

SCHOOL LIBRARY IMPACT STUDIES: A Review of Findings and Guide to Sources

Executive Summary

An enormous volume of literature has been written on the topics of school libraries and children's literacy. Since the 1990s, especially the body of research known as "library impact studies" has grown dramatically, focusing on the correlation between school libraries and student achievement. In particular, the studies examine the positive effect of access to books; the effects of poverty on reading achievement; and the importance of staffing with certified librarians who play an important role in teaching critical thinking skills, leading the way for technology use, and inspiring literacy.

The purpose of this report is to present a summary of the current research on the impact of school libraries which can be used by the Harry & Jeanette Weinberg Foundation to better assess and develop current and future library initiatives.

School libraries -- "hubs of learning in public schools" -- are considered by students to be especially important as sources of books. Results from a survey conducted by Scholastic, Inc. and the Gates Foundation showed that 83 percent of all students got books from the school library, compared to 38 percent from public libraries and 20 percent from retailers.

Universal findings from more than 60 impact studies conducted in 22 states conclude that schools with a well-equipped library, staffed by a full-time, certified librarian and appropriate support staff contribute significantly to gains in student learning. High quality school libraries not only help students read more, but also help them learn how to use and process information better and to perform better on achievement tests. Levels of library funding, staffing levels, collection size and range, and the instructional role of the librarian all have a direct impact on student achievement.

Research confirms that the fundamental purpose of school libraries is to provide access to books and that access is the primary factor that leads to raising student test scores in all aspects of literacy. Access to books not only fosters an early love of learning and has a positive effect on reading achievement, but appears also to offset the impact of poverty. Results of studies show that children of poverty perform poorly on reading tests because they have very little access to books at home and in their communities. Unfortunately, at least one study indicates that students in most need -- those attending schools with the highest concentration of students living in poverty -- have access to the fewest school library resources. All aspects of literacy improve when children have access to books. If they have access to books, they read them, and they read them for longer periods of time.

Around-the-clock access to a library's digital resources is critical to 21st century learners, but a study of Pennsylvania public schools in 2012 suggests that access to a physical school library and librarian throughout the school day, as well as before and after school, is equally important. Pennsylvania students with such ample access scored "Advanced" on achievement tests.

Staffing of school libraries with full-time, certified librarians is also significant in impacting student achievement. At successful schools, in addition to providing access to books, they play a key role in teaching. As leaders and instructional partners who collaborate with teachers, especially in the early grades, librarians develop in their students a life-long love of reading, build critical thinking skills and digital literacy that prepare students for the 21st century workplace, and help students meet the Common Core State Standards. Studies conducted in at least 14 states show that students in schools with certified librarians consistently score better on standardized achievement tests in reading, compared with students in schools without certified librarians. Additionally, school

libraries that also have support staff working under librarians to assist with non-instructional needs are considered to be more effective than those without because they give the school librarian more time to teach and collaborate.

Teaching, especially information literacy and technology instruction, is central to the role of school librarians. Results of a 2012 survey of members of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) conducted by the National Center for Literacy Education showed that 86.81 percent of respondents agreed that developing students' literacy was one of the most important parts of their job. Considerable attention is being given to the school librarian's role in helping teachers implement the Common Core State Standards. Since the Common Core State Standards are not a national curriculum and are adopted at different levels in each state, school librarians provide critical support to teachers and administration by recommending and teaching strategies and sources that develop reading comprehension and analysis of informational text in all content areas.

Studies consistently show that higher test scores result when school librarians are involved with instruction and the correlation is positive especially regarding disadvantaged students who often do not have access to resources and computers in their homes. By providing students equal guidance and access to print and digital resources, school librarians help close the gap between privileged and at-risk students.

Studies of third- and sixth-graders show that, in addition to improving literacy and achievement test scores, the presence of a teacher-librarian is the single strongest predictor of reading enjoyment.

Despite these many findings that underscore the importance of having certified librarians in public schools, about 25 percent of America's school libraries do not have one on staff, according to the American Library Association (ALA). The ALA reports that on average, there is one school librarian for every 953 students and cutbacks continue. For example, New York City is currently reducing staffing, claiming that advancements in technology, shifts in teaching practices, the addition of classroom libraries, and the trend toward smaller schools have made librarians not as necessary as they once were. Studies, however, counter this argument. The research expertise of librarians fits in with the critical-thinking skills the schools are trying to instill by implementing the Common Core.

Several other key factors also contribute to higher scores on standardized achievement tests: Longer and flexible hours of library operation, larger and newer collections, higher per-pupil expenditure in library-related resources, comfortable facilities that provide more than a place to check out books, and modern technological infrastructure.

Among many measures for assessing the quality of school libraries and correlating outcomes are: Usage - the number of visits to the library, length of time spent each visit, number of books checked out, number of events held in the library, and number of parent visits; Collection - size, currency, number of subscriptions, diversity (including bi-lingual material), and A/V.

Evidence from multiple library impact studies conducted across the U.S. offers the following conclusions:

- Access to books through school libraries develops life-long positive attitudes in students towards reading and helps them read more. The earlier the foundation can be laid, the better.
- Students consistently perform better on tests when there is a full-time, certified librarian and appropriate assistant on staff.
- Extended hours of operation and flexible scheduling have a direct impact on student achievement.
- Higher expenditures and larger, newer, and varied collections contribute to improved student test scores.
- Collaborative planning between school librarians and teachers enhance student learning.
- The higher the number of visits to the library, the higher the scores on student achievement tests.
- School libraries are essential to students by providing facilities and tools to prepare them for navigating the information age and entering the workplace of the future.
- School libraries have the ability to bridge the gap between privileged and at-risk students by providing equal access and resources for learning.
- School librarians empower students by instilling in them a love of reading from early ages; teaching new ways of learning; guiding them to read and think critically; and offering technology skills.

Introduction

Since the 1990s, numerous studies have examined the impact libraries have on student achievement and behavior, giving special attention to the librarian's important role in teaching, leading the way for technology use, and inspiring literacy. A significant portion of this research -- collectively known as "school library impact studies" -- has been conducted by Dr. Keith Curry Lance and his associates at the Colorado Department of Education and the University of Denver who have looked at schools, so far, in 22 states and one Canadian province. For this report, in addition to these "impact studies," more than 100 documents from a wide range of authoritative sources such as the **American Association of School Librarians, Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries at Rutgers University, Literacy in Learning Exchange, National Center for Education Statistics, National Center for Literacy Education, Scholastic Research Foundation, state library associations,** and many more, were collected and reviewed.

The summary which follows organizes key findings from these studies under these topics:

- **Access**
- **Budget**
- **Collaboration/Cooperation**
- **Environment**
- **Instruction/Information Literacy Curriculum**
- **Learning and Motivation**
- **Outreach/Community**
- **Poverty**
- **Resources/Collection Development**
- **Staffing**
- **Technology**
- **Usage**

Requested by the Weinberg Foundation to look at the role of foundations involved in this field, I found that there are many groups such as the Robin Hood Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation that sponsor initiatives on libraries and schools and address topics such as children's literacy and poverty. Some, like the Altman Foundation, support initiatives such as Library Connections that helps to revitalize inner-city elementary school libraries in New York by developing school library programs and expanding collections. Although information from these non-profit organizations is very useful, I could not find any foundations that have published studies with evidence outcomes measuring the overall impact of school libraries. This topic is open for further exploration. A partial list of foundations appears at the end of this document.

An extensive bibliography appears at the end of the document.

(*Note:* Some terms are used interchangeably in the context of this summary as well as in the studies reviewed. Professionally-trained librarians = *certified* or *endorsed*. Librarians = *library media specialists*. *Support staff* = Library Aide, Library Assistant, School Library Assistant, Library Paraprofessional, Library Clerk, Library Tech, Technology Assistant, Media Aide or Media Technician.)

Summary of School Libraries Research

Universal Findings:

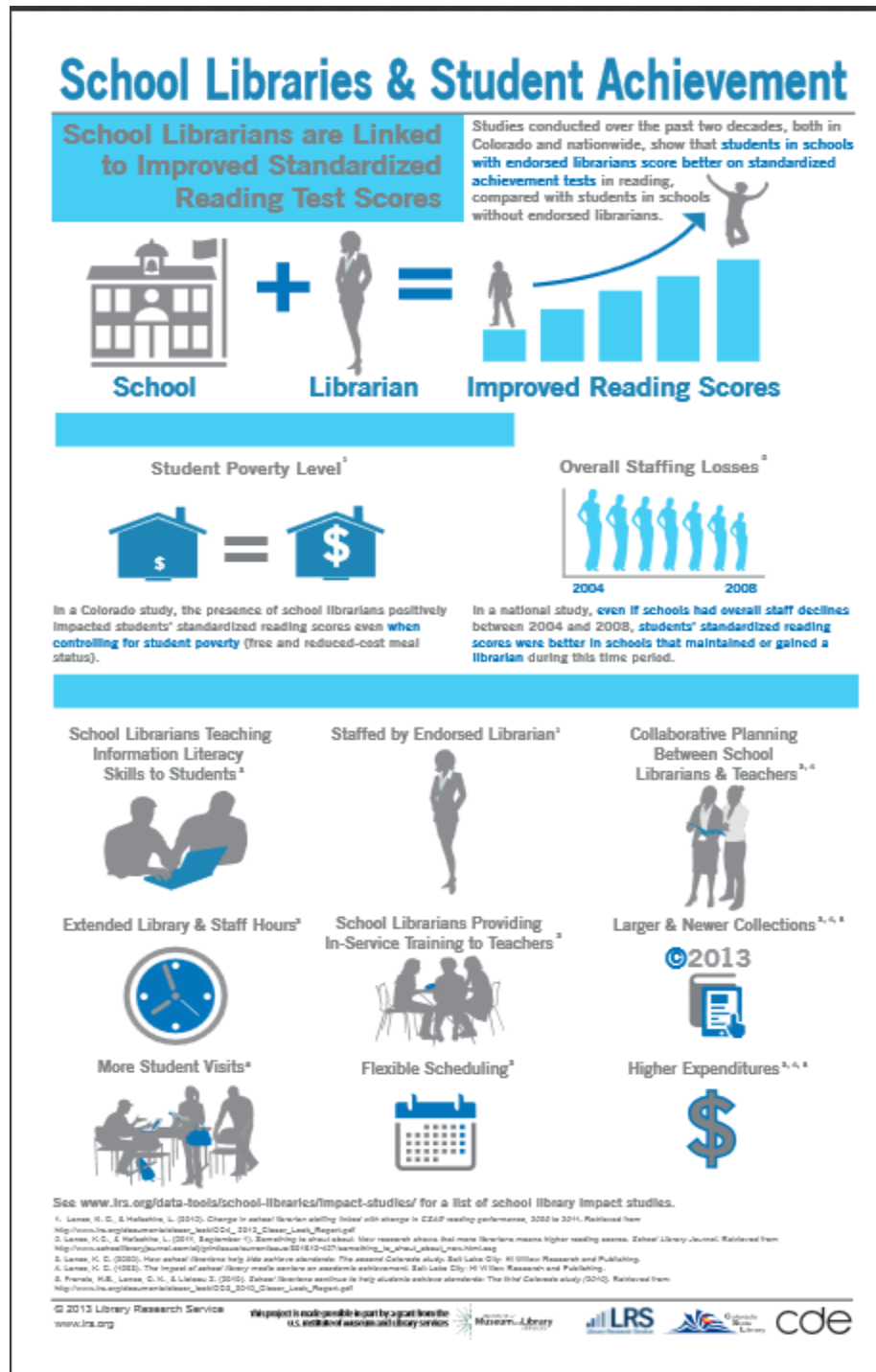
The level of library funding, staffing levels, collection size and range, and the instructional role of the librarian have a direct impact on student achievement.

More than 60 studies in nearly two dozen states confirm that schools with a well-equipped library, staffed by a full-time certified librarian and appropriate support staff contribute significantly to gains in student learning. For a full picture, surveys have been conducted to include perspectives of librarians, staff, parents, administrators (Shannon, 2012; Lance, 2013), and students (OH 2003; Bleidt, 2011).

- **A strong library program leads to higher scores.**
Results from dozens of large-scale studies, involving over 8,700 schools and over 2.6 million students, have consistently demonstrated that students score an average of 10-20 % higher on reading and achievement tests when their school has a strong library media program. This effect holds, regardless of other school conditions such as student-teacher ratio, overall per-pupil spending, student demographics, and community socio-economic conditions. (Lance, et al., 2005; Lance, et al., 2003)
- **Access to better libraries means better reading.**
Higher quality school libraries correlate with higher scores on reading tests done at state, national, and international levels. Aspects of school library quality that relate to reading achievement include: the size of the collection, the presence of a credentialed librarian, and overall staffing. When children have access to books, they read them a lot, and when they read a lot, all aspects of literacy improve.
- **School librarians provide much more than access to books.**
They also serve as leader, instructional partner, information specialist, teacher and program administrator. They lead in building 21st century skills by collaborating with teachers to provide essential skills of critical thinking, digital literacy and technology; foster love of reading; help students meet the Common Core State Standards; and help students prepare to enter the workplace.
- **High levels of poverty mean little access to books.**
Consistent evidence shows that children of poverty have very little access to books at home and in their communities. Lack of access to books is a major reason why these children do poorly on reading tests.
- **Access to books appears to offset the impact of poverty.**
Many studies have appeared in the last few years indicating that access to books not only has a positive effect on reading achievement, but also that the positive impact of access is as large as the negative impact of poverty. This suggests that a good library can offset the effects of poverty on reading achievement.

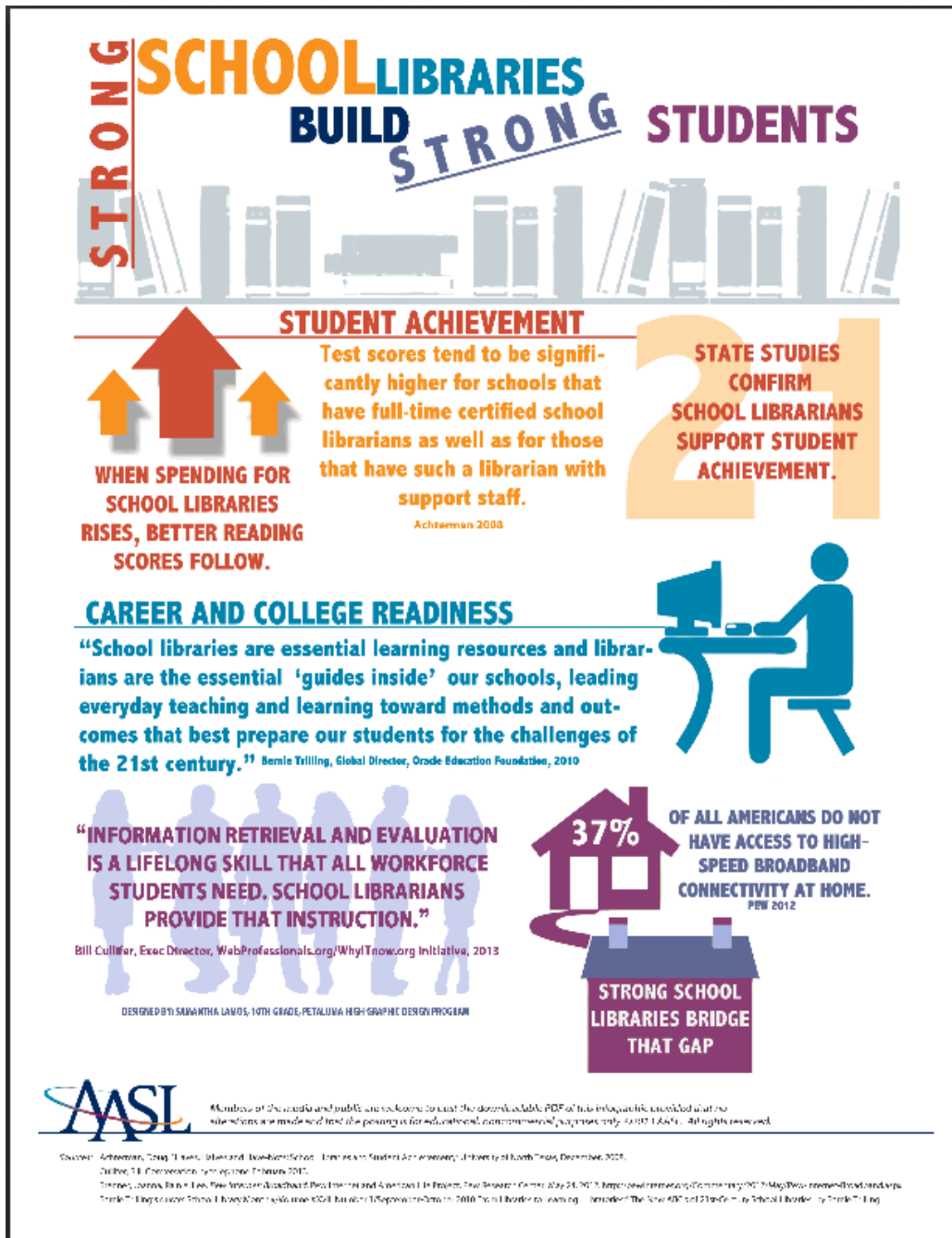
For an extensive list of talking points confirming the benefits of school libraries, see the American Libraries Association website: *Libraries Matter: Impact Research* <http://www.ala.org/research/librariesmatter/>

The infographic below from the Library Research Service summarizes some of the universal findings from studies on libraries and achievement including: presence of a certified librarian, higher staffing levels, teaching information literacy, extended hours of operation, in-house teacher training, flexible scheduling, higher expenditure, larger and newer collections, collaborative planning between school librarians and teachers.



http://www.lrs.org/documents/school/school_library_impact.pdf

The infographic below from the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) highlights some important features of school libraries: Test scores are higher when there is a certified librarian and support staff; 21 state studies confirm school librarians support student achievement; when spending rises, better reading scores follow; librarians teach lifelong skills of information retrieval and evaluation; strong school libraries bridge the gap of access to high-speed broadband connectivity.



http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org/aasl/files/content/aalissues/advocacy/AASL_infographic_strongstudents-2013.pdf