

State of School Libraries in Oregon: Challenges and Successes

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JENNIFER MAURER is the School Library Consultant at the State Library of Oregon, where her duties include general consulting and working with OSLIS and the K-12 aspect of the statewide databases. Previously, Jen worked with the bookmobile program at the Salem Public Library and was a teacher and a school librarian for a dozen years, split between Texas and Oregon. She enjoys birdwatching and exploring waterfalls.

The State Library supports Oregon school libraries in a variety of ways. Data about school library staffing and funding is collected and is often requested by library advocates. The State Library's Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) allotment contributes to or funds Oregon Battle of the Books (OBOB), the statewide databases, and the Oregon School Library Information System, otherwise known as OSLIS. In addition, the Oregon Association of School Libraries (OASL) has benefited from LSTA competitive grants, such as grants they received to develop the Oregon School Library Standards and the related Grade-Level Learning Goals. I work closely with the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), and as I learn about relevant updates and projects at ODE, I keep the library community informed about potential opportunities and connect OASL leadership with appropriate ODE contacts. Much of the support I provide comes in the form of consulting as needs arise. As one example, I helped a paraprofessional running a library on her own navigate a situation in which her principal proposed a new policy charging a committee with approving all library book orders. Another example is when controversy arose around an OBOB title, *George*. A few administrators pulled the book about a transgender student from their library collections and forbade their OBOB groups from reading it (Brown, 2019). In response, I organized meetings with ODE staff, the Oregon Intellectual Freedom Committee and ALA office, and others which culminated in coordinating a webinar about intellectual freedom best practices for school administrators.

Additional local support comes from organizations like the Oregon Library Association (OLA) and Oregon Association of School Libraries. For example, as a result of how COVID-19 has affected K-12 education, OASL leadership developed talking points about the value that licensed and paraprofessional staff bring during distance learning. Those organizations can also advocate for school libraries in ways that the State Library, as a state agency, cannot. In the last couple of years, OASL ramped up their advocacy efforts by forming an advocacy committee. They created an advocacy toolkit and worked with the OLA Library Development & Legislation Committee during the last full session of the

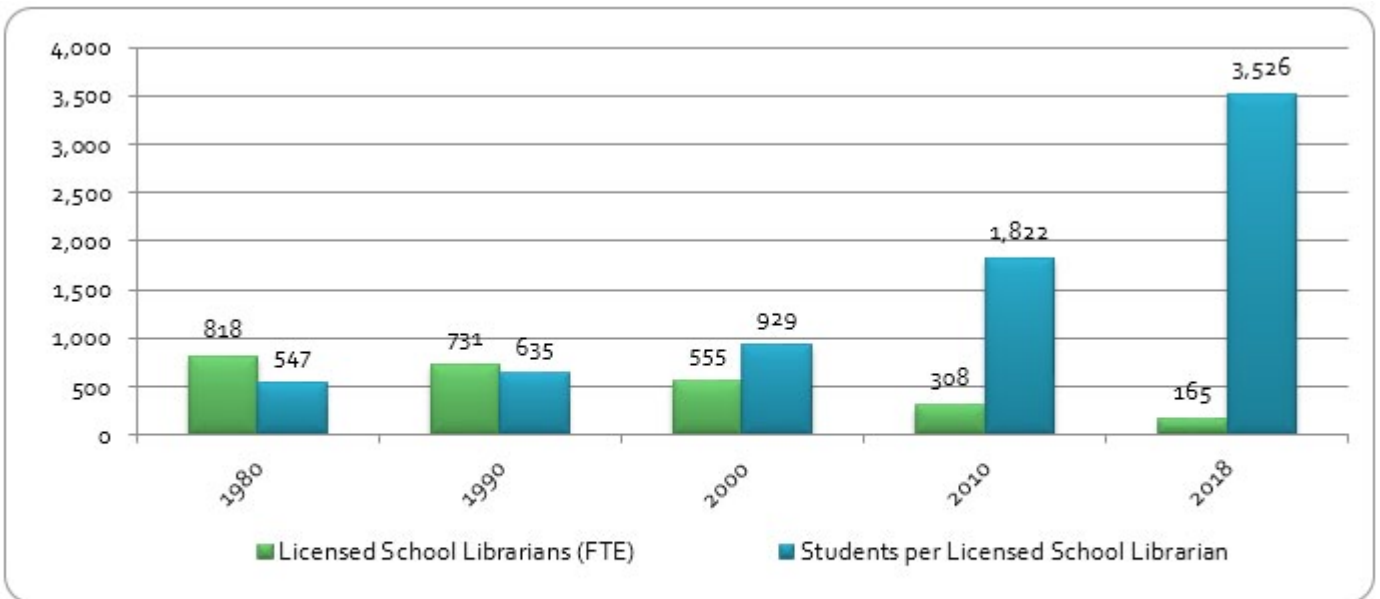


Oregon Legislature, trying to pass legislation that would require licensed school librarians in elementary schools, among other things, based on momentum from the then-pending Student Success Act. The school library legislation did not advance, and the advocacy committee plans to pursue new legislation again when the time is right. That situation is a reflection of the current state of school libraries in Oregon. Much good work is being done, but efforts to staff, fund, and better utilize school library programs often do not move forward.

In preparation to write this article, I asked OASL members to respond to a survey about successes and challenges. Top challenges surfaced, both through the survey responses and from trends I have noticed in my dozen years at the State Library. To save space, I identified the library staff whom I quoted as licensed/certified (L) or classified/paraprofessional (C). The quotes are a sampling, and you are encouraged to read the full list of responses (Maurer, 2020b).

Lack of Licensed School Librarians on Staff

As of the 2018–19 school year, there were 165 FTE licensed school librarians in Oregon’s 1,256 public schools (Maurer, 2020a). There were also 697 FTE school library classified staff that year. The State Library has tracked this information since the 1980–81 school year, when there were 818 FTE licensed librarians. Unfortunately, we have no equivalent data about Oregon’s private schools. One negative consequence of few or no licensed librarians being on staff is that students lose out on the instructional component of a strong school library program. For example, often there is no intentional instruction around information literacy and all it entails.



Licensed School Librarians in Oregon Public Schools, 1980-81 through 2018-19, by Decade

Table: State Library of Oregon | Data: Oregon Department of Education

CHALLENGE: “Even with Oregon’s Student Success Act, no new positions were added to the libraries. I am unable to change administrators’ attitudes about the need for training and for appropriate staffing, even with discussion and evidence. My biggest challenge was ... no time allowed in part-time contracts to train paraprofessionals that are new to the job. Because many of the library paraprofessionals have ‘other’ jobs, the libraries are closed or not available to student or staff use.” (Solo L for district)

SUCCESS: Eugene School District hired a district librarian during the second half of the 2019–20 school year. Around the same time, Lane Education Service District hired a librarian to serve rural districts. Both positions had gone unfilled for several years.

Administrators Do Not Understand Role of Libraries and Library Staff

The staffing issue speaks to another concern that rises to the top of the list. Many school and district administrators do not understand or value the role of the school library program or the work that is involved. Contributing factors may be that libraries are seldom addressed in educational leadership programs, and in some cases, newer administrators may have no experience working with a licensed librarian, even from their teaching days. Often administrators are not swayed when presented with the collective body of evidence known as school library impact studies.

CHALLENGE: “Our only licensed librarian moved and was not replaced by the district. As the library assistant, I was given her responsibilities, on top of my own, and expected to do them in the same amount of time I had as an assistant, only 6.25 hours a day. I don’t think administrators understand that running the library is more than checking in and checking out books.” (C)

CHALLENGE: “The biggest challenges I deal with are the ethical dilemmas I face as a result of inadequate resources. Increasingly, I am being asked to participate in requiring our classified [library] staff to function as teachers, which is unfair to both students and our classified staff.” (L)

Paraprofessional Staff Overextended

It is not surprising then that survey results revealed that school library paraprofessional staff can feel underappreciated or overextended. That is especially true when they run a library by themselves. Lack of training can be an issue, and as part of the State Library’s new strategic plan, we will look into providing professional development resources or opportunities for school library paraprofessional staff.

CHALLENGE: “I am grateful for my benefits, and I know I am lucky that the position even still exists in schools, but with the pay and title of ‘assistant’ I feel greatly undervalued. It suggests an entry-level job meant for a teenager just out of high school, but I can say that the job requires the same behavioral management skills that teachers have and a good deal of knowledge.” (Solo C)

CHALLENGE: “Because of the unreasonable demands and low pay that our classified staff contend with, we have had high turnover in recent years. This school year, 40 percent of the staff I support were new to the job.” (L)



Licensed Staff Overextended

Of course, some of the concerns about being overextended apply to licensed librarians as well. Being split between two schools, serving as the sole licensed library staff in the district, or having additional teaching responsibilities in other subject areas limits a librarian's ability to form relationships with students, serve in the role of readers' advisor, collaborate with teachers, and work towards standards-based instructional outcomes.

CHALLENGE: "While we are fortunate to still have licensed teacher-librarians in our district, we have no full-time positions in any of our buildings ... I have taught 900–1,100 students weekly between two school sites for the last decade. This does not allow us to have the relational or academic impact that students deserve, nor can we effectively collaborate with classroom teachers to maximize learning through coordinated activities." (L)

SUCCESS: "We genrefied our HS collection and circulation increased *significantly*. Our district leadership has changed in recent years, and until COVID we were making progress with plans to increase licensed librarian FTE in the district—not sure what will happen now." (L)

Minimal Library Budget

Another struggle is trying to build a relevant collection that meets the instructional and general interest reading needs of students with a minimal or sometimes nonexistent library budget.

Through the Quality Education Model (Maurer, 2019), the Oregon Quality Education Commission establishes recommended guidelines, not requirements, for how much money to allocate to different programs for a prototype elementary, middle, and high school. The purpose is to help legislators make school funding decisions. The recommendation from the 2018 model suggests budgeting a minimum of \$16 per student on library books and periodicals, and for the 2017–18 school year, less than 5 percent of Oregon public schools met that target. As a result, many school library staff rely on book fairs and donations to fund or supplement their materials budget.

CHALLENGE: "Library funding is one of our biggest challenges. My MS and ES libraries are not provided a budget. We rely solely on fundraising (book fairs) to provide resources for those buildings. I try to supplement their collections using my limited district budget, but it's not enough. We are the **ONLY** academic program that is required to fund-raise to operate. Shameful." (L)

SUCCESS: "I do feel like schools in my district are supported very well by our Library Media Support Services. They use a generous portion of their budget to get us award-winning and diversity-related books every year." (C)

Encroaching on Facilities

In 2018, Ridgeview High School in Redmond announced that they would repurpose their entire library (Colosky, 2018). During construction in the summer of 2020, La Grande Middle School planned to turn 40 percent of the library into two classrooms (Mason, 2020). And, I was contacted by two concerned library paraprofessionals asking if their schools were allowed to significantly reduce their library spaces in order to utilize the facilities for physical education (PE). What do those scenarios have in common? A combination of schools running out of room, tight budgets, more stringent PE requirements, and/or not valuing the library program has led some schools to repurpose their library facilities. It



also speaks to a self-perpetuating cycle: some administrators do not adequately fund or staff libraries, library usage decreases, and then those administrators point to low library usage as evidence to support not funding or not staffing the library—and sometimes not even having a library space.

SUCCESS & CHALLENGE: “Last February, the district committed to hiring a second district librarian—me! Now we have two certified librarians in a 10-school district ... one of our high school libraries was converted into a full-time study hall and academic support space ... a lot of the library is inaccessible to the whole school during the school day.” (L)

School Library OARs Interpreted Inconsistently

Two Oregon Administrative Rules (OARs) relate to school library programs—Media Programs: OAR 581-022-2340 (Oregon, 2340) and District-level Continuous Improvement Plans: OAR 581-022-2250 (Oregon, 2250). For the Media Programs OAR, several factors play into “determining whether the assignment of certificated media and other staff is appropriate.” While it may be a burden on Oregon’s smallest districts to require having a certain level of licensed librarian FTE on staff, the open interpretation of the OAR means that larger districts with more means are also allowed to assign responsibility for the library programs to non-licensed library staff.

The State Library and OASL considered it a success when House Bill 2586 passed in 2009, which added the requirement for districts to account for strong school library programs in their continuous improvement plans (CIPs). However, ODE does not have the authority or capacity to approve submitted plans, and school library programs have gained little ground as a result of their required inclusion in district-level CIPs.

Annually, districts must submit, and then post about, a Division 22 assurance form to the Oregon Department of Education indicating whether or not they are in compliance with the OARs under ODE’s purview. If an individual believes that a district is not in compliance with the Media Programs OAR despite the “yes” box being checked on the form, they must use the district’s complaint process, and if not satisfactorily resolved, the complaint can move up to ODE. This means that interested parties must pay attention to and understand what is happening in their district.

SUCCESS: A few years ago, someone in the Tigard-Tualatin School District (TTSD) did just that. A parent with an MLS became aware that no licensed school librarians were on staff in any of the district’s schools, and while the district indicated that they were in compliance with the Media Programs OAR, she disagreed. She reached out to the State Library to learn about her options, contacted ODE, met with the district superintendent, and did more. Her efforts led to TTSD hiring a district librarian. In this case, it took a parent who understood the value of a strong school library program to identify missing pieces and commit time and energy in order to make change happen.

CHALLENGE: “Because of my efforts to alert administration and the school board to our lack of compliance with OARs pertaining to libraries, I was told to stop talking about it and that library advocacy is not part of my job.” (L)

The physical education situation and others have revealed varying interpretations of the school library OARs over the years. Recently, the State Library and OASL were invited to the table by Oregon Department of Education staff for their upcoming review of Division 22 OARs, and we look forward to this opportunity to contribute.



No In-State Options to Obtain Library Media Endorsement

One of the newest challenges is the inability of teachers to obtain a library media endorsement in Oregon. Over the years, low numbers of licensed librarian positions combined with job insecurity from frequent reductions in force led to low enrollment in Oregon's library media endorsement programs. In the last decade, the three remaining programs were all shuttered, with the last closing a couple of years ago. Now teachers who want to add the library media endorsement to their license must use out-of-state online programs, and that process can be difficult to navigate. This past spring, the State Librarian and I met with staff from the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission to seek clarity regarding options, and I shared our findings with OASL membership.


Success Stories

A few success stories are sprinkled throughout this article, but this additional trio can serve as a reminder that good things are happening.

“Successes include author visits (Trudy Ludwig, David Greenburg, Sisbro), Oregon Battle of the Books, summer library hours (eight years), grants received for growth mindset books, and COVID grant for eBooks and Playaways.” (L)

“At the high school, as our school cracked down on cell phones, I created a cell phone online class (really only about 15 minutes) which taught some of the basics of digital literacy and distributed licenses to those who took the class and passed a brief quiz so they could use their phones in the library. It's one more way to teach these skills to kids who might not be getting them otherwise.” (L)

“I have been at my school for three years. In that time, I have established a 21st-century library which incorporates technology, implemented a makerspace, and developed a curriculum with collaborative lessons. We have an open-access library for all students. Our middle school students take a quarter of media tech in which they learn research skills and create video morning announcements.” (L)

While challenges persist, successes dot the landscape, and the small but mighty force of current school library staff is engaged in positive work for and with staff and students. This statement from one of the mighty seems a fitting closing: “Libraries celebrate learning, and in particular, student-driven learning. A strong school library is indicative of a school where learning is valued. That is one reason they are so darn important.” 

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