Executive Summary on the Alaska School Library Needs Assessment Conducted by the Alaska Association of School Librarians (AkASL)

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Introduction

In the spring of 2014, the Alaska State Library announced that it was cutting the position of School Library Coordinator. Acknowledging that this position met many needs of school librarians and school library staff from around the state, the Alaska Association of School Librarians (AkASL) offered to help conduct a needs assessment survey to determine the needs of school library staff in the state and set priorities based on survey results.

Methodology

AkASL board members developed the survey as a collaborative project. The survey was field tested by AkASL members to ensure for reliability and validity. Face validity and test retest reliability were used as methods. Survey Monkey was used to built the survey and ensure anonymity. Participation in the survey was open to any individual working in a school library in Alaska, no membership in AkASL was required. Participants were initially asked "Question 1. Do you work in a school library in Alaska?" If the answer was no, respondents were locked out of the remainder of the survey. The survey was strictly voluntarily for all participants; participants could skip questions if desired. The link to the survey was disseminated during September 2014 via email through the "akschoollibraries" and "AkLA" listservs. Individual AkASL members were encouraged to forward the email along to their friends and colleagues.

Survey Results

Demographics

Question 2: What is your position? 104 individuals completed the Alaska School Library Needs Assessment Survey. Although there is no count of the number of school library staff in the state, and thus no way to demonstrate statistical significance, there are approximately 600 schools in the state. It is estimated that less than half of them have a staffed library. Therefore, we make the assumption that the survey is representative of our state population.

The majority of respondents self-reported as librarians (40.78%, n=42), with library aides and assistants a somewhat smaller number (26.21%, n=27). 13.59% (n=14) of participants identified as librarians with no library endorsement; 4.85% (n=5) as the district librarian, and 14.56% (n=15) as other. Participants who selected other were asked to provide a response; responses mainly included teacher and volunteer.

Question 3: How long have you worked in school libraries? 27.88% (n=29) of respondents indicated they had worked in school libraries for 0-2 years. 7.69% (n=8) worked in school libraries for 3-5 years. 21.55% (n=22) of respondents worked in school libraries for 6-9 years. 43.27% (n=45) worked in school libraries 10 years or more.

Association Between Years Working in Libraries and Knowledge of Professional Development Opportunities. A chi-square independence test ($p < 0.05$) was conducted to determine if there was an association between years worked in libraries (Q3) and knowledge of professional development opportunities (Q14). To conduct the test, a total score was assigned to each respondent, based on their answers to each section of Question 14. The chi-square independence test demonstrated that there is 95% statistically significant association between years worked in libraries and knowledge of professional development opportunities in the state.

Although common sense would suggest that the longer one has lived in the state, the more likely they are to know about professional development opportunities, the data shows the opposite. Respondents that had worked in libraries for 0-2 years were much more likely to indicate they were familiar with specific

programs offered by AkASL and the Alaska State Library, whereas respondents who had worked in libraries for ten or more years were unaware of these programs.

We can infer from these results that communication about programs offered by AkASL and the Alaska State Library is not effective or consistent. A new approach, or a strong push for recruitment to existing communication methods, may be required.

Question 4: How many years have you lived in Alaska? Most participants indicated they had lived in Alaska for 10 years or more (84.76%, n=89). With 4.76% (n=5), 5.75% (n=6), and 4.76% (n=5) indicated they lived in Alaska 0-2, 3-5, or 6-9 years respectively.

Association Between Years in Alaska and Knowledge of Professional Development Opportunities. Common sense might dictate that the longer an individual works in Alaska, the more aware they would be of local and statewide professional development opportunities. However, a chi-square independence test showed no statistical significant association between the two variables ($p < 0.05$). Thus, the length of time a librarian has resided in Alaska is not an indicator of their knowledge of available resources.

Question 5: What is the approximate population of the school(s) that you serve? (Check all that apply). Schools of all sizes were represented, with the majority of respondents work in schools serving 401-500 students (31.07%, n=32).

Question 6: What grade level(s) does your school serve? (Check all that apply). Once again all grade levels were represented, this time in a fairly even spread ($35 < n < 60$), with most respondents indicating they work in schools with 4th and 5th grade students (57.69%, n=60 each).

Professional Development
Question 7: When have you last had training in the following areas? Respondents indicated on a time scale the last time they had training in grant writing, digital resources, information literacy skills, cataloging, and collection development.

With the exception of grant writing, 20-28% of respondents have never had training in any of these areas. 61% of respondents stated they never had any training on grant writing. With the exception of grant writing, over 50% of respondents had received training in one of these areas within the last 5 years. Cataloging showed the second lowest numbers, with only 35% of respondents participating in training in the last two years.

In a comparison of training by category, library aides had less recent training than librarians in all situations.

The data demonstrates that most respondents are getting necessary training from one source or other. However, the fact that over 20% of respondents for each category indicated that they had never had any training in that area is concerning. Additionally, the fact that aides have high percentages in the never column for most areas of training compared to librarians is concerning. Additional training opportunities are needed to ensure that all school library staff, including non certified librarians, have opportunities for professional development.

Time Since Last Professional Development

Time Since Last Training	Never		0-2		3-5		6-9		10+	
Data in %	Aides	Librarians	Aides	Librarians	Aides	Librarians	Aides	Librarians	Aides	Librarians
Information Literacy	54	7	33	66	0	20	13	5	0	2
Collection Development	52	11	40	40	1	24	4	11	4	4
Digital Resources	38	7	50	74	4	10	8	5	0	0
Cataloging	8	27	10	57	1	8	2	8	3	7
Grant Writing	70	54	11	12	0	12	7	15	11	7

Question 8: How would training be best delivered to you? Rank in order. Respondents rated the methods they prefer to receive training. For number one rankings, Face to Face (at the individual's site) ranked the highest at 32.14% (n=27). Academy format (one week in Anchorage) ranked second at 26.44% (n=23). Webinar and distance delivery were next at 13.48% (n=12) and 14.46% (n=12) respectively. Only 7.95% (n=7) of individuals ranked conference sessions at AkLA at their highest rated method for training.

However, it's important to note that even though academy format had a high percentage of individuals ranking it as their top preference, it also had a high percentage of individuals (19.54%, n=17) ranking it as their lowest percentage. Notably, a full university program, was also ranked low, with 16.47% (n=14) of respondents putting it as their last choice.

The data implies that it is important to offer sessions in multiple formats to accommodate the needs of all users. Although many people prefer to attend a session on site for a week, many others prefer other methods.

Grants

Questions 9 and 10 addressed respondents' experience writing and applying for grants.

Question 9: Have you ever written a grant before? Nearly half (42.57%, n=43) of all respondents indicated they have never written a grant. 15.84% (n=16) have written grants for their education; 35.64% (n=36) have written grants for their library; and 17.82% (n=18) have applied for a grant from AkASL. 18.81% (n=19) of respondents indicated they had written grants for other purposes, including other agencies, as part of assignments for courses, or for technology.

Combined with the previous results indicating that few users have applied for grants, the data seems to indicate that training on grant opportunities is needed.

Question 10: Where do you find grants to apply for? Most respondents (44.71%, n=38)) indicated they find grant opportunities through their school or district. 30.59% (n=26) indicated they found grants through AkASL; 34.12% (n=29) through SAYL mail; and 38.82% (n=33) through other librarians.

Communication

Questions 11 through 14 address respondents' communication between each other and professional organizations.

Question 11: What types of media have you accessed in the last year for school library topics? Among the options presented, SAYL mail had the highest percentage (58.54%, n=48), with AkASL website/Puffin at a very close second (54.88%, n=45). Respondents also indicated that they use the State of Alaska Library website (36.59%, n=30), AkASL listserv (23.19%, n=19), Alaska School Librarians Facebook group (31.71%, n=26), and State of Alaska Education website (26.83%, n=22) for information. AkASL region reports had a low rate of 10.98% (n=9); LM_Net a response rate of 15.85% (n=13).

21 respondents (25.61%) also selected other and listed their other sources of information, which included SLED, twitter, other librarians, Google searches, ALA, Pinterest, blogs, and Follett / Destiny news.

The results indicate that SAYL mail and the Puffin are valuable and should continue. Unfortunately, AkASL region reports are low on the list and further investigation is needed to determine the reason behind this and what action should be taken. The AkASL Listserv, Alaska State Library website, and Alaska School Librarians Facebook group seem to be utilized but not by the majority. Additional advertising or focus may result in additional usage. However, it is important to not spread our communications too thin.

Question 12: How do you stay in contact with or network with staff at other school libraries? This question was intended to determine what type of networking Alaska school library staff are engaged in to determine whether support or facilitation is needed.The responses were wide ranging, with email the highest at 86.73% (n=85) and in-district meetings at 67.35% (n=66). Only 3.06% (n=3) of people indicated they did not network or communicate with other library staff around the state.

Notably, only 14.29% (n=14) of individuals indicated they use the AkASL listserv, which is not surprising as it is new and has not been heavily advertised. Further, only 9.18% (n=9) indicated they use the AkASL region representatives to communicate and network. Questions 11 and 12 together indicate a need to investigate the purpose behind AkASL region representations and how they can fit into existing communication channels, rather than exist as their own.

Question 13: Where do you get information and/or support in the following areas? This question was intended to determine what content areas library staff need the most support in and what type of support already exists. Most respondents indicated there was good in school and/or in district support, with the lowest area being book reviews and selection. Online blogs and discussion groups had the highest response rates in the areas of book reviews and selection and activities with students. Support from the Alaska State Library and AkASL were low in all areas. The highest was book reviews at 12.50% (n=11) for AkASL and 10.23% (n=9) for the Alaska State Library.

However, the following areas had no support indicated: scheduling (26.37%, n=24), time management (43.18, n=43%), curriculum support (13.48%, n=12), library curriculum / lesson planning (19.77%, n=17), patron management (21.11%, n=19), interlibrary loan (12.36%, n=11), and cataloging (15.56%, n=14). Future professional development opportunities may wish to investigate teaching in these areas.

Question 14: For each of the options below, please rank how well informed you feel about these programs/opportunities? Of the programs listed, Battle of the Books was the most well known, with conferences in Alaska second, and AkASL grants & awards listed third. 50.00% (n=48) of participants had never heard of Spirit of Reading, 24.21% (n=23) had never heard of professional development opportunities from the Alaska State Library, and 25.00% (n=24) had never heard of any scholarships for high education. Based on these results, opportunities from the Alaska State Library need to be better advertised. Further, the Jo Morse scholarship and Spirit of Reading need to be better advertised by AkASL.

Advocacy

Advocacy questions were designed to determine the type of support currently received and where AkASL and possible the Alaska State Library can focus it's education efforts.

Question 15: Please rank the level of support you receive from the following people/groups. Unsurprisingly, 77.47% (n=70) of respondents indicated their district librarian was either extremely or very supportive. 12.77% (n=12) selected N/A suggesting they do not have a district librarian. 67.02% (n=63) indicated their principal was extremely or very supportive. No respondents indicated their school board was extremely supportive. 13.83% (n=13) stated their school board was very supportive, but 15.96% (n=15) stated their school board was not at all supportive.

Superintendents were similarly listed, with 5.32% (n=5) extremely supportive, 19.15% (n=18) very supportive, and 17.02% (n=16) not at all supportive. Legislators had the highest ranking for not at all supportive (25.53%, n=24), and lowest combined ranking for extremely supportive and very supportive (5.30%, n=5).

These results indicated that AkASL and other organizations should focus their education and advocacy efforts on legislators, superintendents, and school boards. This is not surprising as they are the least likely individuals to be aware of the daily role of the school library. However, it shows that past advocacy and education efforts have been minimal or ineffective. It is crucial to the future of our school libraries that we shift these perceptions.

Question 16: Who in your district advocates for you in your current position? List name(s) and title(s) or indicate none. Sadly, some respondents indicated that they weren't sure they were allowed to advocate, that each person has to fight for themselves, or that there was no one to represent them. Most respondents listed their district librarian as the individual who advocates for them. Library aides and assistants often listed their librarian. Several indicated their principal or union as an advocate.

Since each district has it's own political structure, it is difficult for AkASL and other organizations to advocate for specific positions and schools, but it is important that we educate the people in a position to advocate, such as the principals, superintendents, school boards, legislators, district librarians, and unions.

Question 17: What advocacy tools have you used in the past or would be likely to use in the future? Advocacy tools used in the past included pamphlets to give to school administration (46.38%, n=32), form letters to give to parents, administrators, and community at large (42.47%, n=31), social media (45.16%, n=28), and suggested letters and contact information for legislators (47.27%, n=26). All tools listed were likely to be used in the future, with nothing listed at less than 69%. The highest ranked tools were webinars about school library advocacy (88.89%, n=48) and customizable PowerPoint-style presentations (88.89%, n=40).

This data indicates that advocacy is a priority for school library staff in the state, and something for which resources and training is required.

Question 18: Within each of the following areas, how well informed do you feel about issues facing school libraries? Not surprisingly, participants indicated they were most well informed about issues in their district (very well = 42.55%, n=40). Most participants were moderately informed about issues in Alaska (42.55%, n=40), and somewhat information about issues nationwide (34.04, n=32%). 11.70% (n=11) indicated they were not at all informed about issues in Alaska, and 19.15% (n=18) indicated they were not at all informed about issues nationwide.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Communication, training, and advocacy are needed across all areas. With a few exceptions, communication and training is inconsistent across user types (librarians, library aides, etc.) and locations.

In order to effect change, we need to not do more, but do a few things more centralized and effectively. Communication about opportunities and issues facing libraries need to be centralized to a few sources each with a specific audience or focus in mind. Advertising needs occur to reach all relevant parties.

Training resources should be examined and cataloged. There are many great resources available via different national organizations. We do not have the time and resources to develop our own resources, but we can maintain listings of what is available elsewhere.

Connecting librarians throughout the state is also a priority, which is why the AkASL listserv (akschoollibraries) was developed. Further advertising and use is needed to make this tool viable. However, it has the potential to be a means of reaching a broader swath of our population and getting resources to them.

AkASL and the Alaska State Library should work closer together. The loss of the coordinator position means there is no ex-officio member at our meetings to inform us of developments occurring at the state library and to communicate changes, events, etc. Our communication pipeline is now fragmented. It is important that someone at the Alaska State Library be assigned this role and fulfill it.