

Prevalence of Public Library and School Library Partnerships

1. Purpose and Objective

The purpose of this research was to better understand the nature, prevalence, and quality of partnership activities between public libraries and the public schools in their communities. To date, very little research exists focused on these partnerships, even though public schools are the default formal education opportunities in all communities, and public libraries are the most common informal education entities, present in nearly every community (with 17,000 total across the United States). Much of the existing research is older, and focuses on the benefits of very specific collaborations in individual communities (for example (Dupuy, 2017; Jaffe, 1992; Kelter, 1975; Marvin, 1968; Meyer, 2010; Schwartz, 2019). Much of the recent conversation in this area has not been research based, but rather collecting examples of individual programs, such as the article by Witteveen in the *Young Adult Library Services Journal* (Witteveen, 2017). This article was helpful to understand the nature and frequency of partnerships, and was utilized in this research during instrument development to make sure relevant examples and items were included in the surveys sent to public and school library staff. Witteveen found examples of partnerships that included showing films of popular YA books, building citation skills, utilization of bookmobile resources, program co-development, and promoting library cards; and also highlighted the importance of professional development for school library staff, who often have not received the same training or opportunities around program development as public library staff.

A potential reason why partnerships may not exist or be limited is illustrated in several papers-the simple fact that school libraries are losing staff, may not have a trained librarian on staff, or may be closing all together. While public libraries experience a resurgence, school libraries are seeing funding cuts or all out closure (Damaren, 1997). In Colorado specifically, one out of four public schools has no librarian at all (Lance, 2002). These cuts are being made all while the number of students enrolled in public schools, along with class size, continues to increase (Sparks and Harwin, 2018).

The next steps for this research include utilizing the information described in this paper to better support public and school library partnerships, and to provide better support for the staff who are initiating these partnerships.

2. Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

This research was conducted by the STAR Library Education Network (STAR Net) as part of the “Moon, Mars and Beyond” exhibition program. STAR Net is a federally and foundationally funded organization that provides free training, kits, exhibits and resources to public libraries across the United States. Many programs provided by STAR Net require public libraries to partner with community organizations. In learning more about and supporting these partnerships, STAR Net staff learned that many public libraries struggled to partner with local schools, citing difficulty finding the correct contact, lack of support from school district staff, or simply not understanding how a partnership with a school

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would be possible or beneficial. Public library staff almost unanimously expressed interest in these partnerships, believing they were crucial to filling gaps in services for children and families in their service area.

3. Methods and Data Sources

Two surveys were sent in the summer of 2024. One survey was sent to public library staff, and the other to school library staff. The public library survey was distributed through the STAR Library Education Network listserv, ALA Public Programs Office Programming Librarian page, and through the Chief Officers of each State Library. The school staff survey was sent through the Chief Officers of each State Library, as well as several NASA program partners who work with formal educators. The public library survey received 334 complete responses, and the school library survey received 145 responses. These different response rates were expected due to the more limited distribution of the school library survey, and the fact that school library staff and other formal educators are less familiar with STAR Net.

4. Results

Public Library Survey: 334 complete responses were received for this survey. Demographics of respondents were fairly in-line with nationwide statistics for public libraries, with approximately 50% of libraries identifying as rural, 35% as rural or suburban, and 15% as suburban/urban or urban. The majority of respondents indicated they had between 4 and 8 staff members at their branch, though 11% indicated over 31 staff members at their individual branch (see Figure 1). The majority of respondents (Figure 2) identified as Youth Services or similar role (40%) or Directors/Managers (35%). The remainder identified as “Jack of all Trades” with no formal title (15%), Adult Services, Outreach Services or Circulation (less than 10% total). When asked to rate the importance of participation between public and school libraries (regardless of if the libraries currently partnered) over 95% stated that these partnerships are “Very important” or “Important”. No respondents said these partnerships are Somewhat important, unimportant, or very unimportant (see Figure 3). It is important to note that even though these partnerships were rated as very important, they are carried out by a small proportion of staff. Figure 6 shows that the majority of partnership activities are carried out by 1 or 2 library staff members, with less than 5% of libraries indicating most employees participate, and only 10% indicating all employees participate. Respondents indicated that these relationships were overwhelmingly initiated by library staff or leadership, with less than 5% stating relationships were initiated by a public school (see Figure 7).

Somewhat surprisingly, over 90% of respondents said they currently have a relationship with their school district, which could include classroom visits, schools sending library card info home with students, field trips, etc. While the majority of respondents indicated partnership is currently happening, who that partnership was with differed significantly (Figure 4). The most common responses to who specifically the partnership was with was individual teachers or the school library. However, many respondents also reported

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partnerships with classroom parents, with one specific grade only, school-wide partnerships, or even district wide partnerships. Respondents were able to indicate more than one response to this question. Respondents were also able to indicate other partners in a text box, and approximately 12% of respondents used this opportunity. Partnerships indicated included Inter-Library Loan, partnerships with higher education institutions, partnerships with the State Library, partnerships with local religious schools or private schools, partnerships with Pre-K/Daycare, contacts within the Board of Education, contacts with principals, partnerships with schools facilitated by other organizations (such as the YMCA) and partnerships supported by local grants.

For the indicated partnerships, respondents were also asked to indicate what level of school these partnerships occurred at. Respondents could check multiple responses, and the most common answer was Elementary school (Figure 5). Charter schools, home schools, and HeadStart, vocational schools, Juvenile Detention facilities and special needs schools were also mentioned in the comments. These partnerships also included a wide range of activities (Figure 6), with classroom visits, school library visits (such as for storytime), and support of summer learning activities being the most common responses, all with over 70% of respondents reporting these activities. Providing access to technology, homework help, support of virtual learning during the pandemic and field trips were also common responses. Respondents were also able to provide write-in responses, and almost 20% did so, reporting partnerships also included after school clubs (like Lego club), using school IDs as library cards, purchasing books for each other, programs related to specific events (such as the Total Solar or Annular Solar eclipse), afterschool programming, supporting service projects, monthly book club visits, shared resources (such as tutors), providing after-school snacks, sharing author visits, opportunities for interaction during lunch and recess, supporting back to school nights, free books to teachers, shared volunteers, and partnership in grant-funded programs.

It's not surprising that all respondents agreed that maintaining these relationships was very important, with the vast majority of respondents saying they “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that these relationships are important. Public library staff also had a strong belief that their administration values their partnership efforts, with only 2 respondents stating they “Somewhat Disagree” that library leadership finds these relationships important. However, library respondents beliefs regarding how their school partners view these relationships was slightly less positive. In Figure 8, respondents are less sure how important the school views the partnership, though the majority of answers are still positive.

Respondents were also asked to rank barriers to partnership. We asked them to rank rather than list to get a better idea of which barriers were most common, or more of an obstacle. The number of available staff to sustain partnerships was the most commonly ranked #1, followed closely by the ability to find and maintain school partners, and the interest level of those potential partners. The full list of rankings can be viewed in Figure 9. Additional barriers listed include communication challenges, disinterest of students, difficulty

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accessing vehicles, disinterest of public school leadership, lack of accessibility on the library side (not ADA compliant), and restrictions from the public library board.

Because of the importance of state and national standards in school-based activities, respondents were also asked how important standards were in their normal programs. The majority of respondents stated they were “Somewhat important”, with about 25% stating standards weren’t important to their work (Figure 10). Respondents however, believed standards were more important for their current and potential school partners (Figure 11).

When asked to describe their current partnerships, simple sentiment analysis showed that over half of the interactions had negative feelings associated with them. This was due to difficulty finding partners, difficulty getting the partner on the school side to buy-in to activities, and the over-whelming amount of staff time (often on one individual) to conduct partnership activities. Positive sentiments were expressed predominantly by respondents from larger districts that had more staff participating in the partnership. The word cloud in Figure 12 shows that there was a fairly even spread of partnership activities across approximately 20 different items such as back to school night, storytime, summer partnership, summer learning, classroom visits, field trips, shared IDs, and shared projects.

The last question we asked of the respondents was if they had any further information to share, such as their “secret sauce” to successful partnerships. The majority of respondents chose to answer that particular prompt, discussing the importance of communication (including those who did not have positive experiences with partnership). Respondents also recommended focusing on charismatic events to jump start partnership (such as the solar eclipses), using your own personal contacts (like your children’s teachers), being persistent in communication, reaching out to individual teachers as opposed to administration, being realistic about how turnover may “restart” relationships, focusing on principals, supporting testing schedules, focusing on quality rather than quantity, bringing resources like the bookmobile to schools and school events,

School Library Survey:

145 complete responses were received from the school library side of the survey. Respondents were predominantly from suburban or rural/suburban, suburban/urban locations, in contrast to the public library respondents, (Figure 13), and were fairly evenly split between elementary, middle, and high school respondents (Figure 14). Over 95% of respondents stated their school had a library or equivalent media center, with the vast majority of respondents indicated that the library or equivalent had 1 or fewer staff members (Figure 15). Respondents were most likely to be a teacher-librarian or a librarian, with a handful of respondents indicating they were teachers, media center managers, teaching assistance, specials teachers, or the school principal (Figure 16). Respondents indicated, similar to the public library survey, that for the majority the partnership involved 1 or 2 school staff members. 6% indicated a partnership that included most employees of

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the school. When asked about the length of their partnership, a large number (nearly 40%) indicated a partnership of greater than 6 years (Figure 20).

Respondents overall had a positive view of the importance of public and school library partnerships, with the majority of respondents stating these partnerships were at least Somewhat Important (with 45% stating they were Very Important). The breakdown is shown in Figure 17. A little over 80% of respondents stated they have a current partnership with their local public library, with around 3% unsure of their partnership status. Respondents were asked to indicate what level of infrastructure at their school was involved in the partnership, and for the majority of respondents, the highest level of infrastructure was the library or media center itself, with 5% indicating a school wide partnership was the highest level, and 23% indicating a district wide partnership was the highest level. Less than 10% indicated that an individual teacher was the extent of the partnership (Figure 18). In agreement with the results from the public library survey, the majority of the partnerships were initiated by public library leadership or an individual library staff member, with less than 8% of partnerships initiated by a school employee (Figure 19).

When asked what their partnership activities looked like, the majority of respondents indicated that all the items were relevant for their location. This included classroom visits and field trips, supports for virtual learning during the pandemic, storytime visits, supporting summer learning, supporting school assignments, and checking out kits/supplies from the public library. Write-in responses included advertising public library events, inter-library loans, supporting school assignments, checking out kits or supplies, a shared catalog, bookmobile visits, library card signup, book club, ebooks, and communication re books turned in to wrong locations (14 respondents mentioned this).

When asked about the importance of maintaining the partnership, the majority of respondents responded positively, with about 6% saying they disagree at some level about the partnership being important (Figure 21). Respondents were similarly optimistic about whether their library partners believed this partnership was important (Figure 22). Responses were a bit more spread out when considering whether or not school administration valued the partnership (Figure 23).

School library respondents were also asked to rank the barriers to partnership, and similar to the public libraries, indicated that interest from the school district and time involved were the biggest barriers. The full list of rankings is shown in Figure 24. It's worth noting that there isn't a huge difference across the different items, indicating there is no one answer when it comes to barriers. Other barriers listed were often very specific, such as the public library not having an interest in teen programs, or library staff causing issues with parents (for example a non-binary public librarian).

Respondents were also asked what time of partnership activities would be of interest to them (Figure 25). This question was asked so that STAR Net can do a better job in supporting public libraries in coming up with activities that will be meaningful for their

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current and potential school partners. The most popular answer was supports for summer learning, though other answers were almost as common, such as classroom/school library visits and field trips, supporting school assignments, and checking out kits and supplies from the public library. Write-in ideas included bookmobile visits, public libraries doing a better job promoting their programs through the school, interlibrary loan, year-round reading activities, teen activities, and shared author visits.

School library staff were also asked to indicate how important standards were to their programing they do with partners. The responses indicated a lower level of importance (though they were still important) than expected. See Figure 26. In fact, respondents actually thought the public library would consider standards slightly more important than the school did, as shown in Figure 27!

Respondents were also asked to describe their partnerships with their local library, and unsurprisingly there was a lot of overlap with the public library responses. Common responses included summer learning support, homework help, shared ID cards, bookmobile visits, interlibrary loan, the public library providing materials to the school library, field trips, and resources for teens. However, when asked about other items they wanted to share there was a stark difference, as most respondents discussed transportation issues, issues with school administration not supporting partnerships, and the feeling that public library staff was angry with schools for not hiring credentialed librarians preventing potential partnerships. The sentiment of these responses was overwhelmingly negative, with only 10% of respondents adding additional positive coded information.

5. Discussion

Based on the data presented above, partnerships between public libraries and their local schools appear to be both common and overall well-received by those participating in the partnerships. School staff overall appear to be a little less confident in the strength of the relationships, or in their value to those they are partnering with. The partnerships described by respondents in both public libraries and schools were very similar, indicating a good understanding of the purpose of the partnership between both venues. Both venues also shared some of the same concerns, such as the benefit school administration sees to the partnership, issues with transportation between venues, and the risks involved with so few staff on both sides being part of the partnership.

6. Scholarly significance of the research and Next Steps

This work is significant because it confirms that the largest formal education institutions (public schools) and the most prevalent informal education institutions (public libraries) are already working together in the majority of communities. These partnerships should be central in future funding opportunities in both formal and informal education. The current barriers to successful partnership identified in this research can be alleviated by groups

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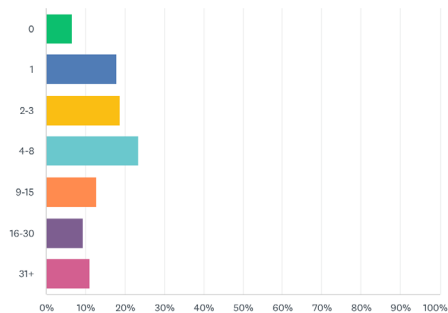
such as STAR Net, as well as federal and local funders, now that they have been identified. Next steps for STAR Net include incorporating this feedback into our future programs, specifically into kit programs as borrowing materials was a very common partnership mechanism. Providing more public libraries with tools and resources for their schools to utilize is one way to increase and strengthen partnerships. Encouraging more participants from both venues to take part in the partnership will be a goal in future projects.

This work was conducted and funded as part of the “From Our Town to Moon, Mars, and Beyond” project (grant #80NSSC21M0081) from NASA, and has been determined to meet the criteria for IRB exemption by the Education and Development Center.

Figures:

What is the number of full-time library staff at your branch?
(Do not include volunteers, or staff that serve multiple branches)

Answered: 334 Skipped: 149



Figure

What is your role at your library? (Please pick the role that is closest to accurate for you, even if it's not the exact name. For example, if you have a very specific role like "maker-space 3D printer operator" or "holder of puppets for story-time" choose the option that best fits the group you most work with!)

Answered: 333 Skipped: 150

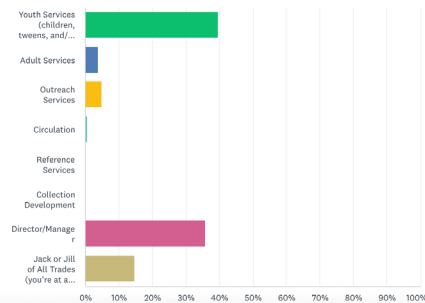


Figure 1

Prevalence of Public Library and School Library Partnerships

How would you rate the importance of partnerships and collaboration between public libraries and local schools? (Please answer this question based on your own personal opinion, regardless of your current partnership status.)

Answered: 334 Skipped: 149

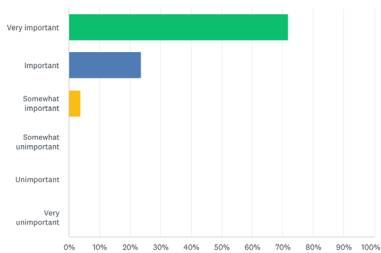


Figure 2

What level of school infrastructure is involved in your partnership? (Check all that apply)

Answered: 294 Skipped: 189

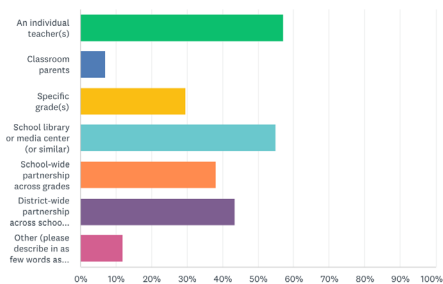


Figure 3

For the partnerships indicated above, what level of school are these partnerships present in? (Check all that apply)

Answered: 294 Skipped: 189

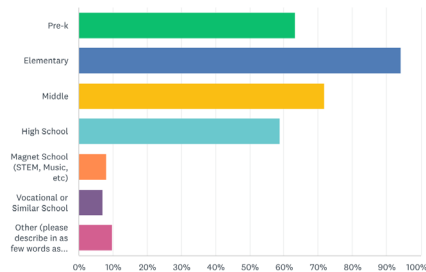


Figure 4

Prevalence of Public Library and School Library Partnerships

What activities are included in your partnership? (Check all that apply)

Answered: 294 Skipped: 189

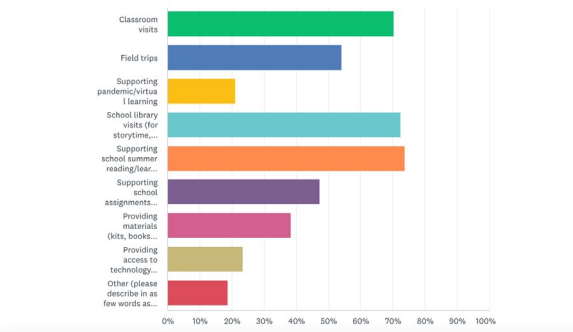


Figure 5

On the library end, how many of your staff are involved in this partnership?

Answered: 292 Skipped: 191

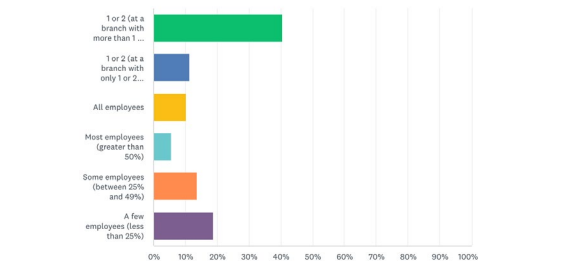


Figure 6

How was this partnership initiated?

Answered: 294 Skipped: 189

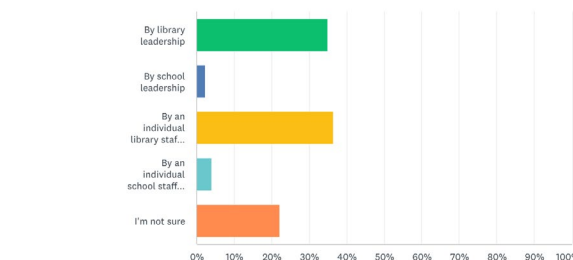


Figure 7

Regardless of if you currently partner with your local school, what is your perception of how important state and national standards would be to them if you were conducting programs as part of the school day (field trips, classroom visits, school library visits, etc)

Answered: 275 Skipped: 208

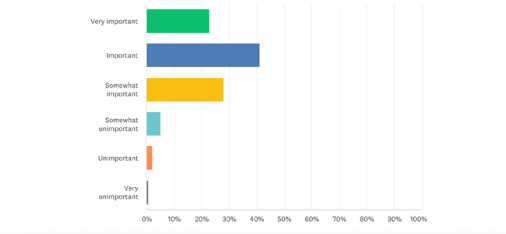


Figure 8

Prevalence of Public Library and School Library Partnerships

Do you feel your school partners believe this is an important relationship?

Answered: 294 Skipped: 189

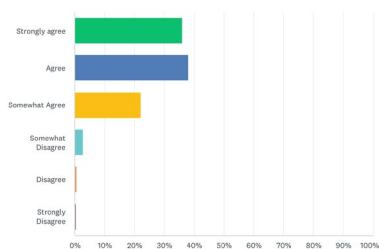


Figure 9

Whether or not you have a current school partnership, please rank the below barriers to partnership in order of most relevant/burdensome for you and your library.

Answered: 275 Skipped: 208

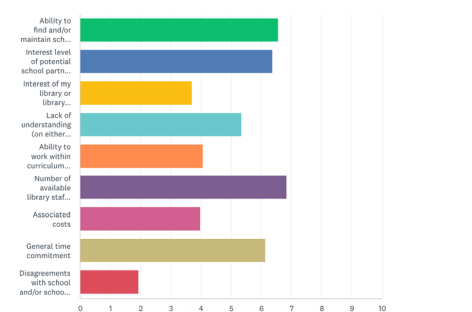


Figure 10

How important are state and national level standards to the programs you conduct in your library? (Not school partner programs)

Answered: 278 Skipped: 205

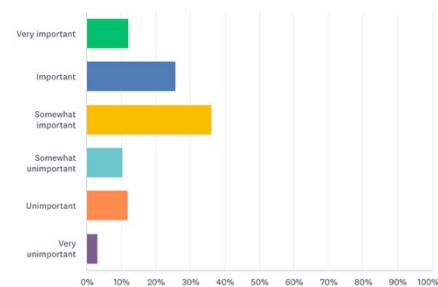


Figure 11

Prevalence of Public Library and School Library Partnerships

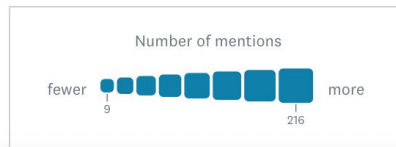
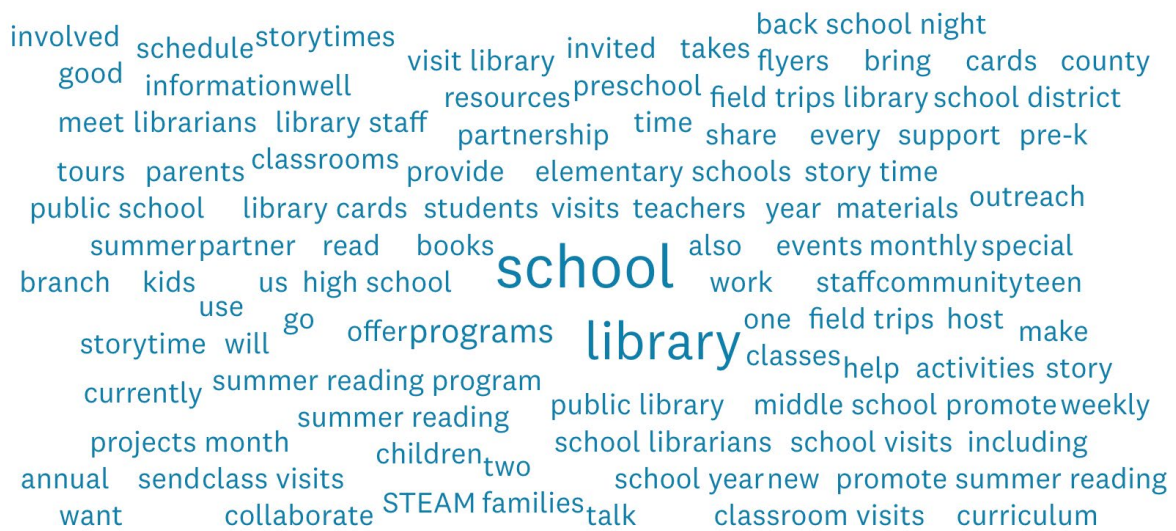


Figure 12

Community Type (please use census information to get your best guess if you don't know the answer to this question)

Answered: 145 Skipped: 0

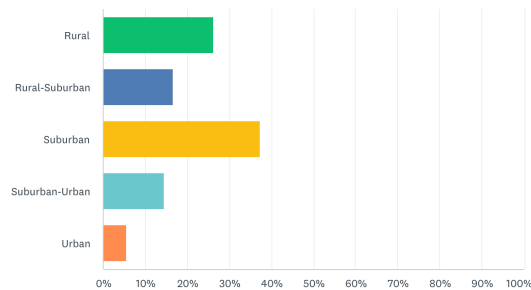


Figure 13

Prevalence of Public Library and School Library Partnerships

What type of school do you work at? (If the exact answer isn't presented below, please chose the option that is closest to accurate)

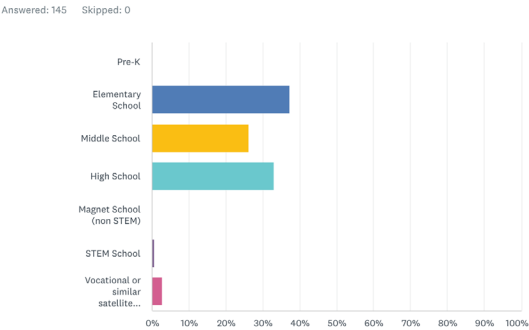


Figure 14

Number of full-time librarians at your school (do not include volunteers, or staff that serve multiple schools).

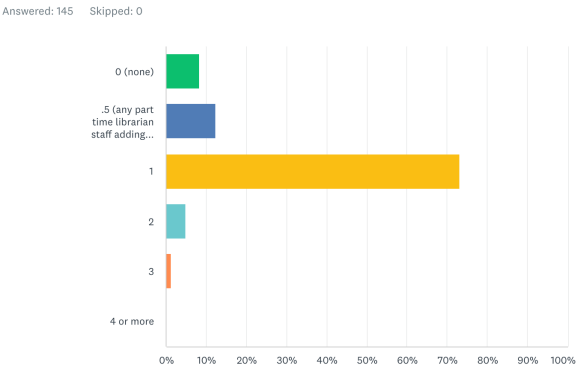


Figure 15

What is your role at your school? (please pick the role that is closest to accurate for you, even if it's not the right name. If you have a very specific role like "print room copy operator" choose the option that best fits your role!)

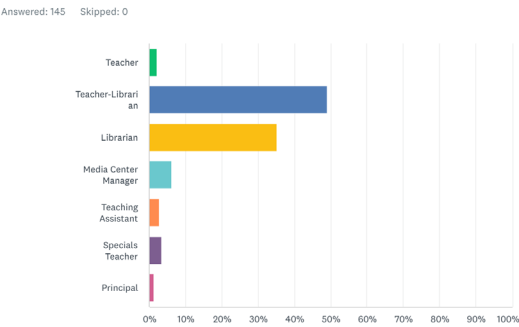


Figure 16

Prevalence of Public Library and School Library Partnerships

How would you rate the importance of partnerships/collaboration between public libraries and local schools? (Please answer this question based on your personal opinion, regardless of your current partnership status).

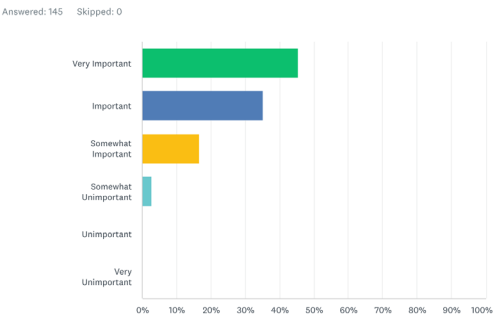


Figure 17

What level of school infrastructure is involved in your partnership? (Check the highest level of infrastructure involved)

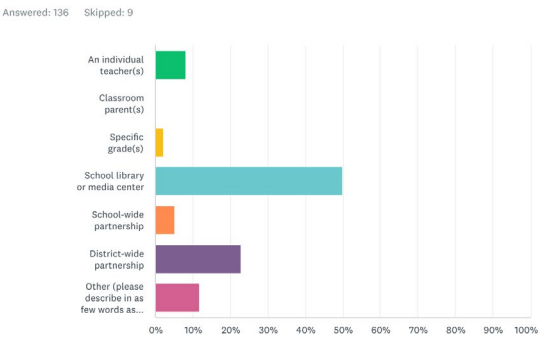


Figure 18

Was this partnership initiated through library/school leadership, or an individual staff member?

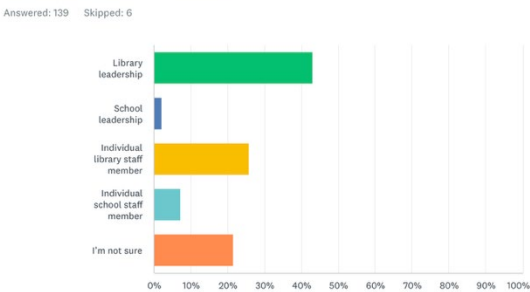


Figure 19

Prevalence of Public Library and School Library Partnerships

How long have you had this partnership?

Answered: 134 Skipped: 11

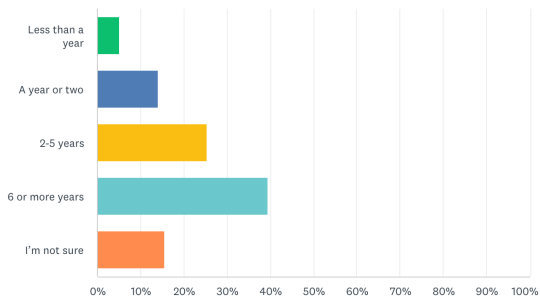


Figure 20

Do you consider maintaining this relationship an important function of your work or your schools work? Please rate your feelings on the below scale.

Answered: 136 Skipped: 9

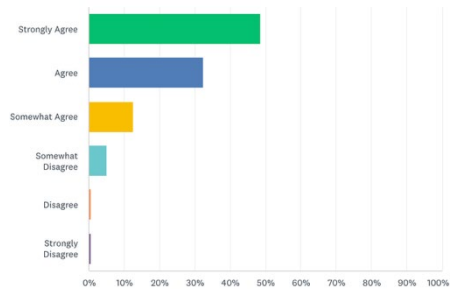


Figure 21

Do you feel your library partners believe this is an important relationship?

Answered: 134 Skipped: 11

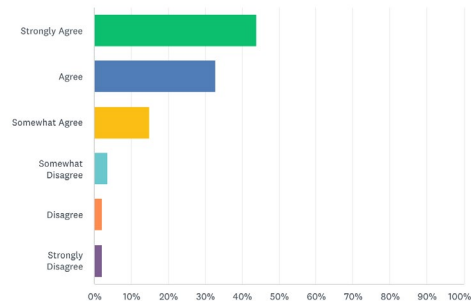


Figure 22

Prevalence of Public Library and School Library Partnerships

Whether or not you have a current public library partnership, please rank the below barriers to partnership in order of most relevant for you and your school.

Answered: 136 Skipped: 9

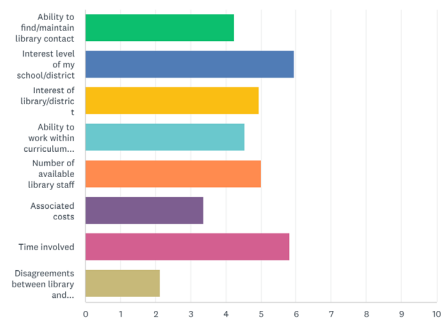


Figure 23

Does your school administration value your partnership efforts?

Answered: 131 Skipped: 14

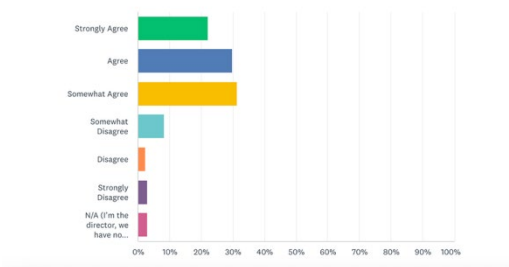


Figure 24

Regardless of if you currently do these activities, please check which ones you'd be interested in.

Answered: 142 Skipped: 3

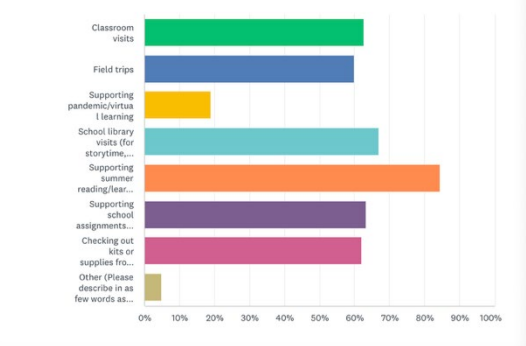


Figure 25

Prevalence of Public Library and School Library Partnerships

Regardless of if you currently partner with your local library, what is your perception of how important state and national standards would be to them if you were conducting programs as part of the school day (field trips, classroom visits, school library visits, etc)

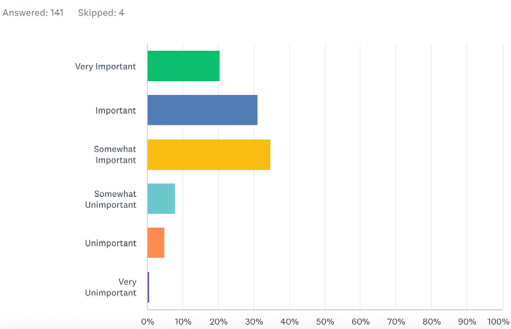


Figure 26

How important are state and national level standards to the programs you do with partners (irrespective of the specific partnerships)?

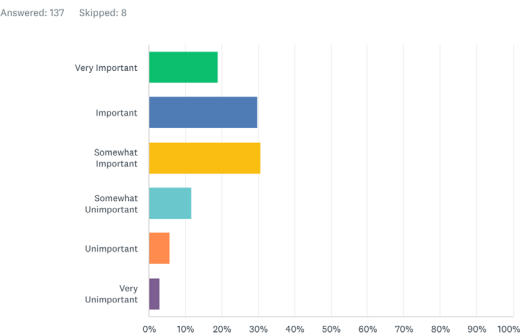


Figure 27

Prevalence of Public Library and School Library Partnerships

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