



LAURA BUSH 21st CENTURY LIBRARIAN PROGRAM

Sample Application RE-260110-OLS-26
Project Category: Planning

Marshall University Research Corporation

Amount awarded by IMLS: \$199,520
Amount of cost share: \$0

Marshall University will examine how school administrators understand and evaluate school library programs in rural Appalachian districts. School libraries remain a critical component of literacy development, information access, and instructional collaboration, yet in many rural regions, including Appalachia, the number of schools staffed by certified school librarians continues to decline. National workforce analyses indicate that nearly one-third of U.S. schools lack librarian staffing, with West Virginia among the states with the highest rates. This planning project will investigate how current evaluation practices influence institutional decision making related to program sustainability and workforce stability. The project will convene a regional advisory board and design structured interview protocols and survey instruments to examine how school library programs are currently defined, evaluated, and understood within district leadership systems.

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.

INTRODUCTION (One Paragraph)

Marshall University requests \$199,520 in IMLS funding under the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program to conduct a 24-month planning project examining administrator evaluation practices and their relationship to school library workforce stability in West Virginia and neighboring Appalachian districts where the number of schools staffed by certified school librarians continues to decline. The project responds to the documented decline in staffed school libraries by investigating how administrator preparation to evaluate school library programs shapes sustainability decisions. Project partners include participating rural school districts, the June Harless Center at Marshall University, and a representative from the West Virginia Department of Education or the State Superintendent's Office serving in a consultative advisory role. The intended result is a comprehensive regional needs assessment report documenting current evaluation practices, identifying gaps in administrator evaluation literacy, and providing evidence-based recommendations to guide future workforce initiatives aligned with LB21 Goal 2, Objective 2.1.

PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

Across Appalachian regions, including West Virginia and western North Carolina, school library programs operate within educational and economic systems shaped by rural geography, constrained district resources, fluctuating enrollment patterns, and ongoing workforce instability. School librarians in these regions frequently serve multiple schools, manage instructional and technology responsibilities, and support literacy, digital fluency, information ethics, and instructional collaboration. Institutional understanding of their work varies across district leadership structures, and this variability shapes how programs are supported and sustained.

National workforce analyses document a sustained decline in school librarian positions over the past decade (Kachel & Lance, 2021). More recent school-level data indicate that 29.5% of U.S. schools lack a full- or part-time librarian, with West Virginia among the states with the highest rates, where approximately 50% of schools report no librarian staffing (Ellis & Lance, 2024). In West Virginia, the number of staffed school library programs has declined in recent years, and many districts operate without a certified school library professional, reflecting patterns identified in national and state-level staffing analyses (Ellis & Lance, 2024). This pattern is also reflected in state staffing data and district-level reporting within Appalachian education systems. Staffing decisions are influenced by fiscal realities and enrollment shifts, yet institutional decision-making structures also shape whether programs are sustained, reduced, or eliminated.

Under current West Virginia licensure policy, school library media is recognized as an initial licensure field and may be obtained through alternative certification pathways, including a Praxis-based endorsement route that does not require completion of formal school library preparation coursework. As a result, individuals serving in school library roles may enter positions with varying levels of professional preparation, underscoring the importance of clear evaluation criteria that help administrators understand and assess the instructional, collaborative, and technological dimensions of contemporary school library programs.

At the same time, administrators responsible for evaluating school library programs receive no formal preparation in school library standards or in assessing program impact. District evaluation systems generally do not include criteria specific to the instructional, technological, and

collaborative dimensions of contemporary school librarianship. These conditions create a systems-level gap in administrator evaluation literacy and institutional clarity regarding what constitutes an effective school library program. Leaders in rural districts often supervise multiple specialized instructional roles within complex and resource-constrained systems (Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013). When evaluation criteria specific to school library programs are not clearly defined, administrators rely on generalized teacher instruments or informal perceptions of library services. These approaches do not capture the full scope of the school library program and do not provide consistent evaluative language to guide staffing or sustainability decisions.

This planning project addresses a structural workforce question: whether and how variability in administrator evaluation literacy influences decisions related to school library program sustainability and workforce stability. The project builds upon scholarship in rural education leadership and professional retention while focusing specifically on institutional evaluation practices. Workforce initiatives often concentrate on recruitment pipelines or professional development for practitioners. This project instead examines the institutional conditions that shape how programs are understood, evaluated, and sustained at the leadership level.

The June Harless Center brings statewide experience in literacy leadership, educator development, and district coordination, providing institutional capacity and contextual insight relevant to rural instructional systems. Its involvement strengthens the project's ability to interpret findings within broader literacy and instructional leadership contexts. While the project is grounded in West Virginia and Appalachian districts, it will also gather broader rural perspectives through structured focus group conversations at national conferences. These environmental scanning sessions will explore whether similar evaluation challenges are present in other rural contexts. The purpose is to determine whether the climate observed regionally reflects broader patterns in rural education settings. These conversations will provide contextual insight and will not serve as validation activities.

Primary beneficiaries include school library professionals in rural districts, district administrators responsible for evaluation decisions, and state-level education leaders concerned with sustaining instructional infrastructure. The project will produce a comprehensive regional needs assessment report documenting administrator evaluation practices, identifying structural gaps, and offering recommendations regarding whether and how future workforce initiatives should address administrator evaluation literacy. This planning effort is designed to generate analytic clarity before intervention. The project will produce a validated needs assessment and conceptual evaluation framework to guide future implementation efforts. Strengthening institutional understanding of how school library programs are evaluated is foundational to sustaining staffed and effective school libraries in rural communities.

PROJECT WORK PLAN

This 24-month planning project will produce a comprehensive regional needs assessment examining administrator evaluation practices and their relationship to school library workforce stability. Findings will clarify institutional conditions shaping school library program sustainability and generate the evidence necessary to inform future workforce-focused

implementation initiatives. The work proceeds in four coordinated phases that move from instrument development to data collection, analysis, and structured environmental scanning.

Phase 1: Advisory Formation and Instrument Development (Months 1–4)

The project will begin with the formation of a Regional Advisory Board to ensure that all instruments and analytic approaches reflect current district and state contexts. The Advisory Board will include rural district administrators responsible for personnel evaluation, practicing school library professionals, a representative from the West Virginia Department of Education or the State Superintendent's Office serving in a consultative capacity, and a representative from the June Harless Center for Rural Educational Research and Development at Marshall University.

Initial advisory members include Mrs. Jennifer Dellinger, NBCT, school librarian in Gaston County Schools (North Carolina); Ms. Cassie Owens Moore, South Carolina School Librarian of the Year (2024), Oconee County School District; and Dr. Trena Paulus, Professor and Coordinator of Qualitative Research Methods at East Tennessee State University and Fulbright Scholar. These advisors bring expertise in school library leadership, rural education contexts, and qualitative research methodology. Additional school leadership advisors will be identified during the early stages of the project to ensure representation from administrators responsible for personnel evaluation and instructional supervision in rural districts.

The June Harless Center brings statewide experience in literacy leadership, educator development, and district coordination, providing institutional capacity and contextual insight relevant to rural instructional systems. Dr. Tarabeth Heineman, Executive Director at the June Harless Center, will provide guidance related to district engagement and rural education context during this phase.

During Phase 1, the Project Director, Dr. Kimberly McFall, and Co-Project Director, Dr. Tisha Duncan, will work with Dr. Trena Paulus to develop semi-structured interview protocols and survey instruments. The Advisory Board will review draft instruments to ensure clarity, contextual relevance, and alignment with district policy language and licensure structures. The instruments will focus on how administrators define school library program effectiveness, which evaluation criteria are currently used, what evidence informs staffing decisions, and how evaluation systems align with professional standards. Following Advisory Board review and refinement of instruments, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval will be secured prior to initiating data collection activities. Prior to full data collection, pilot testing of interview and survey instruments will be conducted with a small number of participating districts to confirm instrument clarity and feasibility.

Phase 2: Regional Data Collection (Months 5–12)

The second phase will involve systematic data collection across selected rural and Appalachian districts. Data sources will include semi-structured interviews with 25 rural district administrators and 25 certified school librarians, survey distribution to capture broader regional perspectives, and collection and review of district evaluation documents where available.

This sample size is designed to generate cross-district thematic insight while remaining consistent with the scope of a 24-month planning-level needs assessment. Administrator interviews will examine how school library program effectiveness is defined, what evaluation

criteria are currently used, what evidence informs staffing and sustainability decisions, and how evaluation systems align with professional standards.

Interviews with school librarians will explore how evaluation expectations are communicated, how existing evaluation tools reflect assigned instructional and program responsibilities, and how evaluation practices influence perceptions of program stability and professional sustainability. This dual perspective will clarify areas of alignment and misalignment between institutional evaluation structures and program realities.

Survey data will provide additional contextual patterns and allow for thematic comparison across participating districts. Review of district evaluation documents will further clarify how school library roles are formally assessed within existing systems. During the later stages of Phase 2, collected interview transcripts, survey responses, and district evaluation documents will be organized and prepared for analysis. The Advisory Board will remain engaged through scheduled review meetings to monitor progress and ensure continued alignment with project objectives.

Phase 3: Analysis and Synthesis (Months 13–18)

During the third phase, qualitative and survey data will be systematically analyzed to identify recurring themes related to administrator evaluation literacy, institutional understanding of school library impact, alignment between evaluation tools and professional standards, and perceived connections between evaluation practices and workforce stability.

Findings will be synthesized into a structured Regional Needs Assessment Report. The Advisory Board will review preliminary findings to confirm contextual accuracy and strengthen interpretive clarity. This step ensures that conclusions are grounded in documented evidence and regional realities.

Phase 4: Environmental Scan and Contextualization (Months 19–24)

The final phase will extend the inquiry beyond the region through structured focus group conversations at national education conferences. These sessions will engage rural district leaders and school library professionals from outside Appalachia to explore how school library programs are evaluated in their contexts and whether similar evaluation challenges are present.

Environmental scanning conversations conducted with rural district leaders and school library professionals at national conferences will provide contextual insight into whether evaluation challenges identified in Appalachian districts reflect broader patterns across rural education systems. These discussions will help situate regional findings within national professional conversations and inform interpretation of results in the final needs assessment report.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND OVERSIGHT

The Project Director, Dr. Kimberly McFall, will oversee all phases of the project, coordinate Advisory Board engagement, supervise data collection, and lead analysis and report development. The Co-Project Director, Dr. Tisha Duncan, will assist with research design, instrument development, and interpretation of findings related to administrator evaluation practices and district decision-making structures.

Advisory Board members and institutional partners will provide consultation throughout the project to ensure alignment with practitioner realities and rural education contexts. Project staff possess expertise in school library leadership, rural education systems, and qualitative research methodology. Regular progress monitoring and structured Advisory Board consultation will ensure timely completion of project activities.

EVALUATION OF PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Project performance will be monitored through completion of activities according to the established timeline, documented participation in interviews and surveys, Advisory Board engagement, and production of the final Regional Needs Assessment Report. Evaluation of the planning project will focus on fidelity to the work plan and successful generation of actionable analytic findings.

PROJECT RESULTS

Intended Results and Deliverables

The primary deliverable of this planning project will be a comprehensive Regional Needs Assessment Report examining administrator evaluation practices and their relationship to school library workforce stability in West Virginia and Appalachian districts.

The report will include:

- Documentation of current evaluation structures used to assess school library programs
- Analysis of administrator definitions of program effectiveness and evaluation criteria
- Findings from interviews with 25 rural district administrators and 25 certified school librarians
- Thematic synthesis of survey data and district evaluation document review
- A summary of insights gathered through national environmental scan conversations
- Evidence-based recommendations regarding whether and how future workforce initiatives should address administrator evaluation literacy

In addition to the full report, the project will produce a concise Executive Brief designed for district and state-level leadership audiences.

Addressing the Identified Need

These results directly address the structural gap in administrator evaluation literacy identified in the Project Justification. By documenting how school library programs are evaluated and how evaluation practices relate to staffing and sustainability decisions, the project will clarify whether variability in evaluation structures contributes to workforce instability. The findings will provide district leaders and state education officials with concrete insight into current institutional conditions and support informed decision making regarding program sustainability and workforce stability.

Adaptability and Usability

Although grounded in Appalachian districts, the needs assessment methodology and documented themes will be structured to support replication in other rural education systems. The final report will include the semi-structured interview protocols, survey instruments, document review framework, advisory consultation structure, and analytic approach used during the project.

The final report will clearly outline the planning sequence used in this project, from advisory formation through data synthesis and environmental scanning. Other rural education systems will be able to use this documented process to conduct similar needs assessments of administrator evaluation practices. Providing a transparent and adaptable planning model strengthens the field's ability to examine workforce stability through an institutional lens.

Dissemination

Findings will be shared through:

- Executive summaries distributed to participating districts
- Briefings for the West Virginia Department of Education or the State Superintendent's Office
- Facilitated dialogue sessions at national education conferences focused on rural leadership
- Structured conversations with district and state leaders to review key themes and implications

Dissemination will center on documented themes, patterns, and institutional conditions that shape how school library programs are evaluated and sustained.

Sustainability and Future Work

As a planning project, the long-term value lies in the clarity generated through the needs assessment. The findings will inform whether a targeted initiative focused on strengthening administrator evaluation literacy is warranted. If evidence supports the need for further action, the documented themes and recommendations will guide the design of subsequent workforce-focused proposals under LB21 Goal 2.

The June Harless Center for Rural Educational Research and Development at Marshall University provides institutional capacity to sustain this work beyond the grant period. Through its ongoing partnerships with districts across the state, the Center is well positioned to facilitate continued dialogue with education leaders regarding evaluation practices and program sustainability. The needs assessment report and executive brief will serve as reference documents to support these conversations and inform district and state-level decision making.

Based on the data generated through the needs assessment, the next phase of work would focus on developing strategies that address the institutional conditions identified in the study. These strategies may include resources, guidance, or professional learning designed to strengthen administrator understanding of school library program effectiveness and support more informed decision-making regarding program sustainability. By documenting current evaluation practices and institutional conditions, the project provides an evidence-based window into how leadership structures influence the stability of school library programs at a time when the number of schools staffed by certified library professionals continues to decline.

Schedule of Completion: Year 1

[illegible]

Schedule of Completion: Year 2

[illegible]