

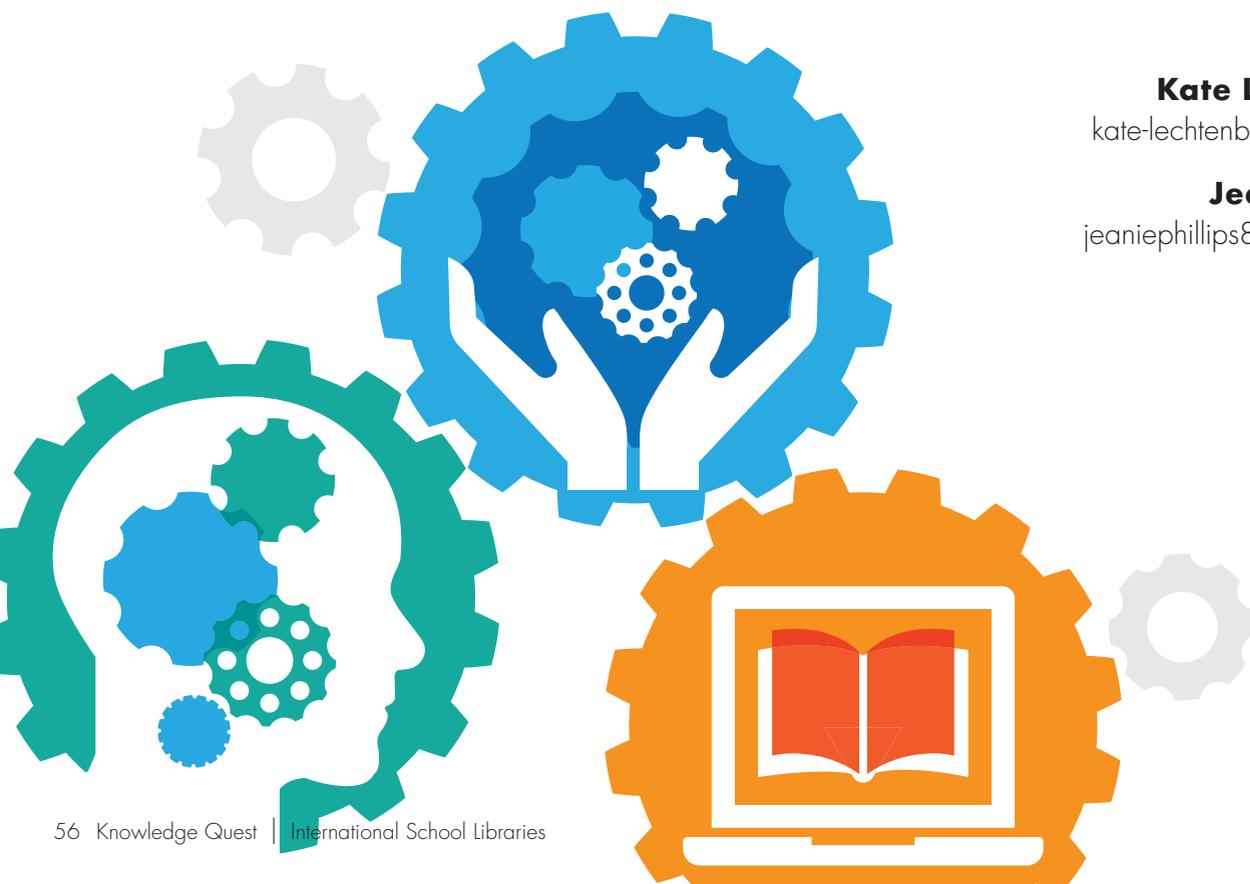
Speaking Up for Equity Takes Courage—But the Standards Have Your Back

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In today's politically charged climate, school librarians may feel vulnerable when we raise questions about equity, inclusion, and social justice. On the other hand, we cannot and should not avoid this fundamental question: Who does my school library serve?

School libraries can be equity hubs. Scholars recognize equity as an interdisciplinary, system-wide goal, and school librarians are well placed to be equity leaders because of our connections to all learners. Paul Gorski and Katy Swalwell make an explicit call for interdisciplinary equity work in all content areas at all grade levels for students of all backgrounds. They remind us that "teaching for equity literacy is a political act—but not more so than *not* teaching for equity literacy" (2015, 39).

The *National School Library Standards* require school librarians to make equity a value that permeates the entire school library community. Creating displays to celebrate diversity is not enough. We cannot allow ourselves to approach diversity as a "social good," in which isolated programs serve marginalized students without challenging the overall structures of oppression (Watt 2015, 9). Instead, the AASL Standards challenge us to embrace the systemic value of diversity as we work to remedy structural barriers to equity.

This focus on systemic equity is also in line with efforts to include school library communities, collections, and curricula in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This 2015 reauthorization and expansion of long-standing education policy and civil rights law renew our focus on equitable opportunities for all students, and libraries are part of this vital work. The AASL Standards are organized into six Shared Foundations; we will explore each through the lens of equity, providing a rationale for action and examples of school library practice.



Include

Key Commitment: Demonstrate an understanding of and commitment to inclusiveness and respect

for diversity in the learning community.

When the AASL Standards were introduced at the AASL National Conference in November 2017, there was a consensus that the Include Shared Foundation and Key Commitment were both "new" and "necessary." They ask us to teach students to seek and include balanced and diverse perspectives, exhibit empathy and tolerance, and demonstrate a commitment to equity as they build their own understand-

ings. Include situates our learners within a global learning community and asks us to prepare them for full participation in that community (AASL 2018). And the Include Key Commitment demands that we provide authentic learning opportunities, create an accessible facility, and maintain a diverse collection that meets the needs of a broad range of learners. Include does the lion's share of equity work, and we use it as we share examples that demonstrate how equity and inclusion are embedded in all the Shared Foundations and Key Commitments.



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Inquire

Key Commitment: Build new knowledge by inquiring, thinking critically, identifying problems, and developing strategies for solving problems.

Inquire is focused on cultivating curiosity and the capacity to pursue it. Unfortunately, some students have been left out of the inquiry process and relegated to rote skill development or fact-finding missions without opportunities to exercise their voice and choice. However, the *National School Library Standards* call for all students to have the opportunity to inquire meaningfully and authentically. Inclusive inquiry also asks us to think about how we question representation; do we teach learners to probe the stories they read, the resources they use, and the perspectives they seek for inclusiveness? Inquiry is a powerful lens that students can use to explore justice in our world.

Inquiry for All

Shelly Buchanan, former school librarian and now lecturer in the MLIS program at San Jose State University, researches student-driven inquiry. Buchanan argues that “all kids need to play the whole game of inquiry from the beginning because it is meaningful, real, relevant work with an authentic audience.” Her research shows that, regardless of readiness or achievement, students

experience deeper, more satisfying learning when they choose a topic of personal interest, design and execute the research, and create artifacts and new knowledge for presentation to their peers and larger school community (2016).

Anita Cellucci, librarian at Westborough (MA) High School, agrees. She uses guided inquiry design to create opportunities for every single learner—including English language learners and students with individualized education plans—to be curious, ask genuine questions, create keywords, and use meaningful resources to explore their interests. Equity doesn’t mean that all students have the same experience; Cellucci uses individualized instruction to scaffold learning at all levels of readiness, which means that all learners get to learn how to inquire (2018).

Inquiry about Inclusion

Lauren Perlstein, librarian at the Putney (VT) Central School, engages her learners in critical thinking about stereotypes and generalizations. When *We Forgot Brock!* by Carter Goodrich (Simon & Schuster 2015) was selected as one of Vermont’s Red Clover Award Books, she did some detailed planning to prepare her learners to analyze the gendered stereotypes in the book characters’ imaginary friends. Before she read the book aloud, she had her young students sketch their own imaginary friends. Then they talked

about gender stereotypes. By the time they saw the book they were prepared; when they spotted a stereotype their hands went up. Perlstein taught them how to critically analyze a text, and to question it for bias and stereotypes (2017).



Collaborate

Key Commitment: Work effectively with others to broaden perspectives and work toward common goals.

Often educators translate “collaboration” to mean “group work,” but the AASL Standards remind us that true collaborations include diverse perspectives. The Collaborate competencies require us to go beyond superficial group work in pursuit of real conversations and problem-solving opportunities that require stakeholders to examine and value diverse perspectives.

Supporting Discussions in the Library Community

Collaborations in the library can happen at the school, classroom, and small-group level. This year Diane Brown and Chelsea Sims, school librarians at South East Junior High in Iowa City, collected demographic information with their annual survey to allow them to discover how welcome students within gender, racial, and sexual orientation groups felt in the library. Although the survey showed that 86 percent of

students feel welcome in the library, Sims and Brown also learned that some demographic groups felt more welcome than others. "Of course, the negative feedback received was difficult to read," Sims notes, "but we had to take a critical stance on what we are doing so can we make it better" (Sims 2018).

Jen Dovre, K-12 school librarian at Ballard Community School District in Iowa, reminds us that equitable collaboration also requires inclusive curriculum and resources. She collaborated with a ninth-grade social studies teacher to help students broaden their perspectives about hate and genocide (2018). The resulting literature circle unit leveraged the study of genocide narratives in diverse cultural contexts and collaborative conversations between peers to help students "understand that learning is a social responsibility" (AASL 2018, School Librarians, III.D.2).

Collaborating for Equitable Access

Kelsey Barker, school librarian at Longfellow Middle School in Norman, Oklahoma, collaborates with students, families, and communities to ensure a culture of 24-7 access to the library, to nurture partnerships with the public library, and to promote reduced-cost WiFi connections for qualifying families. Barker further supports equitable access by providing digital literacy resources to complement the district's 1:1 initiative, and says, "This has been especially beneficial to students with disabilities or students whose parents lack digital literacy skills" (2018).



Curate

Key Commitment: Make meaning for oneself and others by collecting, organizing, and sharing resources

of personal relevance.

The school library collection is a natural place to consider equity, and the AASL Standards challenge school librarians to curate "a collection of reading and information materials in formats that support the diverse developmental, cultural, social, and linguistic needs of the range of learners and their communities" (School Libraries, II.B.1). School librarians can use a variety of collaborative and reflective strategies to pursue an inclusive collection that offers both windows to and mirrors of the world.

Reflecting on Bias

Former school librarian and current doctoral candidate Jenna Spiering's research encourages school librarians to be on the lookout for biased language in book reviews that might unintentionally limit the audience for a title by suggesting that LGBTQ+ books are supplemental purchases that are only "for" students of particular sexual orientations or gender identities. She calls attention to warning statements in reviews that call out LGBTQ+ characters or topics as controversial, and reminds school librarians to think about how such warning statements contribute to self-censorship (2017). While Spiering's work focuses on LGBTQ+ issues, her suggestions can also help us consider other forms of dominant-culture bias in reviews.

Around the 2016 elections, school librarian Kyrstin Delagardelle Shelley heard her Northview Middle School students in Iowa voice a range of political sentiments, from anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim comments

to confused, curious, or dismayed questions about political controversies. The political climate pushed Shelley to renew her commitment to curating a diverse library collection that would give her students the chance to read books about people and cultures with whom they may not often interact. Moreover, now that she has become politically active in the community, both through progressive organizing events and through her election to the Des Moines Public Schools school board, Shelley knows that she needs to be particularly aware of how her biases are reflected in the school collection. She continues her commitment to diverse collections, and she is careful to do so with a keen eye toward balance and careful references to her district's selection policy (2018).

Collaborating for Inclusive Collections

Rachel Small, school librarian at Pine Glen Elementary in Burlington, Massachusetts, curates equitably through collaborative weeding and selection. Small targets specific parts of her collection, and she asks experts to help. For example, her district's social studies coach helped her weed the Thanksgiving books that perpetuate inaccuracies about the holiday. And when she decided to genre-fy the library, Small enlisted a team of teachers, staff members, parents, and district coaches to help weed books with obvious biases and help recognize equity gaps in specific areas of her collection. For inclusive selection, Small uses social media to help her connect with authors and illustrators to find books that support equity, and she purchases a variety of high-interest, low reading level books to make sure all of her students can be passionate about what they read. She also takes recommendations from students seriously, using Destiny's Wish List feature to solicit and collect requests from her students (2018).

Equity is an issue when making and tinkering are seen as “extras” or enrichment, but the Crossett Brook school library provides the entire student body with the opportunity to make, tinker, play, and problem-solve.



Explore

Key Commitment: Discover and innovate in a growth mindset developed through experience and reflection.

Explore is focused on self-discovery and innovation through reading for personal enjoyment, tinkering and making, and solving problems of personal interest. Librarians are finding ways to help students interested in equity and social justice explore these areas in meaningful ways. They are also providing equitable opportunities for learners to read, make, and solve problems.

Exploring Social Justice

Meg Allison, Union 32 Middle and High School librarian in Vermont, began the school year by curating a social justice reading list and publishing it widely on social media. Meanwhile, a U-32 student spoke out at a school assembly because he had heard the n-word on the bus ride to school. He implored the student body: “We are better than this!” Allison reached out to the brave student, and a social justice club was born. Students are using an online system to report instances of hate speech witnessed at school and to slowly build the case that the school has a climate issue. Their plan is to provide resources that both staff and students can use to speak up and speak out. In the meantime, they themselves are speaking up through art exhibits, student-led protests, and other social action (2018).

Reading for Empathy

Peter Langella, librarian at Champlain Valley Union High School in Vermont, believes that schools have a mandate to teach students how to be good citizens, and that good citizenship requires knowing something about the lives

of others. Enter literature, Langella says, “Reading books by diverse authors, about diverse characters and diverse populations is a way to educate students about the world.” Research linking reading fiction to empathetic brain activity led Langella to approach his administration and faculty to argue for more free-choice reading in school. Now, students have the opportunity to read for choice in their ELA and social studies courses. And Langella offers a course of his own: Story as an Essential Experience. Students explore empathy through related themes like windows and mirrors, resilience, love and hate, race, and identity (2018).

Equitable Tinkering and Leading

The principal at Crossett Brook Middle School in Duxbury, Vermont, where Jen Hill is librarian, made an interesting observation: most student leaders are “good at school.” The Makerspace Leadership Team, on the other hand, has a variety of leaders, some of whom don’t always shine in the classroom. And that gets to the core values of the makerspace: access and interest. Hill and her students have designed their makerspace so that all students have access, and student interest is at the center. Equity is an issue when making and tinkering are seen as “extras” or enrichment, but the Crossett Brook school library provides the entire student body with the opportunity to make, tinker, play, and problem-solve. Exploration in the Crossett Brook makerspace lets kids who don’t always excel in the classroom create amazing things; students who don’t always get along learn to collaborate to solve problems; and all kinds of kids get to grow their leadership skills (2018).

The AASL Standards provide pathways for school librarians to think about evaluating sources and about creating and sharing new knowledge with attention to ethics and privacy.



Engage

Key Commitment: Demonstrate safe, legal, and ethical creating and sharing of knowledge products

independently while engaging in a community of practice and an interconnected world.

The Engage competencies recognize that all students are information evaluators and producers. The AASL Standards provide pathways for school librarians to think about evaluating sources and about creating and sharing new knowledge with attention to ethics and privacy.

Engage in Thoughtful Knowledge Consumption and Creation

Shannon Walters, school librarian at Burlington (VT) High School, does not assume that access to technology means that her students know how to use it well. In her community, as in most, an enormous skill divide exists. Walters believes it is the school library's duty to democratize these skills by closing that gap. She uses technology to help students analyze information and evaluate news for accuracy as they search for authoritative sources. In her library, students also have opportunities to create new knowledge, cite their sources, and share their work in ways that are meaningful and relevant. "We have to go beyond selfies," says Walters, and ensure that all students have meaningful opportunities to create through moviemaking, coding, graphic design, and more. Walters

believes that libraries help students discover what they didn't know they needed (2018).

Likewise, when Norman (OK) Public Schools adopted and trained faculty districtwide in the Guided Inquiry Design model, Teresa Lansford, National Board Certified school librarian at Lincoln Elementary, began to see students creating more meaningful products. As one group of students inquired and created a video to teach their peers about water waves, the opportunity to share their new knowledge in a format tailored to their audience gave them confidence and a sense of pride. Lansford noted, "This group of students hadn't seen themselves in the past as having anything to contribute to our learning community and here they were with a valuable contribution to our learning. You could tell they felt more important in school than they had before" (2018).

Privacy in an Equitable Library

Kelsey Barker from Norman (OK) Public Schools models her understanding of ethical use of information by respecting her students' privacy rights and creating an environment where privacy is a key part of information ethics and intellectual freedom. Barker says, "My students understand that their library records are private and that they can access digital materials for even more freedom. This allows students with learning disabilities, for example, to select materials on their reading level without fear

of ridicule from peers." Working with her school staff to help them understand every student's right to read also helps create a library environment in which all community members' intellectual freedom rights are protected (2018).

Action Steps for Equity

Let the *National School Library Standards* be your call to action! Consider the action steps below as you create equitable opportunities and outcomes for your students and help them become thoughtful global citizens. Librarians all over the country are building on a long-standing democratic tradition of serving the public via access, instruction, and community. We strongly encourage you to aspire to new ways of championing equity, inspired by the stories told here and ideas outlined in table I.



Table 1. Examples of action steps for equity.

SHARED FOUNDATIONS	GOALS	ACTION STEPS
INQUIRE	Ask tough questions.	Where does bias show up in my library culture and policies? Whose stories are missing from my collection? What perspectives are not represented?
INCLUDE	Recognize bias and seek diverse perspectives.	Reflect on your instructional practice: Are you teaching all students in ways that are meaningful and appropriately challenging for them? Take an implicit bias test, such as the one at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit and reflect on how the results might inform your practice.
COLLABORATE	Work with others to identify and address assumptions and biases.	Collaborate with your faculty to share your work and ask each other hard questions about equity. Collaborate with students to create a library where all learners feel welcomed and respected. Be sure that your library advisory board is diverse!
CURATE	Build a collection that does not just “celebrate diversity” but represents all perspectives equitably.	Read diverse books and add them to your collection. Ask students and teachers what perspectives are missing and fill those gaps. Subscribe to <i>Teaching Tolerance</i> magazine (free to educators) at www.tolerance.org/magazine/subscribe .
EXPLORE	Provide opportunities for all students to read, make, tinker, innovate, and grow.	Survey student interests and look for opportunities to provide related resources. Collect data: Who gets to make and create in the library? Who doesn’t? How might you address the gap? How might students take leadership roles in your library?
ENGAGE	Take responsibility for your library and rectify inequities.	How accurate is your collection? Evaluate your resources for bias and stereotypes. Showcase learning products from a wide variety of learners.

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