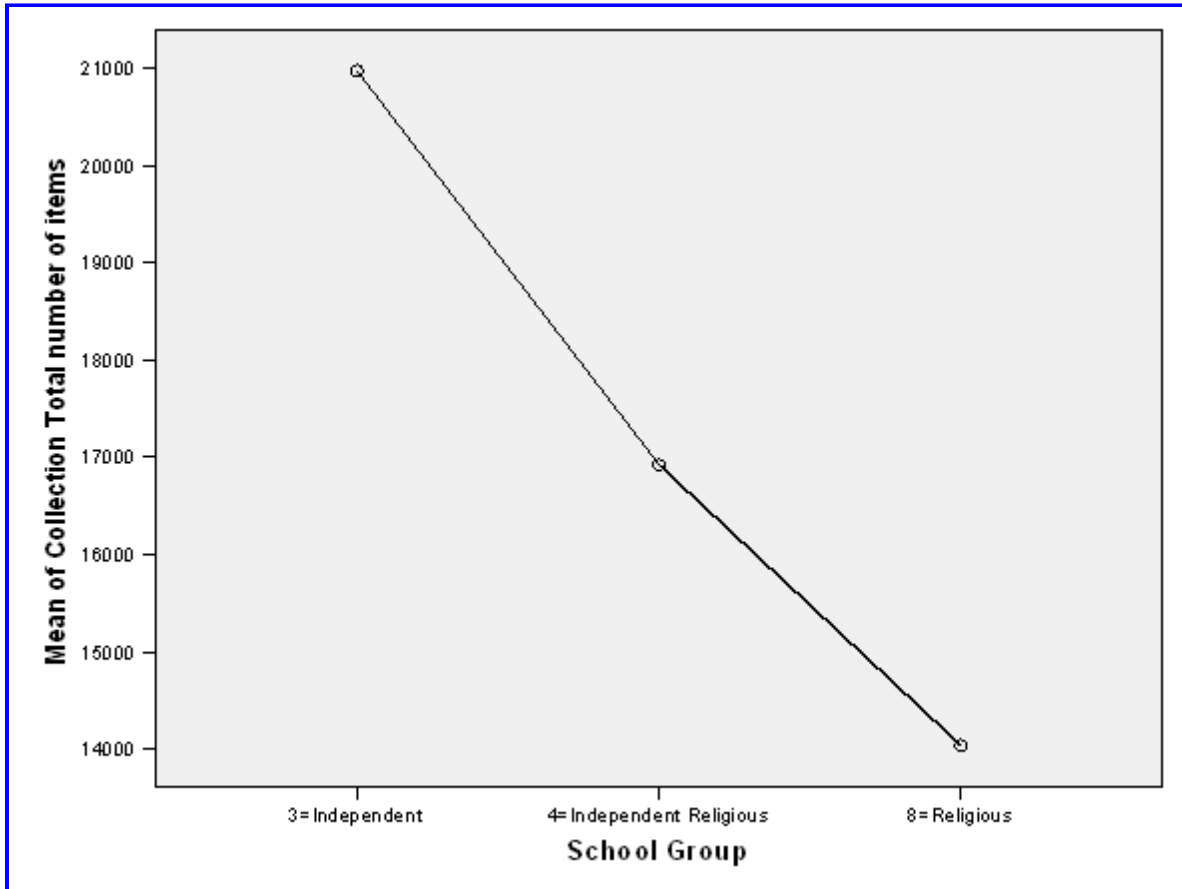


Figure 5.

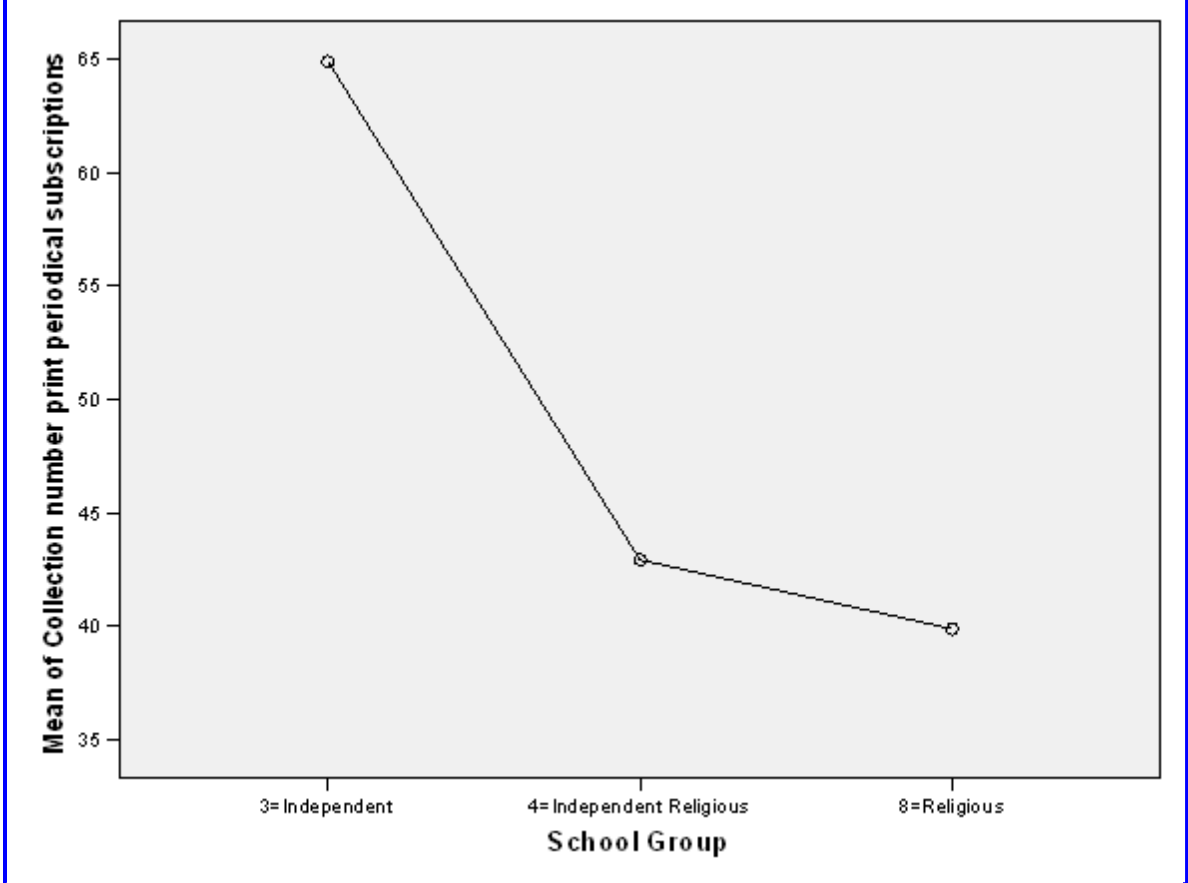


Figure 6.

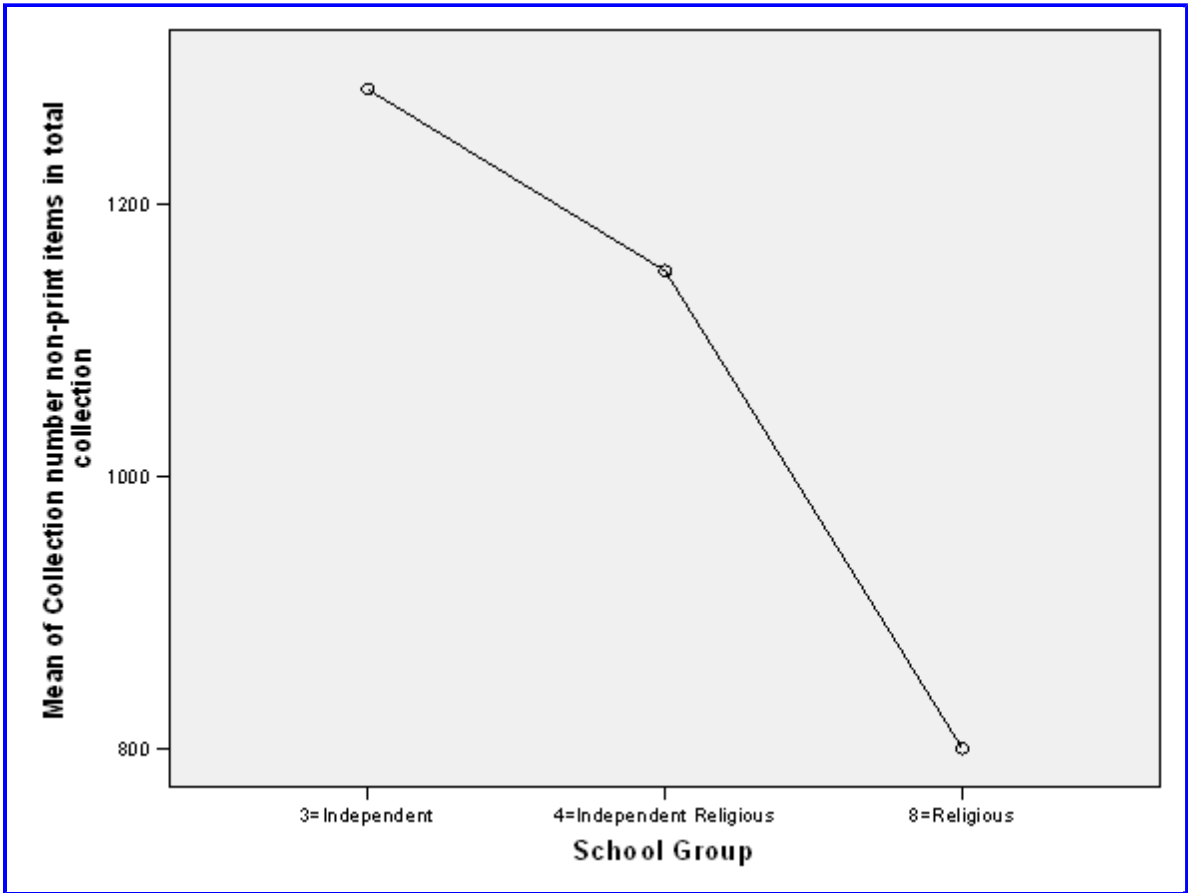


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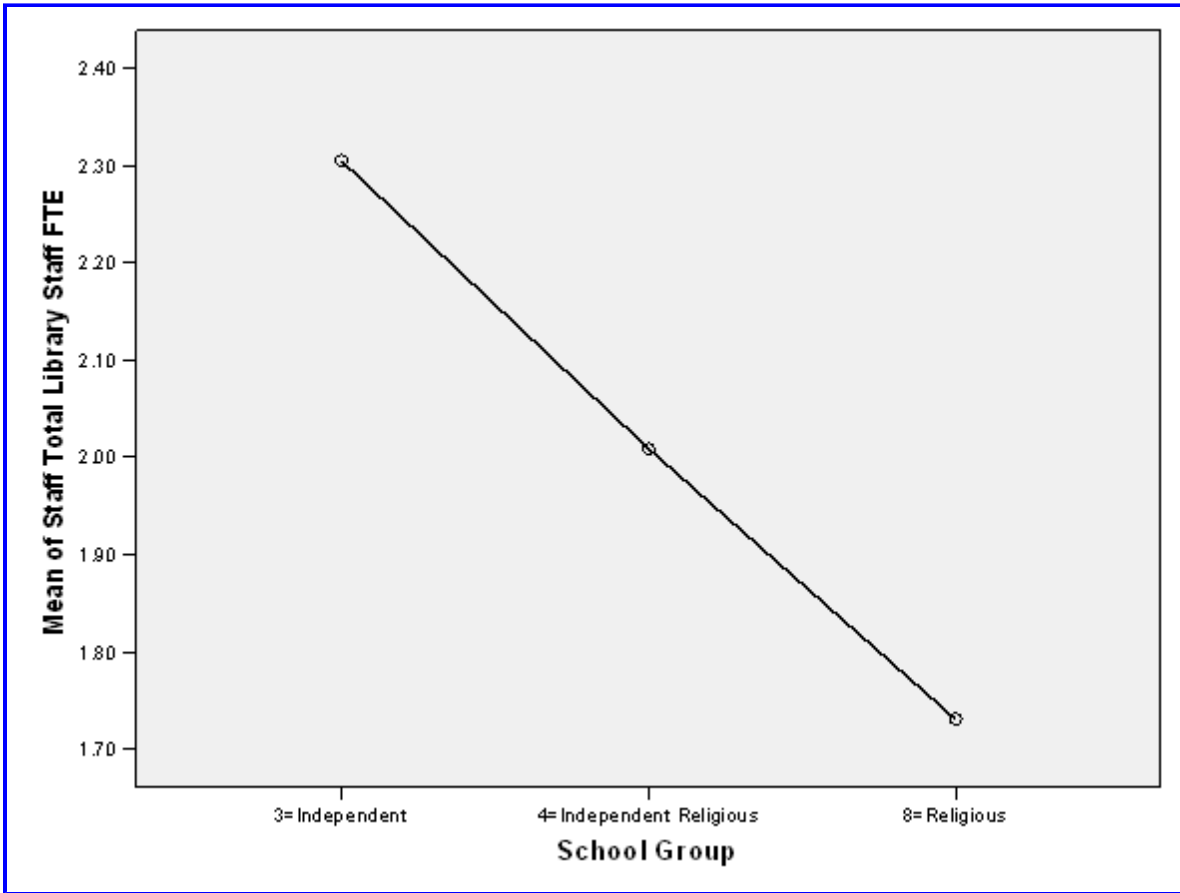


Figure 8.

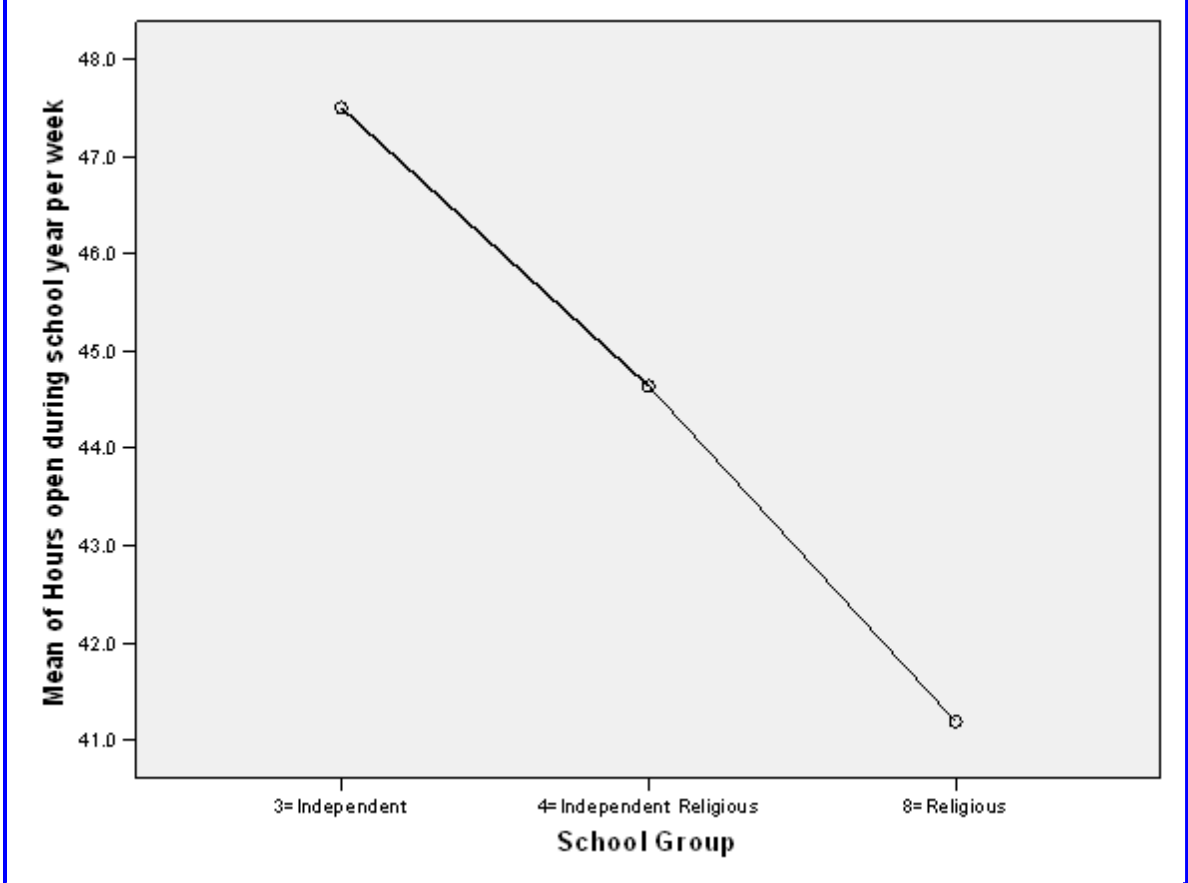
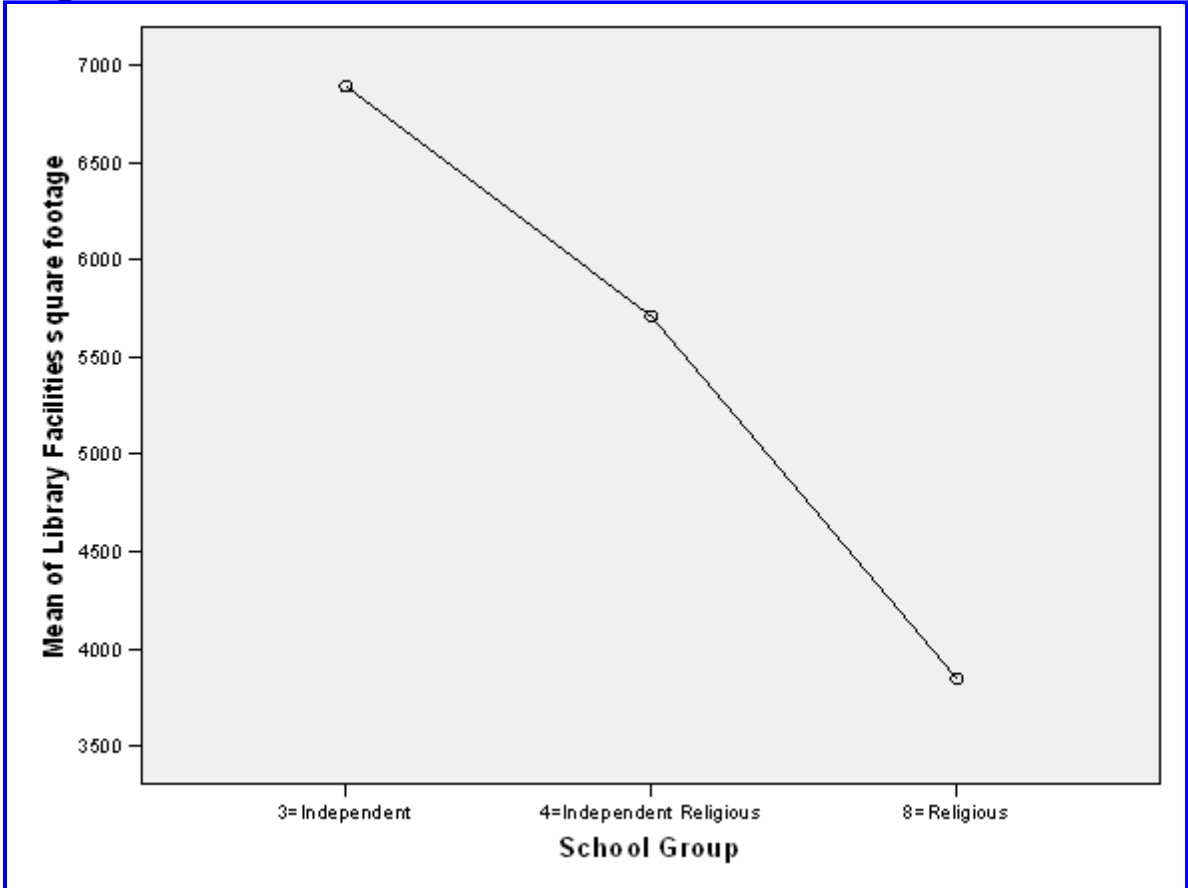


Figure 9.



# Appendix. Survey Questions—2005 Survey of Independent School Librarians

1. What is the name of your school?
2. In what state is your school located?
3. Total number of students served by this library media center?
4. Total number of faculty served by this library media center?

## Type of School (check all that apply):

5. Grade range served by this library media center?
6. Budget:
  - a. Dollars per student:
  - b. Library media center budget as a percent of total school operating budget:
  - c. Does this library media center have an endowment?
7. Library media center staff:
  - a. Ratio of students per professional (credentialed or other degree):
  - b. Ratio of students per total library media center staff (including paraprofessionals)
  - c. Total library media center staff FTE
  - d. Total hours open per week (including weekends) during school year:
8. Collections:
  - a. Total items:
  - b. Total print items per student and total nonprint items in collection (e.g., media equipment):
  - c. Total print periodical subscriptions and total database subscriptions:
9. Library media center facilities:
  - a. Square footage
  - b. Total seats
10. Computer access:
  - a. Total workstations or laptops in library media center:
  - b. Do you provide wireless access?
  - c. Do you provide remote database access?
11. Do you have a library media center webpage?
12. Do you have an automated catalog?
13. Is the catalog accessible remotely?
14. Does this library media center serve a summer program?