2020

AASL National School Library Standards: Progress Toward Implementation

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This mixed-methods, exploratory case study examines perceptions of the implementation of the U.S. National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries. A survey was first distributed to gain insight into school librarian implementation of the NSLS. Participants included practitioners in the state of Virginia in the United States who had attended professional development training on the National School Library Standards (NSLS). A sample was then interviewed about their implementation. Using the standards implementation levels identified by the California Common Core Implementation Task Force (2019) as a framework, findings indicate that after one year of training and use, many librarians remain at the awareness phase of implementation. Findings do suggest some areas in which practitioners have shown progress as they implement the standards into practice. Finally, common challenges or barriers to implementing the NSLS are noted. Future directions for research and recommendations for training at both the school/district level and national organization level are suggested.

Introduction

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), is the national professional association for school librarians in the United States. AASL has published professional standards for the school library since the early 1900s. The Standards have been updated on an ongoing basis to reflect changes in education policy, advances in technology and pedagogy, and the dynamic shifts in the expectations many school librarians experienced in their practice. In 2018, AASL released the *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* (NSLS), its most recent set of standards. These standards situate the school library within the broader education community and guide school library professionals. They have similarities to the educational expectations of other national school library guidelines and the adopted *IFLA School Library Guidelines* (2015), focusing on such topics as the purpose of the school library, programming and activities, and assessment and evaluation of the school librarian, instruction and the program.

An aggressive implementation plan was launched by AASL with the new standards (AASL, 2017a). This plan included a systematic set of objectives developed to introduce the new Standards, create support resources, and launch multiple components of the three integrated standard frameworks. This implementation plan was guided by an independent task force tasked with strategically planning professional development initiatives to ensure the new standards reached a broad audience and, sufficient training on the Standards was available (AASL, 2017b).

One year post-adoption of the NSLS, after several stages of the implementation plan have been launched, there is little data available about the impact the new standards have made on the practices within school libraries and the perception of the *Standards* by the school librarians who

work with them. This exploratory, mixed-method case study captures the opinion and experiences of school librarians working in one state as they implement the AASL School Library Standards in practice.

Statement of the Problem

This study intends to provide a snapshot of current practice implementing the NSLS to include perceptions of resources and support post-training, alignment of pedagogical practices to the NSLS, and noted challenges school librarians face with implementation.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What do school librarians perceive to be the beneficial components of the new standards to their practice?
2. To what extent has professional development on the standards facilitated implementation of the NSLS?

What do school librarians perceive to be barriers or challenges in adopting and implementing the new standards into their practice?

Related Background

School Library Standards

AASL publishes standards and guidelines to guide effective school library programs in K-12 schools. These documents have been updated since the early1900 to reflect the evolution in school library education and policy. Standards since the mid-century document a path toward current policy and practices. The AASL *Standards for School Library Programs* (1960) reflected a significant change to the school librarian's role and had an emphasis on student services and the school librarian's responsibilities as an instructor and teacher. In 1969, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Library Association (ALA) published the *Standards for School Media Programs* (NEA & ALA, 1969), a set of standards that set a minimum expectation of staffing of a school library. This document established that one qualified media specialist (per 250 students) would be staffed in a school library to implement and oversee the school library program (NEA & ALA, 1969). This set of standards also addressed teaching information literacy skills to students. The 1969 Standards provided students and teachers with the teaching support services to which they are entitled (Sullivan, 1986).

School library standards were updated in 1988 with the publication of *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs*. *Information Power* (1988), published by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), was pivotal in establishing an influential role for school librarians within the school environment. These guidelines suggest the school library as a learning environment that supports the academic goals of teachers and students. The revised *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* (AASL & AECT, 1998) further promoted opportunities for school librarians to engage with others in the school and established school librarians as leaders with the purpose of strengthening the school library program. Though the promotion of partnerships for learning collaboration, leadership, and technology was emphasized as integral school library programs (AASL & AECT, 1998, p 47). The role of leader provided the opportunity for school librarians to articulate the importance of information literacy across the curriculum and to advocate for a school library that meets the needs of all students (AASL & AECT, 1998, p.125-126).

With a focus on standards-based reforms in education, school librarians incorporated more teaching duties. The library standards established in *Information Power* (1998) identified the roles of school librarians to be that of teacher and instructional partner, along with manager of the library program (p. 5). This iteration of standards provided an opportunity for school librarians to position themselves as facilitators of student achievement within the school community and raise awareness for the instructional components of the school library program. The next set of standards would demonstrate this with The *Standards for the 21st Century Learner* (AASL, 2007) being a set of learning standards to guide student instruction, followed later by *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* (AASL, 2009) a separate set of guidelines for school library programs.

Developing a New Set of Standards

AASL began a comprehensive update of the national school library standards in 2015. A 7-member editorial board was seated to begin this research-based work (AASL, 2018, p 9). The work started with an environmental scan of professional education standards, a comprehensive assessment of current and forecast school library and education trends, and key findings were drawn from systematically gathered surveys and focus group input. In 2018 the NSLS was released and offered a standard set of consistent vocabulary terms used by school library practitioners and the education field (AASL, 2018, p10). At 314 pages, the NSLS went beyond expected student learning outcomes to include competencies intended to inform and guide the school librarian, school library, and learner. The NSLS text took on a format unlike the previous AASL standards iteration, *Standards for the 21st Century Learner* (AASL, 2007), including numerous online support resources (AASL, 2017c). The supporting pieces were an immediate benefit noted by those who reviewed the early release of the NSLS, *"The online support for AASL's National School Library Standards is effective and will support practicing school librarians as they explore and adopt the new language and content of the book."* (Moreillon, 2017). As Moreillon (2017) went on to note in her review, one of the most beneficial features of the new standards was the *Standards Integrated Framework* that aligns the competencies and expectations for the learner, school librarian, and school library within the *Standards*. The framework has competencies that can be explored independently but is developed as an integrated set to reflect a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning in the school library (AASL, 2018).

Implementation Plans for the National School Library Standards

A task force was seated by AASL to assist with the implementation of the new standards (AASL, 2018). The charge to this group was to introduce the Standards, build awareness, understanding, and commitment to the Standards from the school library community and their stakeholders, create and provide professional development, marketing and advocacy messaging, and infuse and reflect the AASL strategic goals. The resulting AASL Implementation Plan (2017a) had four broad goals upon development:
- Explain the structure purpose and value of the AASL Standards to school librarians, stakeholders, and partners beyond the school community
- Engage innovators in developing tools to explain the structure, purpose, and value of the AASL standards to school librarian, stakeholders, and partners beyond the school library community
- Equip practitioners to understand, apply, and use the AASL Standards in their educational settings
- Evaluate progress toward implementing AASL Standards and adjust for changing conditions

In addition to this multi-faceted plan was the inclusion of action items, timelines, and criteria for assessment and evaluation. The implementation process also included the creation of products and tools to facilitate use and entry-level understanding of the standards for practitioners. These materials are housed on a standards portal designed for training and use of the Standards (AASL, 2017c).

Initial implementation training of the AASL *Standards* occurred at the AASL National Conference in Arizona in November 2017. Virginia sent several delegates to participate in professional development training on the NSLS. These full-day training sessions, in addition to multiple 60 to 90-minute sessions throughout the conference, introduced state leaders to the materials, and began conversations on implementation. Additional training occurred at the state and district level to infuse multiple experiences with the standards for a broader practitioner experience.

Implementing Learning Standards as a Framework

In education, implementation of learning standards happens over time (Hicks, 2019; Huberman & Miles, 1984; Supovitz & Turner, 2000). Some states have an adoption process for any set of standards that includes stakeholder review and comment period followed by professional learning to support the new standards (Hicks, 2019). The California Common Core Implementation Task Force identified three phases of implementation: awareness, transition, and implementation (2019). Each of these has distinct characteristics defined below:

- *Awareness Phase:* This phase represents those having an introduction to the AASL Standards, the implementation plan and resources, and professional development provided to introduce the materials.
- *Transition Phase:* This phase represents a concentration on district support, engaging with AASL standards with others in the building, district or state to understand shifts in practice to using the materials, establishing new professional learning opportunities, and expanding collaborations between all stakeholders.
- *Implementation Phase:* This phase expands new professional learning support, fully aligns curriculum, instruction, and assessments, to the new Standards and effectively integrates these elements into daily practice.

These phases were used and shared with the participants of this study. These phases establish a framework for this study and are used to describe participant implementation of the NSLS.

Method

Participants

School librarians in the state of Virginia were the target population for this case study. All participants attended at least one professional development training session focused on implementing the NSLS. Once the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the research, participants who had attended at least one training session were solicited through targeted emails. Participation was verified through professional development registration. Participants were provided information describing the study and invited to voluntarily respond to a survey about their experiences using the standards. One hundred thirty-eight potential respondents were included in the sample. Fifty-two completed the survey; therefore, a response rate of 38% was obtained.
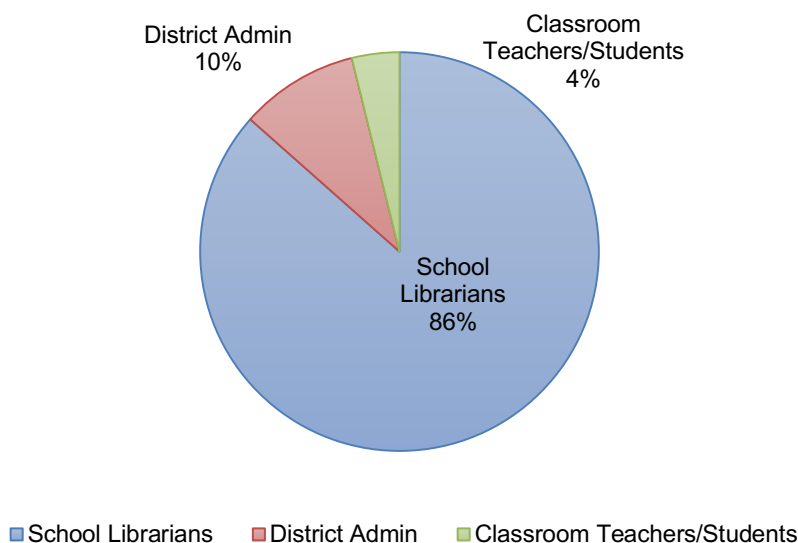
Figure 1. Participant self-reported role in practice.

Participants were primarily practicing building-level school librarians (n=45, 86%). A few district-level library administrators also participated in the survey (n=5). Four percent of respondents (n=2) were current classroom teachers enrolled in a school library program, as shown in Figure 1.

Survey respondents were further invited to participate in a one-on-one semi-structured interview after the survey. A convenience sample of those who positively responded to participate in this process was chosen. Participants were selected to provide a geographic representation of librarians across the state as well as to represent various levels at which the school librarians were assigned to teach; Table 1 illustrates participant demographics. Five participants were interviewed to explore the implementation of the standards in unique settings.

Table 1. Interview participant demographics.

Participant	Setting	School Level	Library Experience (Yrs)
1	Urban Southeast	Elementary	1
2	Rural- central	Middle	12
3	Suburban-North	Elementary	15
4	Suburban- Far West	High	20
5	Rural-West	Middle	5

Data Collection and Analysis

Using a modified version of the *Common Core Implementation Survey (2019),* participants responded to a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions about their experiences about AASL standards implementation. Quantitative and closed response survey questions were reported in aggregate and analyzed using descriptive statistics for frequency and mean. (Leedy & Ormond, 2010). Qualitative, open response survey questions were analyzed using open deductive coding (Patton, 2002). Each response was analyzed as a unit of analysis and coded for meaning or intent.

One semi-structured individual interview was conducted with each of the five selected participants. Exploratory questions were developed to guide the interview. The interview was conducted and recorded in an online space, then transcribed. Analysis of the interview transcription was conducted using grounded theory, inductive analysis (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). Two researchers independently coded the entire transcript using open coding to complete an initial coding of data, noting any developing themes. After each researcher coded the transcripts, a meeting

to compare and develop a consensus among codes was held, and a final codebook was established. The researchers then individually returned to the transcripts to deductively collapse and finalize all codes. Findings were then organized using the established implementation framework (California Department of Education, 2019).

Findings

All participants indicated they participated in at least one formal professional development training session focused exclusively on the NSLS, and some had attended multiple sessions. Most respondents spent an average of 4-8 hours in professional development activities for the NSLS, as shown in Figure 2.
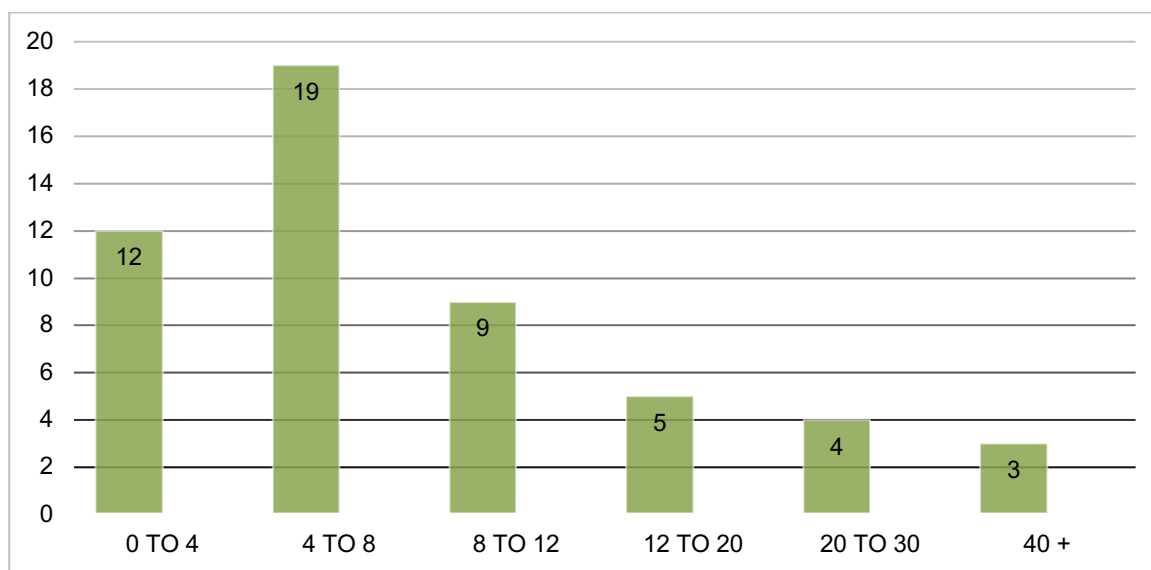

Figure 2. Participant time spent in NSLS professional development.

Findings from the survey show 37% (n=19) of the participants identify having 4-8 hours of training; an additional 23% (n=12) stated they had 0-4 hours of training. Nine participants (17%) reported 8-12 hours of training, and five (10%) said they attended 12-20 hours. Seven participants (13%) self-reported having over 20 hours of training on the NSLS, as shown in Figure 2.

Not all professional development was standardized, and even those who attended the same sessions did not report the same experiences. Topics explored during professional development sessions varied widely, from a simple introduction to the Standards to the language and format used within the document to how to engage with the materials in practice. Some training sessions explored additional resources created for use in implementation or facilitated the sharing of ideas for lesson development. Figure 3 provides an overview of topics participants perceived to have been represented in the attended training sessions.
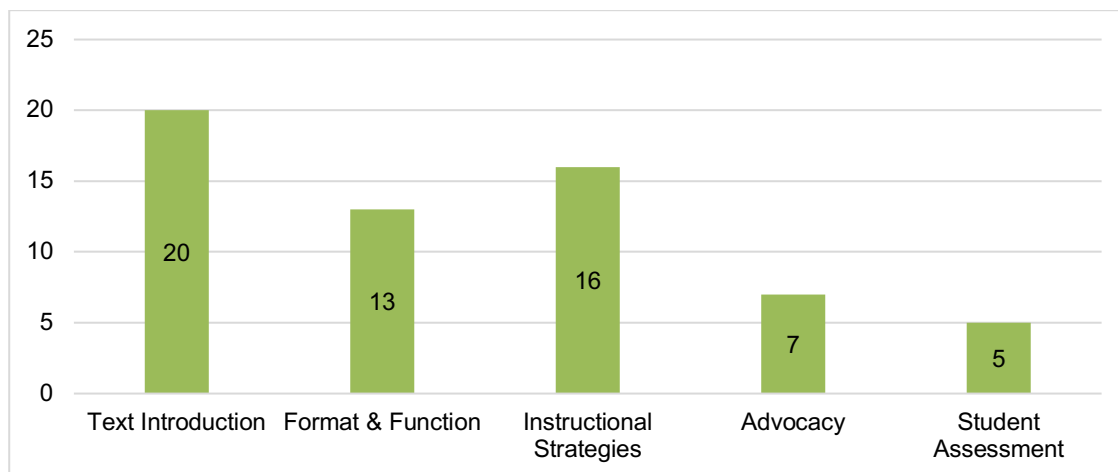
Figure 3. Participant reports of topics addressed during NSLS professional development sessions.

As Figure 3 shows, 20 participants cited an introduction to the text and 13 cited format and function as topics of the professional development session they attended. In contrast, 16 participants mentioned instructional strategies, and five noted student assessment as a topic of discussion.

Standards in Use

Data analysis identified common progress in implementation among participants. Overall perceptions were positive, but even after multiple hours of training and perhaps as much as a full year of use, participants largely self-assessed at the awareness stage and still lacked confidence in their use of the standards.

Awareness Phase

Participants reported they began to implement the standards in practice. However, many self-identified at the awareness level when asked to assess their stage of the Implementation Framework. The participants stated the overview and introduction to the NSLS was beneficial but did little to move them beyond the awareness stage in the implementation process, "*The conference was great, but putting it into practice was difficult. Very confusing.*" Participants identified multiple areas they wanted to see developed in future training to include practical applications of instructional strategies. More than one participant echoed, "*I just need more training*" when asked what would propel them to the next stage of implementation.

Transition Phase

While participants found professional development beneficial for implementing the standards in practice, most perceived the training fell short in assisting their progress to the transition phase and use. Participants noted a lack of authentic practice during and after the professional development sessions as well as a lack of shared engagement of stakeholders to make implementation the most meaningful. Participants shared that implementation could be strengthened if future training included opportunities to share and develop practical examples of the standards used in library lessons. Participants stated they were looking for examples of curriculum aligned to the shared foundations of the Standards, as well as the NSLS aligned to other sets of standards in various content areas so that their work could be integrated in an interdisciplinary manner. One participant summarized after the training, "*I lack a solid understanding of the language of some of the new standards and how that translates into instructional approaches.*" Alignment with common information literacy or

inquiry models taught in the school library was also frequently mentioned as a desired topic to be developed to connect to the NSLS in practice.

Nearly all participants stated that their school district did not have a plan in place to implement the NSLS. Participants further perceived the NSLS as supplementary and less relevant to the work the school librarians were currently tasked to complete. Participants noted this disconnect with school division priorities and stakeholder goals as a factor impeding their progress toward implementation, *"I am NOT evaluated or observed with the standards--principals have no idea/clue they exist… no one has convinced me they are needed."*

Implementation Phase

Most practitioners did not have a plan for implementation established. While the implementation was emerging, and only two participants self-assessed at the implementation stage in the implementation framework, all participants were able to isolate a target area and described planned integration of the Standards into their practice. Further, each interviewed participant was able to identify a success story of NSLS use within their practice. This use was likely to be embedded within previous work that was ongoing but now reframed through the lens of the NSLS, *"Some of the lessons that I teach with databases and finding sources, I have really refocused on Curate competencies for students"* (Participant 5). The interviewed participants found it easier to identify the shared foundations embedded within the work they were already doing rather than begin to reframe their practice around the Standards frameworks. However, as was evident in this description of a large project by Participant 2, articulating where the competencies are demonstrated in practice is easier:

> *One extensive project involved having students in Geometry writing proofs to create social change. We were conducting research on variables and articulating logic out of arguments, presenting arguments… community engagement. There's a lot of them* [the NSLS learner competencies] *that can be found in there.*

Implementation examples focused primarily on student learning, though some participants have begun to turn their attention to school librarian or library development as well, *"I put it in my professional growth plan this year to evaluate my program, that I'm assessing my program, using some of the standards and that's where I've used that checklist a little bit"* (Participant 3). This broader focus may create greater awareness for those outside the school library.

Challenges and Barriers

Participants had a greater understanding of the NSLS materials after the training. However, engaging with the materials and implementing them into work with students once back in their schools was more challenging. Even those who made dedicated implementation efforts perceived there to be barriers or challenges. Some felt the new format of the standards document was a barrier. The perception that more and more in-depth training was needed seemed to impede some participant implementation of the standards in their practice. More often, participants indicated time, and a disconnect with stakeholders were the most significant challenges to implementation. The perceived lack of support and understanding from others in their schools prevented many participants from progressing beyond awareness to the transition stage of implementation.

With an already overloaded schedule and job description, participants felt the implementation of new standards that others in the school building did not recognize or support was low in their priorities. Those that were more likely to implement the NSLS with higher fidelity had greater district level or administrative support. A noted barrier preventing progression was a perceived lack of alignment of the NSLS with school or district goals.

Though implementation materials have been developed to include advocacy and awareness materials for stakeholders, participants report little use or training in these materials. Sixty-one percent (n=32) of the respondents reported not owning a copy of the full *Standards* text. All other support materials were freely available through the AASL Standards portal, but 38% (n =20) reported not using or accessing the advocacy one-pager brochures, and 21% (n=11) reported not using or accessing other support resources, as shown in Figure 4.
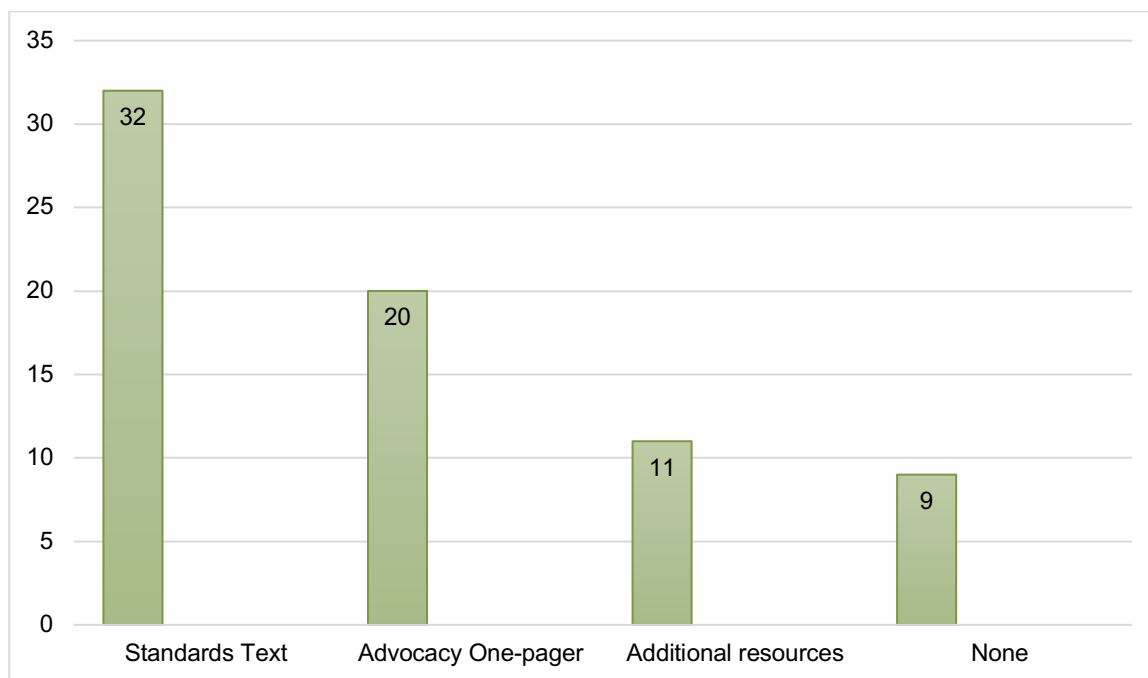

Figure 4. Participant reported use of standards resources.

Another frequently cited barrier to standards implementation was insufficient time. Participants noted a lack of time to develop lessons and revise library lesson content to align with the learner framework. They also frequently cited a lack of support of others within the school and district to support efforts to integrate this work. Ineffective assistance included administrative personnel as well as teaching peers. Participant 3 articulated this lack of support, "*I think the standards were finally mentioned in a PD last April. So, eighteen months after the roll-out, they were first mentioned in my library district PD, and that's really frustrating for me.*"

Lack of knowledge about the roles and responsibilities of the school librarian intensifies the challenge of implementation of the NSLS. Respondents noted they lack "*buy-in from their leadership team*" or note there is "*no support or advocacy from the library supervisor*" to implement the Standards. Additionally, nearly all participants stated that their school district did not have a plan in place to implement the use of the National School Library Standards. Participant 4 specifically noted the lack of administrative context in evaluation as a barrier to full implementation of the standards in her practice:

> *I had an administrator who, as my evaluator, had absolutely no idea that we had library standards at all. I gave him a copy of the framework, and he was absolutely flabbergasted that the library has any sort of standards whatsoever that we were supposed to be looking at in any way, shape, or form.*

There were also several site-specific barriers to implementation noted by the interviewed participants. Participant five stated the lack of accountability at her site as a barrier to

implementation, "*A barrier for somebody like me is that I don't have to write down what I'm doing. I think that some people aren't paying attention to the standards because they're not being made to*" (Participant 5).

Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications

The study findings demonstrate that implementation of the National School Library Standards is in initial stages. Practitioners in Virginia were mostly in the awareness phase of implementation and are just beginning to understand the new set of learning standards. Training on the Standards helped move the participants from beginning awareness of the new Standards to increased comfort and confidence in using them. Over time, those who have intentionally integrated the learner framework into their learner experiences find they have met with success. The established framework states that the transition phrase includes engaging and collaborating with others (CA Department of Education, 2019). Since many participants cited awareness and "buy-in" from others as one of the most prominent challenges to their use of the NSLS, progress toward implementation is impeded without additional support or interdisciplinary training.

In some cases, implementation training did not provide enough information on how to articulate the value of the standards to others in education or provide a universal language that could be used when discussing their work. Practitioners noted significant challenges to building relationships with others to ensure a clear and consistent message between school librarians and other educators in the building and administrators. The need to reflect the goals and values of a school library program remained a challenge as resources and training did not immediately align with other efforts within the school or district that were perceived to be a priority for the school librarians. Similar barriers to implementing the new standards exist across settings despite aggressive implementation actions and materials available before the full release of the Standards. This includes materials developed with the specific purpose to engage with stakeholder groups and to articulate the content and context of the NSLS.

Building on previous Standards iterations (AASL, 1960; AASL, 2009; AASL & AECT 1988; AASL & AECT, 1998), the NSLS call on the professional school librarian to engage as an instructional partner who equally takes on the role of leader and by extension school library advocate The Implementation Task Force developed a series of explainer videos and advocacy one-pagers that are hosted on the AASL Standards portal (AASL, 2017c). Though the cost of the NSLS was frequently cited as a barrier by participants, resources for use with stakeholders in implementation were freely available, and yet participants were not accessing them. Building a common perception of importance and is an area for development in resource and training development if most school librarians are going to progress beyond the initial stage of awareness to transition, and the NSLS is going to be fully embraced within the school environment.

Recommendations and Future Directions

The adoption of the National School Library Standards presents an opportunity for reflection and professional growth for school librarians, as well as a vehicle for advocacy with others in the educational community. Findings included in this case study capture early exploration of the implementation efforts of a group of practitioners in the state of Virginia. Some participants had just recently completed training on standards implementation; therefore, first use and understanding were just developing. The participants noted topics they would like to see in additional training sessions or resources, including curriculum alignment with other sets of standards/content areas; the opportunity to share what standards use looks like in practice; alignment of standards with common inquiry models; and isolating training to investigate smaller parts of the materials (e.g., one Shared Foundation or domain per training session). Training and the broader implementation

objectives (AASL, 2017a) were developed before any authentic practice; therefore, these suggestions provide a realistic roadmap for the profession moving forward.

Assessment of learners using the new standards and authentic collaboration and advocacy among stakeholders are additional areas for development. Practitioners note there are significant challenges to building relationships with others to ensure a clear and consistent message between school librarians and other educators and administrators that reflect the goals and values of a school library program. Building relationships is an area for development in resources and training development if the NSLS is going to be fully embraced within the school environment. Assessment dialogue and practical application of the standards in school library settings, as well as collaboration with others in the educational setting will also provide thoughtful interdisciplinary conversations. Identifying areas those in practice want to explore in-depth and the resources that will assist with this work will offer a richer vision for the impact standards materials may have on practice.

Implementation of the standards provides an opportunity for new research. This exploratory case study collected data in VA, a state with a good deal of support for school librarians. VA Department of Education Standards of Quality (2019) specify:

> Each local school board shall employ, at a minimum Librarians in each elementary schools, one part-time to 299 students, one full-time at 300 students; Librarians in middle schools, one-half time to 299 students, one full-time at 300 students, two full-time at 1,000 students; and Librarians in high schools, one half-time to 299 students, one full-time at 300 students, two full-time at 1,000 students.

Additionally, many school districts across the Commonwealth continue to employ a dedicated school library supervisor. State affiliates attended standards training upon their release, and five of the fourteen members of the AASL Standards Editorial Board and Implementation Taskforce members were from the state of Virginia (AASL, 2017b), making this the most well-represented state in these leadership groups. The next step for this research is to conduct similar explorations in other states that have adopted the NSLS as their state school library standards (e.g., Maryland and Oklahoma), as well as states that do not have strong support for school libraries, such as Arizona and Montana. Such an investigation would explore whether diverse practitioners perceive similar implementation experiences and examine the perception of school librarians with differing levels of support, as well as identify universal needs and barriers to implementation at the national level.

Further exploration of how school librarians are using and implementing the standards over time is also essential. Identifying ongoing resource and training needs and ensuring that these needs are met will be critical to the usefulness of the Standards. This introductory work opens a dialogue about areas where implementation has begun – what is going well and what can be developed further to facilitate best practice in the field. Findings included in this case study help promote a shared rejuvenation for those embracing the opportunity to progress forward in the implementation process.

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