



New District, New School Year, New Standards

Starting at the Beginning

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Assessment and evaluation are sometimes difficult things to discuss, and we often think of them as once-and-done end results. However, assessing where you are in the learning process should be an ongoing activity, and formative assessments can provide valuable information about what the next (or first) steps should be to approach a learning target. The same is true for assessing the school library. Let me share what I have done to assess my libraries, using the new *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*. I know that implementing the standards can feel overwhelming. Therefore, I am writing to share my process so that readers can see a way to engage with the standards. So, let's start at the very beginning...

At the beginning of this school year, I started a new position as the district librarian in my town. I had been working in a different district for the past six years, so there is certainly an adjustment to "coming home."

Some teachers know me from my previous time working as a building-level school librarian in

this district, but all of the administrators are new, save one. So, it is very much a chance to start over. What better time to do that than the beginning of the school year?

I shared the checklist in [chapter 14] with my district-level supervisor and set about the task of figuring out how to assess the school libraries in the district from both the perspective of individual libraries and the district as a whole.

And with our new school library standards, too! So, yes, I began the year with some excitement.

As I write this in September, I know there will certainly be challenges. In this district, I am the only certified school librarian for seven schools: one high school, one middle school, three "in-town" elementary schools, and two rural schools of twenty-one and eleven students, respectively. Each of the "town" schools has a dedicated library paraprofessional. The larger of the rural schools has a part-time paraprofessional whose

tasks include some library duties, and the smaller rural school has no library paraprofessional. The paraprofessionals provide the day-to-day services in the school library such as

check-out, homework and technology help, readers' advisory services, and resource assistance. At the elementary schools, they also teach the regularly scheduled library "special."

My predecessor and I have been meeting for the past year as a small informal professional learning community. Therefore, I came to this position knowing some of the celebrations and challenges of the school libraries in the system. I decided the best way to start the new school year, especially since I am technically new to the district, is to work on a formal assessment of the various libraries and their services. Assessment should always be based upon some sort of guide, so I am glad to have the *National School Library Standards*.

Assessing Where We Are

Preparation and Process

Right before coming into work for the first time, I reread chapter 14 in the AASL Standards book: "Evaluating School Libraries." I shared the checklist in this chapter with my district-level supervisor and

set about the task of figuring out how to assess the school libraries in the district from both the perspective of individual libraries and the district as a whole. Disclaimer: At the time of this writing in September, I have not yet completed the task. The plethora of “beginning of the year” tasks required for each school has been more distracting than I expected. Trying to gather data on seven individual schools can sometimes feel daunting as well. However, having the standards as a guide has certainly helped keep me focused.

As I mentioned, the first thing that I did was share the checklist with my district-level administrator and explain that I wanted to start the year by doing a formative assessment of the school libraries and the district program by using the *National School Library Standards* and the checklist in our book. He agreed that this would be a useful place to begin. I then typed the checklist into a spreadsheet to record evidence from each school, instead of just “checking the box.”

When preparing to assess a school library, gathering some data and evidence before beginning is helpful. I recommend:

- running collection analysis reports;
- gathering copies of all written policies and procedures (both building and district-level);
- finding any lesson plans, schedules, and collaboration logs that may still be around from previous years;
- seeking out minutes or notes from library advisory committees; and

- jotting down a list of any questions that may need to be asked of other people.

It also may be good to pull together any pictures that have been taken of displays or student work or lessons, especially if a formal written report to a supervisor is part of the process, which it will be in my case.

Because I am not at each library every day, and I know my predecessor wasn't either, I decided that the best way to gather this evidence was to survey the paraprofessionals at each building, asking them questions as if they were the certified librarian (as they are, for all intents and purposes, acting in the role of school librarian for their building). So, I developed a Google Form Survey with a section for each of the Shared Foundations, and questions that could help me understand how each Shared Foundation manifests at each school. I based the questions on the evaluation checklist. I will compare the answers to the AASL Standards' School Library Alignments as part of my formal report. Also, I have been spending the first few weeks of school rotating between all the buildings and observing the library layouts and how the paraprofessionals interact with the students and teachers.

Even though I have not yet completed this assessment, I believe the work is important and good. To make this process more “bite-sized,” a librarian could choose just one of the Shared Foundations and assess based on it as a starting point. Because I wanted to gather data on the programs that exist now so that I can work toward building a cohesive district-wide department, I have tackled all six at once!

Focuses of the Assessment

Let's take a look now at each of the Shared Foundations, focusing on the building-level evaluation items in the checklist. (I am waiting to apply the district-level items after gathering and analyzing the building-level data.) The “School Library Evaluation Checklist” (AASL 2018, 174–80) includes four or five checklist items for each of the Shared Foundations at the building level.



Inquire. According to the checklist, the successful school librarian collaborates with teachers, systematically teaches research processes, participates in curriculum development and implementation, and ensures school library access for all users. Evidence to prove this can include lesson plans, collaboration logs, policies to show access to facilities, and membership in various building leadership committees. For this Shared Foundation, I asked survey questions about collaborative activities, the research process, and on which committees the paraprofessionals may have been included.



Include. This Shared Foundation, with its focus on intellectual freedom and diverse points of view, inviting and safe learning environments, accessible resources and spaces, and appropriate evaluation of personnel, was easier to assess. Evidence can be gathered through observation, collection analysis reports, and information on staffing and supervisory assignments, including formal evaluative documents and hours of operation. Survey questions for this foundation focused on hours of operation, library rules, display updates, and how personnel evaluations are handled.



Collaborate. Collaborative planning of lessons, supporting collaboration among students, encouraging input in policies, and participation in decision-making teams show up again in this Shared Foundation. Therefore, many of the same pieces of evidence gathered for Inquire could also be used for evaluating the school library in this category. So, again, I am looking for lesson plans, stories about student activities, schedules, library advisory committees, and membership on various committees. Since I had already asked about lesson plans and collaboration in the Inquiry section of my survey, here I asked about who has made the decisions about library policies and procedures, what working with small student groups looks like, and for the respondent to share a successful group library project.



Curate. This particular Shared Foundation was an interesting one to evaluate because of some local variations. To begin, I ran collection analysis reports for each school collection. I included only one survey question, which was a “Check All That Apply” question to find out how involved the paraprofessionals have been in the management of the individual library collections, as I seek information about their role in ordering and weeding. I am currently working with our school board to rewrite the library selection, weeding, and reconsideration policies, so there may be some changes in the procedures surrounding this Shared Foundation.



Explore. Leading learners in exploration means the school library should be a place where learning can be participatory and

active, with a variety of instructional methods in use, inclusion of technology, and lessons that supplement other resources and connect to the outside world. I observed the library layouts at each school and searched for things like makerspace areas, space for group work, and displays. In the survey, I asked questions about instructional practices and activities.



Engage. Engaging learners is certainly more than just keeping them occupied and interested. They must learn to interact with the world of information in a positive, ethical, and respectful manner. This includes showing an understanding of copyright, privacy, intellectual property, ethical online behavior, intellectual freedom, new technologies, and responsible use of technology and social media. For evaluating our inclusion of this Shared Foundation, I looked for posters, displays, lesson plans, policies, and answers to survey questions regarding instruction in copyright, how the paraprofessionals keep up to date with current educational and library-related practices, how the various libraries promote intellectual freedom, and how information is shared with teachers.

Looking Ahead

Although the details of my library evaluations go beyond the scope of this article—and, as I write this in September, are not really complete enough to be published—I have already noticed things that might have taken me longer to discover without the focus of a formal assessment process based on the Shared Foundations. For instance, we do not have a systematic research process being taught, with many of the research skills being taught by

individual teachers in classrooms. However, we do have makerspace activities and centers being employed in each of the elementary schools. Most importantly, all of the paraprofessionals that I have the privilege to work with are very interested in improving their practice to include what is best for our students and believe that the school libraries should be vibrant, engaging places that enhance the learning of our students. And this shared focus on students’ learning is, in my opinion, the very best place to start our journey together.

Work Cited:

American Association of School Librarians. 2018. *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*. Chicago: ALA.



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