



NATIONAL LEADERSHIP GRANTS FOR LIBRARIES

Sample Application LG-260056-OLS-26
Project Category: Applied Research

University of Kentucky

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$505,985
Amount of cost share:	\$0

University of Kentucky in collaboration with the University of Pittsburgh will perform research to identify how school libraries currently serve the learning needs of PreK children, elucidate elements of school library services to PreK learners prioritized and valued by educational stakeholders, parents, and young children, pinpoint school library program strategies that support children holistically and in specific domain areas, and uncover challenges in providing library services to PreK learners. Completion of these tasks will lead to materials to support school library services for PreK children and recommendations for practice. The research will begin with two linked exploratory studies: a nationwide survey followed by interviews with select survey respondents. These studies aim to identify how school library programs are currently serving the learning needs of PreK learners as well as challenges in doing so. The researchers will next engage in a multi-site case study designed to elucidate the elements of school library services to PreK learners that educational stakeholders, parents, and young children most prioritize and/or value.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program to which you are applying.

Exploring and Amplifying School Library Services for Young Learners

Introduction

The University of Kentucky, in collaboration with the University of Pittsburgh, is requesting \$505,985 for *Exploring and Amplifying School Library Services for Young Learners*, an Applied Research project designed to explore school library services for children attending publicly funded prekindergarten (PreK) programs. This project is responsive to the Office of Library Services call for projects that “facilitate regular and family-friendly programming that is of social and educational benefit to children and parents alike” as it aligns with the Agency Level Goal 1 Champion Lifelong Learning, Objective 1.1 Advance shared knowledge and learning opportunities for all, and the NLG-L Program Goal Objective 1.1: Serve the learning needs of the public through libraries and archives. Guided by the overarching research question, “How do school libraries support children in publicly funded PreK programs?” this three-year project will (1) identify how school libraries currently serve the learning needs of PreK children, (2) elucidate elements of school library services to PreK learners that are prioritized and valued by educational stakeholders, parents, and young children, (3) pinpoint school library program strategies that support children holistically and in specific domain areas including early literacy, information literacy and inquiry, and digital literacy, and (4) uncover challenges in providing library services to PreK learners. Completion of these tasks will allow us to develop materials to support school library services for PreK children and recommendations in relation to school library services for PreK children.

Project Justification

Importance of High-Quality Early Learning Opportunities

Experiences, interactions, and conditions in the first five years of life set the stage for lifelong learning and wellbeing. The human brain experiences rapid development in early childhood that leads to language acquisition, cognitive skills and understandings, and social-emotional capacities (Britto et al., 2017). Children develop optimally when they engage in activities and experience environments that are emotionally supportive, developmentally appropriate, and structured around consistent and predictable routines (Williams et al., 2019). Everyday interactions that offer opportunities to laugh, sing, play, and interact with responsive adults attuned to their needs and well-being lead to increased learning abilities, greater academic and life achievements, higher rates of community involvement, and an overall improved quality of life (Britto et al., 2017).

With the intention of preparing children for both a successful academic trajectory as well as supporting other developmental domains such as communication, social emotional development, and executive functioning (Barnett, 2011), PreK programs tend to be regarded as strong economic investments (Heckman, 2006) leading to increases in high school graduation rates and reductions in special education placements (McCoy et al., 2018). As such, access to publicly funded PreK programs has steadily increased over time with enrollments doubling in the last 50 years (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2019). The programs are important for all children but are vital for children with disabilities and specific developmental delays who are entitled to these programs through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004).

More than one-third of all four-year-olds in the United States currently attend a publicly funded PreK program (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2025), and an additional 6.75% of children ages 3 to 5 receive preschool services through IDEA (US Department of Education, 2025). Presently, 44 states and the District of Columbia offer publicly funded PreK programs, and more than 50% of four-year-olds in 11 of those states and the District of Columbia attend (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2025).

Value of Library Services for Children

Libraries make a difference in the lives of children and families. Americans value libraries for the resources they provide and for their role in supporting early learning (Horrigan, 2015). Libraries are particularly well situated to support young children’s developing traditional, information, and digital literacies.

Early Literacy

Early literacy is a recognized predictor and enabler of long-term academic success and lifetime economic outcomes (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; McLaughlin et al., 2014). Children’s early literacy skills lead to both

beginning and later reading competence in the elementary through high school years (Adlof et al., 2010; Hjetland, et al., 2019), and these skills even play out into adulthood in terms of reading proficiency and income (Khanolainen et al., 2024). Early literacy skills influence later mathematical achievement and are related to executive functionings that support behavioral and emotional regulation (Chang, 2023; White et al., 2017). Early literacy importance is underscored by its designation as a global human rights issue (UNESCO, 2025).

Libraries play a critical role in the literacy landscape for all ages, but their support of early learning is particularly notable. Public libraries have long promoted interest in reading via storytime programs (McKenzie and Stooke, 2012). Since the early 2000s, these programs have intentionally integrated strategies intended to foster early literacy skills, and through modeling of everyday practices (i.e. playing, reading, singing, talking, and writing). Investigations of library storytimes suggest that they are rich environments for language development and lead to important early literacy behaviors (Campana et al., 2016; Joo et al., 2024). As the primary grades reading curriculum has recently narrowed to focus on decoding, school and public library activities that facilitate language comprehension, such as interactive shared reading (Cahill, 2004; Cahill et al., 2018; Campana et al., 2016), are not only of heightened importance but also aligned with the science of reading (Dickinson et al., 2010; Silverman et al., 2020).

Information Literacy & Digital Literacy

Information literacy is a set of skills and knowledge for identifying information needs and applying strategies for locating, evaluating, and using information (ALA, 1989). Starting in 2007, the American Association of School Librarians' (AASL) standards for school library learning expanded more traditional concepts of information literacy to include inquiry-based approaches to research processes, emphasizing students' curiosity; skills for constructing questions; and strategies for making observations, applying evidence, and sharing learning (Stripling, 2008; WebJunction, 2021). Librarians and teachers teach and facilitate these skills and dispositions with young children through instruction, modeling of thinking strategies, and library programming.

Instruction

Frameworks for inquiry learning such as the Stripling Model of Inquiry and Guided Inquiry Design (GID) offer theory-based pedagogies for inquiry learning experiences led by the school librarian, sometimes in collaboration with classroom teachers. In different ways, these models center learners' interests to foster curiosity, motivation, persistence, and depth of understanding. For pre-kindergarten learners, the application of these framings aligns cognitive, social, and behavioral dimensions of early childhood with exploration of information. As an example of these inquiry framings applied to formal instruction, the Empire State Information Fluency Continuum, endorsed by the School Library System of New York State and based on the Stripling Model of Inquiry, includes PreK standards which infuse emerging reading skills into information literacy and inquiry skills, including asking questions, categorizing information, distinguishing fact and opinion, participating in discussions through speaking and active listening, and responding to information through play, writing, and drawing (Stripling/Empire State Information Fluency Continuum, 2022).

The GID framework developed by Kuhlthau and Maniotes (and grounded in Kuhlthau's Information Search Process theory) incorporates social and emotional aspects of learning into inquiry-based approaches to information literacy. At the PreK-2 levels, implementation of GID might scaffold learners' language and literacy skill development into age-appropriate inquiry learning by using read-alouds, audio recordings, and video clips to provide depth of content beyond children's reading levels. In this way, children practice critical thinking, answer questions, and reflect on their learning through "age-appropriate responding" (Maniotes, 2018, 4).

Modeling by the Librarian or Teacher

Stripling (2021) explains "inquiry stance" as a frame of mind observable through curiosity, questioning, open mindedness, and a willingness to pursue answers and new interests. Teachers and librarians model an "inquiry stance" for young learners through think-aloud practices and informal exploration of questions during library experiences such as storytime. Pentland describes weaving questioning skills naturally into school library time, including after storytime, before new learning, and after reading or listening to texts, using strategies like brainstorming, think-pair-share, and journal reflections. She also emphasizes the importance of repeated practice in asking questions, especially with kindergarteners, using examples and nonexamples of questions (2020). Donham recommends school librarians integrate scripts for modeling dispositions of inquiry. While

prompts such as “yes, but . . .” introduce the disposition of open-mindedness, the sentence stem “I wonder . . .” fosters curiosity (2016). The See, Think, Wonder routine from Visible Thinking and Project Zero also nurtures observation skills and curiosity; Donovan recommends introducing this protocol stem by stem with young learners (2020).

Programming

Library programming invites information literacy and digital literacy development through storytime, STEM programs, and family literacy events and services. Practices for preschool storytime often incorporate six pre-reading literacy skills that strengthen children’s readiness for reading at school-age. Effective interaction and engagement with these skills for preschoolers include modeling such practices as using varied and rich vocabulary and retelling stories with events from the beginning, middle, and end (Foote 2015).

Extending programming examples to include digital media, storytime exploration of digital tools such as interactive stories, guided play with apps, coding games, and content creation offer shared and guided tech time for children and parents (ALSC & Koester, n.d.). Mills, Campana, Martens, and Haines reported on the use of technology in public library services and programming for ages 0-5, which reflected a range of devices in use and 68% of survey respondents using technology devices during storytime (2018). Public librarians provide parents and caregivers media mentorship, in which librarians apply more traditional reference knowledge to emerging forms of digital information and tools (Haines, et al., 2016). Library services that support digital learning also include circulation of devices (e.g., tablets, ereaders, laptops, wireless hot spots), technology support and troubleshooting, and independent or guided use of technology tools and devices within the library space (Mills, et al., 2018).

AI Literacy

An area of evolving attention in libraries, as well as in preparation programs and professional development for librarians– is artificial intelligence (AI). Children’s familiarity with AI in everyday life, from smart speakers that play favorite music, to personalized recommendations in streaming video platforms and conversational language learning apps, establish a ready framing for exploration of AI tools. Teachers’ nascent knowledge and confidence of AI literacy, along with lack of curriculum and guidelines, present challenges to teaching AI literacy to young children (Su et al., 2023). Even with existing frameworks and a common recognition of the importance of AI literacy in teacher education, integration of this area into teacher preparation programs is limited (Dilek et al., 2025).

Indeed, teacher education scholars and researchers in LIS observe related questions about integration of AI into PK-12 learning, as well as in libraries and library science education, including calls for critical, reflective approaches in AI education and emphasis on critical AI literacy (Morris & Malady, 2025; Baer, 2025; Dilek et al., 2025). Examples of frameworks and guidelines that identify or incorporate AI literacies include the U.S. Department of Labor’s AI Literacy Framework (2025); UNESCO’s AI Competency Framework for Students and AI Competency Framework for Teachers (2023); and skills and knowledge addressing AI literacies embedded in 2024 update of the ISTE Standards, albeit not explicitly. In 2025, Common Sense Media and Day of AI released its AI Literacy Toolkit for Families, which offers videos and activity guides with implementation resources for schools to facilitate. Just as school librarians address early literacy, information literacy, and other forms of digital literacy through instruction, modeling, and programming, so too are they situated to support children’s budding AI literacy.

Current State of School Library Services to PreK

All students are entitled to an effective school library staffed by a certified school librarian (Lester, 2023). However, not all PreK students have access to school libraries or certified school librarians (Tullio, 2006). Moreover, it is not clear how well school librarians are positioned to support PreK learners.

Empirical Research

When school librarians provide welcoming environments and services for PreK (Shannon, 2004), students learn important early literacy and information literacy skills (Cahill, 2004; Geitgey & Schwelik, 2013). However, very little empirical research exists to inform school librarians’ practice in this realm. Two decades old studies

suggest that school library service to PreK is the exception rather than the rule (Thomas & Cooper, 1995; Tullio, 2006). A more recent study, sponsored through the Idaho Commission for Libraries, examined circulation policies for PreK children in that state and found only 16% of libraries allow PreK students to check out library books (Bailey-White & Stewart, 2016). At present, no published empirical research provides insight into the quality or foci of school library services for PreK.

School Librarian Certification and Learning Standards

Educational preparation and requirements to become a certified school librarian differ widely across the U.S.: some states require only a bachelor's degree in education, others require a master's degree in library science, and still others require additional training and/or verification of knowledge and skill via a minimum score on a school library proficiency examination (EveryLibrary Institute, n.d.). Currently, half of the U.S. states explicitly designate school librarians to serve PreK students (Cahill & Adkins, 2023), though there is evidence that school librarians in other states do serve this population (Isenberg, 2018). Given the wide variation in education and pathways leading to school librarian certification, some school librarians may need additional support to adequately serve young children.

Curricular standards outline the knowledge and skills students are expected to acquire at each grade level (Schwartz, 2023). All US states and territories have early learning guidelines that describe what young children aged three to five should know and be able to do in all domains of school readiness (Administration for Children and Families Office of Childcare, 2016). On the other hand, there is great disparity in the formal adoption and approval of school library standards by state departments of education. Multiple states have officially adopted the current AASL (2026) standards or have aligned their school library standards with them. These standards are competency-based and could apply to PreK, but some states have adopted these standards for K-12 only (e.g. *Kentucky Academic Standards for Library Media: Kindergarten through Grade 12*). Other states have created standards that address knowledge and skills different from those articulated in the AASL standards: some of these states have included PreK in those standards (e.g. *Mississippi College and Career Readiness Learning Standards for Libraries*). Across all states, only 10 have officially adopted/approved school library standards applicable for PreK (Cahill & Adkins, 2023).

School librarians collaborate with other teachers and educators to improve learning outcomes for students. School librarians view collaboration with teachers as a primary responsibility (AASL, 2020), and that role expectation is explicitly integrated into the learner, librarian, and school library frameworks of the AASL (2026) standards. When school librarians and teachers draw upon both school library and content area standards and guidelines, they develop a shared vision for the ensuing student learning (Kammer et al., 2021). To position themselves as instructional partners (AASL, 2020) who support content area learning while also integrating meaningful and intentional support of students' developing traditional, information- and digital literacy related skills (Massey, 2023), school librarians must be attuned to both the school library standards and content standards. Standards crosswalk documents between the current and prior versions of the AASL standards demonstrate numerous alignments between the digital learning, participatory learning, inquiry learning, technology literacies, information literacy, and reading initiatives of an effective school library program (AASL, 2018) and content area learning standards. Crosswalks between early childhood standards and school library standards could illuminate similar alignments thereby supporting school librarians in homing their services to PreK students and their collaborations with PreK educators.

Summary

Although publicly funded PreK has the potential to lead to positive long-term academic, social, and societal benefits (McCoy et al., 2017), those outcomes are predicated on high quality learning experiences and curriculum that lay a strong foundation for future learning (Meloy et al., 2019). School library services delivered by certified school librarians are elements of high quality equitable educational programs (Adam, 2026).

Research that pinpoints elements of effective school library practice for PreK learners will not only lead to professional resources that enable school librarians nationwide to improve their practice but will also contribute to the existing evidence base on the value of school libraries. While the proposed research will benefit all PreK children who subsequently receive school library services, it is particularly imperative for children with

disabilities who are entitled to those same services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004). Identifying the elements of school library services to PreK learners that are prioritized and valued by educational stakeholders, parents, and young children will position the field to both address these priority areas as well as advocate for the importance of school library services to PreK children. Finally, through identification of alignments across standards documents, the proposed research will facilitate school librarian instructional partnerships and curricular leadership. Letters of support affirm the importance of this work to the field.

Project Work Plan

The overarching research question for this Applied Research project is “How do school libraries support children in publicly funded PreK programs?” The three-year project will achieve the following goals: (1) identify how school libraries are currently serving the learning needs of PreK children, (2) elucidate the elements of school library services to PreK learners that are prioritized and valued by educational stakeholders, parents, and young children, (3) pinpoint school library program strategies that support children holistically and in specific domain areas including early literacy, information literacy and inquiry, and digital literacy, and (4) uncover challenges in providing services to PreK learners. Completion of these tasks will allow us to develop materials and recommendations to support school library services for PreK children.

Strategic Collaboration

Drs. Maria Cahill and Rebecca Morris will serve as co-Primary Investigators for this project, and they will be supported by graduate student assistants whom they will train to help collect, prepare, and analyze data. Dr. Cahill has extensive experience researching library services for young children and has led multiple large-scale, multi-state projects designed to identify how libraries benefit young children and their families. Dr. Morris conducts research that integrates school librarianship, LIS education, and actionable knowledge for practitioners and has wide-ranging experience gathering data from and writing for P-12 school administrators. In addition, Drs. Cahill and Morris are both former school librarians and have expertise in multiple forms of data collection including surveys, individual and focus group interviews, and observations with child participants. As experienced instructors in online and face-to-face contexts, and as authors of numerous practitioner-facing publications, Drs. Cahill and Morris are qualified to disseminate findings and translate them into materials as well as communicate recommendations for school library services for PreK children.

Seven consultants have agreed to serve in an advisory capacity to strategically guide the research team in developing data collection tools and protocols and in translating the findings for evidence-based practice. These consultants bring expertise in library services for young children, the value of libraries to communities, school library services for PreK learners, inquiry learning, school library standards development, research focused on [school] library services to children, and administration of P-12 schools.

Research Design Overview

The *Exploring and Amplifying School Library Services for Young Learners* project centers around research designed to explore how PreK children benefit from services provided by certified school librarians through the school library program. Similar in spirit to a strengths-based approach to learning, which recognizes and builds upon strengths in promoting growth (Park & Peterson, 2006), this project employs an appreciative approach focused on facilitating positive change by identifying and building upon successes (Reed, 2007). Appreciative research is designed to elucidate what works to promulgate a better future (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Naturally, in seeking to build upon solutions that work, we expect our research to uncover challenges. We fully intend to report those in the findings, but we will approach the project with an eye towards discovering and sharing promising practices.

Figure 1 below illustrates the project work plan and research design. The research begins with two linked exploratory studies: a nationwide survey followed by interviews with select survey respondents. These studies aim to identify how school library programs are currently serving the learning needs of PreK learners as well as challenges in doing so. The researchers will next engage in a multi-site case study designed to elucidate the elements of school library services to PreK learners that educational stakeholders, parents, and young children most prioritize and/or value. Case study is particularly well-suited for contexts and phenomena that have limited existing research as this method serves to surface issues and questions for continued investigations (Mills et al., 2010). As part of the case study, we will conduct observations, review documents, and engage in

extended interviews to further explore strategies that school librarians employ as well as the learning foci of school library programs for PreK. Doing so will allow us to pinpoint school library program strategies that support children holistically and in specific domain areas germane to libraries, including early literacy, information literacy and inquiry, and digital literacy.

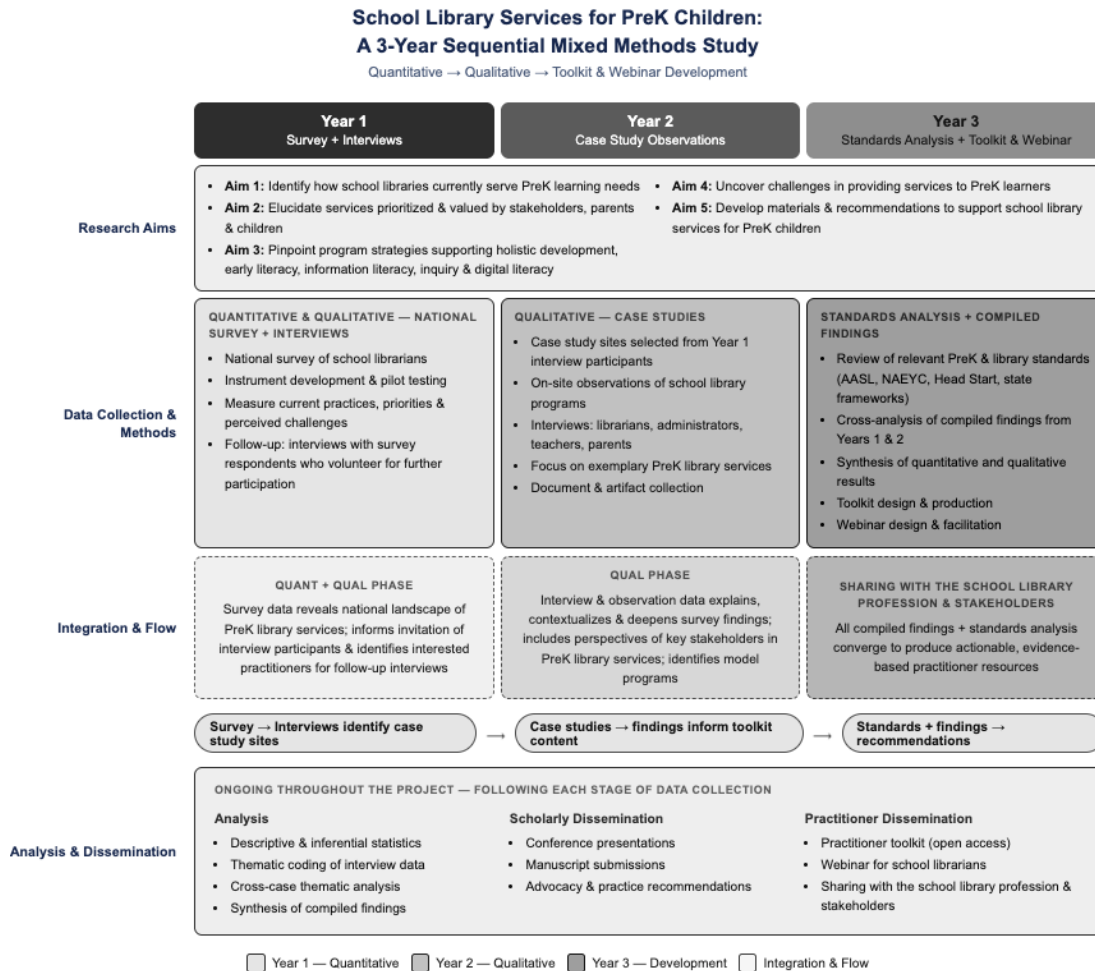


Figure created using Claude (Sonnet 4.6), an AI assistant developed by Anthropic (2026).

Just as explorations of services to young children in public libraries have identified benefits across developmental domains (Campana, 2021), we expect that each of the studies in this project will expose learning benefits, social emotional skill development, and elements of joy in school library services for young children. We also fully anticipate that the exploration will uncover challenges in providing services to PreK learners, though these challenges may not necessarily be “problems”. Findings from these studies coupled with a document analysis of educational standards will lead to the development of a toolkit and webinar intended to inform educational stakeholders of the value of school library services and also support school librarians in providing these services to PreK learners. In addition to translating and communicating findings via the toolkit and webinar, the researchers will also publish findings in researcher and practitioner library and information science and education journals, and across the project years will disseminate preliminary findings through conference presentations for both practitioner and researcher audiences in library and information science as well as early childhood education. Throughout each phase of the project, the researchers will consult with the project Advisory Board to ensure the “trustworthiness” of the studies and to confirm that presentations of findings “ring true to readers, practitioners, and other researchers” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 238).

Year 1 (September 2026 to August 2027)

Research Preparation Part 1

The researchers will design and create instruments and data collection protocols targeted for this project. We will first review the reports of the three existing studies of school library services for PreK (Bailey-White & Stewart, 2016; Thomas & Cooper, 1995; Tullio, 2006) to gather ideas. By and large, all instruments, including surveys and guides for gathering information from adult participants through semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, will be completely original and designed to promote generativity of ideas and identification of the provision of and challenges to school library services to PreK students. To elicit feedback from young children, the researchers will adapt one or more procedures previously tested and verified with PreK-aged children such as a laddering, picture sorts, photovoice, and/or draw and tell (Barriage, 2018; Bartie et al., 2016; Barfield & Driessnack, 2018; Guo, 2017; Hansen et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2019). For observations at the case study sites we will adapt a two-camera observational collection method previously developed for and used in studies of public library services for young children (Campana et al., 2016; Cahill & Ingram, 2021). We will use these recordings to categorize and analyze strategies employed using systematic observational techniques, as done in the projects mentioned.

All protocols and questionnaires will be reviewed by the advisory board for sensitivity, validity, and trustworthiness (see below). Following preparation of instruments, protocols, and procedures, the researchers will seek permissions to conduct research with human participants. The University of Kentucky (UK) will serve as the lead institution for IRB purposes. The team will follow the requirements and protocols designated by the other institutions and entities (e.g. The University of Pittsburgh, participating school districts, etc.) as needed.

Nationwide Survey and Interviews of School Librarians

In mid-Fall 2026, we will administer a **survey to school librarians and school library supervisors nationwide**. The specific objectives of this survey include identifying the extent and frequency of school library services provided for PreK students, understanding the goals of those services, and determining perceived enablers and barriers at the preparation, program, school, district and state levels. The survey will contain two optional questions: one requesting contact information if the school librarian is interested in entering a drawing for a \$25 gift card to an online book seller, and a second one requesting contact information if they would be willing to participate in an individual virtual interview. Working with state and regional school library associations and state library agencies, we will distribute a link to the online survey via email. Across the fifty states, there are approximately 40,000 school librarians (SLIDE, 2026), and past national survey studies have yielded 10-15% response rates (AASL, 2012). Survey data will be analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively to identify frequencies and major themes. We will conduct a preliminary analysis in late Fall 2026 to enable selection of interview participants. Full analysis will be completed in early Summer 2026.

We will conduct **interviews with school librarians** early in the 2027 calendar year. Interviews will focus on identifying details about school library services for PreK learners. From survey respondents who express willingness to interview, we will select a purposive sample of 20 school librarians and offer each a \$50 gift card to an online book seller. Participants will be strategically and intentionally selected to represent the full range of geographic areas based on region of the country, community settings (urban, suburban, rural), school context (P-12, early childhood, primary, elementary, etc.), school demographics (e.g. Title I, ELL, etc.) and provision and frequency of service to PreK students. All interviews will be conducted via a web conferencing tool and recorded in early-Spring 2027. Full transcription of all interviews will commence as the data are uploaded to a UK-controlled secure site. The researchers will conduct a preliminary analysis of the interviews in mid-Spring 2027 to enable selection of case study sites; full analysis will be completed in early Summer 2027. Consistent with an exploratory approach (Stebbins & Kendall, 2008), the researchers will employ open coding that is iterative, comparative, and primarily inductive to make meaning from the data and generate findings.

Case Study Site Identification, Preparation, and IRB Modifications

Researchers will engage in a multi-site case study of school library services for PreK learners at three to four sites in Year 2. Based on findings generated from interviews with school librarians (see above), we will select sites “from which the maximum can be learned” (Audet & d’Amboise, 2001, p. 6). In preparation for the case study phase of the project, the researchers will refine instruments and protocols (see note above regarding initial preparation) to collect numerous forms of data including **observations of services and programs**,

elicitation of child perspectives, surveys of parents; individual interviews with school librarians, school and district level administrators (e.g. principals, assistant superintendents of learning, coordinators of early childhood services); **focus group interviews with educators** (PreK teachers, kindergarten teachers, special areas teachers), **paraeducators** (teaching assistants and special education students' assistants), and **parents; and reviews of documents** (schedules, long range plans, lesson plans, etc.). Once final drafts of instruments and protocols are ready, following Advisory Board Meeting 2 (see note below), we will modify the IRB application and seek approval to engage in the case study research. Next, we will contact prospective case study sites and seek formal approval. Following approval, we will update the IRB application to include the sites, and we will schedule case study data collection to commence in Fall of Year 2.

Advisory Board Meetings 1 and 2

We will meet with the advisory board twice during Year 1. The first meeting will take place early in the project. Prior to the meeting, we will share draft copies of the national survey and librarian interview protocol. During the first meeting we will provide an overview of the project, discuss advisors' roles and responsibilities, and review and refine the national survey and librarian interview protocol. The second meeting will take place mid-Spring 2027. Prior to the meeting we will share drafts of the child elicitation procedure, parent surveys, all interview protocols, and an anonymized overview of prospective case study sites. We will request advisors review them and prepare written feedback prior to the meeting. During meeting 2, we will discuss proposed case study site selections and written feedback on data collection. Following the meeting, the researchers will refine data collection procedures and protocols.

Year 2 (September 2027 to August 2028)

Multi-site Case Study

During the Fall of Year 2, we will collect data from 3-4 sites. One researcher will travel to each site for up to one week. Prior to the visit, the researchers will acquire consent from all prospective participants, coordinate with the school librarian to make arrangements for observations, and schedule individual and focus group interviews. Three weeks prior to the visit, we will request the site distribute a link to a parent/guardian survey. The objective of the survey is to identify parent/guardian perceptions of the value of school library services for their PreK children, their perceptions of the quality of the services in relation to their children's developmental and learning needs, and their perceptions of their children's reaction to the school library program. The survey will also contain three optional questions: one requesting contact information if the parent/guardian is interested in entering a drawing for a \$25 gift card to an online book seller, one requesting permission for their child to participate in the program observation (see information below) and child elicitation activity (see earlier note about this procedure), and one requesting contact information if they would be willing to participate in a focus group interview to share additional perspectives on the school library program. To collect observational data of school library programs for PreK, we will use a two-camera system to video record both the school librarian and the children who choose to participate. In this way, we can observe all details of every interaction between the librarian and the children. All children will be able to fully participate in the program, but children whose parents have not consented to participation will not be captured in video recordings. While on site, we will digitally capture and/or seek digital access to any pertinent documents including but not limited to library schedules for PreK services, long range school library plans, lesson plans, and school librarian-PreK teacher collaboration documents. Finally, we will conduct focus group and individual interviews with multiple stakeholders (as previously described). We will provide \$50 gift cards to an online book seller for all individuals who participate in observations, child elicitation, and/or individual or focus group interviews.

Analyses of Case Study Data

Beginning with data collection and continuing through the end of the calendar year, we will prepare all case study data for analysis including digitizing all data and transcribing all observational and interview data. We will use systematic techniques to determine practices and participant behaviors in the observations and will employ open coding and an iterative and inductive approach to qualitative analysis for all interview and document data.

Advisory Board Meetings 3 and 4

We will meet with the advisory board in early Spring 2028 to share an overview of case study data collection with a focus on enablers but we will also identify challenges. Additionally, we will share preliminary insights based on field memos and ongoing iterative analyses. We will meet again with advisors in late Spring 2028 to

share and discuss preliminary findings of the case study analysis. The focus of discussion will be implications for practice. We will prioritize the order of subsequent analyses of the data based on advisor feedback.

Year 3 (September 2028 to August 2029)

Standards Document Analysis

To identify developmentally appropriate standards applicable to school library services for PreK children, the researchers will engage in a document analysis (Gross, 2018) of relevant standards including, but not limited to AASL (2026) standards, state-level school library standards, state-level early childhood standards, and the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework. The standards analysis will occur in the first month of Year 3.

Consolidation of findings

The researchers will consolidate findings from the survey, interview, and multi-site case study and document review studies to (1) identify how school libraries are currently serving the learning needs of PreK children, (2) elucidate the elements of school library services to PreK learners that are prioritized and valued by educational stakeholders, parents, and young children, (3) pinpoint school library program strategies that support children holistically and in specific domain areas including early literacy, information literacy and inquiry, and digital literacy, and (4) uncover challenges in providing library services to PreK learners. Completion of these tasks will allow us to develop materials to support school library services for PreK children and recommendations in relation to school library services for PreK children.

Advisory Board Meetings 5 and 6

The researchers will meet with advisors in early 2029 to share an overview of the findings of all studies, discuss implications for practice, and identify strategies for translating findings for practitioners within P-12 education and beyond (i.e. structure of toolkit and webinar). We will meet with advisors again in mid-Spring 2029. Prior to the meeting, we will share drafts of the toolkit and the webinar slide deck as well as the methods we will use to evaluate each resource. During the meeting, we will present the webinar and solicit feedback on the toolkit, the contents and structure of the webinar, and the methods of the webinar and toolkit evaluations.

Toolkit and Webinar Development

As indicated above, we will work closely with the advisory board to develop the toolkit and webinar. The purpose of the toolkit is to support school librarians and pre-service librarians who serve PreK learners, including through instruction and programming; communicating at-home practices with parents; and building advocacy for school library services for PreK children. We will first review and consolidate the findings from all four studies, prioritizing them in terms of importance and feasibility for inclusion in the toolkit. Example toolkit materials include infographics, data visualizations, and fact sheets representing major findings; communication templates; sample instructional materials for PreK classes; implementations supports such as checklists and decision trees; resource lists; and materials for professional development and pre-service library education, such as protocols and assessments. The webinar will introduce the toolkit, share major study findings, and facilitate dialog on implementing strategies for PreK services, via sample professional materials in the toolkit.

Toolkit and Webinar Scheduling and Delivery

Working with state- and regional school library associations and state library agencies, we will share information about the toolkit and webinar with school and children's librarians and library leaders. The webinar will take place mid-Spring 2029 before the end of the P-12 academic year for most regions of the country and in the evening when school librarians would be available to participate. The webinar will be delivered through a web-conferencing software with real-time transcription capabilities to ensure accessibility, and it will be recorded and made available, along with the toolkit, through an open-access website.

Project Results

Publicly funded PreK has the potential to lead to positive long-term academic, social, and societal benefits (McCoy et al., 2017); however, those outcomes are predicated on high quality learning experiences and curriculum that lay a strong foundation for future learning (Meloy et al., 2019). School library services delivered by certified school librarians are elements of high-quality, equitable educational programs (Adam, 2026).

Guided by the overarching research question, “How do school libraries support children in publicly funded PreK programs?”, this project will (1) identify how school libraries are currently serving the learning needs of PreK children, (2) elucidate the elements of school library services to PreK learners that are prioritized and valued by educational stakeholders, parents, and young children, (3) pinpoint school library program strategies that support children holistically and in specific domain areas germane to libraries including early literacy, information literacy and inquiry, and digital literacy, and (4) uncover challenges in providing library services to PreK learners. Completion of these tasks will allow us to develop materials [DE2.1] to support school library services for PreK children and recommendations in relation to school library services for PreK children.

Throughout the project, the researchers will disseminate preliminary findings through conference presentations for both practitioner and researcher audiences in library and information science as well as early childhood education. In addition to translating and communicating findings via the toolkit and webinar, the researchers will also publish findings in researcher and practitioner library and information science and education journals. Deliverables and links to publications and presentations will be available through a project website.

PreK Children and Families

While school librarians and educational stakeholders are the direct recipients of the research findings and the materials and recommendations related to school library services for PreK children, the more than 1.75 million children who currently attend publicly funded PreK and their families as well as those who will be attending in the future will benefit from improved services. While this research will benefit all PreK children who subsequently receive school library services, it is particularly imperative for children with disabilities who are entitled to those services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004). Participation in quality school library programs and access to school library services in early childhood lead to school readiness, facilitate social and emotional well-being, and support development of dispositions that lead to lifelong learning.

School Librarians

Research that pinpoints elements of effective school library practice for PreK learners will not only lead to professional resources that enable school librarians nationwide to improve their practice but also contribute to the existing evidence base on the value of school libraries.

Identifying the elements of school library services to PreK learners that are prioritized and valued by educational stakeholders, parents, and young children will position the field to both address these priority areas as well as advocate for the importance of school library services to PreK children.

Public Librarians

Just as school librarians can base programs and services on an evidence-base that incorporates research and best practices from public library programs and services for children, so too can public libraries benefit from improved practices and robust research from school libraries. Public libraries have long supported school readiness of young children through storytime programs focused on early literacy. However, public children’s librarians struggle in the media mentor role and could benefit from research that addresses developmentally appropriate strategies for supporting young children’s digital literacy. Similarly, public librarians can integrate inquiry strategies that promote curiosity and creative thinking across their programs for all children.

PreK Educators

PreK educators aim to prepare their students for the academic and life demands of the future. School librarians can serve as instructional partners for PreK educators. The examination of standards documents will identify natural alignments for school librarian and PreK teacher collaboration.

Larger Educational and Community Systems

Educational systems and school leaders are successful when students are successful and when their systems work to properly educate students. Educators beyond the PreK years benefit when children come to their classes prepared for the academic and social demands of formal and informal learning environments.

References: see Supportingdoc2

Schedule of Completion

Year 1

[illegible]

[illegible]

Year 2

[illegible]

[illegible]