Implementing the National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries in Rural Virginia

Jen Spisak | spisakjr@longwood.edu
Carl A. Harvey II | harveyca@longwood.edu
Karla Collins | collinskb@longwood.edu
Audrey Church | churchap@longwood.edu
As we traveled home from the November 2017 AASL National Conference in Phoenix with our copies of the new National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries in hand, a major topic of conversation was how we could facilitate implementation of the new AASL Standards in the rural area of Virginia where our university is located. Our driving questions were, essentially, how could we get copies of the new standards into the hands of our region’s school librarians, and how could we assist them as they implemented the new standards in their schools?

Faculty Research Grant
Each academic year Longwood University offers a limited number of Faculty Research Grants. Applications are due by the end of January so when we returned from Phoenix we started to work on our proposal. Two of our goals for the research project were as follows:

Goal 1: To provide access to the American Association of School Librarians’ National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries along with professional development and resources to support implementation in the Pre-K–12 public schools in our region.

Goal 2: To explore the process school librarians follow as they implement new National School Library Standards. What roadblocks do they encounter? What successes do they have? On which standards do they focus first? Why?

As the only public university in the region, Longwood takes service to the region very seriously. In our grant application we noted that due to the cost of the AASL Standards book, most of the school librarians and school divisions in the region would not have funding to support their purchase and that, unless we did something, standards-focused professional development opportunities would be nonexistent locally. We also emphasized that the project would provide school librarians with the opportunity to build a community of practice across the region focusing on the AASL Standards. In late spring, we were notified that our grant had been approved.

Once the grant was approved, we developed research questions to help us meet our goals and be able to fine-tune and improve our process in the future.

Research Questions
What is the status of implementation of the National School Library Standards in our region of Virginia’s public schools? How does the status change?

What techniques do school librarians in our region use to implement the new standards?

What successes and challenges do our region’s school librarians experience during implementation of the new standards?

How does professional development and participation in communities of practice impact implementation of the National School Library Standards in public schools in our region of Virginia?

How do professional development and participation in communities of practice impact our region’s school librarians’ growth as professionals?

Reaching Out to School Divisions
Because we wanted all school librarians to have the opportunity to participate in research regarding AASL Standards implementation—research that would include attending professional development workshops on campus during school hours—our first step was to reach out to division superintendents and directors of curriculum and instruction/professional development in each of the school divisions. We contacted them via e-mail, providing basic information about the new standards, explaining our project, and asking permission for their school librarians to participate. All twelve school divisions provided names and contact information for their librarians and approved their participation in the project. Our next step was to explain the project to the school librarians and invite them to participate, and then to order a copy of the standards book for each participant.

Participant Demographics
Forty-nine librarians were employed in the region and invited to participate in the workshop and year-long professional development
around implementation of the new AASL Standards. Thirty-seven school librarians agreed to participate, a response rate of 76 percent. One participant indicated working at a primary school (age 3 through second grade); eighteen (48.6 percent) indicated working at elementary schools. Eight (21.6 percent) indicated working at middle schools; one at a middle/high school combination, and nine (24.3 percent) at high schools.

Of the thirty-seven participants, eight (21.6 percent) had 0 to 3 years school librarian experience; eight (21.6 percent) had 4 to 7 years of experience; six (16.2 percent) 8 to 11 years of experience; six (16.2 percent) 12 to 15 years of experience; three (8.1 percent) 16 to 19 years of experience; and six (16.2 percent) 20 or more years.

### September Professional Development Workshop

#### Establishing a Baseline

On September 20, 2018, librarians representing all twelve school divisions came to Longwood’s campus to participate in a full-day workshop. Prior to distribution of the standards or any discussion, participants completed a survey designed to gather the following data:

- What standards the librarians were currently using
- How they implement national standards in instruction
- How they assess student learning in the library
- How national standards influence their professional practice
- How they characterize principals’, teachers’, and parents’ awareness of national library standards

#### Basic demographics

We followed up the survey by asking who already had a copy of the standards book in their library. We then introduced the structure and design of the standards: Common Beliefs, Frameworks, and terminology: Shared Foundations, Domains, Key Commitments, Competencies, and Alignments. Because the grant allowed us to purchase a copy of the AASL Standards book for each attendee, AASL granted us permission to copy each of the frameworks—learner, school librarian, and school library—and participants annotated these copies to self-assess at the Domain level for each Shared Foundation, indicating whether they felt themselves to be Proficient, Beginning, or Not Yet Started. Since up to this point we had been collecting data from the participants, it was then time for professional development to begin!

### Beginning the Journey

Prior to the workshop we had strategically divided participants into six groups, one for each of the Shared Foundations—Inquire, Include, Collaborate, Curate, Explore, and Engage—with a mix of grade levels and school divisions in each group. Within their groups participants unpacked their Shared Foundation, creating a poster to share their conversation and understanding.

Following a gallery walk to view the posters, participants were reorganized into groups of elementary, middle, and high schools. Each group contained an "expert" from each of the previously mentioned Shared Foundation groups. They took part in a discussion focused on the Shared Foundations as related to their level. This allowed everyone to develop a beginning understanding of all six Shared Foundations. Next they began to brainstorm and discuss what the AASL Standards might look like in action at each of the grade levels: elementary, middle, and high.

To finish out the day, grouped by school division, participants composed a one- to two-sentence initial statement for how they plan to go about implementing the standards in their school division during the 2018–2019 school year. Finally, we asked them to set individual goals for AASL Standards implementation for the school year. To set these goals, we asked participants to look back at their frameworks and the Domains within Shared Foundations that they had marked as Beginning or Not Yet Started and select three or four that they wanted to focus on this year in their libraries.

To record their school division statement and individual goals, we used the free version of the learning management system Canvas. Canvas would also provide the space for their online community of practice for the 2018–2019 school year. The librarians were split into four communities of practice: high school (one group), middle school (one group), and elementary school (two groups).
Each community of practice is led by one of the four members of our team (the authors of this article, all educators of school librarians). Within these groups in Canvas, we have provided discussion spaces for sharing strategies, artifacts, and resources for AASL Standards implementation for the respective grade levels.

Preliminary Findings

We gathered preliminary information pertaining to the status of implementation of national standards by the librarians in this region before our professional development year began. Data were collected on the Domains and Shared Foundations in the new standards that are currently in use by each school library, how participants implement them in instruction, and how up-to-date school librarians felt their level of knowledge of the AASL Standards was before the workshop.

Of the thirty-seven workshop participants, only seven librarians owned the National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries book before attending our workshop. Of these seven, four were currently our students and had the standards as a required text for our school librarianship courses. It was clear that this grant would provide needed access to the AASL Standards, part of our first goal in writing the grant. According to survey responses, before the workshop the school librarians were using a variety of previous iterations of school library standards. Most of the participants reported using the earlier standards for collaboration and standalone lessons.

Although a large number of attendees acknowledged they were not up to date on the new AASL Standards, their participation in this professional development opportunity showed a desire to learn about and implement the new standards. As mentioned earlier, we knew lack of money would be an obstacle to purchasing the standards in our region, but as we write this in January 2019, we would like to know if other obstacles exist. For example, we would like to follow up on how often the participants are able to access library-specific professional development and what obstacles they have in accessing professional development. When we reconvene in the spring, we will ask these questions to see what assistance we are able to provide.

The school librarians were tasked with self-assessing their levels of proficiency for each Shared Foundation and Domain. The ratings were Proficient, Beginning, and Not Yet Started. Preliminary analysis of these workshop data show participants feel more proficient with the Domains for school librarians and for school libraries than they do with the Domains for learners (see figure 1). Further study may be warranted to determine why participants rate themselves more proficient for their work as librarians and for their school libraries than they do for their work with learners.

Upon examination of the Shared Foundations that had not yet been started by the participants, the following observations were made. For the learner framework, Curate and Engage were the Shared Foundations most commonly selected as Not Yet Started (see figure 2), and for the librarian framework and school library framework Engage was the Shared Foundation most commonly selected as being Not Yet Started (see figures 3 and 4).

Engage was the most commonly selected Not Yet Started Shared Foundation for the school librarian and school library frameworks, and Curate (with Engage a close second) for the learner framework. Therefore, we expected to see most participants’ goals fall within these most commonly selected Not Yet Started Shared Foundations. As described later, our expectation was not met.

These data show a need in our region for access to the new AASL Standards and materials for implementation. The librarians are teaching lessons in their schools and implementing the standards when they can, but these data show they need support to do so.
Stakeholder Awareness of the Standards

Preliminary results also show a great perceived need for sharing the AASL Standards with teachers, principals, and parents to raise awareness and advocate for the school library (see table 1). It is clear that these school librarians feel their stakeholders have little to no awareness of the AASL Standards. Based on these results, we plan to provide time in the follow-up workshop for librarians to begin to develop plans for how they will raise stakeholders’ awareness of the standards. We will provide some preliminary ideas and then encourage librarians to brainstorm together and work with other librarians in their school divisions to outline a plan for sharing the new AASL Standards with principals, teachers, and parents.

As noted previously, we expected the participant goals to align with the most commonly selected Not Yet Started Shared Foundations in each of the three frameworks as these self-assessments indicate areas for the most growth. It is interesting to note, however, that there are actually few clear connections between the areas where school librarians indicated lower proficiency and the goals they selected for their focus.

For the learner framework, the goals were fairly evenly spread among the Shared Foundations with slightly more participants choosing goals from Collaborate and Explore (see figure 5). For the school librarian framework and the school library framework, the Collaborate Shared Foundation had much higher frequencies of goals than the other Shared Foundations (see figures 6 and 7). This result was not what we had anticipated based on the self-assessment when Curate for the learner framework and Engage for the school librarian and school

Participants’ Goals for 2018–2019 School Year

After the professional development workshop, participants were encouraged to consider what they had learned during the day and to reflect on the frameworks they had annotated earlier in the day when they self-assessed their proficiency for implementing each Shared Foundation and Domain as Proficient, Beginning, or Not Yet Started in their library. As mentioned previously, participants were encouraged to draft three or four goals across the three frameworks they would like to focus on improving this year. The breakdown of the Shared Foundations on which they planned to focus during the current school year can be seen in figures 5 through 7.

Table 1. Librarian perceptions of stakeholder awareness of national standards for school libraries (n=37).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all aware % (n)</th>
<th>Somewhat aware % (n)</th>
<th>Very aware % (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>62.2 (23)</td>
<td>32.4 (12)</td>
<td>5.4 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>78.4 (29)</td>
<td>18.9 (7)</td>
<td>2.7 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>91.9 (34)</td>
<td>8.1 (3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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library frameworks had been the Shared Foundations with the highest frequencies of being selected as Not Yet Started prior to the training session.

Upon reflection, we acknowledge that we pushed the participants to choose goals in a hurry at the end of a long day. Most of the participants were not familiar with the new AASL Standards at the beginning of the day. At the end of a full day, we gave attendees limited time to choose goals for the year. That day, some people did ask for more time to consider their choices. We asked all participants to choose goals but indicated they could change the goals after more thought. Based on the seemingly random goal choices and our reflections about the day, we sent individual e-mails to each participant in January encouraging them to reconsider their goals and tell us how they are doing with the goals or if they wanted to change their focus for the remainder of the year.

Our research plan calls for interviewing focus groups after the follow-up training session in the spring. One question for these groups might be related to how goals were chosen on the initial workshop day. It will be interesting to find out if participants chose goals based on their initial understandings or if they chose goals that seemed attainable at the time.

During the 2018–2019 School Year

During the workshop, the regional librarians showed great interest in their new community of practice. They had never been together before as a region, and they were looking forward to having a new community of colleagues with whom they could plan, share, pose questions, and get feedback on ideas. They especially enjoyed meeting school librarians from other school divisions as well as librarians who taught the same grade levels as themselves. While several of the school divisions in the region have multiple elementary schools, most have only one middle and one high school, so having a community of practice by shared grade level was met with great enthusiasm.

Since the workshop, communication within this community of practice has taken place through Canvas. As mentor leaders, we each contact our groups monthly to check in and inquire about their status with standards implementation. We encourage them to respond to discussion posts in answer to the prompt of the month (which our team at Longwood posts) and to continue posting questions, comments, suggestions, and strategies for the group. We are currently considering ideas for how to boost participation in Canvas by members of our mentored groups. In the second semester of the school year, we plan to encourage our groups to not only respond to the discussion prompts and each other, but also to post successful lesson plans and artifacts of implementation to share with one another.
In April we will regather as a region for a culminating workshop. During this workshop, the regional librarians will discuss their levels of implementation of the standards in their respective schools. They will share success stories and stumbling blocks as well as artifacts and lesson ideas. At the end of the workshop, participants will develop additional goals for further implementation during the next school year.

What’s Next

Through our Canvas course and at the culminating spring 2019 workshop, we are continuing to offer professional development and help groups establish communities of practice with whom they can work this year and in the future. Through our research, we hope to identify roadblocks that school librarians encounter and successes that they experience as they work to implement AASL’s National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries.

Jen Spisak, a school librarian from 2004–2016, is an assistant professor in the school librarianship program at Longwood University. She is the author of Multimedia Learning Stations: Facilitating Instruction, Strengthening the Research Process, Building Collaborative Partnerships (Libraries Unlimited, 2015). She has previously been honored as her school’s Teacher of the Year and as the Virginia Association of School Librarians School Librarian of the Year.

Carl A. Harvey II is an assistant professor of School Librarianship at Longwood University. Previously, he was an elementary school librarian for seventeen years in Indiana where his school won the 2007 National School Library Media Program of the Year Award. He was the 2011–2012 president of AASL. He has published several articles and has written six books, including The Library Media Specialist in the Writing Process (co-authored with Marge Cox and Susan Page) (2007); No School Library Left Behind: Leadership, School Improvement, and the Media Specialist (2008); The 21st Century Elementary Library Media Program (2010); Adult Learners: School Librarians and Professional Development (2012); Leading the Common Core Initiative: A Guide for K–6 Librarians (co-authored with Linda Mills) (2015); and The 21st Century Elementary Library Program, 2nd Edition (2017). He serves as one of the editors of School Library Connection.

Karla Collins is an associate professor of School Librarianship at Longwood University. Karla started her school library career in 1991 and worked as a school librarian at all levels before teaching at Longwood. She currently serves as chair of the Knowledge Quest Editorial Board.

Audrey Church is professor and director of the school librarianship graduate program at Longwood University in Farmville, VA. A frequent presenter at local, state, and national conferences, she is the author of Leverage Your Library Program to Help Raise Test Scores (Linworth, 2003), Your Library Goes Virtual (Linworth, 2007), and Tapping into the Skills of 21st Century School Librarians: A Concise Handbook for Administrators (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). She is a past president of AASL, the Virginia Educational Media Association, and the Virginia Educational Research Association.