

17 July 2020

TO: RAILS Board of Directors

FROM: Deirdre Brennan

SUBJECT: Executive Director Report – June, 2020

Welcome new board members!

We are very pleased that you have joined our RAILS board and we all look forward to working with you this year. You have already received a packet for the orientation meeting at 9 am on July 24. Board members have found the orientation very useful in past years and we hope you will also.

Our monthly RAILS reports are organized by the goals of our strategic plan (which you will hear more about at orientation).

Promote, support, and expand resource sharing to optimize use of tax dollars and other funding and help libraries share resources to the fullest extent possible

Delivery resumed on June 29. More than 70% of our libraries have resumed delivery, but volume is still very low, only around 25%. This reflects the limited amount of in-library services that are occurring because of COVID-19 restrictions related to building capacity and general public anxiety about indoor spaces and virus infections. I hope you will all visit, if you haven't already, our Pulse page to view the fantastic [reporting tool](#) that Monica, Mark and Grant developed for libraries to use as they make decisions about reopening buildings and resuming services.

Also, the LLSAPs have not all resumed full service. Some are only supporting local holds, as opposed to interlibrary loan and reciprocal borrowing. We understand that 18 CCS libraries will resume interlibrary loan services later this month, and probably SWAN will do so in mid-August.

Census

We are continuing our work on the 2020 census. As I think you all know, we were awarded a \$775,000 grant from the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) to work with libraries and hard to count communities to ensure a complete count for 2020. Many programs and organizations are dependent on federal funding that is distributed to the states based on population as determined through the census and RAILS is one of them. The State Library receives funding from the Institute for Museum and Library Services every year that it, in turn, distributes to the library systems to support delivery, continuing education and other services.

We also received additional funding to continue working on the census through October 31, the new final date for the census count.

Work with libraries of all types to tell the library story

Advocacy will again be a big focus in FY21. I have included a link to our *My Library Is..*[campaign](#) to tell the library story.

School libraries

I am very concerned about the status of school libraries. This is not a new concern, but the situation does seem to be deteriorating even further. I have included an article in your packet related to the “relevance” of school libraries. Our advocacy committee discussed the plight of school libraries at length during their meeting on July 15.

Help libraries be the best they can be

Training

RAILS is continuing to provide training, of course, in the form of webinars. We are also continuing virtual networking sessions and visits with member libraries. We have seen increasing demand for and use of our online training during the pandemic.

Several staff members attended the ALA virtual conference, and some of us will also be attending the virtual meeting of the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) July 20-22. ICOLC is a very interesting partner because it includes consortia of all types – academic, public, multitype – from around the world. We learn a lot from them.

REALM – Reopening Archives, Libraries and Museums

I continue to attend meetings of the REALM (Reopening Archives, Libraries and Museums) steering committee and operations group. Next week, REALM will announce the results of the second set of test on library materials. I recommend that you visit the [website](#) to see the latest news and sign up for email updates.

Member update planned for July 23

We will hold our next Member Update on July 23 from 11 to 1. Topics include:

- Sharon Streams from OCLC will give the latest updates/results from the [REALM Project](#) studying how long the COVID-19 virus survives on library materials.
- Best practices in developing personnel policies and procedures for staff and patrons who test positive for COVID-19
- The latest results from RAILS’ reopening survey and what programs/services different libraries are currently offering
- An update on RAILS delivery
- RAILS EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusion) initiatives
- The debut of “the new L2” and how library staff can prepare

There will also be plenty of time for questions on all of these topics.

I continue to record “RAILS Minute” with Dan Bostrom every week. These are literally one-minute conversations about what’s new at RAILS. They are posted on social media and seem very popular as a quick way to stay up-to-date with RAILS.

Prepare libraries for the future

The State Library has approved our FY 21 budget and operations plan. The operations plan is included in the orientation packet that you all received. It is not clear when we will receive funding for this fiscal year; and, we have not yet received all of our funding for last fiscal year. The cash flow delays have been ongoing for most of the years that RAILS has been in existence.

RAILS, social justice and EDI

Included in your packet is an updated statement regarding RAILS responsibilities to build a better society. You will see that this statement is included as part of our Strategic Plan, Goal 4. I look forward to continuing our discussion about systemic racism, bias and how RAILS can work to eliminate them in libraries and society at large. We will also update you on our EDI initiative.

Aim to be the best library system in the country

The orientation session for new board members is scheduled for the morning of July 24. The regular July board meeting is the afternoon of July 24.

At future meetings, we will resume our board development and service of the month reports. We had paused them because of the pandemic.

This Month at RAILS – July 2020

Promoting/Supporting/Expanding Resource Sharing

Leading/Working with Libraries to Expand Resource Sharing

Six RAILS Libraries Receive LLSAP Membership Grants

To help make resource sharing more affordable, RAILS offers [Catalog Membership Grants](#) to fund startup costs for RAILS member libraries wishing to join one of our six [online shared catalogs](#) (also known as LLSAPs): CCS, Pinnacle, PrairieCat, RRLC, RSA-NFP, and SWAN.

Congratulations to our most recent grant awardees:

- Glenside Public Library District, SWAN, \$32,985.95
- Grayslake Area Public Library District, CCS, \$37,865
- Lostant Community Library, PrairieCat, \$8,846
- Palatine Public Library District, CCS, \$45,965
- Roselle Public Library District, SWAN, \$32,755
- Warrenville Public Library District, SWAN, \$23,668

RAILS Works with ICOLC on OCLC Pricing Discrepancies

The cost of OCLC membership is an impediment to expanding resource sharing for many Illinois libraries, and libraries of similar size have reported significant differences in OCLC fees. RAILS has been working with [ICOLC](#) (International Coalition of Library Consortia) to analyze these pricing discrepancies. ICOLC is an informal group currently comprising approximately 200 library consortia from around the world. Member consortia serve all types and sizes of libraries.

RAILS discovered significant discrepancies in OCLC pricing data for Illinois public libraries and coordinated these results with ICOLC members' analysis of academic library data across the country. ICOLC will include these combined results as part of a larger report they are sending to OCLC to address various concerns.

Providing Access to Digital Content/E-Resources/Other Innovative Projects

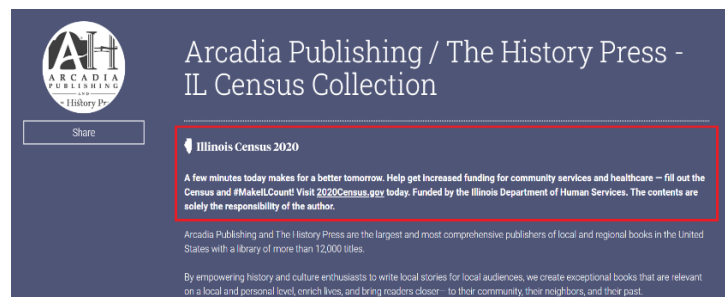
RAILS Report on Impact of COVID-19 on Library E-Content Usage

RAILS collected/analyzed information from various e-content consortia in our area to determine the impact of COVID-19 related library closures on the use of digital/e-content collections. We found that e-book usage increased dramatically during Illinois' stay-at-home order, while audiobook usage remained largely flat. We compiled an [OpenGov story](#) with our findings, including details about the information collected, charts, and questions for future study.

RAILS Adds Titles to BiblioBoard through Census Grant

RAILS added over 500 titles to our statewide [BiblioBoard Library collection](#) as part of our census grant from the Illinois Department of Human Services. The Illinois Census 2020 collection focuses on health, wellness, local history, and education. Highlights include 142 e-books for children from Capstone Publishing and 158 Arcadia Press local history titles.

We worked with BiblioBoard to include additional census promotion and branding directly in the collection. Each item is marked with an “Illinois Census 2020” badge (see red highlighting below). The description of the collection includes language about and links to the census. And the details page of each item has a “Be Counted” button that links directly to the census website.



We also added 120 Plympton e-books to the BiblioBoard Library collection this month, including a series of short fiction and nonfiction stories, as well as additional Recovering the Classics titles and covers.

eRead Illinois Renewals Update

RAILS concluded the [eRead Illinois](#) renewal process on July 1. A total of 420 libraries successfully renewed their eRead Illinois subscriptions for FY 2021. We also added 16 new eRead Illinois member libraries between April and July of this year. Two libraries never completed the renewal process, and four cancelled their membership.

Explore More Illinois Update

Most [Explore More Illinois](#) attractions remain closed due to COVID-19 or are opening with limited capacity. We will continue to monitor the situation and “restart” Explore More when participation is more robust.

We have started contacting Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS) library directors to get permission to add their libraries to Explore More Illinois. All SHARE libraries are authenticated. (SHARE is IHLS' automation consortium.) Over 263 Illinois libraries have joined Explore More Illinois thus far.



Improving Physical Delivery Services

RAILS Resumes Full Delivery to Requesting Libraries

Much to our member libraries' delight, RAILS resumed full delivery to all libraries that requested it beginning June 29. Approximately 70% of our libraries opted in to receive delivery as of that date, including several academic libraries, and our delivery volume is slowly and steadily increasing.

On June 18 and 25, RAILS returned the 43,000+ items that were stored in our warehouses during the stay-at-home order. We also picked up items at these locations to deliver to other libraries. The following tables show the number of containers picked up and delivered on each of these days.

Number of Delivery Containers Received by RAILS Service Center/Area

	Burr Ridge*	Coal Valley	East Peoria	Geneva	Rockford	Shorewood	Wheeling*	Total
June 18	861	200	419	489	219	431	456	3,075
June 25	676	118	303	183	195	355	295	2,125
Total	1,537	318	722	672	414	786	751	5,200

Number of Delivery Containers Delivered by RAILS Service Center/Area

	Burr Ridge*	Coal Valley	East Peoria	Geneva	Rockford	Shorewood	Wheeling*	Total
June 18	313	122	205	152	214	269	248	1,523
June 25	1,167	180	359	265	287	337	589	3,184
Total	1,480	302	564	417	501	606	837	4,707

*RAILS contracts with CTL Global to provide delivery service to Burr Ridge and Wheeling area libraries.

Providing Greater Purchasing Power

RAILS Discounts Result in Great Savings for Member Libraries

RAILS partners with a wide variety of vendors to offer special, deeply discounted rates for our member libraries. These discounts combined have resulted in close to \$1 million in savings for RAILS members over the past year. Our EBSCO deals saved more than 100 libraries over \$400,000. RBdigital savings from list price were over \$400,000. Other impactful deals included Swank Movie Licensing, PressReader, READsquared, and OpenGov, which combined for another \$100,000 in savings for participating libraries in FY 2020. Information about all [RAILS deals and discounts](#) is available on our website.

Career Online High School Update

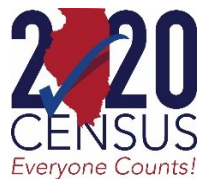
Eighteen RAILS libraries currently participate in the Career Online High School (COHS), which gives adults the opportunity to earn their high school diploma. RAILS subsidizes the cost of the platform for all libraries in the state. The platform includes extensive training for participating staff, implementation, and student recruitment support. The vendor, Gale, held two webinar demos in July with approximately 10 participants. We recently streamlined procedures, updated the RAILS/COHS brochure, and negotiated a smaller bundle for libraries with smaller populations.

RAILS Partners with HR Source on Discount Membership Program

Renewals are underway for libraries participating in our [Discount Membership Program](#) with HR Source. As of July 1, 45 libraries renewed their membership, which is approximately 80% of participating libraries. We anticipate more libraries to renew in the month ahead as libraries begin to resume their regular services.

Building Collaborative Relationships & Fostering Networking

RAILS Online Roundtable on Census 2020



On July 7, RAILS hosted an online roundtable featuring a variety of Census 2020 topics, including presentations from Amy de la Fuente (RAILS), Tina Beaird (Plainfield Public Library), and Denise Raleigh (Gail Borden Public Library District). A total of 89 people registered and 59 attended live. A [recorded version of this event](#) is available on the RAILS YouTube page.

RAILS & AISLE Roundtable on Summer Reading Collaborations a Success!

Last month, we announced that RAILS and AISLE would co-host a roundtable in June on public and school library collaborations on summer reading and how libraries are working together to develop new plans in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The roundtable was a huge success: 71 people registered and 57 attended live. A recording is available on [the RAILS YouTube page](#).

RAILS Collaborates with IHLS on IACRL Fall Semester Town Hall

On Wednesday, July 29, from 10 a.m. – noon, the Illinois Association of College and Research Libraries (IACRL) will host a [town hall event](#) in collaboration with RAILS and the Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS). This event will give academic libraries an opportunity to share what they are doing related to opening their physical spaces and/or navigating instruction in the COVID-19 environment.

Telling the Library Story

Helping Members Tell Their Story



RAILS Awards Three My Library Is... Grants

RAILS offers [My Library Is... Grants](#) to give libraries an opportunity to plan projects that help tell the library story and that increase visibility and support for libraries in general. RAILS recently awarded grants to these [three projects](#):

- **Evanston Public Library** (\$5,000), Racial Equity Outreach Video Series – Through this series, the library aims to increase its visibility in historically marginalized communities, raise awareness of available resources, and engage in deeper conversations with underrepresented voices in the community.
- **Gerber/Hart Library & Archives** (\$5,000), Podcast Project – The library offers collections and programming that reflect the diversity and rich history of the LGBTQ community. Gerber/Hart will create an eight-episode podcast to make its collection more accessible to community members and to reach a larger audience.
- **Elmwood Park Public Library** (\$2,100), You Are Beautiful Campaign – The library plans to develop a promotional video that can be shared with their village, schools, real estate agents, and Chamber of Commerce to highlight Elmwood Park's belief in these pillars of a community.

My Library Is... Blog Helps Libraries Tell Their Stories

The [My Library Is... blog](#) is one of the most popular features of the campaign website. One of our goals for FY 2021 is to increase the number of blog posts by RAILS staff and guest posters from our member libraries. Recent posts include:

- [A guest post](#) from Jeanne Jesernik, Adult Services Librarian at La Grange Public Library, about a collaboration (during social distancing) between the Brookfield Public Library and La Grange Public Library writers groups on the [COVID Chronicles: 19-Word Stories](#) anthology. The work includes 23 writers reflecting on their pandemic experiences using only 19 words.

- [A post](#) on how to answer the “why do we need libraries?” question using RAILS’ new talking points infographics.
- [A guest post](#) from Russ Iwami, Reference Librarian at the National University of the Health Sciences Learning Resource Center, detailing the library’s unique approach to staying open throughout the pandemic.
- A [guest post](#) from Eva Baggili, Adult Reference Librarian at Chicago Ridge Public Library, about the library’s quick adaptation to a virtual library system during the pandemic and the many ways they met their community’s overwhelming needs.

Featured Library Story of the Month on My Library Is... Website

The Library Stories section of the [Sharing Showcase](#) is another popular feature of the My Library Is... website. Ellen Schmid, Law Librarian at the Kane County Law Library & Self Help Legal Center, recently [added a story](#) (with photos) demonstrating how her library is changing and creating services to meet the needs of patrons during COVID-19.

Within one week of being closed due to the pandemic, the library transitioned their walk-in Divorce and Family Law Help service to a call-in service. The pandemic also gave the library the opportunity to envision and institute a successful new service. Their 16th Judicial Circuit was one of the first in Illinois to begin using Zoom for court appearances. The library equipped their public access computers to allow people to quickly and seamlessly attend their Zoom court hearings.

All library staff and board members from all RAILS libraries are invited to [add stories](#) to the Sharing Showcase showing how their library is making a difference in their patrons’ lives on a daily basis.

Advocating for Libraries

School Library Advocacy Collaborations with AISLE Board

On June 29, RAILS and IHLS staff met with [AISLE \(Association of Illinois School Library Educators\)](#) Board representatives to discuss ways we could partner to help school libraries. (These meetings are held on a regular basis.) Topics discussed included:

- A proposed change to RAILS’ [My Library Is... grants](#) to focus on school library advocacy projects, and how AISLE can get involved
- Recap of the successful [AISLE/RAILS roundtable](#) on public/school summer reading collaborations (see above)
- The [L2 \(Library Learning\)](#) Continuing Education Directory and how school libraries can use L2
- The Illinois State Board of Education’s (ISBE) new guidelines for Illinois schools reopening in the fall, why school libraries were not consulted in developing the plan,

and how we can communicate to ISBE that school libraries need to be involved in similar efforts in the future

- How we might promote the My Library Is... [talking points](#) and other campaign resources for school libraries at the AISLE virtual conference
- RAILS and AISLE partnering on a continuing education event to help school librarians see the importance of advocacy in their day-to-day working lives
- A potential co-sponsorship by RAILS and AISLE for the Future-Ready Library CE program

Helping Libraries Be the Best They Can Be

Ensuring Ongoing Library Staff Development

RAILS Partnerships Bring CE to Members

RAILS partnered with two organizations to offer two continuing education (CE) webinars to our members in July. On July 14, RAILS and [AISLE](#) jointly offered “It’s Our Time to Shine! The Difference We Can Make As Future Ready Librarians.” This webinar was presented by author and nationally recognized school librarian Shannon McClintock Miller, and focused on the future ready school library.

On July 29, RAILS and ARRT (Adult Reading Roundtable) are jointly offering the webinar “Bookfluencers: Using Social Media to Recommend Books.” [This webinar](#) will feature a panel of librarians discussing their use of social media to connect readers to books.

Over 200 RAILS members have registered to attend these July webinars at the time of this writing.

Preparing Libraries for the Future

Helping Libraries Respond to Change

RAILS Library Reopening Survey

RAILS created a [reopening survey](#) to help members keep up to date on other libraries' reopening plans, hours open to the public, and the different programs/services libraries are currently offering. The survey and [results are available](#) on the [COVID-19 Pulse Page](#) on the RAILS website. There is also a [service area map](#) to view information on other libraries in the same geographical area or by catalog status (RAILS LLSAP members or standalone libraries). RAILS invites members to update their information as their service offerings change. Only the most up-to-date information will display in the results.

As of this writing, 244 members have completed the survey, some with updates. Interesting discoveries thus far include:

- 98% of those surveyed are accepting returns of materials.
- 88% are currently offering curbside pickup of materials.
- The majority of those surveyed are offering virtual services; 77% are offering virtual programming and 68% are offering virtual reference.
- 50% are offering access to public computers/devices.
- 38% are allowing limited access to the building by appointment or walk in.
- 27% are offering full access to the building within the capacity limit.

CE to Help Libraries Respond to COVID-19

RAILS was pleased to welcome back David Vinjamuri to offer two webinars in July focused on how libraries respond to COVID-19. David is a New York University professor and is known here in Illinois for helping to launch the [Soon to Be Famous Illinois Author Project](#).

On July 8, David and Joe Huberty of Engberg Anderson Architects presented “Reopening under COVID-19: A Space Planning Approach.” This webinar shared insights into strategic space planning with respect to social distancing, as well as a discussion of HVAC and filtration systems.

On July 23, David and fellow NYU Professor Thom Kennon presented “Social Media Listening and Adapting Libraries during the Pandemic.” This webinar shared insights gathered from social media listening on patrons’ reactions to isolation and self-quarantine during the pandemic and a discussion of how various libraries around the country are adapting based on these insights.

Aiming to Be the Best Library System

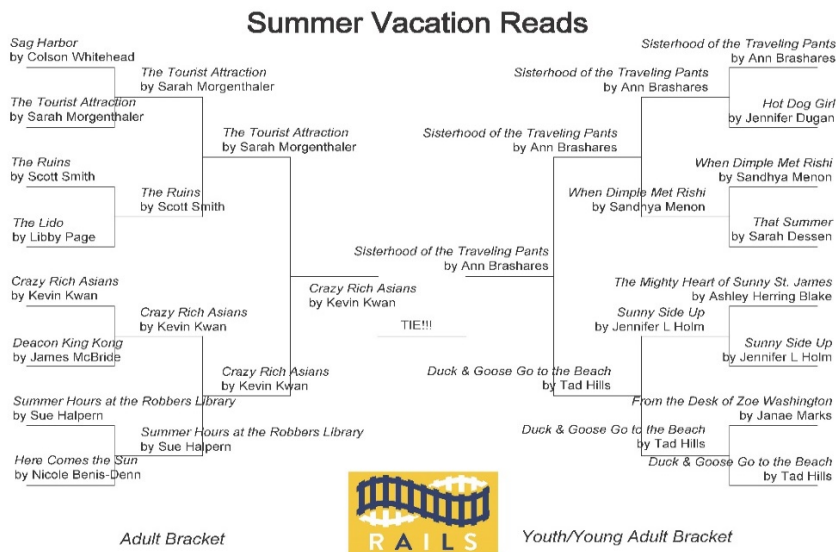
Member Communication/Engagement

Facebook Tournament of Polls: Summer Vacation Reads

RAILS held our first-ever tournament of polls via Facebook in June. The topic was summer vacation reads. *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* by Ann Brashares and *Crazy Rich Asians* by Kevin Kwan tied for first place in the tournament. We created a bracket and ran two polls each day. In a single week, the tournament featured:

- 16 titles
- 15 polls
- 97 total votes

Below is a bracket with the titles and winners of the individual polls.



Modeling Best Practices & Innovation

RAILS EDI Staff Initiative Moves Forward

RAILS is working on an ongoing, internal EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusion) initiative to teach staff EDI principles and to help eliminate unconscious bias. We are working with Elisabeth “Biz” Lindsay-Ryan, a diversity and inclusion professor, trainer and consultant based in Evanston.

We finalized our contract with Biz in July. Contract activities include:

- Design of a Workplace Climate Model RAILS will use to foster a culture of dignity, respect, diversity, and inclusion
- Development and launch of a Workplace Climate Team
- Training for all RAILS staff
- Design of Workplace Climate toolkits and other materials

We will also explore with Biz how to most effectively engage our member libraries around this work.

RAILS Staff News

Monica Harris, RAILS Associate Executive Director, began her three-year term as an American Library Association At Large Councilor on July 1.

As COVID-19 Budget Cuts Loom, Relevance of School Librarians Put to the Test

By Cayla Bamberger, Claire Bryan, Jessica Campbell, and Anya Schultz

July 1, 2020 | Updated: July 3, 2020

From California to Pennsylvania, school librarians are on edge as district and school leaders across the country seek ways to cut back expenses amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

 [Back to Story](#)

"Each day, we kind of hold our breath," said Debra Kachel, a researcher and advocate for the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association—a librarians' group in a state where at least 20 districts have already proposed library cuts. "A lot of these districts are informing librarians that they will be furloughed."

The cutbacks come even as school librarians have stepped up in unprecedented ways during the COVID-19 school closures—using social media to provide students with emotional support; giving book recommendations; organizing poetry readings; brokering book access for students; guiding teachers through a complicated web of free online resources; providing tech-support; and helping students navigate a deluge of online news and misinformation.

"I have heard this rhetoric that, 'Well, you're not in a brick and mortar building, so you're not really needed,'" said K.C. Boyd, a middle school librarian in Washington, D.C, who has recorded read-alouds for her students and the younger siblings, cousins, and neighbors they supervise. "No! We're needed more than ever before."

Cherity Pennington is a prime example of how school librarians have gotten creative during the pandemic.

By mid-April, the library services coordinator for Oklahoma's 3,600-student Shawnee Public School district had already helped secure \$1,000 in donated books, as well as many more from the homes and classroom libraries of colleagues and community members. Her initiative to send those books to students alongside free meals from the district on school buses proved very popular—especially with one student who was stuck at home with no television, computer, or internet access.

"I was thrilled to be able to connect this young student to such a special book," Pennington wrote in an email.

Similar examples can be found all over the country. In New Mexico, school librarians have set up **YouTube channels** to read bedtime stories and have partnered with local PBS stations to bring children free lessons in reading and literacy. In New York City, librarians like Ciro Scardina—who works at the 4,000-student Edward R. Murrow High School in Brooklyn and took to recording Instagram videos for his students from his kitchen table at home—shared so many ideas that they temporarily crashed a citywide email listserv. And in Nebraska, school librarians have hosted online reading challenges and a virtual dress-as-your-favorite-character competition, won by a student who dressed as Puck, the whimsical fairy from "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

"This was really a time for people to step up and say, 'Here's what I'm capable of, here's what this profession is capable of, and here's what we can do,'" said Cynthia Stogdill, the president of the Nebraska School Librarians Association.

Many librarians and their advocates hope federal stimulus dollars will help keep such efforts going into next school year. Most recently, the American Association of School Librarians wrote to U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos asking for both public and school libraries to be a priority for funding.

'Difficult to Be Optimistic'

Despite librarians' new roles and creative efforts during the pandemic, their positions are again at risk, raising fresh equity concerns.

In the decade since the last recession, one in five full-time school librarian jobs were lost, according to national data analyzed by Keith Lance, a library researcher and consultant from the RSL Research Group. Districts serving high numbers of poor and minority students were particularly hard hit. Other educational positions rebounded when the economy recovered, but the ranks of school librarians did not.

Will things be any different under the current pandemic?

"It's difficult to be optimistic about how school libraries and librarians will fare in COVID-related budget cuts," Lance wrote in an email.

Many librarians and their advocates have turned to Washington for help. So far, though, federal funds are short. The \$500 billion CARES Act, enacted in March to provide financial relief in the wake of the pandemic, included \$13.5 billion for K-12 schools, but that money might not go to librarian needs. The Act included \$45 million for the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and \$30 million of it has already been allocated to state library agencies—which again, may or may not distribute that money to school librarians. School librarians scrambled to **apply** for the remaining \$15 million by June 12th.

In the meantime, cuts to school library budgets have already started to hit.

In California, for example, the **6,400-student** school district in Selma and the **39,000-student** school district in Sweetwater have proposed eliminating all librarians for next school year. And the proposed library cuts in Pennsylvania communities like Greensburg-Salem, outside Pittsburgh, are a huge concern in a state where one-third of the 500 school districts already have just one librarian, at most.

Superintendents like Greensburg-Salem's Gary Peiffer said the choice is difficult, but when he studied the projected revenue for his district, he knew he was in a bind.

"I just couldn't have the expenditures we had before with things being this uncertain," said Peiffer, whose district has 3,000 students. The budget cut full-time school librarian positions but retained one professional to rotate through the schools. Students will still have library access, but not the guidance of a full-time professional.

"The end of this pandemic isn't anywhere in sight," Peiffer said, and the district's finances could be "dire" in the next few years.

Widening 'Digital Divide Issues'

Such cuts will likely occur more frequently in rural and urban communities that serve poorer and more racially diverse student bodies, experts said, worsening pre-existing inequities. The nation's poorest and most diverse schools already employ the fewest librarians in the country, according to a 2016 **National Education Association report**. Districts that did not lose a librarian from 2005 to 2015 were 75 percent white, and the districts that lost the most librarians had predominantly minority student populations, as **Education Week previously reported**.

The stakes are high for the country's neediest students, especially during a pandemic, said Lance, the school librarian consultant.

"Librarians may be uniquely qualified to help their schools assess and address digital divide issues," he said—especially when those gaps are already being exacerbated by full-time at-home learning, which puts

many low-income students at an even greater disadvantage.

School librarians also teach their students to question, to find the answers, and to approach these answers with a healthy dose of skepticism. For students looking to advance to higher education and intellectually demanding professions, these skills help set them up for life.

For now, the response of many librarians has been to try to prove they're not expendable.

"I had many very frank conversations with librarians," said Mary Chappell, the chair of New Mexico School Librarians, "saying, 'Hey, guys, if you value your job right now, you have got to step it up and prove that you're valuable.'"

Bamberger, Bryan, and Schultz are recent graduates of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, and Campbell is a PhD student at Columbia Teachers College. All are affiliated with School Stories, a Columbia Journalism School publication.

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