

FEATURE





IMPLEMENTING THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LIBRARY STANDARDS AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL

Sarah Culp Searles

sarah.searles@knoxschools.org

A large district has some unique challenges when planning support for a reflective growth process around implementing the *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*. This type of setting typically has a wide variety of school demographics, budgetary constraints, school library staffing configurations, administrators' visions, faculty dynamics, and school librarians' learning curves to take into consideration when planning a large-scale rollout of the AASL Standards.

However, this type of setting also brings some unique opportunities. It has the advantages of an existing tight support network for school librarians, economy of scale for providing resources and professional development (PD), and central office staff with dedicated time and attention specifically for supporting school librarians in implementing the standards as part of a vision for world-class school libraries.

The AASL Standards represent an opportunity for all school librarians across the country to step back, reflect on their practices, and look for ways to grow in service to their learners and school communities. In the face of continued budget cuts and position losses around the country, the standards also provide an excellent tool for school librarians to strengthen their common language and unified vision for their services, enabling school librarians and other stakeholders to mount diverse advocacy efforts aligned to build on each other meaningfully. This article will describe how my district, the Knox County Schools in Tennessee, has worked to leverage its strengths and support the AASL Standards in ways that may be adapted for school libraries in all kinds of districts across the country.

Context for Standards Implementation

Serving nearly sixty thousand students at ninety school sites, the Knox County Schools (KCS) is among the nation's largest districts. With a mid-sized city, Knoxville, situated in the middle of smaller townships and farm country, KCS has every type of school within its zone. We have urban, rural, and suburban settings; school sizes range from tiny walkable neighborhood schools to huge behemoths; school demographics range from nearly all kids on free and reduced lunch to nearly none, and from ethnically quite homogenous (both mostly white and mostly black) to textbook-worthy examples of 21st-century global diversity. Leadership philosophy is firmly school-based, with as few dictates coming from the central office as possible, so that decision making happens as close to the diverse needs of each individual school site as it can.

In a district like ours, library services necessarily look somewhat different in every school because each school has different needs and resources and dynamics. This situation makes perfect sense, and it is a good thing. We want school librarians to have autonomy over the way they organize their instructional time, the emphases of their collections, their circulation and space-usage policies, and the myriad ways in which they communicate and collaborate with their staffs, based on local factors, such as school size, demographics, schedules, staffing configurations (some have co-librarians or assistants), parental involvement, school curricular initiatives, technology access, and so forth.

However, it does mean that my staff downtown (KCS Library Media Services, or KCSLMS) has some unique challenges to face when it comes to helping our librarians implement the AASL Standards across all those different settings! We

cannot simply tell school librarians the right things to do because the answers will be different at every site. Therefore, what we do to support implementation is focus on providing flexible opportunities for professional development that will account for site-based differences, so that all school librarians will be able to learn according to their precise needs, while developing the kinds of systems and structures that will set us up for continual collaborative growth in the future.

Flexible Professional Development Opportunities

Fostering a New Mindset

KCS school librarians, like those in other districts all across the country, approached the AASL Standards with a wide variety of experiences, skill sets, and expectations. The previous *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* and *Empowering Learners* guidelines had been mentioned in our district but were never the full focus of training in our district, and Tennessee does not have state standards for school libraries. As a result, the whole idea of standards-based practice involved (and still involves, as we continue this implementation work) a significant shift in mindset for many school librarians. To try to push that mindset shift with some consistency across the district, while also accounting for the huge range of librarians' individual professional learning needs as well as their school site needs, we have developed a series of flexible professional development opportunities and vehicles.

Monthly Video Series

Since the AASL Standards were released in the middle of a school year, when we were unable to convene all school librarians to formally introduce the standards, we elected to do a soft rollout via a series of monthly short video lectures. To model and emphasize that I, too, was

in the midst of reading and learning my way through the whole *National School Library Standards* book, we gave the video series the tongue-in-cheek title of “Read Along with Sarah.”

Each month, I picked one Shared Foundation and made an informal video walking through some of the most important implications of its Competencies. Additional videos were made to address cross-cutting topics and/or anticipated questions, such as “Where are the ‘Library Skills’?” These videos were distributed to the department throughout the spring 2018 semester, so that school librarians could gradually digest the content in advance of the formal summer training workshop. (The videos can be accessed at <https://tinyurl.com/kcslms-youtube>.)

Summer Standards Training Sessions

The most traditional standards PD we have offered was a two-day summer training workshop. These sessions were optional, since they were off contract time, but about two thirds of KCS’s school librarians chose to attend. These workshops focused on understanding the AASL Standards and how the frameworks are put together, what it means to elevate lesson plans using the standards, and developing focused and effective daily objectives based on the standards.

Participants selected “major and minor” Shared Foundations to focus on during the 2018–2019 school year, so they could develop lessons using the standards while not feeling so overwhelmed by the complete frameworks. We plan to treat that summer 2018 training as the first installment of a three-year plan for formal training, with additional workshops in the next two years designed to dig deeper into effective implementation.

Summer Standards Make-Up Online Modules

School librarians who did not attend the summer workshops were given the option of an abbreviated two-hour online training that they could attend at their leisure. These online modules did not have the benefit of in-person collaborative conversations and feedback provided by the summer workshops, but they offered the most essential information in a quick and convenient format.

District Learning Days

KCS’s three District Learning Days (DLDs) each year are the main structure for content-area learning on contract time—which is to say, these are the three days a year when all ninety of our school librarians can be gathered into one place to learn and network. For the last two years, we have been piloting a structure for school librarians to engage in personalized learning during our DLDs. We lead a guided group conversation in which each of them completes a needs assessment (considering their past successes, current needs, and administrators’ goals and priorities) and accordingly selects a professional learning goal for the year.

They then have a variety of options for pursuing the learning that they need to work toward that goal. Conference-style PD sessions for presenting information, panel discussions for sharing ideas, self-paced tasks to experiment with using tools, open-ended collaborative discussions with colleagues, and even protected “quiet think time” are available options to support each school librarian’s personalized learning process. During the needs assessment, school librarians are asked to ensure that the goals they have selected will align with the AASL Standards and continue their growth in implementation.

KCSLMS Toolbox Sessions

To make connections between the AASL Standards and other content school librarians may use to grow and refine their work, we offer monthly optional PD “Toolbox” sessions throughout the year. Each session has three mini-topics to deepen and enrich librarians’ understanding and implementation of the standards, such as the maker movement, the NGSS Science and Engineering Practices, learning commons theory, inquiry frameworks, and AASL’s definition of an effective school library program. Topics are chosen from the wider field of librarianship, state and nationwide trends and initiatives in education, and important collaborative opportunities with other content areas within KCS. Materials from these sessions are distributed online for those who cannot attend in person.

Systems and Structures

Integrating Standards Seamlessly

While flexible professional development has been the most visible part of our district-wide implementation efforts, we have also worked to ensure that systems and structures are in place to help our school librarians align their new understanding of the AASL Standards with their everyday work. Our ultimate goal is that the standards should never feel like “one more thing on the plate,” or a disconnected and independent initiative, but should become an integral and seamless part of school librarians’ everyday work in our district.

Shared Leadership and Vision

One of the first structures we put in place was to appoint a standards team made up of librarians representing different grade levels and a cross section of the district’s school demographics. This team acted as our vanguard, with early responsibilities to discuss and understand the

AASL Standards, experiment with implementation in their buildings, and predict what difficulties or frustrations other school librarians might run into.

Facilitated by our KCSLMS instructional coach, Amber Moser (like me, a former building-level school librarian), the standards team members were a tight-knit and dedicated leadership team. Together they grappled with what curricular supports should be developed to help each school library's unique implementation, designed the overall structure for the summer standards workshops, and worked alongside Amber to help present those workshops to their colleagues. Many of them have stayed on the team this year to help work on what the rest of the three-year implementation plan may look like, based on feedback from their peers.

Year-Round Communication for Learning

The other early system we put in place was to convert our old department newsletter, which had previously just consisted of assorted news or announcements, into a more coherent online professional learning resource. When we came up with the idea of the soft rollout and the "Read Along with Sarah" videos, we knew we needed to create a more-regular communication structure so that our school librarians would know what to expect and how to interact with the material they were receiving.

So while we still distribute monthly announcements about department business as needed, we now also have recurring columns that explain concepts embedded within the AASL Standards, connect the standards and school librarians' work to other important documents such as KCS board policy, request feedback from the department about their support needs, and highlight best practices from KCS school librarians who

are implementing the standards well in their buildings. Also, we now house our "newsletter" content in our district's learning management system instead of e-mailing PDF files so that all of that content is more easily accessible for future reference, especially as we hire new school librarians over time.

Administrative Partnership

This year's major structural work has been to assemble a team of school librarians and their principals to collaboratively develop a new school librarian job description based on the AASL Standards. Principal/librarian pairs were recruited from schools who had already been working on implementing a new vision for school libraries in their buildings. The team consisting of all the pairs met together after school to generate collective input on the ideal roles librarians should serve in their schools, align their thinking to the AASL Standards, and then synthesize that input into a new job description.

Our hope is that this new job description will assist us in district-wide standards implementation in several different ways. Ideally, it will clarify and emphasize the importance of the AASL Standards in our work, so that school librarians will have a clearly defined way of understanding that the standards are how we do business, rather than an ancillary document or extra program. We hope that the new job description will also be a useful support to administrators as they hire new school librarians in the future, and as they engage in other personnel management work such as evaluations. The better our administrator partners understand what effective school librarians do, the better equipped administrators will be to empower this work in their own school libraries, helping young learners and school librarians develop the Competencies and Alignments in the *AASL Standards Integrated Framework*.

Moving Forward

Expecting a Multi-Year Process

Large districts often feel like they're trying to "turn the Titanic around in a bathtub" when managing a big change effort, and that metaphor has often felt apt for us during this process! Since many of our school librarians are not just new to the updated standards but also to the mindset of standards-based practice, we fully expect that complete implementation of the AASL Standards with fidelity will be a multi-year process, with some missteps and redirections naturally occurring along the way.

Creating and Sustaining Momentum

One of our major challenges is sustaining momentum for this work in a large group of people, spread over a large geographical area (about five hundred square miles), over a long period of time. Since the AASL Standards were released in the middle of a school year, we couldn't take advantage of our August 2017 DLD as a clean starting point.

So instead, we chose the soft rollout through our 2018 spring semester monthly newsletters, followed by our summer workshops, so that by the time the following August DLD came around, many school librarians had already engaged with quite a bit of standards learning. Our monthly Toolbox sessions are designed to continue feeding participants fresh content related to the standards, so that they can continually grow and deepen their understanding without feeling like they've been metaphorically bruised by yet another training.

Offering Participatory Professional Learning

We want our school librarians to feel like they are well supported but have personal ownership in implementation, rather than feeling like someone has weighed them down with a hefty mandate. To that end, we have

worked hard at every stage to share leadership and make learning participatory. All of our PD offerings are heavily discussion-based, so that participants have ample opportunities to learn from their peers. Every effort is made to distribute information online or to share online versions of in-person meetings, so that school librarians who aren't able to attend will still be able to access learning.

Between them, the standards team and job description team include about a quarter of our department, so that a wide variety of perspectives is involved in the development of work that will affect everyone. Our newsletter showcases peers' implementation efforts, so that we can harness the social power of seeing colleagues trying the AASL Standards and finding success.

Moving toward Advocacy

As the implementation grows roots, our hope is that it will develop self-

sustaining energy as fundamental advocacy. There is no better start to advocacy than making effective practice visible to multiple stakeholder groups daily, and that is exactly what the AASL Standards call on school librarians to do. Our professional development efforts are designed to nurture that effective practice in every building, and our systems and structures are designed to enlist and empower many voices to confidently spread the word. A particular success has been the involvement of principals in the job description team; harnessing their voices makes them true partners in ensuring that school librarians' work is aligned to principals' visions and in sharing that good news with their administrator colleagues.

We are excited to continue to see the fruits of all these implementation efforts come together and create truly excellent services for our learners and school communities, both now and in the future.



Sarah Searles is district specialist in library media services for Knox County (TN) Schools. She serves as Supervisors

Section Representative on the AASL Board of Directors. Sarah was a Lilead Fellow in the 2015–2016 cohort and in 2018 was named Valedictorian on the Tennessee Association of School Librarians Distinguished Administrators Honor Roll. In 2011, prior to her move to district administration, she and her colleagues at West High School were proud to have their school library selected as a stop on 2010–2011 AASL President Nancy Everhart's Vision Tour. Sarah's article "Developing a District Vision for Library Services" was published in the November/December issue of *School Library Connection*.

ADAPTING FOR SMALLER DISTRICTS

YOUR DISTRICT'S JOURNEY MAY NOT LOOK THE SAME AS OURS, BUT THERE ARE MANY WAYS YOU CAN ADAPT SOME OF THESE SAME FLEXIBLE PD IDEAS AND SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES TO WORK IN YOUR SETTING! HERE ARE A FEW SUGGESTIONS FOR HOW TO GET STARTED:

- Read the *National School Library Standards* book in full and study the online resources on the standards portal! Even if you don't have a local supervisor to steer the process, many resources have been gathered to help you get started.
- Form a professional learning network (PLN). Enlist anyone who might be helpful in studying the AASL Standards together—other school librarians, collaborating educators, supportive administrators, technology or literacy coaches, state affiliate leaders.
- Discuss a clear vision for why this group needs to work together. Why is the PLN worth committing to? How will studying the AASL Standards benefit your learners and educators?
- Choose local initiatives and priorities as your lenses for studying the standards. Make your work relevant to your district's existing priorities, not "one more thing!"
- Pick an online collaborative platform for sharing information to the whole group. An existing platform your district uses, social media, cloud-based productivity tools, or some combination may all be good choices.
- Decide on a regular communication method and schedule for the group. Put it on the calendar and stick to it!
- Brainstorm what resources other than standard "presentation sessions" your PLN members can contribute to and benefit from. Book study discussions, collaborative planning time, visiting other schools, existing webinars gathered and shared, or even just share-outs of "Here's what I tried and how it went" can be terrific places to start.
- Build a sense of community between your PLN members by interacting regularly on Twitter or another communication and sharing platform, even if it's not always just about the standards.