

# School Librarian, Where Art Thou?

by [Keith Curry Lance](#)

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Most everyone in our profession is aware that school librarian numbers have dipped, but we haven't known the numbers or a time line for these losses. What has been happening to school librarianship? The well-accepted story in the field is that it has been shedding jobs, which is inarguable. But there has been too little overarching analysis to help describe the true state of the profession. To address that gap, it's useful to illuminate when the job losses began, and at what rate, and to explore some of the factors impacting the national data.

Between the 1999–2000 and 2015–16 school years, the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES) reports that the profession lost the equivalent of more than 10,000 full-time school librarian positions nationwide. That translates to a 19 percent drop in the workforce, from 53,659 to 43,367. The most rapid declines happened from 2009–10 to 2013–14. The decline slowed from then to 2014–15; but resumed larger losses in 2015–16, the latest data available.

These findings are based on data from one of NCES's longest-running programs, the Common Core of Data (CCD; unrelated to the Common Core State Standards). The CCD tracks school employment for selected positions, such as teacher, instructional aide, librarian, library support staff, and instructional coordinator. Each year, school districts report to their state education departments, and those departments report to NCES the number of full-time equivalents (FTE) employed in those positions.

## Three facts about the NCES data

First: These are FTE counts, not head counts. One reported FTE librarian may refer to one person working full-time, two working half-time, or

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["Charter Schools, Segregation, and School Library Access"](#)

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[California: An Anomaly.](#)

[What's an Instructional Coordinator?](#)

another configuration. That full- or part-time librarian may be covering more than one school building. Second: The NCES data does not describe credentials or job definitions. It is not clear that those counted as librarians are state-certified. There are cases where someone certified as a librarian is being employed—and paid—as support staff. These folks are not included in the librarian counts. Third: At the state level, non-reporting of school librarians by districts or schools does not explain year-to-year changes in FTE counts. NCES uses imputation, a form of estimation, to ensure that its state figures are adjusted to compensate for non-reports. The notable exception to this rule is the suppression of 2015-16 library support staff data for five states, ones for which complete

This is the only comprehensive, national data currently available about school librarian employment in U.S. public schools. Previous data cited by the American Library Association (ALA) drew from NCES's final School Library Media Center Survey of the Schools and Staffing Surveys project in 2011–12 ([nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass)). In that data, one part-time librarian may have been counted by multiple schools.

The up-to-date CCD numbers provides a lens on the status of the profession and sparks several questions. Among them: Is school librarianship as a profession in decline, or has it experienced a lull—due to the combined impact of the Great Recession and a generational wave of retirements—from which it might be beginning to recover?

Perhaps more significantly, for those of us looking forward: To what extent does this data fail to tell us the full story by focusing on an outdated job description, “school librarian,” rather than the expanded range of job titles that our profession now encompasses?

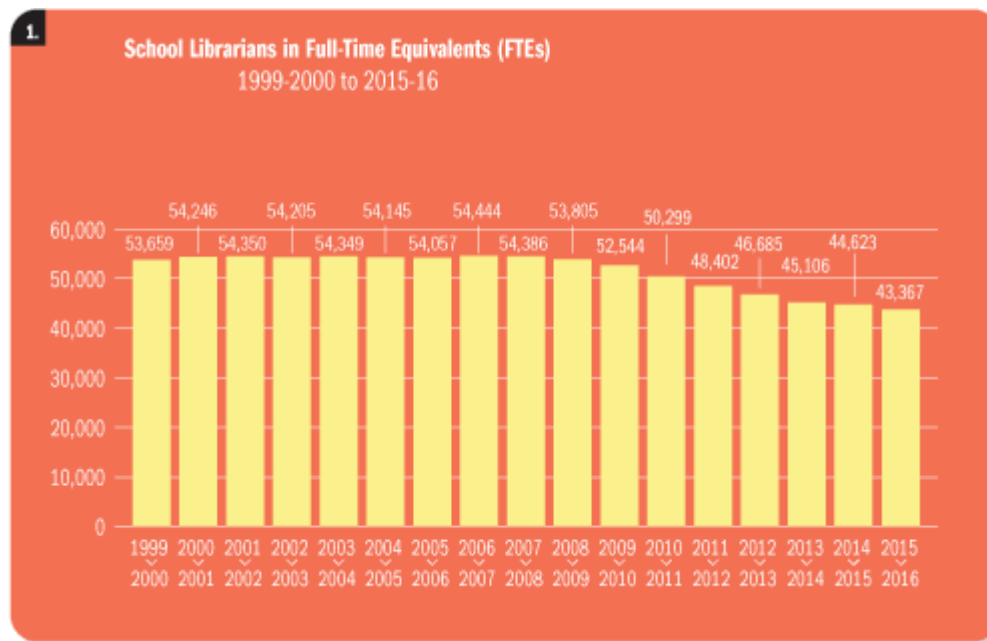
## BY THE NUMBERS

To begin to answer these questions, it's worthwhile to examine the statistical trends for school librarian employment since the turn of the millennium. A look at the change from 1999–2000 to 2015–16 (Chart 1), the most recent school year that data is available, reveals a loss of more than 10,000 school librarians—19 percent—nationwide.

The intervening bars, however, indicate a significant difference in the rate of change between the first and second half of this time frame. In 1999–2000, there were almost 54,000 school librarians, a figure that stayed relatively stable through 2007–08. Then, the cliff seemed to fall away. Starting in 2008–09, we began shedding librarians in high numbers each year through 2014–15. The timing of the beginning of the decline, of course, coincides with the Great Recession, which began officially in December 2007 and ended in June 2009. The decline continued steeply after the recession, through 2013–14, with the rate of loss slowing noticeably in 2014–15. Albeit at a slowing rate, losses of school librarians have continued since the economic recovery began.

[Data for Library Support Staff Missing in Some States](#)

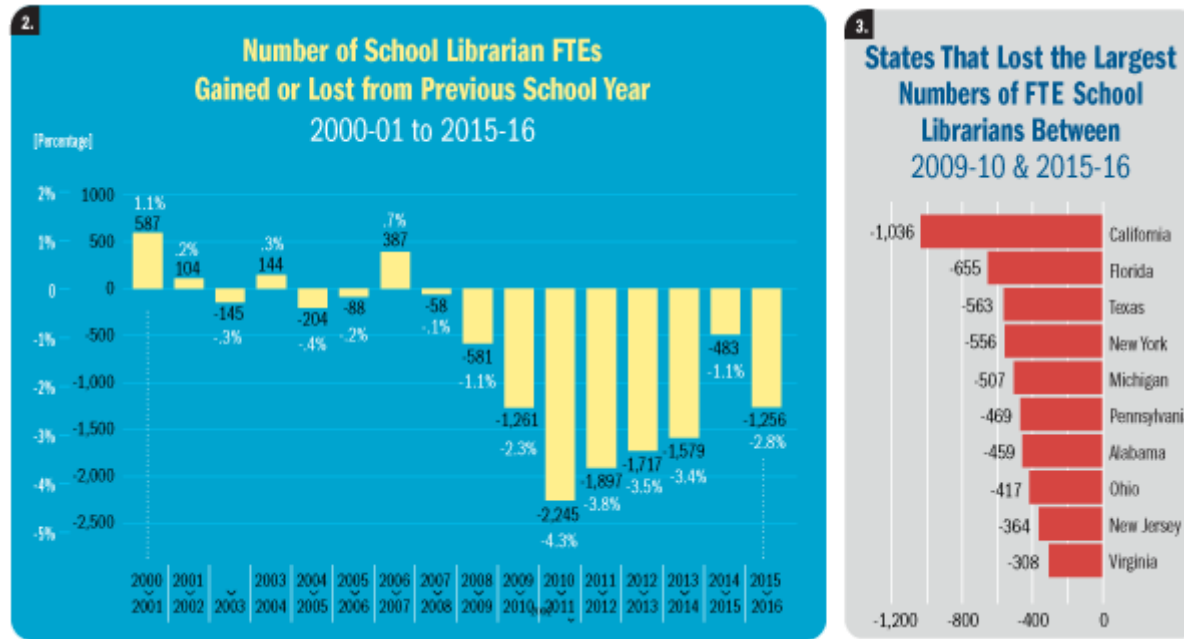
estimates were not possible. This was the first time data on any of the positions examined here went unreported since 2000.



The year-to-year trend is even clearer (Chart 2). From 2000–01 to 2007–08, the numbers of librarians gained or lost wobbled up and down marginally. The losses increased between 2007–08 and 2010–11 and reached more than 2,200 between 2009–10 and 2010–11.

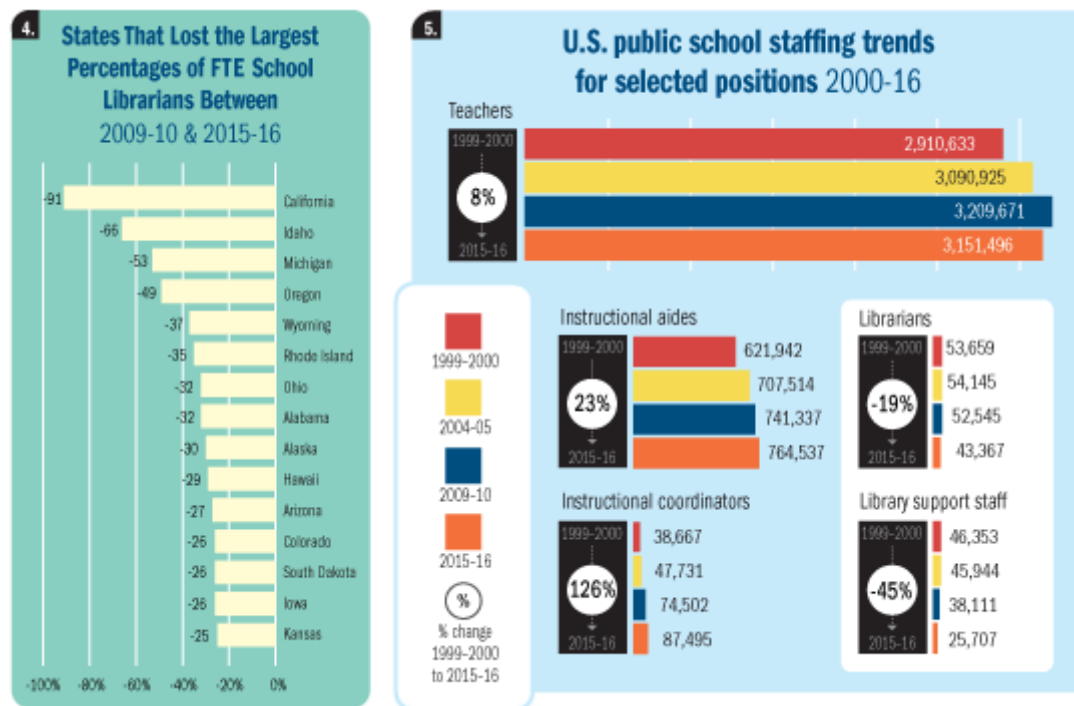
Between 2011–12 and 2013–14, losses continued in a range of about 1,600 to 1,900; but, the extent of year-to-year loss was reduced slowly. Then, suddenly and somewhat hopefully, in 2014–15, fewer than 500 (1.1 percent) were lost. The following year, losses in excess of 1,200 (2.8 percent) resumed.

Meanwhile, the fates of school librarians in certain states were very different after the recession (Chart 3). Between 2009–10 and 2015–16, California reportedly lost 1,036 librarians—by far the most. Florida lost 655, and Texas, New York, and Michigan lost between 500 and 600 each. Three other states—Pennsylvania, Alabama, and Ohio—lost between 400 and 500, while New Jersey and Virginia lost between 300 and 400 each. These 10 states account for 5,334 fewer positions since 2010—more than half of the 10,292 that have disappeared since 2000.



The proportional rate of losses by state is also illuminating. As Chart 4 illustrates, between 2010 and 2016, California reportedly lost nine out of 10 of its librarian FTEs. For the same interval, Idaho lost about two-thirds; Michigan and Oregon, half; four states (Wyoming, Rhode Island, Ohio, and Alabama), about one-third; and seven others between 25 and 30 percent each.

The high losses reported for California, however, owe in part to a reporting change procedure in that state between 2014–15 and 2015–16. (See below: “California: An Anomaly.”)



## THE LARGER STAFFING CONTEXT

A look at the larger staffing context sheds light on how schools have shifted staffing over this same time frame. Chart 5 compares the employment numbers for librarians and library support staff with those for teachers, instructional aides, and instructional coordinators. From 2000 to 2005 to 2010, teachers increased steadily, if modestly, from 2.9 to 3.1 to 3.2 million, respectively, and dropping slightly by 2015 to 3.1 million. Instructional aides have also increased steadily, from almost 622,000 in 1999–2000 to more than 764,000 in 2015–16.

At the same time, the number of instructional coordinators—proportionally speaking—has exploded. In 2000, there were fewer than 39,000, and in 2015, more than double that, at more than 87,000. Meanwhile, even more library support staff than librarians have been shed by public schools, from more than 46,000 to fewer than 26,000—a loss of almost 21,000, or 45 percent.

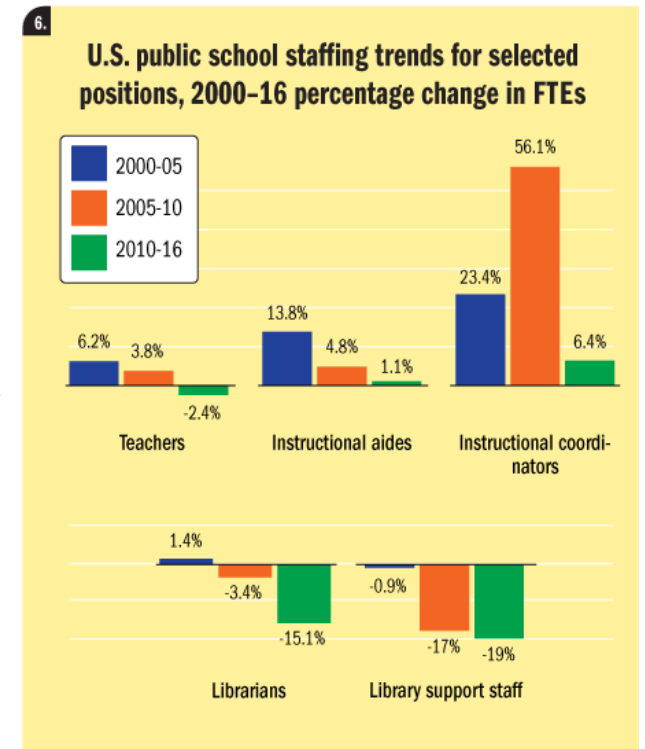
The percentages over time reveal another pattern (Chart 6). Teachers, which increased modestly between 2000 and 2005 as well as 2005 and 2010, declined between 2010 and 2016. Instructional aides increased between 2000 and 2016. From 2005, librarian and library support staff losses accelerated, and both reached double digits by 2016.

Contrast the trends for teachers and librarians and their aides with that of instructional coordinators. Between 2000 and 2016, the numbers of instructional coordinators skyrocketed. Since 2000, U.S. public schools have been hiring instructional coordinators at a dramatic rate.

## QUESTIONS FOR THE PROFESSION

The NCES data seems clear: At this point, regardless of any slowing of cuts, it appears we've lost 19 percent of our school librarians. What is far less clear is how the position of school librarian is being perceived differently in different states, districts, and schools, and how those varying perceptions impact the data. Here are questions for our profession going forward: Are school librarian jobs simply evolving into other ones with different names—digital learning specialist, digital media content specialist, technology integrator, and information literacy teacher, for example? Are those now calling themselves curriculum specialists, educational technology specialists, and instructional design specialists more likely to be counted as instructional coordinators? As in the case of California, are librarians now called “teacher librarians” and being reported only as teachers?

We had better get busy answering these and other questions. Whatever the nature of the change is—structural change in the profession, statistical artifacts attributable to changing perceptions, or both—it is already well under way. How will the profession respond?



*Keith Curry Lance studies the evolving profession of school librarianship.*

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## California: An Anomaly

California's 2015–16 data provided a key example of the re-conception of school librarianship that is happening to varying degrees across the country. For 2014–15, California reported 811 librarians. In 2015–16, it reported only

105. The reported loss of 706 FTEs in one year seemed incredible, even considering the state's roller-coaster history with school librarians. The state's decrease of 706 librarians from 2014–15 to 2015–16 accounts for more than half of the national loss (1,256). Consultations with officials of the California Department of Education and the California School Library Association revealed a partial explanation for the apparent 87 percent drop. Motivated by the wish to protect librarians from budget cuts as “support staff,” California reported “teacher librarians” as teachers instead of librarians. That had a double-barreled consequence: It inaccurately inflated that state's librarian losses while creating a mystery about the true numbers. In California, a more fundamental question has been answered: Is a “teacher librarian” to be counted as a teacher or as a librarian? Unfortunately, California school library advocates' decision to go with “teacher” complicates the data—along with the fate and standing of librarians nationwide.



## What's an instructional coordinator?

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, some job titles in this category include career technical supervisor, curriculum and assessment director, curriculum and instruction director, curriculum coordinator, curriculum director, curriculum specialist, education specialist, instructional systems specialist, program administrator, and school standards coach.

NCES defines an instructional coordinator as someone who “supervises instructional programs at the school district or sub-district level...coordinators and supervisors of audiovisual services; curriculum coordinators and in-service training staff; Title I coordinators and home economics supervisors; and supervisory staff engaged in the development of computer-assisted instruction.”

Their tasks commonly include training teachers about instructional materials and equipment; conferring with committees and other groups to relate curriculum materials; researching, evaluating, and preparing recommendations on instructional materials; and participating in conferences that promote student welfare.

These descriptions encompass many higher-order tasks long associated with highly qualified school librarians. There is no extant analysis of CCD data on this job category, despite its remarkable growth, and the CCD doesn't provide tracking job assignments focused on tech and its instructional integration.

## Data for Library Support Staff Missing in Some States

For 2014–15, library support staff FTEs numbered 4,724 in five states: California (3,745), West Virginia (292), Nevada (283), New Jersey (282), and Montana (122). The following year, for the first time, those states reported no data regarding those positions. The national total in 2014–15 was 30,869, compared to 25,707 in 2015–16—a difference of 5,162. Notably, 4,724 of those losses could be accounted for by the five states with missing data, leaving a certain loss of 438. Those states' data omission raises questions:

- Were some conditions required for imputing data in these states not met? If so, which ones?
- To what extent were library support staff in these states lost—or counted elsewhere—for example, as instructional aides?

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California school libraries

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instructional coordinators

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