

State Library Conferences as Professional Development Venues: Unbalanced Support for the AASL-Defined Roles of the School Librarian

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Abstract

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) released new guidelines for school library programs in the summer of 2009. Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs (AASL 2009a), hereafter referred to as EL, spells out the five roles that school librarians must practice to empower library users. The purpose of this content-analysis study was to investigate the professional-development offerings available to school librarians through state-level conferences and determine the degree to which these sessions promote the five roles for school librarians as identified in EL.

Using a stratified

Introduction

To optimally support a school community, a school librarian must play a number of professional roles and master various competencies. In *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs* (AASL 2009a), hereafter referred to as *EL*, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) delineates the school library practice necessary to meet the needs of 21st-century learners. Additionally, in *EL* AASL spells out and prioritizes the five roles that school librarians must embrace to empower library users: leader, instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, and program administrator.

EL builds upon the association's previous guidelines *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* (AASL and AECT 1998), but, in addressing the needs of society and education, increases the focus on learning for knowledge and emphasizes the important of the instructional partner role. Further, AASL recognizes the increasing need for librarians to practice leadership roles (Gordon 2009). In *EL* the role of "leader" was added to the other four roles previously described in AASL guideline documents.

EL charges that school librarians serving as leaders embrace "challenges and opportunities to empower learning through their roles as instructional partners, information specialists, teachers, and program administrators" (AASL 2009a, 46). *EL* further proposes that as leaders school librarians are visible and active in their learning communities; they communicate with and engage in collaborative activities with all library stakeholders and with decision-making communities in their schools, districts, and states. They also actively participate in their national associations. In *EL* leaders are described as librarians who build relationships and partnerships, integrate 21st-century skills throughout the school environment, demonstrate professional commitment and knowledge, and take a global view through active participation in the local and global learning communities to develop effective programs and to advocate for student learning (AASL 2009a, 17). Thus, an effective school librarian must demonstrate the ability to lead through mastery of the other four roles.

Literature Review

Having recently published new guidelines, it is imperative that AASL get the word out to practitioners in the field. Not only must the association disseminate the goals and objectives of the national organization, it must also ensure that practitioners fully understand how to implement and use the guidelines to affect practice (Sawchuk 2010). In the field of school librarianship, research repeatedly points to the incongruity between guidelines for best practice and enactment of those guidelines by practitioners (McCracken 2001). To address this issue, the AASL initiated Learning4Life (L4L), an implementation plan to disseminate both the guidelines and *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* (AASL 2007). AASL offered L4L and other sessions focused on the new guidelines at 2010 and 2011 ALA Midwinter Meeting and Annual Conference, the 2010 Fall Forum, and 2009 AASL National Conference.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (Goldring and Gruber 2009), there were 50,910 full-time and 8,850 part-time state-certified school librarians in 2007–2008. Only 8,000, or 13.39 percent, of those professionals are members of AASL, and even fewer, approximately 2,250 of them, or 3.77 percent, attended AASL's 15th National Conference in Minneapolis in 2011 (Jacobsen 2011). However, a larger number of school librarians do attend state-level conferences for library professionals, and these venues offer support for school

librarians' professional development and advancement toward the goals and objectives of the national professional association.

The library and information science community widely recognizes conference attendance as an accepted form of professional development. A number of leaders in library and information science (Abram 2008; Morse 2008; Natarajan 2008; Simmons and Fenton 2010) as well as leaders among school librarians (Alaimo 2004; Franklin and Stephens 2008; Johns 2005; Laughlin 2010; Needham 2008) have encouraged conference attendance for professional

Methodology

Sample

Using a stratified random sample, the investigators selected twelve conferences sponsored or cosponsored by s

percent inter-rater reliability was reached. Additionally, the researchers randomly selected one of the conference programs to reanalyze approximately eight weeks after the initial analyses. All researchers independently recoded the single conference program with 90 percent or greater agreement with the first analysis.

Figure 1. Domain matrix.

Category Coc -6

3.2 Literacy Skills

including storytime;
storytelling; readers' theater;
oral history; writing

Table 3. Major topics at all school library state conferences.

Topic	Role	N	%
Pleasure reading motivation	Teacher	58	15.10
Promotion of literacy skills	Teacher	43	

Communication tools to connect the school with the global learning community	Information Specialist	32	8.3 3
Collection development and/or management	Program Administrator	20	5.2 1

developing collaborative teaching policies, practice, and curricula. Another two sessions involved collaboratively planned and taught assignments that promote information literacy and/or technology use. And one session focused on the “learning commons,” a concept of the

conferences and across three different types of conferences, as well as by the subtopics within each role domain.

Roles

In states where school librarians are required to hold classroom-teacher certification or to have successfully completed a specified number of years as classroom teachers, it is not surprising that a focus on the “teacher role” would be a vestige of this heritage. In the SLOCs, sessions centered on the teacher role dominated the offerings. Many of these sessions provided conference participants with opportunities for skill development in the areas of literacy instruction, storytime methods, and book-promotion strategies. While the teacher role is valuable for school librarians (Neuman 2001; Todd 2011), they must also add the values, knowledge, skills, and responsibilities of “librarian” to their classroom-teacher skillsets. The instructional partner, information specialist, and program administrator roles more clearly focus on the “librarian” aspects of the job description.

In FLACs the program administrator role was most often demonstrated in conference sessions. While these topics are important to the foundation of managing the library collection and program, they do not necessarily ensure that the program is integrated into the larger school

attendees focus on professional development for school librarians, this role ranked last in terms of representation at all of the conferences and was not supported by any of the sessions at one of

support the teacher role: motivating pleasure reading, promoting literacy skills, and understanding popular reading material (specifically, author, illustrator, and poet talks). Motivating reading and promoting literacy skills can be viewed as “traditional” activities of school librarians.

It is possible that sessions focused on literacy are highly important to school librarians given the current educational climate and focus on literacy that have developed since the advent of Reading First funding (U.S. Dept. of Ed. 2002). Additionally, there have been numerous calls in the school library field for school librarians to serve as literacy leaders within their schools and communities (Achterman 2010; Asselin 2003; Branch and Oberg 2001; Braxton 2008; sc2 727. fu8l to srous4(r)3hReaaRe4(nt). Additiously16.27nd

proposals, may not have considered AASL's roles. Reviewing all submitted program proposals would have expanded the scope of this study and would have assisted in establishing a broader view of potential professional development opportunities at state-level conferences.

While this study categorized sessions by role domain, the researchers made no attempt to determine the quality of sessions or their impact on participants' learning. Without session exit interviews, there is no way to determine if participants considered the session a pathway to mastery in one or more of the four roles and if they thought they could apply their new knowledge to develop their leader roles in their school communities. As a result, the researchers

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professional development goals for themselves related to the subtopics in each role where they feel they could use the most growth.

The researchers hope that the domain matrix developed for this study will prove to be a useful tool for planning committees of state-level conferences. Committees can analyze the content of their previous conferences and select or solicit specific types of conference programs to address all roles. Planners can also determine a strategy for considering how the “leader” role is

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