

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN



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2025–2026 PRESIDENT OF AASL

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Policy + School Libraries = Together We are Stronger

One of the first things I share with new librarians in my district are our policy and procedure manuals.

I share which school board policies govern the library, provide professional development on how to follow the policies, and our procedures manuals.

The expectation that all librarians read, understand, and follow policy and procedure is of the utmost importance for essential library non-negotiables: learner privacy, intellectual freedom, and inquiry.

School libraries are often described as the heart of a school—a place of inquiry, curiosity, connection, and discovery. Yet even the most vibrant, learner-centered library depends on something less visible but equally essential: a strong framework of policies and procedures. These structures are not barriers to creativity; rather, they are the architecture that allows innovation, equity, and access to flourish. Policies and procedures are an essential component to a strong school library.

Policy is Quiet Advocacy

Up-to-date policies and procedures are a quiet form of advocacy: they protect your learners, your professional judgment, and the very existence of your program. In today's climate of rapid legislative change and frequent book challenges, K–12 school librarians cannot afford to rely on outdated handbooks or unwritten “this is how we've always done it” practices.

As school librarians, we navigate a complex ecosystem. We manage collections, technology, instruction, collaboration, and community engagement—all while ensuring that every learner feels seen, supported, and empowered. Without clearly articulated policies and procedures, this ecosystem can quickly become

inconsistent, inequitable, or unsustainable. With them, however, the library becomes a reliable, transparent, and resilient touchpoint within the school. Knowing and reflecting your libraries' policies and procedures is essential knowledge for every school librarian.

At their core, policies reflect values. They communicate what we believe about intellectual freedom, access to information, diversity of perspectives, and the rights of learners. A well-crafted collection development policy, for example, does more than outline how materials are selected; it affirms a commitment to representing a wide range of voices and experiences. It provides a rationale for decisions and a safeguard against challenges, ensuring that choices are grounded in professional standards rather than personal preference or external pressure.

Procedures, on the other hand, operationalize those values. If policy is the "why," procedures are the "how." They provide clarity and consistency in day-to-day practice: how materials are cataloged and processed, how circulation operates, how technology is managed, how titles are selected and how instruction is scheduled. When procedures are clearly documented and consistently applied, they reduce ambiguity, streamline workflows, and create a more predictable and supportive environment for both learners and staff. In a district, this creates equity, consistency, and continuity throughout every school library.

One of the most critical roles of policies and procedures is in protecting equitable access. School libraries serve diverse populations with varied needs, and without intentional structures, inequities can easily emerge. Consider circulation policies: Are learners allowed to check out multiple items? Are there fines or restrictions that may disproportionately impact some learners? Do you limit the number of "popular" titles a learner can have? Are digital resources accessible beyond the school day? Thoughtful policies ensure that all learners—not just those with fewer barriers—can fully engage with the library's resources.

Similarly, technology policies shape how learners interact with digital tools and information. In an era where access to technology is both essential and uneven, school librarians play a key role in bridging gaps. Clear procedures for device use, digital citizenship, and online research not only support learning but also foster responsible and ethical participation in a digital world. These structures help learners build the skills they need while maintaining a safe and respectful environment.

Policies and procedures also provide stability in times of change. Schools are dynamic environments, influenced by shifts in leadership, curriculum, funding, and community expectations. A strong policy framework ensures continuity, allowing the library to maintain its mission and standards even as personnel or priorities evolve. For new librarians or staff members, documented procedures serve as a roadmap, enabling them to step into their roles with confidence and clarity.

Importantly, policies are not static documents to be filed away and forgotten. They should be living, responsive tools that evolve alongside the needs of the school community. Regular review and revision are essential. This process should be collaborative, involving administrators, teachers, learners, and, when appropriate, families. By engaging stakeholders in policy development, librarians not only strengthen the quality of the policies but also build shared understanding and support.

Transparency is another key benefit. When policies and procedures are clearly communicated and readily accessible, they build trust. Learners understand expectations. Teachers know how to collaborate effectively. Administrators see alignment with school goals. Families recognize the library as a thoughtful, intentional space for learning. In moments of challenge—such as a request to reconsider a library resource—transparent policies provide a clear, fair process that respects all perspectives while upholding professional principles.

For school librarians, the work of developing and maintaining policies can sometimes feel secondary to the more visible aspects of the role: teaching, programming, and engaging with learners. Yet this foundational work is what makes those visible successes possible. It creates the conditions for a library that is not only dynamic but also dependable; not only innovative but also principled.

As leaders in our schools, librarians are uniquely positioned to advocate for the importance of these structures. We can model best practices, share our policies with colleagues, and contribute to broader conversations about governance and equity within education. In doing so, we reinforce the idea that the library is not just a space, but a system—one that is thoughtfully designed to support learning, inclusion, and intellectual growth.

In reflecting on the role of policies and procedures, it is helpful to reframe them not as constraints, but as commitments. They are commitments to fairness, to access, to professionalism, and to the enduring mission of the school library. They enable us to navigate complexity with clarity and to respond to challenges with confidence.

As we look to the future of school libraries, the need for strong, adaptable frameworks will only grow. Emerging technologies, evolving information landscapes, and shifting educational priorities will continue to shape our work. By investing in robust policies and procedures, we ensure that our libraries are prepared not only to respond to these changes, but to lead through them.

Ultimately, the strength of a school library lies not only in its collections or its programs, but in the intentionality behind its operations. Policies and procedures are the quiet, steady forces that uphold that intentionality. They are the foundation upon which we build libraries that are inclusive, responsive, and transformative—libraries that truly serve as the heart of the school.