

Implementing the U.S. School Library Standards: Data and Dialogue from the Field

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Abstract:

In this exploratory study, a survey was conducted to learn about school librarian perceptions on the implementation and practice using the US National School Library Standards (NSLS) for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries published by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA). Participants in the state of Virginia in the United States, reported on their experiences after attending training on the new NSLS and they began their personal plan of implementation. This report documents preliminary findings indicating participants found implementation training largely introductory. After one year many remain at the awareness phase of implementing the new standards, yet to begin transitioning their activities or implementing the standards into practice. Participants have encountered challenges to implementing the Standards including awareness and “buy-in” from other stakeholders in the district and time constraints, preventing their implementation efforts. Additionally, lack of confidence in their own understanding of the materials has prevented some school librarians from fully implementing the new Standards. Future directions of this research include final data collection and analysis from additional training sessions, as well as follow up interviews with some participants to gather deeper insights on the perceptions of the population. Recommendations include future training at both the school and district level to increase and sustain implementation efforts.

Keywords: School Library Standards, School Library Education, Standards Implementation

Introduction

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), is the national professional association for school librarians in the United States. Since the early 1900s, AASL has published professional standards for the school library. These standards have been situated within the larger education and library community to guide

school library professionals in their work. US School library standards have been updated on an ongoing basis to reflect changes in education policy, advances in technology and pedagogy, and the dynamic shifts in the expectations many school librarians experience in practice. In 2018, AASL released the *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* (NSLS), its most recent set of standards. These Standards have similarities in educational expectations with the *IFLA School Library Guidelines* (2015), focusing on such topics as the purpose of the school library, programming and activities, and assessment and evaluation of the school librarian, instruction and the program.

An aggressive implementation plan was launched with the new US Standards (AASL, 2017). This plan included a systematic set of objectives to introduce, launch and train users on use of multiple components of the developed Standards frameworks. The Implementation Plan was guided by an independent task force assigned to strategically launch professional development initiatives to ensure the new standards reached a diverse audience and sufficient training on the use was available.

One year post adoption of the new *National School Library Standards*, after several stages of the Implementation Plan have been launched, there is little data available about the impact the new standards have made on the practices of school librarians and the perception of the standards by the school librarians who work with them. This study attempts to capture those perceptions. In this exploratory case study, the researcher surveyed professional school librarians working in one state who had all attended professional development training on the NSLS. Participants work in schools where use of the standards is integrated with other educational curricula.

Statement of the Problem

The goal of this study was to provide a data driven snapshot of current practice and implementation of the US *National School Library Standards* to include perceptions of the materials, pedagogical practices, alignment and articulation with other faculty and administrators, and noted challenges school librarians face in the implementation phases. Exploration of additional resources during professional development was also considered. This study focuses on the research questions:

1. What do school librarians perceive to be beneficial components of the new standards?
2. How has the professional development on the standards facilitated school librarian implementation?
3. What do school librarians perceive to be the greatest barriers in adopting and implementing the new standards into their practice?

Related Background

Implementing Learning Standards

In education, implementation of learning standards happens across a span of time (Huberman & Miles, 1984; Supovitz & Turner, 2000). The California Common Core Implementation Task Force identified three phases of implementation: awareness, transition and implementation (2019). Each of these have distinct characteristics defined below:

Awareness Phase: This phase represents those having an introduction to the AASL Standards, the implementation plan and resources and professional development provided to introduce the materials.

Transition Phase: This phase represents a concentration on district support, engaging with AASL standards with others in the building, district or state to understand shifts in practice to using the materials, establishing new professional learning opportunities, and expanding collaborations between all stakeholders.

Implementation Phase: This phase expands new professional learning support, fully aligns curriculum, instruction, and assessments, to the new Standards and effectively integrates these elements into daily practice.

These phases were used and shared with the participants of this study.

Implementing the National School Library Standards

At 314 pages and including both program and learner standards, the standards text took on a format unlike the previous iteration, *Standards for the 21st Century Learner* (AASL, 2007). In addition to the text are numerous online support resources. This was an immediate benefit noted by those who reviewed the early release of the standards, “The online support for *AASL’s National School Library Standards* is effective and will support practicing school librarians as they explore and adopt the new language and content of the book.” (Moreillon, 2017). As Moreillon (2017) went on to note in her review, one of the most beneficial features of the new standards is the *Standards Integrated Framework* that aligns the competencies and expectations for the learner, school librarian and school library within the *Standards*.

The framework has competencies that can be explored independently but is developed as an integrated set to reflect a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning in the school library (AASL, 2018). This iteration of the standards is new, however. As school librarians begin to explore the implementation of the standards in practice, a more comprehensive examination of the strengths and obstacles to the format and use of the text will become evident.

A task force was seated by AASL to assist with the implementation of the new standards. The charge to this group was to introduce the standards, build awareness, understanding and commitment to the standards from the school library community and their stakeholders, create and provide professional development, marketing and advocacy messaging, and infuse and reflect the AASL strategic goals. The resulting AASL Implementation Plan (2017a) had four broad goals upon development.

- Explain the structure purpose and value of the AASL Standards to school librarians, stakeholders and partners beyond the school community
- Engage innovators in developing tools to explain the structure, purpose, and value of the AASL standards to school librarian, stakeholders, and partners beyond the school library community
- Equip practitioners to understand apply and use the AASL Standards in their educational settings
- Evaluate progress toward implementing AASL Standards and adjust for changing conditions

In addition to this multi-faceted plan was the inclusion of action items, timelines, and criteria for assessment and evaluation. The implementation process also included the creation of products and tools to facilitate use and entry-level understanding of the standards for practitioners. These materials are housed on a standards portal designed for training and use of the standards (standards.aasl.org, 2017c).

Initial implementation training of the AASL Standards occurred at the AASL National Conference in Arizona in fall, 2017. Virginia sent several delegates to participate in professional development training on the NSLS. These full day training sessions, in addition to multiple 60 to 90-minute sessions throughout the conference, introduced state leaders to the materials and began conversations on implementation. Further training was planned at the state and district level to an effort to infuse multiple experiences with the standards for a broader practitioner experience.

Data Collection and Methodology

The target population for this case study was school librarians in the state of Virginia. All participants attended at least one dedicated professional development training session focused on implementing the *AASL National School Library Standards*. Once IRB was approved, participants were solicited through targeted email to voluntarily respond to a survey about their experiences and perceptions. Ninety-two potential respondents were included in the sample. A response rate of 28% was obtained.

A modified version of the *Common Core Implementation Survey* was used for this study (2019). Survey questions were a mix of both quantitative and qualitative design. Quantitative and closed response survey questions are reported in aggregate and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative, open response questions are analyzed using open deductive coding (Patton, 2002). Each response was analyzed as a unit of analysis and coded for meaning or intent. These responses were then grouped across participant responses and organized into themes. Themes were recorded and are discussed in the findings.

Findings

Participants

Eighty-one percent (n=21) of the respondents self-reported to be practicing school librarians. One participant was a classroom teacher/non librarian. The remainder of the participants (15%, n= 4) self-identified as school library supervisors/district level support for the school library. Responses indicate the majority (70%) own a copy of the full standards text. Other Standards resources that participants use to support their work, according to their responses, include the free Learner Framework download (n=17), the explainer one-page resources designed for stakeholders (n=9), and the explainer videos (n=5). Two respondents were using the AASL Standards APP. Four respondents reported not using any materials developed for the Standards.

The survey was distributed after participants had attended a professional training session focused specifically on the standards, though some may have attended more than one training event. The survey was not distributed immediately after the professional development, allowing time for engagement with the material and others in the district.

Using the definitions provided for implementation phases, the majority of participants consider their engagement with the standards to be at the awareness phase. The most basic level, this phase is an introductory level of implementation where users are themselves becoming aware of the resources and materials. Fifty-eight percent (n=15) of respondents placed their implementation at this phase. An additional thirty-five percent (n=9) stated they were in the transition phase. Post training, these participants felt they had the tools and resources available to begin working with materials in their practice. Only two participants stated they were in the implementation phase after participating in the professional development sessions.

Perceptions about the standards and implementation materials

All participants indicated they had training in the NSLS. Findings from the survey show that eighteen of the participants identify having 4-8 hours of professional development training on the Standards. An additional two stated they had 8-12 hours of training while three stated they had participated in 12-20 hours of training on the Standards. One participant identified as attending each 20-30 hours of training and over 40 hours of training on the standards (see Figure 1).

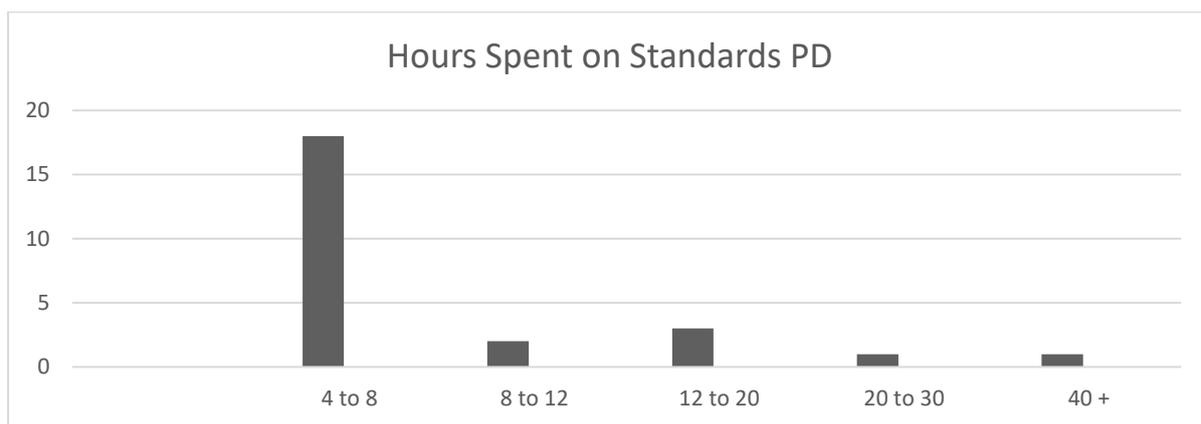


Figure 1. Participant time spent on Standards PD

Some participants left the training sessions with mixed reviews of the National School Library Standards. While the survey did not ask them to qualify how much they liked or perceived the standards as beneficial to their practice, participants discussed the materials in connection to their practice. One participant noted, “I think the standards are sound and a solid foundation. I can see that from a birds-eye view, but in the day to day planning instruction I'm struggling with seeing them as a road map. Teachers are so used to looking at state standards which are written (hopefully) with the developmental level of the learners in mind. National standards such as these are outcomes are more challenging to layer the developmental part on top of. Not many teachers have training in this”.

When discussing the training, participants identified several topics that were frequently included in sessions on the standards. Nearly all (n=20) stated that a basic introduction to the text, to include an introduction to the language of the standards, was part of any professional development they attended. Additionally, the formatting and function of the Standards materials was frequently included as a topic (21%, n=13 respondents). Deeper connections and use of the materials occurred at various levels. Sixteen participants (25% of respondents) stated that their professional development session included some training on instructional strategies that support student achievement. Other less frequently included topics were advocacy and building relationships with other stakeholders using AASL Standards materials (n=7) and assessing student achievement (n=5) (see Figure 2).

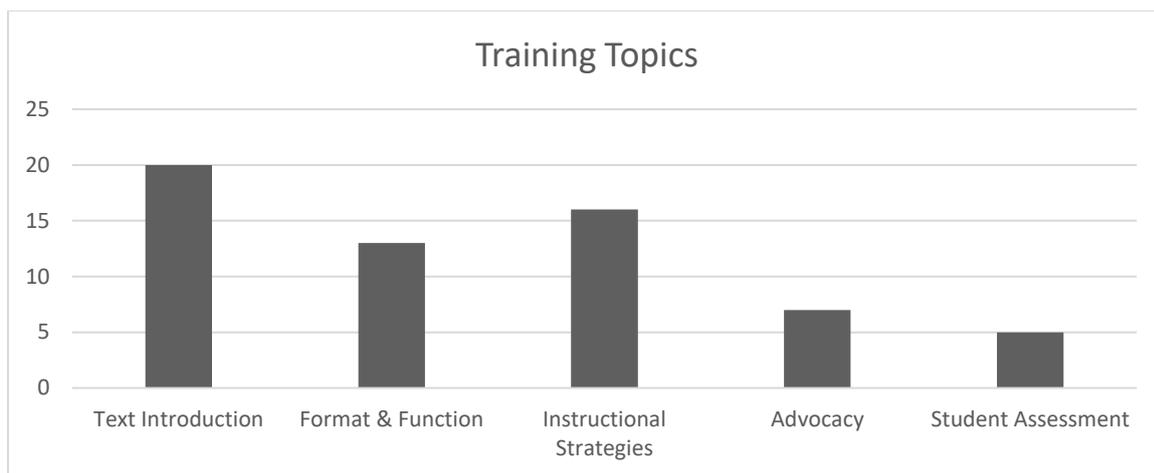


Figure 2. Topics addressed during NSLS PD training session

Facilitation of Implementation

To best implement new educational materials, a deep understanding is required. One respondent noted, “The conference was great, but putting it into practice was difficult. Very confusing.”

Participants seemed to be able to understand and benefit from the training, but once back in their schools, engaging with the materials to implement them into their work with students was more challenging. Participants addressed topics they perceived to be beneficial to implementation, as well as those topics they felt were missing but may have been helpful in facilitating their implementation journey. When reflecting on those topics that assisted in understanding and planning personal implementation, twelve participants stated training on the language of the standards was beneficial and nine felt an overview of the format and function of the materials was helpful. Six found a benefit in the materials on advocacy and stakeholder relationships. The majority benefitted from the more practical application of instructional strategies for student achievement (n=18).

When asked what training topics might help further their understanding multiple participants stated they were unsure what they needed to be successful, they simply knew they needed more training than they had to feel confident. Some had more concrete ideas. Common themes among these suggestions were curriculum alignment with other sets of standards or integration with other areas of the curriculum, opportunity to share what the standards look like in practice, and training on change and growth models.

Respondents did have suggestions for what would be beneficial to them in future training sessions to help facilitate their implementation of the standards. These suggestions shared the common theme of sharing practical strategies. Some respondents had more specific ideas of how this might be accomplished such as aligning the strategies with common inquiry models such as Guided Inquiry or Project Based Learning or breaking down the training to isolate one Shared Foundation to explore and build learning strategies. However, most participants simply suggested sharing ideas for using the NSLS in lesson design and sharing with others in an open format as a beneficial activity for their own growth and planning.

The suggestion that most and deeper training was needed seemed to impede some participant implementation of the standards in their practice. Eight participants did not currently have a plan to implement the new standards into their practice, while thirteen have begun to plan

implementation but not completed a plan. Only two participants have a completed plan and are actively using a plan to infuse the new standards in practice at this time.

Barriers to Implementation

While many respondents perceived their personal journey with the NSLS to be ongoing, common barriers were mentioned throughout the responses. The most frequently discussed barrier to use and implementation of the standards in practice was the disconnect of the standards with competing priorities within the participant's school division. Responses on this topic were open, therefore the researcher coded replies for meaning. Themes that were prevalent included time, lack of alignment to district and stakeholder goals, the format and function of the standards materials themselves, and the perceived need for more intensive training prior to confidence in use.

One of the most frequently cited barriers to not using or deeply implementing the standards into practice by the participants was the perceived lack of support by others in their district. Respondents noted they lack "buy-in from leadership team" or there is "no support or advocacy from the library supervisor" in implementing the standards. Additionally, nearly all participants state that their school district does not have a plan in place to implement the use of the National School library standards (n=22). Of the four respondents that have a district plan completed, none are actively using the plan.

Another frequently discussed barrier was time. Several respondents seemed open to the implementation of the NSLS, but time constraints of the roles and responsibilities of being a school librarian seemed to take precedence and leave little time for implementing the new standards, especially if they did not feel these were supported by other stakeholders. One participant wrote, "Time! Running a library, teaching 29 classes per week, and other teacher responsibilities make it hard to fully immerse in the plan."

Personal efficacy in use of the standards, even after attendance at training sessions and exploration of the implementation materials was a final frequent barrier. As one respondent stated, "I lack a solid understanding of the language of some of the new standards and how that translates into instructional approaches." Another more generally replied, "I just need more training".

Implications and Further Directions

The release of the US *National School Library Standards* was met with anticipation, excitement and concern. AASL employed a non-traditional approach to the development and creation of the standards (AASL, 2017b). Using a research backed approach with input, but little community feedback, to create the standards required that those who would be using the standards to learn and implement them simultaneously.

This research study demonstrates that the implementation of the *Standards* is in initial stages. The field is just a beginning to understanding the needs of practitioners as they infuse new standards into practice, as well as the benefits and challenges associated with adoption of a new set of learning standards. Through this type of exploration, it is possible to identify areas those in practice are hungry to explore in depth, with the assistance of knowledgeable trainers and readily available resources for support.

School librarians in the VA are working to ensure implementation reflects pedagogical best practice. Similar barriers to implementing the new standards exist across settings and

throughout the field, despite an aggressive implementation plan and professional development training prior to full release of the standards. Assessment of learners using the new standards and authentic collaboration and advocacy among stakeholders remain elusive areas for development that cannot be tackled until school librarians feel capable and successful consistently using the standards in daily practice.

The new standards provide opportunity for new research on implementation methods in school library teaching and collaboration. There are significant challenges to building relationships with others to ensure a clear and consistent message between school librarians and other educators in the building, as well as administrators, that reflect the goals and values of a school library program. The adoption of the *National School Library Standards* presents an opportunity for reflection and professional growth for school librarians. Participants in this study have some vested interest in the profession as respondents were recruited after participation in professional development activities. Exploring their perceptions and identifying strengths and barriers to implementation may assist with strengthening practices across the school library profession. Shared implementation practices help to facilitate a shared rejuvenation in practice for those embracing the opportunity.

Findings from this survey are preliminary and capture early responses to professional development. This research is on-going. Another series of responses is anticipated in summer 2019 before the conclusion of data collection. Additionally, a smaller sample of participants were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. These follow-up interviews are on-going and will be conducted for a deeper exploration of participant implementation of the standards.

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