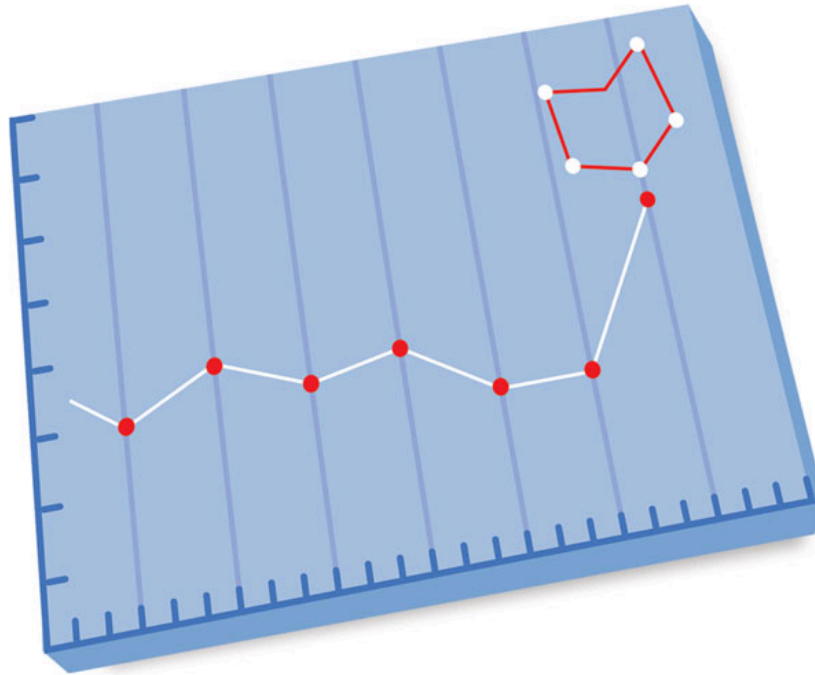


The Librarian Effect on Literacy

by [Sarah Asch](#)

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Concerns about literacy education have been a facet of American schooling for decades, and data repeatedly shows those concerns are not unfounded.

The 2026 [National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](#) scores will be released in early 2027, but data from the most recent “Nation’s Report Card” is clear—reading scores have been declining for years. In 2024, the average reading score for fourth and eighth grade students was two points lower than in 2022. And those 2022 scores were three points lower than the scores from 2019.

This slide has been going on for over a decade, according to analysis from education news outlet The 74. Looking at more than two decades of data, The 74 notes that part of this decrease in overall scores comes down to a widening gap between high achieving and low achieving students. Starting in 2015, there was a notable decline in students performing in the middle range. Meanwhile, there was growth in the number of students that performed either very well or very poorly.

Many have speculated about the cause of these low reading scores—learning loss caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, social media cutting short young attention spans, or insufficient educational standards in schools.

But regardless of the reason, school librarians are often on the front line of the issue and in a unique position to lead literacy efforts on K–12 campuses.

Research by library consultant Keith Curry Lance has shown for decades that schools with librarians on campus have better test scores, on average, than schools without trained library staff. Not only that, but schools with a full-time librarian perform better than schools with only part-time library staff.

So, what can a librarian do to help improve student reading scores?

Co-teaching literacy skills

Librarians play a crucial role in teaching specific academic reading skills that students need to master to succeed on standardized tests.

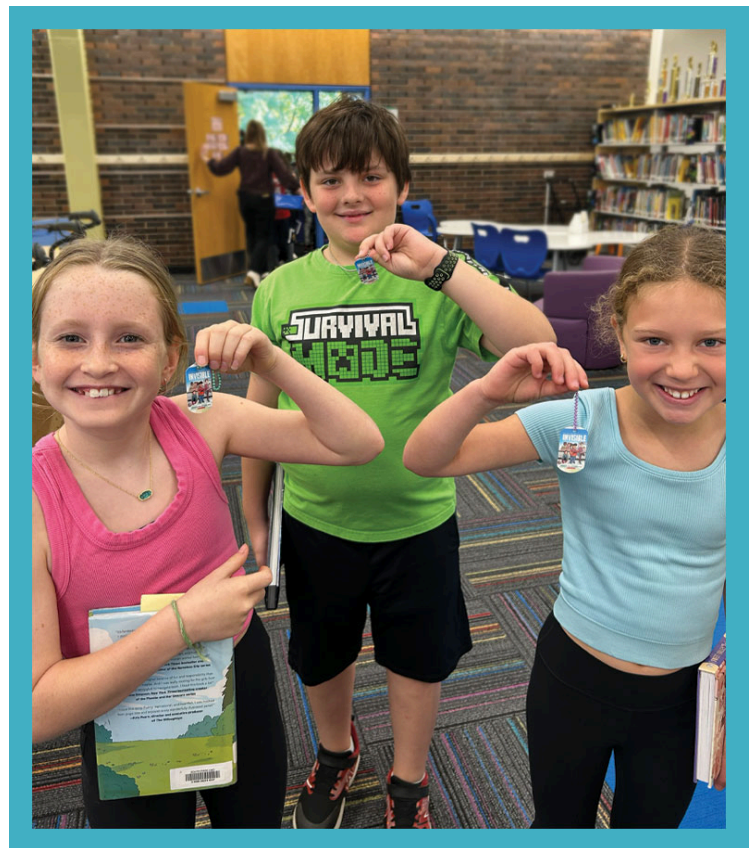
Gabrielle Casieri, an intermediate school librarian and president of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians, says this can look like librarians collaborating with ELA teachers.

“(Librarians) can co-teach with language arts teachers,” she says. “They can help design lessons and inquiry-based projects that will help those students hit the standards, like reading for information. Because not all reading is the same.”

The exact form this takes depends on the age of the students, Casieri says. But she notes that in her experience, students tend to find this type of instruction engaging.

“When they are doing inquiry-based learning, they’re interested, and they’re asking their own questions,” she says. “That can help with vocabulary building and comprehension and fluency and all the things that we’re looking for in reading.”

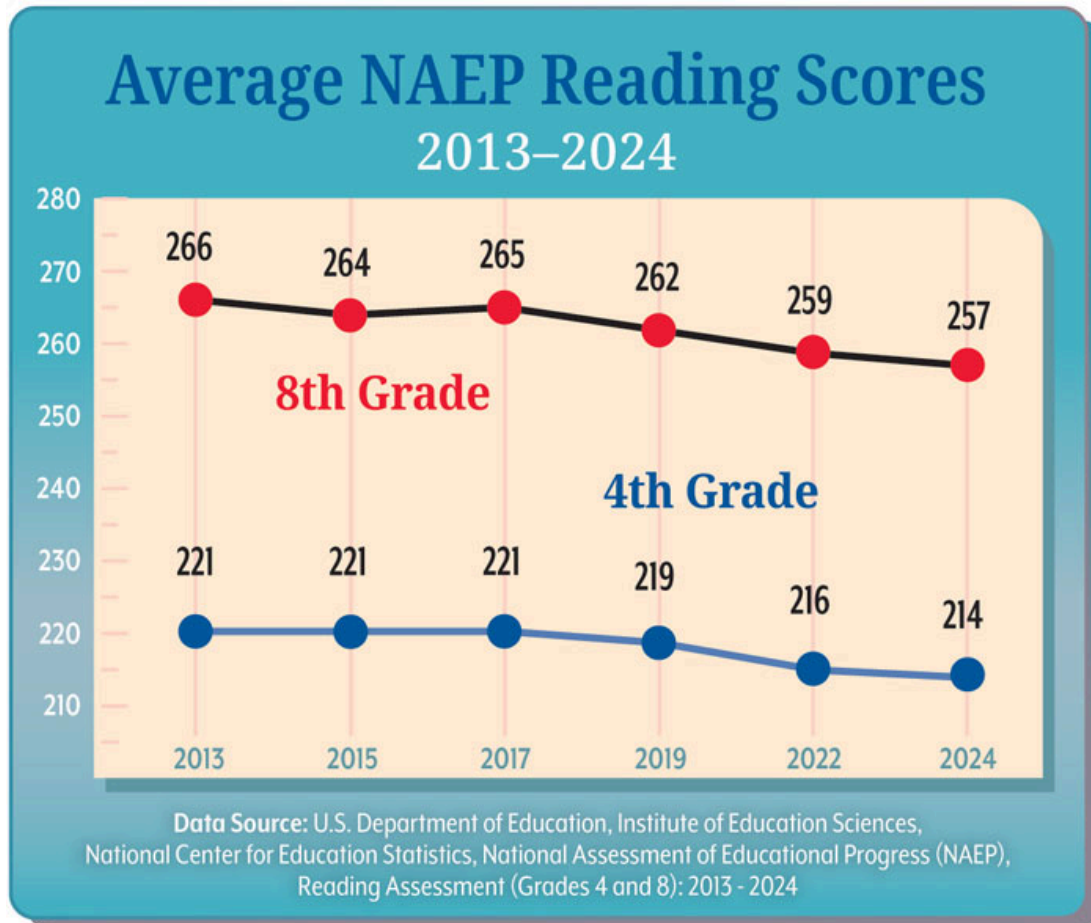
For schools that don’t have access to an on-campus librarian, Casieri recommends that teachers reach out to local public libraries to see if they are able to partner on this kind of instruction.



Students delight in earning “brag tags” for every book they read and discuss.

Curry Lance agrees that collaborative planning between teachers and librarians is a boon for student success—especially on topics that librarians have expertise in like media literacy. Librarians can also be a resource for teachers beyond working on lessons for students.

“This is something that almost all, if not all, of the impact studies I did pointed to as a really valuable activity of school librarians: being resident providers of in-service professional development,” he says.



Incentivizing reading for fun

Another way to improve reading test scores is to get kids reading for fun, according to Cherity Pennington, the librarian at Shawnee (OK) Middle School—and 2026 School Librarian of the Year Finalist (page 22). She says this usually starts with having a library collection that speaks to students.

“When we focus only on academic pursuits, when we’re only focused on how to become a better skillful reader, and we don’t focus on the joy of reading, then we have students who don’t practice reading outside of that school environment,” she says. “When they are practicing, reading on their own, they’re going to become stronger readers.”

A good collection is not enough, however, and there is not always money for a collection overhaul. Pennington says her personal experience echoes Curry Lance's study that schools need a full-time librarian on campus if students are going to make full use of the books in the library. She saw this firsthand in 2015 when an economic downturn meant she had to oversee two campuses instead of one.

"Circulation plummeted in both libraries. I mean just plummeted," she says. "I was able then to take that data to our district administration and show that, you know what, our students aren't reading. So that only lasted one year. And then we saw circulation go way up."

Librarians can also encourage reading for fun with strategic programming, according to Kelly Jahng, an elementary school librarian in Deerfield, IL.

Jahng's campus increased literacy programming starting in January 2024, in response to low benchmark reading test scores from that year's third-grade class.

"We initiated a bunch of things to help try to get them reading more outside of school, especially because that was something I was pretty convinced they were not doing that much," Jahng says. "And that was reinforced through surveys from their parents."

To incentivize reading at home, Jahng started the brag tag program, where students get a dog tag after reading a book for fun and having a discussion with her. She says she's found that for some kids the brag tag collection is less important than making a connection with an adult over books.

"I had one student tell me...back when he was in third grade, after we had a book chat, he said he didn't really care about the little tag that I was offering him," she says. "He just wanted to sit down and talk to me about the books that he was reading. That was really what was the important piece to him."

Jahng also started an annual family book club.

"A parent or other adult reads the book with their student and then they come for the club meeting...during the student's lunch hour," she says. "It's an encouragement for them to be reading with an adult at home...somebody that is a good role model to them."



Students and their grown-ups celebrate reading at home with “family book club” events during school lunch periods.

Make use of state resources

Mississippi has made headlines in recent years for rising reading scores—making it one of the few states to buck national trends. The state achieved this through several programs and policies, including a new rule that students who do not pass the state test at the end of third grade have to repeat the grade.

Miriam Garner, the school library chair at the Mississippi Library Association, says this gateway test means everyone on campus, including librarians, became laser focused on reading skills in the earlier grades.

Garner works as a high school librarian, and says she keeps kids on track by finding genres and authors they like to keep them reading. Another thing that boosts student reading skills on her campus? Resources subsidized by the state that are made available to schools at a lower cost.

For example, during COVID, the state of Mississippi created a consortium with MackinVIA, an ebook provider.

“We can all pay in at a much lower price than what we could afford to buy all the books at,” Garner says. “So the entire state has access to that library as long as their school pays into it. And [the cost] is very minimal. It’s based on your student population.”

With MackinVIA, students can check out books digitally. “Kids can download those books and take them with them on their basketball trip they’re fixing to take, or whatever,” says Garner. “And they can even do it all summer long. They don’t have to be worried about me being at school. They can access that all the time.”

Similarly, the state has an online database for publicly funded libraries called MAGNOLIA, which was created in 1997. This gives students at Garner’s school access to reliable research tools that she couldn’t otherwise pay for out of the local budget.

“There’s an elementary section, a middle school section, and a high school section. And it has professional development for teachers, too,” she says. “They provide services like EBSCO and Britannica. Things like that that we can’t afford to necessarily keep up to date and within our own libraries. I could never pay for an EBSCO license to use.”

Making use of these statewide resources has been crucial to improving student reading skills, Garner contends.

A supportive administration goes a long way

While librarians and teachers can collaborate and bring big changes for students, many of the experts who spoke with SLJ say that a supportive principal makes an even bigger difference. This includes Curry Lance.

“For a librarian to be successful in a school, they have to have an environment that’s conducive to their work,” he says. “They have to have an administration, a principal in particular at the building level, who really knows what the value of a library can be.”

Jahng, who saw reading test scores rise at her elementary school in Illinois, says this was her experience. It was her principal who initially pitched her the idea of launching literacy programs.

“What sticks out to me about the whole thing is that my principal saw me as a resource in this area,” Jahng says. “She saw that I had some additional skills to offer in helping to boost our students’ performance.”

This support not only allowed Jahng to expand her initial programs to the whole campus, but it has also created space to be flexible in responding to new student needs as they arise.

“We’ve realized that our second graders are now having kind of a different problem. Their problem with reading doesn’t really have anything to do with their comprehension. It seems to be a little more related to their fluency,” she says. “They have specific passages that they’re supposed to take home and practice with an adult. And then they can come in and read it to me, and I will give them a little brag tag as well.”

Pennington says all of this comes down to building a reading culture on campus—and that process works best when there is buy-in from all the stakeholders.

“If I were a new librarian, I would want to have conversations with administrators and classroom teachers and family members about what that reading culture looks like,” she says. “I would ask to be on a planning committee to have a strategic plan to improve reading culture in the school and in the district. Those are changes that do not happen overnight, but with a really good plan and a lot of buy-in from stakeholders, especially within the community and with parents, you can transform reading within your schools.”

Ultimately, a lot of factors impact reading scores, Pennington says, including the local poverty level, access to public libraries and bookstores, and family engagement with reading at home. But if the goal is to improve literacy—as well as reading test scores—she says that putting resources into school libraries is an obvious step.

“Let’s invest in what we know is working,” she says.

Three Key Takeaways



School librarians have a measurable impact on reading scores. Decades of research by Keith Curry Lance indicate that a school library with a full-time, qualified librarian is positively associated with stronger student reading outcomes.



Collaboration with ELA educators and joy-based reading programs are effective librarian strategies. Librarians who collaborate with ELA teachers on inquiry-based lessons help students build comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. Equally important is fostering a love of reading through engaging collections, incentive programs, and family book clubs—because students who read for fun become stronger readers overall.



Administrative support and school-wide buy-in are essential. Librarians can only drive change when principals and administrators recognize their value and integrate them into broader literacy efforts.

Sarah Asch is a journalist based in Austin, TX, and is completing her master’s degree at the University of Texas School of Information.

National Assessment of Educational Progress

NAEP

Nation's Report Card

literacy

school librarians

library

programming
