

# Elevating the Profession and Practice through School Library Systems

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## Introduction

New York state is fortunate to have a network of school library systems that provide continuous learning opportunities, innovative services, leadership, equity, and more for school librarians and school libraries. The New York State School Library Systems were established in 1984 for the purpose of providing professional development, consulting about library programs and practice, coordinating cooperative collection development, facilitating interlibrary loans, and supporting regional and state-sponsored electronic resources. There are currently forty school library systems serving more than 3.2 million students, teachers, and administrators in more than 4,200 public and nonpublic schools across New York state. Each system, be it in a city, suburb, rural area, or a mix of those area types, is able to respond to the unique needs of its region, which are shaped by geographic, economic, and cultural factors.

In November 2020, the School Library Systems Association of New

York State partnered with the New York State Library to develop a presentation for the Regents Advisory Council on Libraries highlighting the school librarian's role in remote and hybrid instruction. The New York State School Library System Directors worked together to solicit examples of innovative practices and programming from a diverse cross-section of librarians during COVID

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school closures, and to collaboratively develop and coordinate the presentation. School librarians and school library systems were showcased during the two-hour long "Regents Advisory Council on Libraries Convening: The Role of School Librarians in Remote and Hybrid

Instruction" presentation. The presenters included school librarians, administrators, and students who shared exemplary programming and practices in the areas of digital equity, family support and engagement, social-emotional learning, information literacy, and collaboration. New York City's "Translation of Practice" document was also highlighted.

Clear takeaways from the presentation were the innovative practices that school librarians developed in the midst of the pandemic. Whether it was setting up virtual book checkout and delivery; creating tutorials for teachers, parents, and students; or creating websites with multilingual resources for parents focused on social and emotional health, school librarians found creative ways to support their communi-

ties. Throughout the presentation many school librarians noted their accomplishments wouldn't have been possible without assistance from their respective school library systems.

## Facilitating Communication and Idea Sharing

It is not uncommon for a school librarian to be the sole librarian in their building or district, which can feel isolating. New York state's school library systems offer continuous opportunities for school librarians to be part of a larger professional community. Each system supports a variety of school situations, bringing them together in a greater regional network of professionals.

The school library systems facilitate communication in a variety of ways, including through listservs that promote discussion between the system and the librarians and among the librarians themselves. Listservs provide a safe place to ask questions and share ideas. Karen Fronhofer, K–12 librarian at Salem Central School in the Warren Saratoga Washington Hamilton Essex (WSWHE) School Library System, values the ability to communicate and collaborate with fellow librarians, noting that as the sole librarian in her district, she values the collegiality that comes from communicating with others in her region. "Sometimes I just need to talk to librarians" (Fronhofer 2020).

In addition to e-mail communications, systems began relying on videoconferencing more regularly during COVID closures to bring their school librarians together as a community. Recognizing their need to connect with their colleagues, decompress emotionally, and share promising practices for unprecedented circumstances, many school library systems hosted weekly, and sometimes daily, meetings for their school librarians. School librarian Sarah Amarese of the Churchville-

Chili Central School District noted that the weekly videoconference meetings hosted by the Monroe 2-Orleans School Library System "helped all of us with our own mental health," and she was inspired to hear about the "wonderful things other librarians in our region [were] doing" (2020).

The school librarians of the Broome-Tioga School Library System provide evidence of how a dedicated professional community of librarians can and do elevate each other's practice. Through the regular virtual meet-ups facilitated by their school library system during COVID

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closures, the group had the opportunity to brainstorm regularly to share best practices. One focus was a challenge they were all facing: how to best communicate with students and families with whom they had little or no contact. The support from their school library system was fundamental in helping them craft multifaceted solutions to a complex issue. School librarian Carrie Randall of Homer Brink Elementary stated, "Our [school library system] leaders asked and listened and coached and supported us throughout that unprecedented time. Their flexibility and knowledge allowed us to have the room and resources in order

to think collectively and try various approaches. We put 'can't' and 'don't' and 'haven't' aside for 'try'..." Carrie noted that many proactive practices came from these sessions. "Our results [included] home book deliveries, curbside book pick-ups, online bitmoji classrooms, research database lesson collaborations with classroom teachers, providing resources about COVID-19, YouTube channels centering on read-alouds, collecting student and teacher COVID experience stories—to name a few!" (Randall 2021).

As a result of their participation in a regional professional development series, five school librarians from the WSWHE School Library System collaborated to create an activity in Google Slides that allowed students to choose an adventure while learning about the databases their school provides. One of the collaborators, school librarian Jennifer Casabonne, reflected on the fact that before this professional development, she was not as skilled at incorporating information literacy into her lessons. This "Choose Your Own Adventure" collaborative project "took a long time to work on and it's been a great project to introduce...databases and give lots of choices to kids" (Casabonne 2020). Because of this professional learning experience, these librarians not only extended their learning experience through the collaborative process, but also developed a product that was customizable for each school.

## Promoting Leadership

School librarians have the potential to be leaders in their buildings, and school library systems help them attain that goal through mentoring and leadership training. School

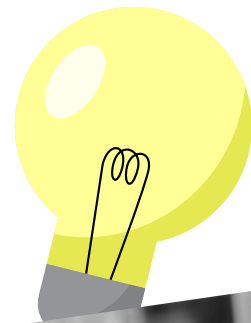
librarians are seen as experts regarding instructional technology integration, resources, and students' social and emotional needs, and COVID-related school closings heightened the demand for their expertise in these areas from fellow educators, students, and parents.

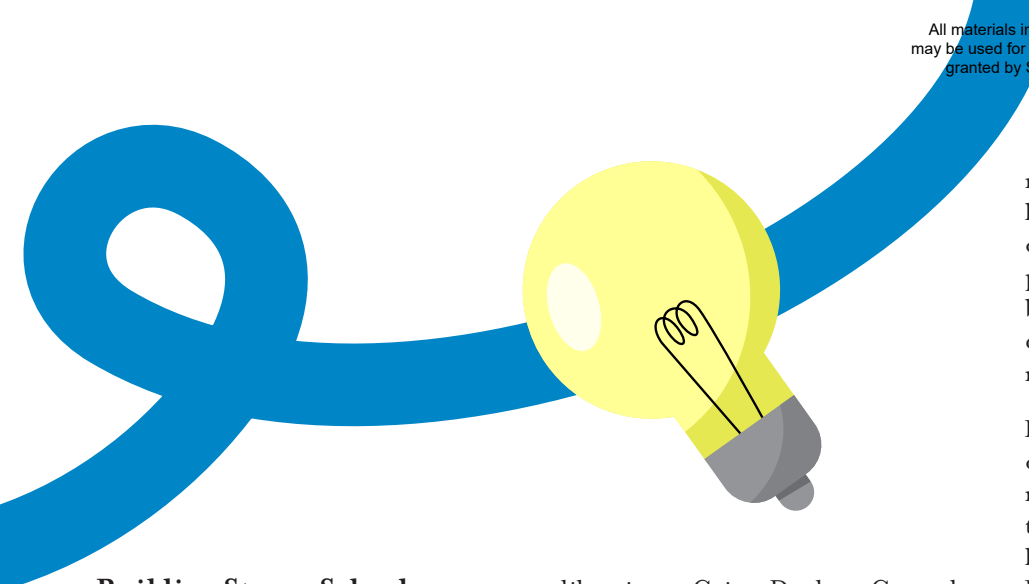
Individual school library systems provided valuable professional development on the resources available to districts. For example, the Questar III School Library System staff created professional learning workshops that focused on Teaching-Books.net, Rosen's Power Knowledge Science Suite, and Sora to support school librarians and other educators in the region. Nancy Pine, librarian at Cairo-Durham Junior Senior High School, was grateful for the extra training provided. "The review of these resource tools and how to use and leverage them gave me the information and confidence to move forward, reach out and support

teachers, students, and struggling parents suddenly thrown into the world of remote learning" (Pine 2021).

School library systems may cover a large area geographically, but they are adept at creating resources for their librarians that are unique and can meet the particular challenges of a region. As a result, the individualized support they provide can bolster school librarians and assist them in leading within their school community. The Genesee Valley School Library System created an instructional guide titled "How Can School Librarians Support Instruction?" that aided school librarians in supporting instruction during the pandemic. Kristie Miller, K-12 librarian at Alexander Central School, used this document to lead in many ways and appreciated how it seemed tailored for her school situation. She stated, "A guiding document, created from outside

my district but regionally that [addresses the] unique challenges that we face geographically, economically, and culturally, can help urge us into action." The guide helped her problem solve and transition seamlessly when it was necessary. "[T]he kind of problem solving that we are used to can take on a new meaning and create opportunities for conversations for paths that don't normally cross. The 'Instructional Guide' helped me reshape my thinking and remake my practice" (Miller 2021).





## Building Strong School Librarians

Schools with certified school librarians and strong libraries have students who are more successful. Certified school librarians who are well versed in current practices in education and librarianship are better able to meet the needs of their students. School library systems help build strong school librarians and thus help build strong school libraries. One way in which systems build strong librarians is through professional learning opportunities.

In New York state's Capital Region, four school library systems collaborated to bring their school librarians together for a series of workshops during school closures. The professional learning focused on using the re-imagined *Empire State Information Fluency Continuum* and New York City's "Translation of Practice" document to transition lessons into the online learning environment, brainstorm ways in which school librarians could support families and students, and outline how school librarians could empower learning through reading and literacy. This work led to continued professional learning during the summer that focused on reopening school libraries and teaching in hybrid, in-person, and remote learning conditions. This sustained professional learning prepared school librarians for an unpredictable year. Nancy Pine,

librarian at Cairo-Durham Central School, summed up the impact of the Questar III School Library System's support when she stated, "It is only through these professional development opportunities that I felt prepared, had a plan in place, and continued to promote the library program in our district" (2021).

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## Assistance in Providing Digital Equity

New York State School Library Systems are also charged with providing equitable access, ensuring that no matter the geography or income level of families or schools, the students in their regions can access high-quality educational resources. One way that systems have historically achieved this is by providing the infrastructure for and

management of robust inter-library loan networks, multiplying the power of individual school collections by providing the means by which any book owned by a member school can be easily shared with any other member school in the system.

However, when COVID closures cut off many students' access to physical materials, it was the digital collections already developed by school library systems that took center stage. Meredith Bruno, school librarian at Watson Williams Elementary School in the Utica City School District, noted that when her district shifted to a fully remote mode of teaching and learning, the Oneida/Herkimer School Library System's Sora e-books collection became the only source of books for many of her students. For her students, 91 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged and 20 percent of whom are English language learners, the Sora e-book collection became a lifeline to literacy. Reflecting on the extended COVID closures, Meredith stated, "My students haven't been able to take out physical books for months...and they often don't have a robust home library or books at home at all," so the school library system's Sora collection has "allowed these students to access a whole library with the click of the button" ("Regents Advisory Council on Libraries" 2020). Meredith noted that the diverse modality of e-books provided by the school library system, including narrated read-alouds and audiobooks, are especially helpful for the large number of developing readers at her school, as well as for those students whose parents are non-English speaking.

This access to rich, relevant collections of resources and the associated training and support enabled school librarians to shine as instructional leaders by ensuring digital equity. Beyond technical

aspects such as access to broadband, devices, and software, the New York State Department of Education's definition of digital equity identifies digital literacy skills and a community of support as critical components. School librarians have taken the lead in ensuring students and teachers not only have the necessary digital literacy skills to access educational platforms and content, but also an ever-present community of support through their school libraries. Superintendent Martha Group of Vernon-Verona-Sherrill School District in the Madison-Oneida School Library System sees her district's school librarian team "as the backbone of the instructional program across the entire school." She stated, "they [have] a full understanding of the technology and curricular needs of our teachers" ("Regents Advisory Council on Libraries" 2020). During school closures, the work that they took on included providing instructional technology support for teachers, students, and families, which included daily tech tips and video tutorials, as well as daily open office hours. As Group explains, "Rather than inundating teachers... they were able to provide bite-sized pieces of technology information that our teachers were able to use with our students at the moment in time at which they needed them" ("Regents Advisory Council on Libraries" 2020). Vernon-Verona-Sherrill school librarian, Tina Laramie, noted that the databases provided by her school library system, as well as the technical support provided for the integration of those resources, were fundamental in helping support teachers in their immediate needs. "I feel fortunate to have another avenue of support that's a huge piece of why we can be successful," she states. "With a system in our region, we have someone else looking out for us" (Laramie 2021).

## Conclusion

School library systems provide the important connection that school librarians need in order to be successful and bring about high levels of student achievement. As regional entities serving multiple districts with diverse needs, school library systems are uniquely poised to deliver services effectively. This includes not only the efficient networking and exchange of robust physical and digital collections, but also individualized consulting and professional development services that require knowledge of each library program's unique needs. Additionally, by facilitating a regional learning



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community able to meet both in person and virtually, school library systems facilitate a rich intellectual exchange that supports the success of the school librarian and the school library.

The school library system provides that multifaceted support to librarians, other educators, and families. We are better together because of school library systems.

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