

STANDARDS COLUMN



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Empowering Learners and Strengthening Instruction: Collaborative Approaches to Holistic Assessment

In today's dynamic educational landscape, learners must go beyond mastering content—they need to make connections, think critically, and apply their learning in authentic, real-world contexts.

School librarians, with their expertise in inquiry, multiple literacies, and personalized learning, are uniquely positioned to help learners achieve these goals. When school librarians collaborate with content area educators, they create meaningful learning experiences that are engaging and relevant and build the essential competencies learners need to thrive in a complex, information-rich world.

One of the most effective ways to capture the full impact of these experiences is through integrated, holistic assessment—a model that evaluates both content standards and the Competencies outlined in the AASL *Standards Framework for Learners*.

The Impact of Collaborative Instruction

Research consistently shows that when school librarians and content area educators work together, learners benefit. Decades of studies confirm that inquiry skills taught by a qualified school librarian lead to greater engagement, deeper retention, and more relevant learning (Lance and Maniotes; Lance and Kachel; Small, et al.; Achterman).

When instruction is co-planned and co-taught, learners gain more than just knowledge—they build transferable skills. These include evaluating sources, synthesizing information, and communicating effectively across formats and audiences. Embedding these competencies directly into units of study, rather than teaching them in isolation, makes them more relevant and impactful. In this way, integrated instruction reinforces academic content while cultivating essential life skills, such as collaboration, curiosity, persistence, and adaptability.

These collaborative opportunities often unfold within an inquiry-based framework, where learners actively construct their understanding rather than

passively receive information. School librarians specialize in guiding learners through the inquiry process—from developing research questions and locating credible sources to synthesizing information and presenting findings. As learners explore topics that matter to them, they build confidence, independence, and a sense of ownership over their learning. Learners’ growth through this process results in their ability to ask big questions, think critically, and persist through challenges—key characteristics of lifelong learners and informed citizens.

Integrating Holistic Assessment into Instruction

Holistic assessment naturally complements collaborative instruction. By assessing content area standards alongside school library standards, educators can gain a more comprehensive and authentic picture of learner growth.

For example, a science educator and school librarian might co-plan a unit aligned with NGSS HS-LS2-7, which focuses on designing solutions to reduce human impacts on the environment. Learners could research a local environmental issue, identify and cite credible

CONTENT AREA STANDARD	AASL STANDARDS FRAMEWORK FOR LEARNERS	EXAMPLE HOLISTIC ASSESSMENT TASK
NGSS MS-ESS3-3: <i>Apply scientific principles to design a method for monitoring and minimizing a human impact on the environment.</i>	IV.B.1. (Curate/Create): <i>Learners gather information appropriate to the task by seeking a variety of sources.</i>	Learners analyze environmental impacts in their community and present research-supported proposals for reducing them, using diverse, credible sources.
NGSS MS-LS2-1: <i>Analyze and interpret data to provide evidence for the effects of resource availability on organisms and populations of organisms in an ecosystem.</i>	I.A.1. (Inquire/Think): <i>Learners display curiosity and initiative by formulating questions about a personal interest or a curricular topic.</i>	Learners investigate how limited resources affect populations and create a multimedia infographic using data visualizations and cited sources.
Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) Grade 7 Science 7.10B: <i>Investigate and explain how catastrophic events impact ecosystems.</i>	III.B.2. (Collaborate/Create): <i>Learners participate in personal, social, and intellectual networks by establishing connections with other learners to build on their own prior knowledge and create new knowledge.</i>	Learners work in small groups to research a natural disaster’s ecological impact and present findings in a collaborative digital presentation with citations.

Table 1 Sample Crosswalk Assessment Table

sources, synthesize their findings, and propose actionable solutions. The science educator might assess learners' scientific understanding, argumentation, and use of evidence, while the school librarian might evaluate Competencies from the *AASL Standards Framework for Learners*, focusing on skills developed through engagement with the inquiry process, such as information literacy, collaboration, and ethical use of information. This dual-assessment strategy reinforces both content mastery and the development of cross-disciplinary skills over time.

To support this work, the American Association of School Librarians' (AASL) Standards Crosswalks are invaluable tools. These crosswalks align the *National School Library Standards* with a range of other national standards, including:

- ASCD Whole Child Tenets
- Code with Google's CS First Curriculum
- Future Ready Framework
- ISTE Standards for Students and Educators
- Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS)

When official crosswalks don't exist—such as with certain state-specific standards—school librarians can take the lead in developing custom alignments (table 1), demonstrating initiative and reinforcing their role as instructional partners.

Developing Instructional Partnerships for Holistic Assessment

While the benefits of collaborative instruction and holistic assessment are clear, initiating instructional partnerships can feel daunting—especially amid the fast-paced, demanding school day. Fortunately, small steps can lead to big outcomes.

Start with casual, low-stakes conversations. A quick chat during a department meeting or over coffee in the faculty lounge can open the door to more intentional planning. Don't underestimate the power of simple human connection.

Another effective strategy: Share a menu of library services with faculty (see Pentland in the Works Cited for examples). This can highlight everything from resource curation and reading

promotion to co-teaching and assessment support. When educators see the breadth of what the school library offers, they're more likely to reach out.

Collaboration does not have to begin with a full co-taught unit. Start small by offering to curate resources for an upcoming lesson or by providing "one-shot" instruction sessions. These early partnerships build trust in your expertise and reliability—laying the foundation for more integrated work.

As relationships grow, sit down together to review the AASL crosswalks. Identify shared goals between content standards and library standards. When content area educators recognize that school librarians understand their curriculum and can offer meaningful instructional support, collaboration becomes a natural next step.

From there, your role evolves—from a support figure to an instructional leader, contributing not only to student learning, but to a culture of collaborative teaching across your school.

Sustaining Collaborative Practice

By championing collaborative instruction and integrated assessment, school librarians help create vibrant, learner-centered environments where both academic content and essential life skills are nurtured. In doing so, they empower learners not just to succeed in school—but to thrive beyond it.

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GETTING STARTED WITH COLLABORATIVE ASSESSMENT

Take these initial steps to build meaningful instructional partnerships and integrate holistic assessment:

- **IDENTIFY SHARED PRIORITIES:** Review content area standards alongside the *AASL Standards Framework for Learners* to uncover natural connections and opportunities for alignment.
- **LEVERAGE EXISTING TOOLS:** Explore AASL's Crosswalks to map library standards to other national standards, clarifying how collaboration supports curricular goals.
- **BUILD RAPPORT WITH EDUCATORS:** Start small and show them the range of services you can provide. Offer targeted support to demonstrate value and build trust.
- **USE EARLY SUCCESSES:** Expand collaboration over time into co-planned units with embedded, holistic assessment.