

FEATURE

# Collaborating to Communicate



# **Librarian Reading Groups and Understanding Standards**

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## Problems with Independent Schools and Standards

One of the issues connected to the use of standards in independent schools is the varying approaches to an astonishing variety of school missions. Independent school administrators and teachers often see national standards to be the purview of the professionals they hire. As a result, teachers and department heads work to select standards that support the curriculum they feel fits their student body.

The independent school curriculum is often what many school librarians refer to as the “psychic curriculum.” We must constantly be aware of conversations in each department or grade level, and curriculum shifts can take place with the hiring and retiring of teachers. No formal announcement to the whole school necessarily occurs with a curriculum change; the department head might simply report the decision to the administration, and the curriculum is updated.

Another obstacle to implementing standards in this environment centers on the age-old problem of administrators who do not understand the profession of librarianship. While most heads of school and division directors have been classroom teachers at some point in their careers, these same individuals—who also supervise librarians and library programs in independent schools—often do not have education degrees and are limited by their own personal idea of what constitutes an effective school library program and a professional school librarian.

While members of our profession know that “independent school librarians are simultaneously independent and collaborative, looking always to both our individual school missions and the broader world of school libraries, public and inde-

pendent, for fresh perspectives on similar problems” (Hand 2010, xi), our direct supervisors often don’t possess this view. I have used the AASL Standards internally throughout my career to calibrate my information literacy program, but I wondered: Could the latest iteration of the standards—which include the application of each standard to not only learners, but also to the practice of school librarians and our programs and spaces—be an advocacy tool I could use with other members of my school community?

There was only one problem in my responding to that important question. I didn’t understand the new AASL Standards myself—yet.

## Revelation in New Orleans

The answer to my prayers came in the form of Audrey Church, AASL Past President, who led a session at the 2018 ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans titled “AASL *National School Library Standards—Top Topics and Trends*.” With an auctioneer-style patter, she blazed through recent research that applied to each Common Belief and Shared Foundation, giving a succinct overview of every article while the audience frantically scribbled notes on the session handout.

You could hear the “ahhhhs” around the room. Seeing concrete publications with a clear focus applied to each standard helped make somewhat amorphous concepts like “Inquire” tangible. Pens frantically made asterisks next to research that fit the individual focus of specific librarians sitting in the audience, who suddenly realized that their pet project had a Shared Foundation or Common Belief attached to it. As I walked out with my lower school librarian, we heard exclamations of “That was so helpful!” again and again on our way to the escalator.

## Structure of the Professional Reading Group

Thinking back to Audrey Church’s bibliography that night at dinner, my colleagues and I came up with the idea of a reading group in which we could read the chapter on a Shared Foundation and then an article or two from the bibliography to make the ideas more tangible. We thought this was a brilliant solution, but since we were only a department of three, we wanted to open up the conversation to our peers. In Richmond our local independent school librarian group RAISL (Richmond Area Independent School Librarians) gathers informally a few times a year to network and discuss issues. This was the perfect venue to see if other school librarians were interested in a larger discussion of standards. The answer was *yes*.

Using a reading group model in which group members partner to read the same article, we met at convenient times for the group as determined by simple availability polls and always made sure food and caffeine were available. We chose the Shared Foundation ahead of time, and, based on personal interest, members selected and read related articles listed in Audrey Church’s original handout from her ALA session. We allowed a certain amount of eating and socializing time at the beginning of each meeting and then began by showing the AASL video associated with the Shared Foundation. (To see the videos, go to <<https://standards.aasl.org/project/learners>>.) With each Shared Foundation organized into its application to three frameworks—the learner, the school librarian, and the school library—we actually began our discussion with the school library alignments. This umbrella view of a program led naturally into a discussion of our work as school librarians and, eventually, of our



direct impact on students, so we discussed all the frameworks in that sequence.

We all felt energized and enlightened by our in-person discussions, but finding meeting times convenient to everyone was, of course, impossible. We wanted to hear as many voices as possible and continue the conversation outside of our in-person meetings. RAISL already had a Google group, which served as an effective electronic discussion list for our membership, but we also created a Slack workspace that could support conversations in an easy-to-access way without cluttering up our inboxes. Slack workspaces are free and will archive a group's last 10,000 messages (which are searchable) and will also store up to 5 GB of files for the group. (More messages and files can be stored for a fee.) You can issue invitations to people with a specific e-mail domain or individuals with a variety of e-mail extensions. The Slack platform is fantastic for reading groups since anyone can respond asynchronously with thoughts in an intuitive interface and easily attach files, which are always visible when users scroll back through the conversation.

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## Impact on Our Practice

The impact this reading group has had on our daily practice cannot be overstated. We have experienced insightful conversations about the language in the *AASL Standards Framework for Learners*, to the point of having a months-long conversation about what makes up an “authentic audience” for various age groups. The duration of that virtual conversation is particularly interesting because the learner framework for each Shared Foundation has proven the hardest framework for us to parse.

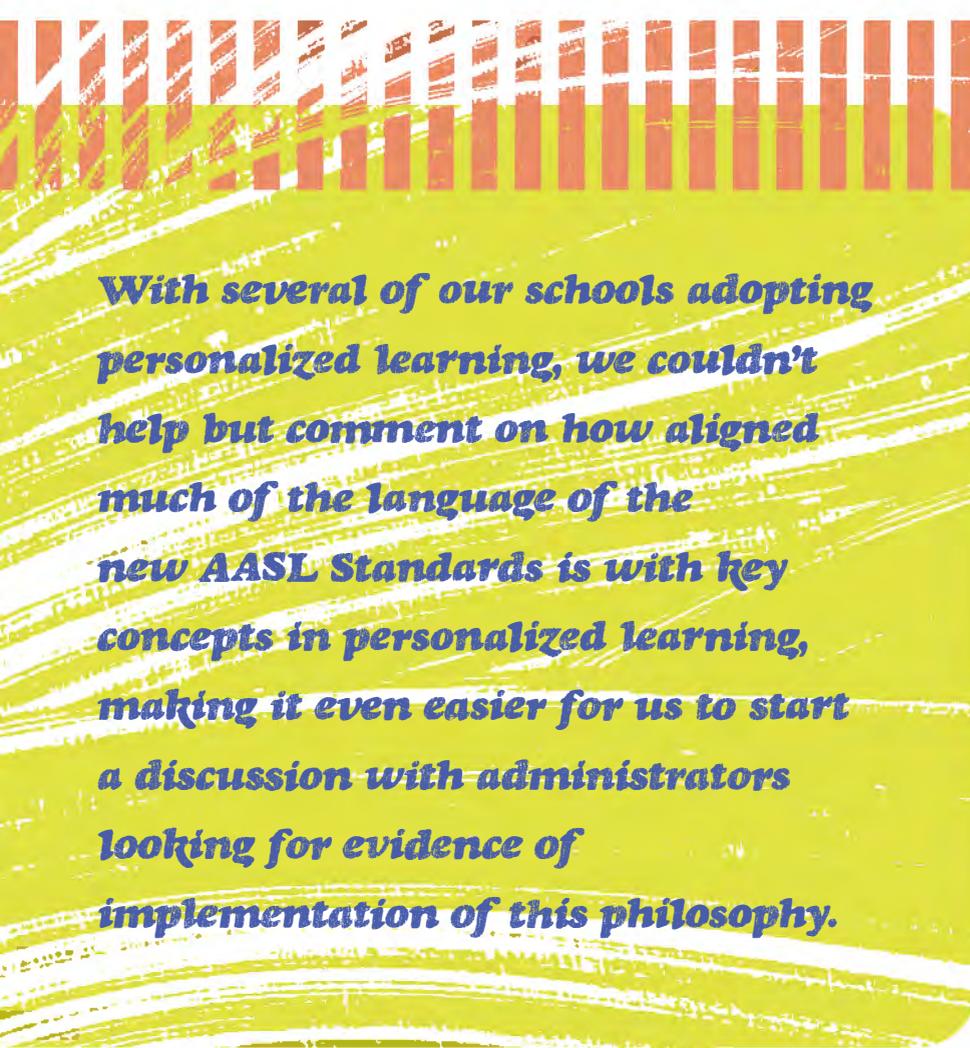
Part of our struggle stemmed from AASL’s decision to use the Domains Think, Create, Share, and Grow. While the standards indicate that these Domains can be a progression or engaged with individually as a personalized guide (AASL 2018c, 17), the concepts described often display a strong hierarchy with foundational concepts introduced in Think and Create, and more sophisticated and complex dispositions described in Share and Grow. Since we could all envision a student who thinks and grows and yet is still a beginner, this language attached to specific disposi-

tions threw us off for a while. Once we viewed Think, Create, Share, and Grow through the lens of a progression, it was much easier to see how the Domains would apply to learners as well as to school librarians and school libraries.

Because the language in the learner framework is deliberately broad to apply to a variety of age groups, our first instinct was to breezily attribute each learner disposition to all our projects. Really digging into each statement, however, yielded a richer conversation, particularly at the Share and Grow stages. If Think and Create can potentially be viewed as the more introductory levels of each framework, we could then see their content as foundational dispositions in which the learner should demonstrate competency.

For example, our conversation around these levels of the Engage learner framework discussed how most of us first introduced the idea of “gathering and using information by: Understanding the ethical use of information, technology, and media” in the Think Domain (VI.A.2) before teaching how to “make ethical decisions in the creation of knowledge by: Ethically using and reproducing others’ work” in the Create Domain (VI.B.1). While these stages in each Shared Foundation stimulated great conversations, I’m happy to say that the majority of the school librarians in our group did feel that we were helping our students develop competencies in Think and Create.

The Share and Grow levels provided more-robust discussions due to the high bar they set. We all felt comfortable that we teach the ethical use of information, but looking at Engage, its Grow level indicates “Learners engage with information to extend personal learning by: Inspiring others to engage in safe, responsible, ethical, and legal information



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behaviors” (VI.D.3). From our perspectives, the Share and Grow Domains incorporate more metacognition and participation in a global world of information than do Think and Create. For school librarians, determining acceptable methods of scaffolding the use of digital products (when many campuses limit access) so students can get to these higher Domains takes creativity. Learning in our reading group how different schools handled the issue of use of online resources offered a diverse set of approaches and allowed us to go back to our individual schools and mention how a competitor dealt with the issue—an often effective method of librarian-to-administrator advocacy in independent schools.

Perhaps most interestingly, we’ve begun thinking about how the school librarian framework can be converted into a document for both self-evaluation and possibly professional assessment in our schools. The published standards have an entire chapter on how to use the *AASL Standards Framework for School Librarians* within each Shared Foundation to connect it to other educator-assessment structures, and the chapter includes helpful crosswalks. However, we felt that developing an instrument that addresses the unique environment of an independent school library would be very useful.

We also responded positively to the chapter’s suggestion of using specific language to apply the Think, Create, Share, and Grow Domains to four performance levels: “Foundational, Developing, Mastery, and Exemplary” (AASL 2018c, 153). In chapter 13 of the standards book, an example of a rubric for assessing school librarians on the Inquire Shared Foundation’s Think Domain focuses on the degrees to which school librarians teach learners to display curiosity and initiative in

information-seeking behavior. This illustration elucidates a “foundational” approach—a school librarian giving a learner a topic to research—and progresses up to an “exemplary” approach—the school librarian modeling the process of formulating questions and facilitating learners’ questions based on their personal interests (AASL 2018c, 154).

Our department and our reading group agreed that administrator response to this progression language would be more positive than our simply presenting evaluators with the school librarian framework of competencies. We thought administrators would perceive a depiction of mastery levels as more professional and more illustrative. With several of our schools adopting personalized learning, we couldn’t help but comment on how aligned much of the language of the new AASL Standards is with key concepts in personalized learning, making it even easier for us to start a discussion with administrators looking for evidence of implementation of this philosophy.

### **Relevance to Independent Schools: Communicating What We Do**

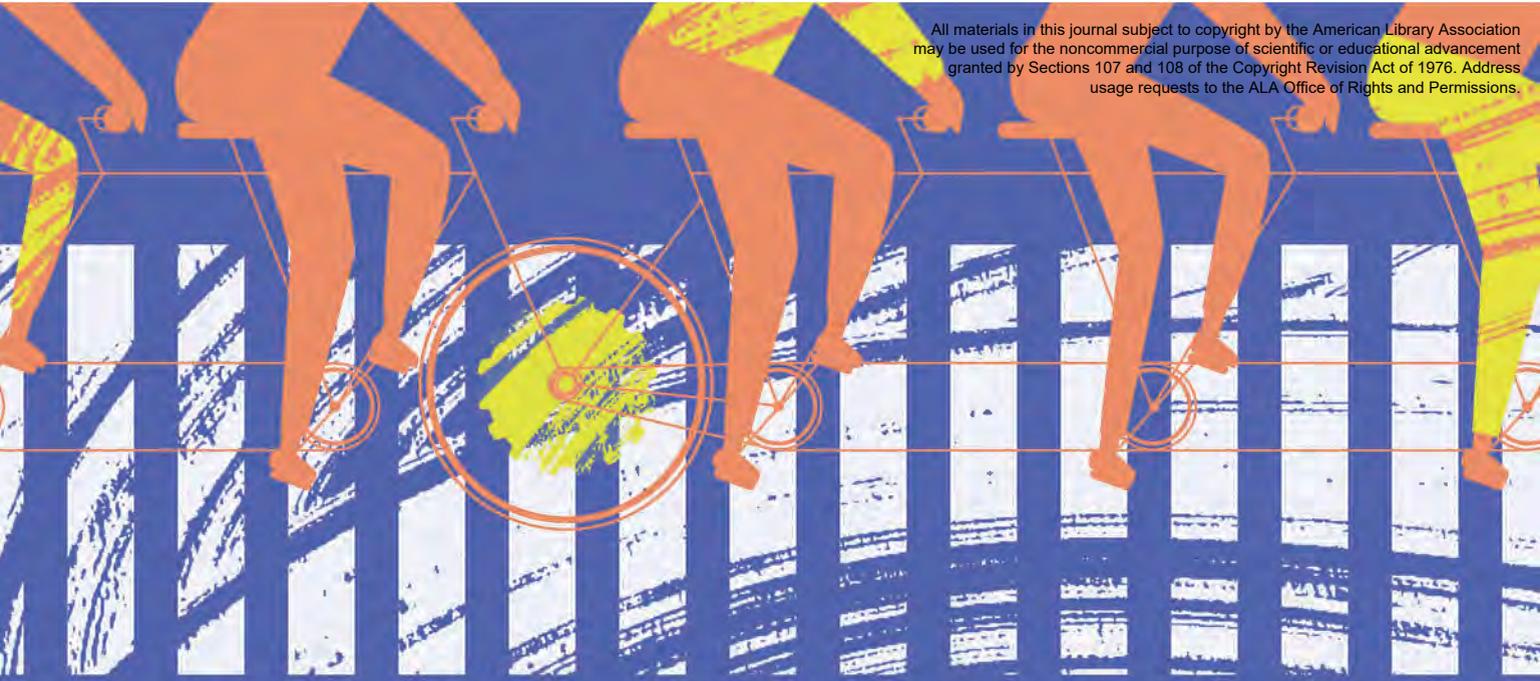
The final piece that emerged from our standards reading group involved discussing the *AASL Standards Framework for School Libraries* in the context of each of the six Shared Foundations. During our reading group conversations, a theme that emerged repeatedly centered on how this framework possesses articulate language that encapsulates a healthy school library program. Our discussions emphasized the participants’ varied experiences when discussing library spaces and programs with administrators to simply communicate what we do or to identify areas of needed financial support.

While a variety of effective techniques to talk to administrators about school libraries exists (see sidebar), we thought that picking out one Shared Foundation a year and choosing school library alignments from the standards as talking points to indicate a program’s strengths and areas of needed growth could be an effective, ongoing method of communicating with a supervisor. I used the school library framework in the context of program goal setting when I met with my administrator for our department head beginning-of-school chat. Introducing the administrator to the framework led to an excellent exchange about some specific aspects of our program (like the ethical use of information) that we don’t usually talk about, giving her a big-picture perspective she didn’t possess prior to that conversation.

### **It Takes Time**

If there’s one piece of advice I can offer any school librarian who wants to parse the AASL Standards, it’s to take your time. The new standards have a tremendous amount to offer us in terms of evaluating learners, evaluating ourselves, and determining the health and well-being of our spaces and programs. But due to the amount of real estate the standards cover, they require us to take time to sit and parse them out, preferably with other professionals.

For independent school librarians, our new standards offer us a chance to bolster our depth of understanding of our profession while also promoting meaningful conversations with the decision-makers who fund and support our school libraries—conversations in which we educate them more effectively about what we do and the value we add to our schools.



## Leveraging Crosswalks for Communication

You would never walk into a classroom filled with students and begin speaking in librarian jargon they couldn't understand. But school librarians often make that mistake during an annual meeting with their administrator. In my eighteen-year career in independent schools, I've had heads of school and division directors who had history doctorates, math degrees, an MBA degree, but only a single person with a doctorate in educational leadership. Just as we meet students where they are, we need to enter into opportunities for communicating our work with our audience in mind. What is the administrator's number one problem? What themes and language does the administrator use to communicate the school's work to parents and prospective families?

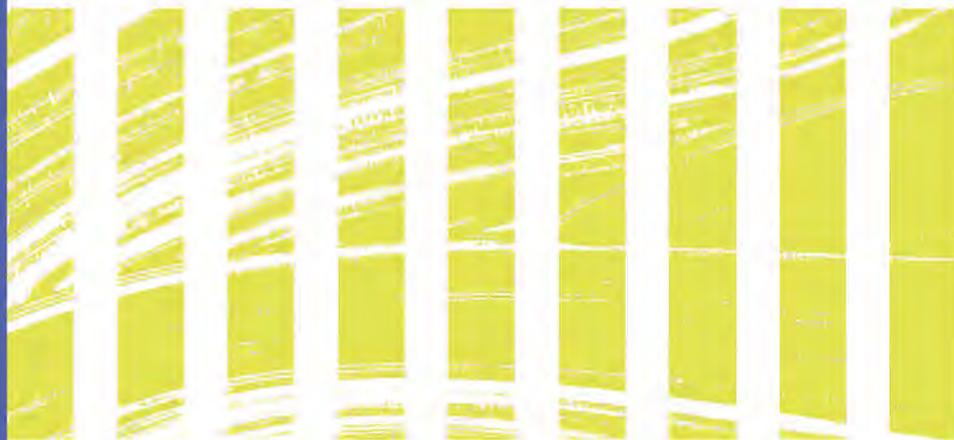
Crosswalks are fantastic vehicles to achieve this common language, particularly those created by organizations that have collaborated with the professional organizations that administrators rely upon to keep them informed. The emphasis in the last decade on STEM and STEAM means no head of school

is unfamiliar with the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). The AASL crosswalk (available at <<https://standards.aasl.org/project/crosswalks>>) comparing and contrasting our standards to the *ISTE Standards for Students* as well as the *ISTE Standards for Educators*, can be a way of explaining the equivalencies between ISTE standards familiar to the administrator and the AASL frameworks for learners and school librarians. Comparing one or two areas of the Shared Foundations in a discussion with your administrator shows how aligned the ISTE/AASL standards are under "Inquire" and emphasizes the importance of inquiry throughout the curriculum. The number of empty boxes on the ISTE side of the crosswalk under "Include" can demonstrate school librarians' emphasis on issues of diversity and inclusivity in our work (AASL 2018b).

The Alliance for Excellent Education, the nonprofit that supports the Future Ready initiative, rolled out their Future Ready Principals program in August 2018, and its infographic and standards are startlingly similar

to its Future Ready Librarians program (Alliance for Excellent Education 2018). Bringing that infographic and the AASL/Future Ready Librarians crosswalk (available at <<https://standards.aasl.org/project/crosswalks>>) to a meeting can be an outstanding starting point to find common ground. Pointing out that the AASL Standards address the learner, as well as the professional and the program, is a terrific way to highlight our profession's breadth of approach. The crosswalk also helps us graphically represent how we are also administrators who connect learners and teachers to the outside world with our big-picture view of the curriculum. Demonstrating support for our school initiatives while showing our awareness and response to larger educational trends helps school leaders see us as partners in accomplishing their goals.

A currently missed opportunity for AASL is the lack of a crosswalk with ACRL standards, guidelines, and frameworks. Since an overwhelming number of independent schools emphasize their college



preparatory focus, any time school librarians can articulate colleges' information-literacy expectations of students, we find an audience willing to listen, particularly at the high school level. For a number of independent schools, especially the ones with administrators and department heads who came from higher education, demonstrating a strong relationship between AASL Standards and the preparation of college-ready students is a necessity.

Listening carefully to your administrators when they speak at faculty meetings, reading their communications to parents, and paying close attention to the themes chosen for professional development can help you select key standards and crosswalks that will effectively communicate what you do as well as demonstrate how you support administrative initiatives.



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