

STANDARDS COLUMN



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Cherity Pennington uses the AASL Standards in her daily practice as the director of library and media services for Shawnee (Oklahoma) Public Schools and as the Shawnee Middle School librarian. Her work is focused on empowering learners and educators and building a culture grounded in collaboration and literacy. She believes all learners deserve access to a highly qualified school librarian.



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Deborah Lang Froggatt served as Director of Library Services for Boston Public Schools for eight years. Prior to that she directed Boston Arts/Academy Fenway High School Library. Her school library career and public school advocacy spans 26 years also serving in Danvers and Beverly, MA and in Brookfield, Ridgefield and Woodbury, CT. She was the Sherman, CT Library Director and the Calumet (MI) Public Hospital Librarian. Academic credentials include: Miami University-BA, History; Princeton Theological Seminary-MA, Education; Southern Connecticut State University-MLS; Ph.D-Simmons University. Research includes the informationally underserved and school librarian assessment. She is now a Trustee of the Phoebe Noyes Griffin Library in Old Lyme, CT.

Advocacy in Action: Navigating Challenges with Confidence and Strategy

If school librarians could design the perfect school library, what would it include?

AN UNLIMITED BUDGET TO PURCHASE MATERIALS FOR EVERY LEARNER'S NEEDS?

A fully responsive schedule that allows for real-time, point-of-need instruction? Daily collaboration with enthusiastic classroom educators? An administrative team that completely understands your role and champions the school library? A community that recognizes their expertise and regularly asks, "How can we help?"

Most school librarians would answer these questions with a resounding "Yes!" Yet, we know that no amount of wishing can bring that ideal school library environment into existence. Today's school librarians often work within emotionally draining and overwhelming circumstances. Despite this less-than-ideal working environment, we are still called to build inclusive, responsive school libraries that meet the varied needs of our learning communities.

Thankfully, the second edition of *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* equips school librarians with powerful tools to navigate challenging situations. The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Standards are not only aspirational—they're practical.

Turning Challenges into Advocacy Opportunities

During the research phase of developing the second edition, school librarians voiced a need for practical ways to apply the AASL Standards in their everyday practice and amid less-than-ideal conditions. Many expressed concerns that their real-world school environments made implementation feel daunting. They needed more support to advocate effectively for their learners, their school libraries, and themselves.

In response, the AASL Standards Committee developed realistic scenarios based on these commonly stated challenges, and paired each with guidance on transforming those situations into conversations and advocacy opportunities. These aren't theoretical exercises—they reflect the lived experiences of working school librarians.

From Obstacle to Advocacy Plan: A Structured Approach

While the AASL Standards have always served as an entry point for school library advocacy, the second edition introduces scenarios as an advocacy template designed to help school librarians break down challenges and rebuild them into opportunities for communication and change. Each scenario sets the stage with a real-world issue commonly encountered while working with learners, other educators, administrators, and families or community members, then walks the reader through:

- Analysis of the concerns
- Alignment with relevant AASL Standards Frameworks
- Connections to Common Beliefs and roles of the school librarian
- Talking points and conversation starters to establish common ground
- Strategic pathways to advocacy beyond the initial concern.

This approach helps practitioners identify the underlying issues, gather professional grounding from the AASL Standards, and plan thoughtful, evidence-based responses. Some of the issues addressed through these scenarios within the second edition include:

- Requests for reconsideration of materials in the collection
- Meeting learners' needs within a non-responsive schedule
- Classroom educators who are reluctant to collaborate

- Policy conversations with administrators
- Limited or diminishing school library funding
- Managing multiple school library sites and support staff.

While not exhaustive, these scenarios represent widespread, recurring issues that many school librarians face. To extend this support, the advocacy template used by the Committee to create these scenarios is available through the AASL Standards portal at standards.aasl.org. The template prompts and empowers school librarians to analyze their own situations using the same structured method. By using this template, school librarians can proactively design responses rooted in professionalism, not emotion—strengthening both their position and the role of the library in the school community.

Step Back to Step Forward

Challenging situations can easily become emotionally overwhelming. Another advantage of using a tool like the scenario template is the built-in pause it provides—creating space for reflection and reasoned response. That act of stepping back before stepping forward is key to dealing with overwhelming emotional reactions in difficult situations.

Sociologist Brené Brown references mindfulness expert Jon Kabat-Zinn's research in her blog post "Stressed and Overwhelmed: 10 Learnings That Changed How I Think About Emotions." She writes, "... we don't process other emotional information accurately when we feel overwhelmed, and this can result in poor decision making." Brown advocates for the power of nothingness or "non-doing" in these moments—stepping back to regain clarity.

The same applies in our professional lives. Stepping back from an emotional situation to take a deep breath and then using a structured tool like the scenario template to move forward allows us to re-enter the situation with renewed confidence in our decision-making and create a purposeful plan.

Thriving in the Real World

No two school libraries—or librarians—are exactly alike. Each will face unique challenges and opportunities for advocacy. But by drawing on the foundational tools in our professional toolbox—the AASL Standards, our Common Beliefs, and our defined school librarian roles—we can turn even the most difficult situations into meaningful moments of growth, positivity, and visibility. With intentional strategy, self-awareness, and support from our professional frameworks we can do more than survive in challenging environments—we can help our school libraries thrive.

WORKS CITED

Jon Kabat-Zinn. Last modified 2025. Accessed July 8, 2025. <https://jonkabat-zinn.com>.

