Standards, Guidelines, and School Libraries

In their different formal editions, the nine documents created to define school libraries were called both standards and guidelines. Standards are a definition of quality and they may have levels associated with them, especially if they have some legal basis attached to them. If they are required by law, then a penalty arises when the standard is not met. If they are not based in a law they may be similar to guidelines which are offered as advice. None of the nine official documents have ever been legal documents.

Issued in 1920, the first were descriptions of expectations for a school library. C.C. Certain, a high school librarian in Detroit, was asked to develop high school standards for the National Education Association (NEA), the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, and the American Library Association (ALA). *Standard Library Organization and Equipment for Secondary Schools of Different Sizes* was the result. These student population sizes ranged from 200–500, 500–1000, and 1000–3000. These covered instruction to be given and the qualification of the librarians and described what a high school library should look like and what it should have in terms of books and shelves. With these standards, the North Central Association, a regional agency, began requiring high schools to have a library and a librarian as a part of their accrediting process.

When a state has standards within their schools, these often are considered requirements, and schools must meet the requirements. When schools were required to have a certain number of books per pupil, many librarians were reluctant to weed a collection so that it met the state standards. However, states seldom required an unreasonable number because they would not have had the funds to help school districts achieve the standard.

History of the Development of Standards

Following the publication of the 1920 standards for high schools, C.C. Certain was asked by NEA and ALA to create standards for elementary schools and, in 1925, *Elementary School Library Standards* mirrored their predecessor. These standards and those that followed until 1998 had some indication of the numbers of resources and the size of the facility.

Two world wars halted any work on standards until 1945 when a sub-committee of *School Libraries for Today and Tomorrow* was created, including both elementary and high school libraries. The person managing this library was both a school librarian and a teacher librarian (p. 18). Nine purposes matched the eight principles; the first was “participate effectively in the school program as it strives to meet the needs of pupils, teachers, parents, and other community members” (9). The ninth began the need for school librarians to take responsibility for professional development, “participate with other teachers and administrators in programs for the continuing professional and cultural growth of the school staff” (10).

The 1960 *Standards for School Library Programs* were developed with the cooperation of 19 other organizations. The list of members from these organizations and the consultants to the project is an honor roll of leaders at that time. This group titled Chapter 1 as “Of importance to all citizens…” (3), and they specified that “a competent, effective library staff is the keynote to
good school library service” (47). They divided the expectations for schools with under 200 students and those that were larger. One of the most useful components to one of this book’s authors was the careful analysis of shelving size and how many books would fit onto a shelf of that size. It was most helpful when building new libraries. The Committee for Implementation of Standards also provided a discussion guide with suggested discussion questions.

The next publication, *Standards for School Media Programs*, was published jointly with the Department of Audiovisual Instruction of the NEA in 1969 and listed 28 other agencies as having representatives to this publication. It changed our name to media specialist, our location to media center, and our collections into media collections. Size of staff, collections, and facilities continued to be a part of these, and they also suggested the need for a central media center servicing several school districts.

*Media Programs: District and School* was prepared in 1975 in cooperation with the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) as co-author. It contained suggestions for district media programs, regional media programs, and the state media program as well as the school media program. Types of staff now included the media specialist, other media professionals, support staff, the media technician, and the media aide. Collections now included a wide variety of equipment to support the media program.

The name for the 1988 publication, a continuing partnership with AECT, changed to *Information Power* and the subtitle from standards to *Guidelines for School Library Media Programs*. The appendixes included budget formulas for materials and equipment, and the facilities areas included considerations for the relationships of the areas to one another. This edition had a few black and white photos. Chapter 1 began with “the mission of the library media program is to ensure that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information.” (1) Specific objectives included:

- provide intellectual access to information
- provide physical access to information
- provide learning experiences that encourage users to become discriminating consumers and skilled creators of information
- provide leadership, instruction, and consulting assistance in the use of instructional and information technology
- provide resources and activities that contribute to lifelong learning
- provide a facility that functions as the information center of the school
- provide resources and learning activities.

*Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* was again a partnership with AECT. Two committees were appointed; the first included researchers who were to review the research and develop a vision statement and the second, practitioners, were assigned to take that vision and make suggestions for how the new edition might be implemented to reach a wide audience. The first part covered information literacy standards and the second discussed how to build partnerships for student learning. This edition also included an appendix with the report of the research results of AASL’s Library Power project.
The next, *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner*[viii], were published in 2007 by AASL alone. It was a very colorful four-page standalone brochure with “Common Beliefs,” and “Learners use skills, resources, and tools to carry out:

- Inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge
- Draw conclusions, make informed decisions, apply knowledge to new situations, and create new knowledge.
- Share knowledge and participate ethically and productively as members of our democratic society.
- Pursue personal and aesthetic growth.”

Each of these included a section for skills, dispositions in action, responsibilities, and self-assessment strategies. Persons attending programs at AASL received a copy, and they were available for download on the ALA website. A second part of this, *Standards for the 21st-Century Learning in Action*, expanded the implementation titled Learning4Life that was downloadable from the AASL site.

Ten years later, *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*[ix] again calls the facility the school library and the person managing the facility a school librarian. It is filled with blue, orange, and grey illustrations, graphs, charts, tables, and graphics. The committees have taken great care to document the process used to gather the contents. An “Overview” is followed by “Frameworks” and then “Assessment and Evaluation.” Included in the text is information about how to implement these standards, and the scenarios at the close describe how the various levels of school librarians can work together to implement these standards. A shorter pamphlet is being prepared to share with school boards, parents, and teachers. The newest standards are unique as they look at the integration necessary for school librarians to become "the center of the school" as spoken of in the library literature as well as in previous standards. This edition features standards for the learner, the librarian, and the library, requiring each of them to consider the same domains and share the same foundational concepts. Think, Grow, Create and Share are the domains considered with the foundation of Inquire, Include, Collaborate, Curate, Explore and Engage underpinning the entire library program.

**How School Library Standards Are Developed**

From the beginning, school library standards have been developed by committees of practitioners, administrators, and members of related organizations, but mostly by persons appointed by a professional organization. Those after the 1920 and 1925 moved into the direct responsibility of ALA and then to AASL.

How persons were appointed to the early committees would take more research time than is needed. One does see Mary E. Hall on the 1920 standards. She was writing about her school library and a quote from her about her library is in the textbook. Since her students were using (albeit early) audiovisual devices, finding these in later standards is not surprising.

As mentioned above, the list of persons contributing to the 1960 standards is truly an honor roll of school librarian practitioners, supervisors, and faculty members, as are the members of
committees for the standards that follow. They were most likely appointed by the AASL president with approval of the AASL board of directors. One author of this book was a president responsible for planning for new standards. Two committees were appointed, one for research and writing and one with practitioners for review and implementation. A past president of both ALA and AASL was appointed to oversee the process.

AASL presidents serve for a single year, and when that term is over, the next president can change the process, if not the people. For the 1998 standards, two committees were appointed, one to research quality libraries and a second to review the committee’s report and plan for implementation. The next year, members were redistributed between the committees, changing the complexity of the assignments. This, as it often does, stretches the time when new standards are completed and ready for distribution.

The level of responsibility for any supporting associations also affects the speed of the process and the content. With the 1975 standards, AASL joined with AECT, and members of dual committees were given responsibility for the development of these standards. It then became a challenge to begin a similar process, and it was thirteen years before the 1988 standards were published. A span of nine years divided the next, and it was than another ten years until the newest standards are in print.

**Future of Standards for School Libraries**

One might question, why bother with standards or guidelines if they do not seem to provide much support in the day to day challenges facing school librarians? One might want to think about answers to the following questions:

1. What is the real purpose of writing standards?
2. Which of these editions of standards would you judge to be designed to speak to someone other than the school librarian? That is, are they written in such a way that an administrator, teacher, parent, or member of the community would understand them enough to support implementation?
3. What differences have any of the previous standards made in the lives of students and teachers?

**Activities**

1. Does your state have standards for school libraries?
2. If you were to be named to chair a committee to create standards for your state, how would you go about leading this task?
3. Divide the class (either by asking for volunteers for each response or just assign students to the debate teams) and discuss whether or not AASL should continue the process of writing standards? Yes or No, and Why Yes or Why No?
4. If you can get a copy or copies of any of the standards, compare them for a single item such as members of the staff, one resource (books or another item), or one area of the facility. How much and what change occurred between editions?
5. After reading the discussion in the literature about the latest standards, what seems to be the important points?

Notes


