
Bridging educational silos: exploring professional development and learning opportunities through academic library/public-school partnerships

School-University
Partnerships

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Received 29 September 2025
Revised 16 January 2026
7 April 2026
22 May 2026
Accepted 4 June 2026

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to examine partnerships between academic libraries and P-12 public schools as a mechanism for advancing professional development and learning amid evolving instructional, technological, and policy demands. Guided by Weick’s sensemaking framework, the study explores how academic library administrators and public school superintendents interpret, construct and enact partnership opportunities following the implementation of a US state’s information literacy legislation. The study focuses on how these actors make sense of institutional roles, responsibilities, and constraints in developing sustainable collaborations that support educator learning and student preparedness across the K–12 and higher education continuum.

Design/methodology/approach – This study employed a mixed-methods, exploratory case study design. Data were collected through statewide surveys of academic library administrators and public school superintendents ($n = 60$), followed by semi-structured interviews with a purposive subsample of participants ($n = 7$). Quantitative survey data provided descriptive insights into partnership prevalence and priorities, while qualitative data supported in-depth analysis of participant interpretations and decision-making processes. Guided by Weick’s sensemaking framework, thematic analysis was used to identify patterns related to partnership formation, perceived opportunities, institutional constraints and strategies for implementing professional development and learning initiatives.

Findings – Findings indicate strong interest among both academic library administrators and superintendents in developing partnerships focused on information literacy, educational technology and project-based learning. Participants emphasized flexible, hybrid professional development and learning delivery models to address time, staffing and logistical constraints. Superintendents emerged as key gatekeepers in partnership decision-making, prioritizing alignment with district goals and financial sustainability. Academic librarians were viewed as well-positioned to support districts facing uneven instructional capacity, though barriers related to staffing, funding, governance, and partnership structure persisted. Pay-per-session models were identified as a preferred strategy for scalable and sustainable collaboration.

Research limitations/implications – This study is limited by its focus on a single US state, New Jersey, which may restrict transferability to regions with different policy environments or educational infrastructures. The participant sample did not include teachers, school librarians, or instructional staff, limiting insight into implementation at the classroom level. Additionally, interview participation was limited, constraining depth of qualitative perspectives. Future research should incorporate longitudinal and comparative designs, include additional stakeholder groups and examine how sensemaking processes evolve over time as partnerships mature and institutional conditions change.

Practical implications – Findings suggest that academic libraries can play a strategic role in supporting district-level professional development by offering flexible, targeted professional development and learning aligned with information literacy legislation and instructional priorities. Superintendents should be engaged early as

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Declaration of interests statement: The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.



School-University Partnerships
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2833-2075
p-ISSN: 1935-7125
DOI 10.1108/SUP-09-2025-0052

decision-makers to ensure alignment with district goals and governance structures. Hybrid delivery and pay-per-session models may enhance feasibility and sustainability. Clear communication frameworks and defined partnership structures can mitigate logistical and staffing challenges, supporting more effective cross-sector collaboration between academic libraries and P-12 school systems.

Social implications – Academic library–public school partnerships have the potential to advance educational equity by expanding access to professional learning in information literacy and educational technology, particularly in districts with limited instructional capacity. By strengthening educator knowledge and practice, these collaborations may improve student readiness for higher education and civic participation. Such partnerships can also help address systemic disparities resulting from uneven resources and declining numbers of certified school librarians, contributing to more equitable, informed and digitally literate communities.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the literature by examining academic library–public school partnerships through a sensemaking lens, emphasizing professional development rather than research collaboration alone. By incorporating perspectives of both academic library administrators and public school superintendents, it illuminates how institutional actors interpret policy mandates and partnership opportunities. The identification of preferred delivery and funding models offers practical guidance for scalable implementation. This work positions academic libraries as critical cross-sector partners in emerging professional learning ecosystems supporting P-12 education.

Keywords Academic library administrators, Information literacy, Public school superintendents, Professional development, School-university partnerships, P-12 educators

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Partnerships between P-12 schools and various types of libraries are essential. There are 116,867 libraries in the United States (US) today ([American Library Association \(ALA\), 2020](#)), and more than 90,000 public and private P-12 schools serve 49.4 million students ([ALA, 2019](#); [NCES, 2020](#)). Increased use of online meeting platforms allow public and academic librarians to connect virtually with any public or private school or P-12 educator across the country. Providing access to libraries, librarians, and their varied resources beyond the school walls makes a more equitable education possible, even in America's schools with the most underserved students ([Grimes & Cohen, 2022](#)).

[Saunders \(2015\)](#) analyzed 63 Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) institutional strategic plans regarding value and impact. In looking at the strategic plans, 17 of the 63 plans (27%) discussed “opportunities for engagement with external partners, including K-12 school systems, museums, and the local community, while seven libraries expressed interest in initiating or building on international collaborations” ([Saunders, 2015](#), p. 288). While some academic libraries have engaged in external partnerships with public schools, there is a need for more of these partnerships to benefit the teaching and learning experiences of teachers, school librarians, education leaders, and students ([Groves, 2019](#)).

One example of an academic library/public-school partnership resulted in academic librarians providing first, in-person professional development and learning (PDL) and later, virtual PDL for school librarians, technology, and social studies teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Grimes & Marks, 2024](#)). Connecting with P-12 schools, academic librarians can offer P-12 educators in-person, online, or hybrid PDL about subjects ranging from children's literature, information literacy (IL), project-based learning, and the use of library resources to incorporate educational technology (EdTech), AI, and immersive technologies into teaching. Such an academic library/public-school partnership can serve as a model for colleges, universities, and schools to implement on a larger scale.

School administrators, at both the district and building levels, can look to establish an academic library/public-school partnership to provide PDL for school personnel in individual schools or district wide. Academic librarians can provide customized online, in-person, or hybrid and in-person PDL to provide academic support to teachers, administrators, and other school staff in the P-12 context. An impetus to explore academic library/public-school partnerships in this study was the recent implementation of one US state's IL law and how academic librarians might be able to assist public schools with its implementation ([State of New Jersey, 2023](#)). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore partnerships between

academic libraries and P-12 schools, and the PDL opportunities these collaborations could generate. The following research questions served to guide the study: School-University Partnerships

- RQ1. How do public school superintendents and academic library administrators perceive the PDL opportunities provided through academic library/public-school partnerships?
 - RQ2. How can public school educators benefit from PDL opportunities that academic librarians can provide through academic library/public-school partnerships?
 - RQ3. How can academic libraries benefit from academic library/public-school partnerships?
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Literature review

History of school-university partnerships

School–university partnerships have emerged as essential mechanisms for bridging research and practice, facilitating the co-creation of knowledge that directly addresses pressing educational challenges. These partnerships foster collaborative relationships that enhance both teacher development and student learning outcomes (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Penuel *et al.*, 2020). Lentz *et al.* (2024) emphasizes that initiating and sustaining such partnerships requires deliberate effort from researchers to build trust and mutual understanding with school leaders. Their findings suggest that the success of these collaborations hinges on aligning research initiatives with the specific needs, constraints, and strategic priorities of schools and districts, rather than adopting a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Similarly, Walsh and Backe (2013) argue that meaningful partnerships enable universities to engage authentically with local educational systems, creating opportunities for shared ownership of initiatives and long-term systemic change.

While much of the literature on school–university partnerships focuses on research production and instructional improvement, these collaborations also hold significant potential as professional development infrastructures. Partnerships can support continuous, job-embedded professional learning for educators, administrators, and support staff. Professional development can strengthen institutional capacity, support innovation, and promote shared learning across organizational boundaries. Such an orientation aligns with contemporary understandings of professional learning as iterative, collaborative, and contextually grounded rather than episodic or compliance-driven.

Research–practice partnerships (RPPs) serve as a formalized model for collaboration between educational researchers and practitioners, emphasizing shared authority, mutual learning, transparency, and sustained dialog (Farrell *et al.*, 2019; Henrick *et al.*, 2017). Foundational scholarship conceptualizes RPPs as long-term alliances designed to bridge persistent divides between research and practice by aligning inquiry with district-defined problems of practice (Coburn & Stein, 2010; Coburn *et al.*, 2013). Within this framework, practitioners are not passive recipients of research, but active partners who shape research questions, methods, and interpretations in ways that support organizational learning and improvement.

Empirical studies link participation in RPPs to improved teacher self-efficacy, enhanced instructional practices, and positive shifts in student outcomes (Bevan & Penuel, 2017; Booth *et al.*, 2015). At the same time, scholars note that RPPs are inherently complex and often constrained by communication challenges, misaligned expectations, and differences in organizational culture and timelines (Penuel *et al.*, 2013). Negotiating these tensions requires ongoing sensemaking and deliberate boundary work as partners align research activity with instructional priorities and professional learning needs (Penuel *et al.*, 2013).

Recent work further underscores the importance of early partnership formation strategies. Lentz *et al.* (2024) demonstrate that while initial contact approaches vary by context, effective

RPPs are more likely to emerge when researchers and institutional leaders clearly articulate shared goals, clarify expectations, and foreground how partnership activities will directly support schools' professional development and learning priorities.

Academic library administrators and public-school superintendents, curriculum directors, and district administrators represent an underexamined but highly strategic partnership axis, particularly in areas such as IL, digital literacy, AI, curriculum resources, and educator professional learning. Academic libraries possess substantial expertise in IL instruction, digital scholarship, instructional design, and emerging technologies, positioning them as essential professional development partners for P-12 systems navigating rapid technological and curricular change. Conversely, school district leaders bring critical contextual knowledge of student populations, policy constraints, accountability structures, and instructional priorities that can inform the design of relevant, scalable professional learning initiatives.

Partnerships between academic library administrators and public-school superintendents can therefore function as cross-sector professional learning ecosystems, supporting P-12 teachers, librarians, and administrators through shared workshops, micro-credentialing initiatives, co-developed learning modules, and ongoing communities of practice. These collaborations move beyond transactional service models toward reciprocal capacity-building, in which universities support district professional development goals while schools inform university outreach, training priorities, and applied research agendas. Such partnerships also enable sustained engagement over time, increasing the likelihood that professional learning translates into institutional change.

Framing school–university partnerships as vehicles for professional development broadens their purpose and impact. Rather than serving solely as conduits for research dissemination or data collection, these partnerships become mechanisms for collective sensemaking, skill development, and leadership learning across educational systems. This expanded orientation reinforces the potential of school–university partnerships to address complex, evolving challenges such as technology integration, equity, and workforce readiness through sustained, collaborative professional learning grounded in shared responsibility and mutual benefit.

Academic libraries and P-12 partnerships

Existing literature suggests that academic library–P-12 partnerships are often set in motion by external policy pressures, instructional capacity gaps, and librarians' expanding professional identities. Mandates related to IL, digital citizenship, and emerging technologies frequently create urgency for districts that lack internal expertise, positioning academic librarians as credible partners (Burhanna & Lee Jensen, 2006; Groves, 2019; Montiel-Overall & Grimes, 2013). Academic librarians are motivated to engage in these partnerships not only by outreach missions but by opportunities to extend instructional expertise, demonstrate institutional value, and align library work with equity-oriented educational goals (Saunders, 2015). Prior studies indicate that librarians gain professional legitimacy, enhanced campus visibility, and stronger pathways for student readiness through sustained engagement with P-12 educators (Hicks & Lloyd, 2016; Martin *et al.*, 2012).

Recent statewide and virtual initiatives further demonstrate that such partnerships can evolve from informal collaboration into durable professional networks when supported by shared infrastructure and leadership commitment (Marks *et al.*, 2023). Taken together, this literature suggests that academic library–P-12 partnerships are activated by intersecting policy demands and professional motivations, rather than by outreach alone. Collaboration is becoming increasingly important in academic libraries and amongst different types of libraries and educational institutions. To connect academic librarians with P-12 schools and better prepare students for college and careers, external partnerships with P-12 schools should be considered part of academic libraries' outreach goals. These partnerships can be formed with a single school or school district, a group of school districts, or a statewide organization such as a statewide education association, statewide school library association, or statewide academic

library committee or organization. In the past, several of these external partnerships with the P-12 community have centered around collaboration specifically on IL instruction (Burhanna & Lee Jensen, 2006; Carr & Rockman, 2003; Cosgrove, 2001; Jackson & Hansen, 2006; Nichols, 2001; Nichols *et al.*, 2006; Martin *et al.*, 2012; Nutefall, 2001).

Research indicates that first-year college students arrive with uneven information-literacy preparation and may lack experience with important research practices expected in higher education (Valenza *et al.*, 2022). Students' reflections on their high school experiences further demonstrate that some feel well prepared for college research, whereas others identify significant gaps in source evaluation, database use, citation, and independent inquiry (Boyer & Dziedzic-Elliott, 2023; Valenza *et al.*, 2022). These differences are compounded by gaps between faculty expectations and students' demonstrated research skills, reinforcing the need for sustained collaboration among academic librarians, school librarians, teachers, and faculty members across educational transitions (Pitera & Bush, 2025). Partnerships that align information-literacy instruction across secondary and postsecondary settings can help make research expectations more transparent and provide students with repeated opportunities to practice essential skills before entering college. Such coordination may also reduce duplication, address preparation gaps earlier, and support a more coherent progression of research competencies from high school through the first year of higher education.

One example of how such coordination can be put into practice is the statewide outreach initiative described by Marks *et al.* (2023). The project brought together two statewide library organizations to organize virtual academic library panels for high school students, with the goals of reducing library anxiety, introducing college-readiness resources, and strengthening connections between P-12 and higher education institutions. By giving students direct access to academic librarians before entering college, the initiative helped clarify expectations surrounding college-level research and familiarized participants with academic library services and support. The collaboration also demonstrated how professional associations can provide the infrastructure needed to extend information-literacy outreach beyond individual schools or campuses. Its success in fostering an ongoing relationship between the participating organizations illustrates the potential for academic and school library partnerships to become durable, scalable components of college-readiness efforts.

In the US today, there are 3,094 academic libraries (ALA, 2020). Through a school-university partnership, academic librarians can support P-12 educators by providing professional development in IL, EdTech, and other areas of interest. The COVID-19 pandemic created a digital infrastructure (e.g. Zoom, Google Meet, Cisco WebEx, Microsoft Teams) to support virtual outreach activities from academic libraries (NJLA-CUS/ACRL-NJ, 2026a). Grimes and Marks (2024) provided virtual PD to P-12 educators in the Paterson Public Schools both on a districtwide and individual school basis. Through a statewide partnership (NJLA-CUS/ACRL-NJ, 2026a), Grimes and Marks (2024) also provided virtual PD to school librarians through an initiative called Teaching Thursdays (NJLA-CUS/ACRL-NJ, 2026b). Academic librarians can engage in outreach to the P-12 community through offering virtual library instruction sessions for P-12 students, virtual professional development sessions for P-12 educators/administrators/staff, and virtual academic library orientations for high school students. Academic librarians offer expertise in IL, EdTech, immersive technologies (including AI), project-based learning, grant writing and a wide range of other areas.

The role of superintendents in partnering

Public school superintendents occupy a central and often decisive role in the formation, direction, and sustainability of school-university partnerships, particularly those focused on professional development and learning (PDL). As district-level leaders, superintendents function not only as instructional visionaries but also as organizational gatekeepers who determine whether external partnerships align with district priorities, resource constraints, and policy mandates. Prior research consistently demonstrates that superintendents play a critical

role in identifying professional development needs and evaluating the strategic fit of partnerships within broader district goals (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2020; Dionne *et al.*, 2020). Understanding their perspectives is therefore essential for assessing both the feasibility and scalability of academic library–led PDL initiatives.

Superintendents' leadership responsibilities have become increasingly complex, requiring them to navigate evolving policy environments, technological change, and shifting expectations for teaching and learning. Arar and Avidov-Ungar (2020) emphasize that superintendents must engage in continuous professional learning and adaptive leadership to effectively manage organizational change and support school improvement. Within this context, partnerships are not peripheral activities but strategic tools that enable superintendents to address gaps in expertise, extend institutional capacity, and respond to emerging instructional demands. As such, superintendents are positioned as sensemakers and strategic brokers, interpreting external opportunities such as collaborations with academic libraries through the lens of district needs, constraints, and long-term planning priorities.

Empirical research further highlights the breadth of professional development concerns that superintendents must address. Dionne *et al.* (2020) found that superintendents view teacher development as extending beyond core instructional skills to include areas such as learner diversity, data literacy, inclusive pedagogy, mental health, and community engagement. These multifaceted needs underscore the importance of partnerships that are flexible, contextually responsive, and capable of addressing both instructional and systemic challenges. Academic institutions, including academic libraries, are therefore positioned as valuable partners when they can provide targeted expertise in areas where districts lack internal capacity, particularly in domains such as IL, educational technology, and research-based instructional practices.

Importantly, superintendents do not simply approve partnerships; they shape their structure, scope, and implementation. The literature suggests that superintendents are most likely to engage in partnerships when initiatives demonstrate clear alignment with district goals, offer tangible benefits for educators and students, and present viable models for sustainability (Dionne *et al.*, 2020; Joyce & Cartwright, 2020). This includes considerations such as cost, scalability, staffing implications, and integration with existing professional development frameworks. In this sense, superintendents act as design partners and decision-makers, influencing not only whether partnerships are initiated but how they are operationalized and sustained over time.

Additionally, superintendents play a key role in mediating between external partners and internal district structures. They are responsible for coordinating with curriculum directors, building administrators, and instructional leaders to ensure that partnership activities are effectively implemented and aligned with classroom practice. This mediating function reflects broader research on research–practice partnerships, which emphasizes the importance of shared authority, mutual accountability, and ongoing negotiation between stakeholders (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Penuel *et al.*, 2020). Superintendents' ability to facilitate communication, build trust, and maintain alignment across organizational levels is therefore critical to the success of partnership initiatives.

Within the context of this study, the role of superintendents is particularly significant given the implementation of state-level IL legislation and the need for districts to rapidly build capacity in areas such as IL and educational technology. As highlighted in the article, superintendents emerge as key decision-makers who prioritize alignment with district goals and financial sustainability while seeking partnerships that can address uneven instructional capacity and resource disparities. Their perspectives shape not only the perceived value of academic library partnerships but also the conditions under which such collaborations can move from conceptual interest to practical implementation.

The literature positions superintendents as central actors in partnership ecosystems, serving as gatekeepers, strategists, and co-designers of professional development initiatives. Their leadership is essential for ensuring that partnerships are not only initiated but also aligned,

The role of librarians in partnering

Academic librarians play a critical and evolving role in school–university partnerships, particularly as collaborators in professional development, instructional design, and cross-sector knowledge exchange. Within these partnerships, librarians are not merely service providers but active contributors to the co-construction of educational practices that bridge P-12 and higher education contexts. As noted throughout the literature, librarians bring specialized expertise in IL, digital scholarship, and emerging technologies, positioning them as key intermediaries capable of translating academic expectations into accessible instructional practices for P-12 educators (Burhanna & Lee Jensen, 2006; Groves, 2019; Saunders, 2015).

A central function of academic librarians in partnerships is their ability to mediate between institutional contexts, aligning postsecondary research practices with K–12 instructional needs. This mediating role is particularly significant in areas such as IL, where gaps in teacher preparation and instructional capacity persist (Julien & Barker, 2009). Through collaboration, librarians support educators in developing pedagogical strategies that integrate research skills, critical evaluation, and digital literacy into classroom instruction. In this sense, librarians act as boundary-spanning professionals, navigating differences in institutional cultures, expectations, and resource availability while fostering shared understanding across sectors.

The literature also highlights the role of librarians as co-designers of professional learning rather than external experts delivering prepackaged content. Effective partnerships are characterized by reciprocal engagement, where librarians work alongside educators and administrators to identify needs, develop contextually relevant programming, and adapt instructional approaches over time (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Penuel *et al.*, 2020). This collaborative orientation reflects broader shifts in professional development toward models that are iterative, job-embedded, and responsive to local conditions (Desimone & Garet, 2017). Within this framework, librarians contribute not only subject expertise but also pedagogical insight, instructional design experience, and familiarity with evolving information ecosystems.

In addition to their instructional roles, librarians contribute to partnerships through capacity-building and leadership functions. By engaging in sustained collaboration with P-12 systems, academic librarians extend their professional identities beyond campus boundaries, positioning themselves as regional education partners and contributors to broader educational ecosystems. This expanded role aligns with findings that librarians gain increased institutional visibility, professional legitimacy, and opportunities for innovation through external partnerships (Hicks & Lloyd, 2016; Martin *et al.*, 2012). At the same time, these partnerships enable academic libraries to align their outreach efforts with institutional missions related to community engagement, access, and equity (Saunders, 2015).

Importantly, librarians' participation in partnerships is often shaped by both professional motivations and structural conditions. While many librarians are driven by a commitment to supporting equitable access to information and improving student readiness, their ability to engage in partnerships is mediated by institutional support, workload capacity, and the presence of formal structures for collaboration (Groves, 2019; Montiel-Overall & Grimes, 2013). As a result, librarians frequently engage in partnership work through a combination of formal initiatives and informal, self-directed efforts, reflecting the broader dynamics of professional learning and innovation within the field.

The literature positions academic librarians as essential partners in cross-sector educational collaboration, uniquely equipped to support professional development, instructional alignment, and knowledge exchange between P-12 schools and higher education institutions. Their roles as mediators, co-designers, and capacity-builders underscore the

importance of integrating librarians into partnership planning and implementation processes. As educational systems continue to respond to evolving policy mandates, technological change, and instructional demands, the role of librarians in partnering will remain central to advancing sustainable and impactful professional learning initiatives.

Theoretical framework

[Weick's \(1995\)](#) theory of sensemaking provides a compelling lens through which to interpret how academic library administrators and public school superintendents in one US state navigate the formation of PDL partnerships in response to evolving educational demands. Sensemaking is defined as the process by which individuals and organizations interpret ambiguous or novel circumstances to construct meaning and guide action ([Weick, 1995](#)). It is particularly relevant in dynamic or uncertain environments, conditions that characterize the educational field in the wake of New Jersey's IL Law ([State of New Jersey, Office of the Governor, 2023](#)), rapid technological change, and shifting expectations for educator preparedness.

In the context of this study, sensemaking occurs as both academic and P-12 educational leaders work to understand their roles, resources, and responsibilities in supporting teacher PDL, especially around IL and EdTech. [Weick \(1995\)](#) emphasizes that sensemaking is retrospective, social, ongoing, and identity-based, each of which applies directly to the purpose of this study. Their decisions and perspectives are socially constructed through professional networks, strategic planning processes, and state policy shifts, particularly the new IL legislation that creates a sense of urgency for cross-institutional collaboration.

The ambiguity created by decentralized policy implementation and varied district readiness invites sensemaking, as leaders seek to clarify how academic libraries can become relevant contributors to P-12 PDL. The study's participants described the perceived value of academic librarians' expertise in IL, research skills, and technology integration. Yet, they also expressed uncertainties regarding financial models, staffing capacity, and logistical coordination. These uncertainties align with what [Weick \(1995\)](#) calls "equivocality," a condition that necessitates interpretation and negotiated understanding.

Sensemaking also involves enactment, which is the idea that individuals shape their environments through the meanings they assign and the actions they take ([Weick, 1995](#)). Academic library administrators who proactively initiate partnerships, develop PDL models, and adapt services that are not merely responding to external demands; they are enacting new organizational identities that position academic libraries as active contributors to educator development. Similarly, school superintendents who interpret the new IL standards as both a challenge and an opportunity use partnerships to help make sense of how to implement the law effectively while improving instructional practices. Moreover, sensemaking is deeply tied to identity. For academic librarians, expanding into P-12 PDL involves a reimagining of their professional role from campus service providers to regional education leaders.

In sum, [Weick's \(1995\)](#) sensemaking framework illuminates how educational leaders are navigating complexity, forging partnerships, and adapting their roles in response to systemic shifts. It helps explain the interpretive and strategic processes that underlie the emergence of PDL collaborations between academic libraries and P-12 schools, underscoring how meaning-making drives institutional change and innovation.

Methods

Research design

The individual served as the unit of analysis for this exploratory sequential mixed-methods study ([Creswell & Creswell, 2024](#)). Sequential mixed-methods designs involve conducting one form of data collection and analysis first, followed by another, with the second phase informed by insights from the first. In this study, the initial quantitative phase included a survey

developed by the authors to elicit participants' perspectives related to academic library and P-12 public school partnerships around professional development. These findings guided the development of semi-structured interview guides used during the subsequent qualitative phase. Individual interviews were conducted with three ALA and four PSS participants. This design enabled the exploration of participant perspectives on the potential of these partnerships and considerations for future implementation.

Participants and recruitment

Participants were recruited through targeted email invitations distributed to individual NJ public school superintendents and through a listserv, the Virtual Academic Library Environment of New Jersey (VALE) listserv (<https://vale.njedge.net>), a statewide professional communication channel serving academic library leadership and affiliated educational stakeholders. The call for participants included a description of the study's purpose, eligibility criteria, and a link to the questionnaire. Recruitment materials were tailored to each professional group to ensure relevance and clarity of purpose.

The sampling strategy was purposive, focusing on individuals positioned to make or influence partnership and professional development decisions within their respective institutions. A total of 60 participants completed the survey, including 28 academic library administrators and 32 public school superintendents. Participants self-reported their professional role and institutional affiliation. While the study focused on senior-level administrators, participants represented a range of institutional contexts and leadership experiences. A demographic summary table (Table 1) reports participant role, sector (academic library or public school district), and years of professional experience to provide transparency regarding the composition of the sample.

Data collection

An initial Qualtrics-administered survey was followed by semi-structured interviews to elaborate and contextualize survey findings. The survey instruments included both closed-ended items (e.g. role, years of experience, preferences for PD modality and fee structures, topic selections) and open-ended prompts capturing participants' descriptions of existing partnerships, perceptions of PDL needs, and anticipated challenges and opportunities associated with school–university collaborations.

Two parallel survey versions were developed, one for New Jersey academic library administrators and one for New Jersey public school superintendents to ensure that items reflected each group's professional context while maintaining conceptual alignment across instruments. Surveys were distributed to 54 academic library administrators and 100 public school superintendents statewide. A total of 60 participants completed the survey, including 28 academic library administrators and 32 public school superintendents.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participants	N	Years in position				NJ counties represented	Level		Number of AL and P-12 partnerships
		1–2	3–5	6–9	10+		2-year institution	4-year institution	
Academic Library Administrators	24	2	5	4	13	14	8	16	6
School Superintendents	22	6	6	3	7	13	All included high school grades		1

Note(s): AL = Academic Libraries; NJ = New Jersey has 21 counties; P-12 = school districts with grades P through 12

At the end of the survey, participants were invited to volunteer for a follow-up interview by providing contact information. Interview participation was optional and separate from survey completion. Seven participants (three academic library administrators and four public school superintendents) completed individual interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes via videoconference. Separate semi-structured discussion guides were used for each participant group. Interview questions were designed to (a) deepen understanding of survey-reported partnership conditions, (b) clarify stakeholders' rationales for PD preferences and partnership structures, and (c) capture leadership perspectives on feasibility, resourcing, and implementation considerations.

Consideration of selection bias and triangulation

Because interview participation was voluntary, the authors acknowledge the potential for self-selection bias: participants who opted into interviews may have had greater interest in partnerships or stronger views about professional development than those who did not. Accordingly, interview findings were not treated as representative of the full survey sample but as explanatory follow-up data that elaborated survey patterns and supported interpretation of points of convergence and divergence across stakeholder groups.

Triangulation was pursued through methodological triangulation (survey and interviews) and data source triangulation (academic library administrators and public school superintendents). In mixed methods terms, the study emphasized integration through building, where survey results informed the focus of interview exploration, and integration through interpretation, where interview narratives were used to contextualize and refine survey-based inferences. Closed-ended survey results provided descriptive indicators of preferences and reported conditions, while interviews supported deeper understanding of how participants made sense of partnership opportunities, constraints, and PDL needs.

Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded in three coordinated phases reflecting the mixed methods design: (1) quantitative descriptive analysis, (2) qualitative reflexive thematic analysis, and (3) integrative mixed-methods interpretation.

Quantitative analysis. Closed-ended survey items were analyzed using descriptive statistics (e.g. frequencies and percentages) to summarize participant characteristics (e.g. role, years of experience, county), reported partnership conditions (e.g. number of partnerships, presence of school librarians), and preferences related to professional development (e.g. virtual/in-person delivery, PD audiences, PD topics, fee structures, interest in certificates). These descriptive results were used to identify broad patterns and areas of alignment or divergence between stakeholder groups.

Qualitative analysis. Open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). All open-ended responses were read for familiarization. The researchers' analysis of the interview transcriptions focused on text that expressed content related to partnerships, PDL needs, implementation constraints, or stakeholder roles. First-cycle coding was inductive and designed to capture participants' language and interpretive frames (e.g. partnership rationale, perceived value, constraints, readiness, governance considerations, capacity). Second-cycle coding involved reviewing and consolidating codes into broader pattern codes; select codes were merged or refined to reduce redundancy and strengthen analytic coherence. Themes were developed by examining relationships among pattern codes across the two stakeholder groups and across data sources.

Mixed methods integration. Integration occurred at the interpretation stage by comparing qualitative themes with descriptive survey patterns. Where quantitative trends suggested agreement or divergence (e.g. PD modality preferences, fee structure preferences, topic priorities), qualitative data were used to explain why those patterns emerged and what contextual factors shaped them. Interview data were used selectively to deepen interpretation

of survey findings, particularly when open-ended responses indicated ambiguity or when School-University leadership-level decision-making considerations required additional context. Partnerships

Trustworthiness and mixed methods quality

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness and quality of findings. For the qualitative component, credibility was supported through transparent documentation of coding procedures, iterative theme development, and reflexive memoing to examine analytic decisions and researcher assumptions. Transferability was supported through detailed description of participant roles and institutional contexts allowing readers to assess applicability to similar settings.

For the mixed-methods design, interpretive quality was strengthened through explicit integration of quantitative and qualitative results, attention to convergence and divergence across stakeholder groups, and careful treatment of interviews as explanatory rather than representative given the small interview subsample. Methodological triangulation across data sources supported confirmability by enabling cross-checking of patterns identified through closed-ended survey indicators with narrative explanations provided in interviews.

Findings

This section organizes findings by research question, with themes integrated across participant groups to emphasize shared patterns and points of divergence.

RQ1: Perceptions of PDL opportunities through academic Library–School partnerships

Theme 1: Strong interest but limited existing partnerships. Both ALAs and PSS expressed strong interest in academic library/public-school partnerships, though formal collaborations were limited. ALAs often described partnerships as desirable but still exploratory or underdeveloped. For example, one academic library administrator stated, “we do not have a partnership with the K–12 schools,” but immediately added that such a partnership would be valuable: “Yes, I would love to have this partnership.” This response captures a recurring pattern in the data: participants recognized the promise of collaboration, even when formal structures were not yet in place. Public school superintendents echoed this concern from the district perspective, emphasizing that the lack of connection between higher education and public schools represents a missed opportunity. As one superintendent explained, “I think it’s an unfortunate gap because I think they really should be feeding off each other in a much more comprehensive fashion.” Another superintendent added that academic librarians were “not on my radar” as potential partners, suggesting that partnerships may be more likely to develop when academic libraries provide “a structured framework” that clearly outlines “the ask,” “the time requirement,” and “expected outcomes.” Together, these responses suggest that both groups viewed academic library/public-school partnerships as promising but underdeveloped mechanisms for strengthening cross-sector collaboration, while also indicating that PSS may need clearly defined partnership models before such collaborations can move from interest to implementation.

Another ALA similarly described an existing school-related program but framed it more as a focused outreach activity than a fully developed district partnership. The participant explained that high school students came to campus for a “research intensive” experience that provided “access to both the expertise and the academic resources of an academic . . . library” to support individual research projects. This example suggests that some institutions already engage in P-12 outreach, but these efforts are often program-specific rather than formalized as sustainable school–university partnerships.

Theme 2: Divergent but complementary value propositions. ALAs emphasized their expertise in information literacy, research skills, and academic resources, while public school superintendents emphasized the need to bridge persistent gaps between higher education and public school systems in ways that produce practical outcomes for teachers and students. One

academic library administrator described the value of partnership as “mutually beneficial,” explaining that academic librarians could provide professional development while also learning “what the needs are from the K–12 community.” The ALA participant further suggested that partnerships could create “a more convenient or cost-effective type of professional development opportunity” for K–12 educators and administrators. From the public school perspective, one superintendent similarly emphasized the need for stronger cross-sector connections, stating, “Very rarely do we make the connection between higher education and public school education. I think there’s a huge gap there.” Together, these perspectives suggest that academic library/public-school partnerships were viewed not only as a mechanism for delivering professional development, but also as a way to close structural divides between P-12 and higher education.

Another ALA framed the value of partnership in terms of student pathways between P-12 and higher education. The participant explained that if academic librarians better understood “what the students who are coming to us need,” they could support “a better and more successful onboarding and transition” for students moving from K–12 into higher education. This illustrates how ALA participants understood partnerships not only as professional development opportunities but also as mechanisms for improving student readiness and continuity across educational sectors.

Theme 3: Importance of strategic alignment and leadership engagement. Participants emphasized that successful partnerships require alignment with district goals, institutional missions, and existing educational structures. One academic library administrator cautioned that partnerships should begin with a clear understanding of district needs: “I think the first thing is to really get a needs assessment and see what they need.” The ALA participant added that academic libraries would need “a clear understanding of their curriculum and the demands for the K through 12 educators” before designing professional development. This supports the theme that partnerships cannot be imposed as one-size-fits-all initiatives; they must be built through needs assessment, relationship-building, and alignment with local curriculum and professional learning priorities.

Another ALA similarly emphasized an incremental approach to partnership formation, describing the process as “baby steps.” This participant described meeting a school district librarian at a community event and forming an intention “to start to establish a connection” and “understand where we might partner.” This example reinforces the finding that ALA participants viewed relationship-building as a necessary precursor to formal partnership development.

PSS also emphasized that effective professional development must be designed at a scale that produces meaningful districtwide impact rather than isolated individual learning. As one superintendent explained, “When you send one or two teachers out to a professional development session, you’re not getting a lot of net bang for your buck.” This perspective reinforces the importance of superintendent involvement in early planning stages, since district leaders are positioned to determine how partnerships can align with broader instructional goals, reach larger groups of educators, and avoid fragmented implementation. Together, ALA and PSS responses suggest that sustainable partnerships require district-level coordination, needs assessment, relationship-building, and alignment with both institutional priorities and local professional learning structures.

RQ2: Benefits of PDL opportunities for public school educators

Theme 1: Instructional capacity building and curriculum enhancement. PSS identified PDL as a means to strengthen IL instruction, integrate educational technology, and support project-based learning and evidence-based writing. ALA similarly emphasized their ability to translate postsecondary expectations into K–12 instructional contexts, helping bridge gaps in student preparedness.

ALAs viewed academic librarians as well positioned to support K–12 educators by translating postsecondary expectations into P-12 instructional contexts. One academic library

administrator explained that academic librarians work with “the products” of the K–12 system and therefore have insight into “some of the skills that our undergrads need.” The ALA participant suggested that partnerships could help “fill that gap” by opening “the lines of communication” between sectors. Another ALA described this same idea as giving K–12 educators “a view into the future,” because academic librarians work with students who recently moved through P-12 systems. The participant explained that librarians can identify “the skills that may be deficient” or “the abilities that college students need to succeed,” then work with K–12 educators so that “part A” and “part B” of information literacy instruction are better articulated across sectors.

Public school superintendents similarly framed partnerships as a way to identify external expertise that could strengthen district professional learning priorities. One PSS explained, “I want to identify really good partners in each area that can enhance what we’re doing,” noting that the district already works with “contracted service providers” in areas such as “K–1 literacy coaching,” “SEL practices,” and “sheltered instruction pedagogy.” The superintendent further emphasized a commitment to “mutualistic relationships,” suggesting that school–university partnerships could operate as reciprocal capacity-building structures rather than one-directional service arrangements. Together, these perspectives support the finding that both ALAs and PSS saw academic library/public-school partnerships as a way to connect higher education expertise with district needs, especially around research, information literacy, critical thinking, and instructional capacity.

Theme 2: High-interest content areas and expanding scope. Both groups identified IL, educational technology, and project-based learning as primary areas of interest. Additional opportunities included: STEM education, AI integration, entrepreneurship, and interdisciplinary programming. These findings suggest that partnerships extend beyond IL into broader instructional innovation.

Although information literacy emerged as a central area of interest, participants also identified broader areas where academic librarians could support K–12 professional development, including educational technology, digital learning, project-based learning, grant writing, STEM-related instruction, and emerging technologies. One ALA responded to a list of possible areas by saying, “I think all of those are important, and all of those are worth focusing on,” but added that the specific focus should depend on each institution’s strengths and areas of expertise. This finding suggests that academic library/public-school partnerships may begin with information literacy but can expand into broader instructional innovation depending on local capacity.

Another ALA participant made a similar point when discussing technology-focused professional development, noting that support would depend on “the actual tools and technology” that individual librarians are “well versed on.” This response underscores the importance of matching partnership offerings to librarian expertise, institutional strengths, and district needs rather than assuming all academic libraries can offer the same menu of professional development topics.

Theme 3: Flexible delivery and credentialing models. Participants strongly favored hybrid delivery models combining in-person and virtual formats. There was also interest in certification-based PDL, which was seen as a way to build sustained educator capacity and enhance professional credentials.

Participants emphasized that professional development models should be flexible and responsive to district needs, institutional capacity, and educator schedules. Although the survey findings supported hybrid and certification-based models, interview responses added nuance by showing that flexibility also includes questions of scale, compensation, and sustainability. One ALA favored a session-based model, explaining, “I think some kind of . . . compensation per session” would be appropriate because this work would not necessarily fall within librarians’ existing workload structures. This example illustrates that delivery models cannot be separated from labor, staffing, and institutional support.

Another ALA was more cautious about recommending a single payment model, noting that cost structures would depend on “the district” and the broader public context. Taken together, these comments suggest that scalable professional development partnerships require clear agreements about format, compensation, workload, and district-specific curricular needs.

RQ3: Benefits of partnerships for academic libraries

Theme 1: Institutional visibility and mission alignment. ALAs viewed partnerships as opportunities to align with institutional missions, particularly around public service, community engagement, and educational access. These collaborations were seen as enhancing the visibility and perceived value of academic libraries.

ALAs viewed partnerships as ways to advance institutional missions related to public service, community engagement, and educational access. One participant described a high school research program as “one of the ways as a state institution that we show up for public service and community engagement.” This quote supports the finding that partnerships can help academic libraries demonstrate institutional value beyond campus boundaries while aligning library work with broader university commitments to community engagement and student success.

A second ALA participant similarly explained that partnership work was part of “fulfilling our mission around. . . community engagement, and serving the State, and advancing and supporting. . . student learning.” This reinforces the claim that academic library/public-school partnerships are not peripheral outreach activities; rather, participants understood them as aligned with institutional missions and public-facing responsibilities.

Theme 2: Expansion of professional roles and expertise. Partnerships allowed librarians to extend their roles beyond traditional services, positioning them as educators, trainers, and contributors to statewide educational initiatives. ALA emphasized their ability to address gaps in IL instruction, particularly in districts with limited access to certified school librarians.

Partnerships also allowed academic librarians to expand their roles as educators, trainers, and contributors to statewide instructional initiatives. One ALA described how their institution was already contributing to statewide information literacy work by “devoting service time to developing the curriculum.” The participant emphasized that implementation should not simply mean “dropping a curriculum on people and saying. . . good luck with that,” but should involve support structures that help educators enact information literacy instruction.

This theme was especially evident in comments about districts with limited access to certified school librarians. One ALA explained that it is “ever more important” to support non-library faculty in embedding “information literacy competencies” into instruction because students “may not be having those experiences anymore.” The participant added that if there is “one librarian for. . . a whole school district,” academic libraries may be able to “leverage” their own capacity to support “dwindling capacity or diminishing capacity in K–12.” This perspective was reinforced by public school superintendents, who framed external expertise as a way to build instructional capacity among staff. As one superintendent explained, “I’m a big fan of people who are experts. . . talking to staff and trying to build capacity.” Together, these responses strengthen the empirical warrant for the claim that academic librarians can help address information literacy gaps in districts where reduced school library staffing limits students’ access to specialized IL instruction.

Theme 3: Long-term relationship building and pipeline development. ALA identified partnerships as a way to build relationships with future students and educators, strengthening connections across the K–12 and higher education continuum. These relationships were seen as contributing to student readiness and long-term institutional engagement.

ALAs viewed partnerships as opportunities to build long-term relationships with future students, educators, school librarians, and district leaders. One participant described the benefit of these relationships in terms of educational pathways, explaining that students move from K–12 to community college or directly to a four-year institution, and that better communication with school library media specialists could support “a better and more successful onboarding and transition” into higher education.

Another participant described cross-sector collaboration as a way to counteract institutional silos. The participant explained that “anything where our organizations are talking, meeting, sharing experience and knowledge” is beneficial because higher education and school libraries often “silo” themselves. This supports the theme that academic library/public-school partnerships can function as relationship-building infrastructures that strengthen communication across educational sectors.

Barriers and structural constraints

Across all research questions, participants identified persistent barriers that shape partnership development:

- (1) **Staffing and Time Constraints:** Limited personnel and competing responsibilities restricted capacity for sustained collaboration.
- (2) **Governance and Communication Challenges:** Difficulty identifying decision-makers and navigating district approval processes slowed partnership formation.
- (3) **Policy and Role Ambiguity:** Variability in IL legislation implementation and unclear institutional roles created uncertainty.
- (4) **Financial Considerations:** While there was willingness to invest, PSS preferred flexible models, particularly pay-per-session approaches, over fixed or subscription-based structures.
- (5) **Uneven Institutional Capacity:** Disparities in school librarian staffing and district resources highlighted inequities that partnerships could help address but also complicate implementation.

Summary

Across [RQ1–RQ3](#), findings show that academic library–school partnerships are widely valued but unevenly developed. ALA and PSS share a strong interest in collaboration, particularly around IL and PDL, but differ in emphasis, with ALA focusing on expertise and outreach, and PSS prioritizing instructional impact and alignment with district goals. Partnerships offer clear benefits for both educators and academic libraries, including capacity building, expanded roles, and strengthened cross-sector relationships. However, structural barriers related to staffing, governance, and funding continue to limit scalability and sustainability. Together, these findings position partnerships as promising but contingent, requiring coordinated leadership, flexible models, and clearer institutional frameworks to move from interest to implementation.

Discussion

This study’s findings illustrate how ALA and PSS engaged in sensemaking as they navigated the formation of PDL partnerships in response to this US state’s IL legislation and broader educational shifts. Consistent with [Weick’s \(1995\)](#) framework, both groups interpreted the ambiguity surrounding policy implementation, institutional roles, and resource constraints through retrospective and social processes. ALA participants reflected on past outreach efforts and institutional missions to frame new partnership opportunities, while PSS emphasized the need for structured proposals and alignment with district goals to make sense of potential

collaborations. The ambiguity inherent in decentralized implementation and uneven district readiness prompted both groups of participants to seek clarity through dialog, strategic planning, and consideration of flexible models such as pay-per-session PDL. Enactment was evident as ALA began to reimagine their professional identities, which would require a shift from campus-based service providers to regional education leaders in public schools, by initiating IL-focused programs and advocating for interdisciplinary engagement. Similarly, PSS enacted new understandings of their leadership roles by positioning themselves as gatekeepers and co-designers of partnerships to address instructional gaps and policy mandates. These sensemaking processes underscore how meaning-making, identity negotiation, and strategic interpretation drive the emergence of innovative, cross-sector collaborations in education.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on academic library/public-school partnerships by offering empirical insights into the perspectives of ALA and PSS in one US state. The findings affirm, extend, and in some cases challenge the existing literature on PDL, IL, and Edtech, while also revealing novel dimensions of institutional readiness, strategic alignment, and partnership sustainability.

The findings support prior work that emphasized the value of academic library/public-school partnerships in advancing IL instruction and PDL (Burhanna & Lee Jensen, 2006; Grimes & Marks, 2024; Montiel-Overall & Grimes, 2013). Both ALA and PSS participants recognized the critical role academic librarians can play in equipping educators with IL competencies, considering this state's IL legislation. This aligns with Julien and Barker's (2009) findings that P-12 educators often feel underprepared to teach IL and require targeted PDL to do so. Moreover, the study reinforces the importance of sustained, job-embedded PDL as outlined by Desimone and Garet (2017) and Wei *et al.* (2010). Participants in our study expressed a preference for flexible, ongoing PDL formats, which included online, hybrid and in-person sessions, that mirror the blended models described by Elliott (2017). The emphasis on collective participation and alignment with district goals echoes the literature's call for coherence and contextual relevance in PDL design (Desimone & Garet, 2017). The findings also support the literature on the transformative potential of EdTech-focused PDL. As Escueta *et al.* (2017) argued, the integration of emerging technologies such as AI and immersive tools into instruction requires continuous upskilling. Both ALA and PSS participants identified EdTech as a high-priority area for PDL, with academic librarians positioned as key facilitators of this learning.

The benefits of academic librarians who provide IL and EdTech PDL have been reported (Hicks & Lloyd, 2016), and this study highlights the strategic and operational considerations necessary for partnership implementation to become a reality. To note, the findings revealed that while interest in collaboration was high, formal partnerships were few with 7% of PSS reported current collaborations with academic libraries. This gap between interest and implementation suggests enthusiasm alone is insufficient, as participants indicated structured frameworks, clear communication channels, and administrative alignment are essential for sustainable partnerships.

A novel contribution of this study is the identification of PSS as key gatekeepers in the early stages of partnership development. Findings from the current study underscore the importance of academic librarians or their representatives engaging school district leadership to secure interest and commitment to ensure alignment with strategic plans. The finding that PSS preferred to be involved in initial planning then delegate ongoing management to other administrators offers a practical insight into how university/public-school partnerships can be operationalized.

Another unique finding is the shared preference among both ALA and PSS for a pay-per-session financial model. While the literature has discussed the scalability of virtual PDL (Grimes & Marks, 2024), it has not addressed the economic models that make such offerings viable. This study fills that gap by identifying flexible, à la carte pricing as a preferred approach, particularly for resource-constrained school districts. Additionally, the study

uncovers the underexplored issue of institutional readiness. While some academic libraries represented by the participants had already begun to align their services with the IL mandate, others cited staffing shortages and lack of formal structures as barriers. This variation highlights the need for differentiated support and capacity-building within academic libraries themselves, which is a topic that has received limited attention.

Implications for practice

The findings suggest several actionable strategies for practitioners. Academic libraries seeking to engage with P-12 schools should develop structured outreach frameworks that include clearly defined services, measurable outcomes, and alignment with district goals. These frameworks should be communicated directly to district leadership, ideally through deans or assistant directors, to facilitate early-stage buy-in. For school districts, superintendents and other leaders should consider designating liaisons to manage partnerships and evaluate their impact. Districts should also explore integrating academic library services into their strategic plans, particularly in areas such as IL, EdTech, and interdisciplinary learning. Both academic libraries and school districts should prioritize flexible delivery formats and scalable financial models to ensure accessibility and sustainability. Offering PDL certifications in high-demand areas such as IL and EdTech could further enhance the value proposition of these partnerships.

Implications for future research

This study opens several avenues for future research. First, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impact of academic library/public-school partnerships on educator practice and student outcomes. Second, comparative studies across states with and without IL mandates could illuminate how policy environments shape partnership dynamics. Further research should also explore the internal capacity of academic libraries to support P-12 outreach. Investigating how libraries allocate staff, design PDL content, and evaluate impact could inform institutional strategies for scaling partnerships. Finally, incorporating the perspectives of teachers, school librarians, and students would provide a more holistic understanding of the benefits and challenges of these collaborations.

Conclusion

This study affirms the potential of academic library/public-school partnerships to enhance PDL, support IL instruction, and foster educational innovation. While the findings align with existing literature on the value of sustained, collaborative PDL and the role of academic librarians in bridging educational sectors, they also reveal critical gaps in implementation, readiness, and financial planning. By addressing these challenges through structured frameworks, strategic alignment, and flexible delivery models, academic libraries and school districts can develop impactful partnerships to advance shared educational goals. As the demands on P-12 educators continue to evolve, such collaborations offer a promising pathway for systemic improvement and sustained professional growth.

Ethics statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the William Paterson University of New Jersey and was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Subject Research (Approval Number: 2024-304, Date of Approval: August 3, 2024).

All participants provided informed consent prior to their participation in the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. All data were collected and stored confidentially and used solely for research purposes.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge our research participants, New Jersey public school superintendents and New Jersey academic library administrators and thank them for their participation in our original study.

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