



by Christy James and Lucy Santos Green, February 2023

As librarians, leaders, and advocates, we all know there's no lack of evidence about the positive impact certified school librarians have on student achievement and schools (Lance & Kachel, 2018). We also know there is a lack of certified school librarians available to make that impact. Unfortunately, too few states require fully-certified librarians to staff their schools. Still, in states like South Carolina that do, partnerships between school districts and university library and information science programs are filling the void and making a valuable and lasting difference in the lives of South Carolina's K-12 students. Even in areas without a legislated mandate, these partnerships can still be an excellent way to recruit strong candidates to fill these critical positions, as well as a venue for educating current and future school administrators on the evolving role of the school librarian.

A Good Problem to Have Is Still a Problem

While we are fortunate to have legislative support for school library staffing in South Carolina, large and small districts have historically struggled to fill these required positions, often leaving school libraries understaffed. School library media is identified as a "critical needs" area by the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDOE), acknowledging its value and the staffing challenges our profession faces. South Carolina library media certification requires a current teaching license, a master of library science degree, and passing scores on the Library Media Specialist Praxis II test. While the "critical needs" designation allows districts more flexibility to hire certified teachers who have successfully completed twelve or more hours toward their MLIS degree, many districts still struggle to fill all open library positions. During the 2021-2022 school year, SCDOE found that 80% of South Carolina school library positions were either vacant or staffed by people who were not fully certified (2022). These unfilled and understaffed library positions create inequities in access and services for students and teachers and erode the overall perceived value of school libraries and librarians. As we are all aware, when librarians are consistently missing from school rosters, some districts begin to think they can continue on without them.

A Partnership to Address a Persistent Problem

In the fall of 2017, Charleston County School District (CCSD), which has seventy-four schools with seventy-six librarian positions, identified eighteen school library openings. While many jobs were filled, four schools still had vacancies when students returned. Having seen similar situations in previous years and anticipating future hiring difficulties, Bill Briggman, CCSD's Chief Human Resources Officer, approached the University of South Carolina's School of Library and Information Science (now iSchool) about a partnership to "grow our own" librarians from current CCSD teachers. CCSD wanted to invest significantly in staffing school libraries and improving students' education by ensuring access to fully certified librarians in every school.



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The initial plan included support for ten CCSD teachers as they pursued their MLIS degrees from the University of South Carolina's nationally ranked and fully accredited online school library program. The two institutions cemented everything with a memorandum of understanding that has been the basis for four more CCSD cohorts and additional cohort agreements with other South Carolina districts. CCSD pays 100% percent of cohort members' MLIS tuition and fees to University of South Carolina (UofSC), and the cohort members repay the district for 33% of those costs through payroll deductions. The cohort members advance through the MLIS program together over two years, following a course schedule designed for them by UofSC's school library faculty, taking two courses every term. In exchange for the district's paying for two-thirds of their degree, cohort members agree to work in a CCSD school library (prioritizing rural and Title I schools) for a minimum of five years. Despite requiring this

commitment, CCSD makes it clear that cohort members won't be automatically placed in libraries. Cohort members must still apply for any position they are interested in and be interviewed like all other job candidates.

Finding the Right People

Interest was immediate when information about the new UofSC teacher librarian cohort program was released to classroom teachers in the late spring of 2017. In less than five days, more than 120 educators filled out our first interest form! From those responses, CCSD's human resources department carefully vetted respondents to ensure they met the cohort's essential application criteria: three or more years of successful teaching experience, a continuing-level contract, and good standing with the district.

Eligible teachers were invited to an informational meeting with current librarians from schools across the district, faculty from the University of South Carolina's school library program, UofSC graduate admissions staff, and representatives from CCSD's human resource department. Potential cohort members learned about the varied and exciting opportunities school librarianship offers, the structure and overview of the MLIS program, financial considerations, the district's expectations for cohort members, and the application process. As we've added additional cohorts, we've transitioned to virtual informational meetings and still include all the necessary stakeholders for this vital part of the process. The cohort program is intense and the program's structure and demands aren't the right fit for everyone, so the information meetings provide an invaluable opportunity for potential cohort members to get a complete sense of the program, ask questions, and interact with both CCSD and UofSC staff and faculty before deciding to apply.



We aim to identify applicants who can excel in the UofSC program and thrive as effective school librarians.

The application and selection processes (designed and managed by Christy James) carefully match both CCSD's district goals and the district's school library program goals. These processes also ensure that the chosen teachers will be strong candidates for UofSC's graduate library science program. We aim to identify applicants who can excel in the UofSC program and thrive as effective school librarians. The application process consists of basic contact information, seven open-ended questions, and two in-depth professional references, one of which must be from the applicant's current administrator. The open-ended questions focus on areas necessary for graduate school and library success, and candidates are asked to provide as many specific examples of their experiences as possible. Ideal cohort members are highly skilled teachers with practices that center on equity and the four C's (critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication), experienced collaborators and professional development providers, demonstrated leaders, and are themselves motivated learners. A diverse panel of school librarian leaders and school and district administrators are invited to score the applications. Each scorer focuses on one application question that closely relates to their experience and area of expertise. This helps with rater-reliability and doesn't create an overwhelming burden for anyone scoring. Reference scores and comments are added to an applicant's final scores and are then sent to human resources, which notifies all applicants of their status.

Support Every Step of the Way (and Beyond)

Whenever cohort members are asked about the best part of being in the cohort, the unanimous answer is the community created within the cohort. The cohort structure creates a bond and an instant support system for all the members. They share phone numbers and email addresses immediately and are urged to establish group communication. We've seen group chats and text chains carry on well after graduation as the cohort members continue to support each other and share ideas as new school librarians.

In addition to the financial contribution from the district, each cohort member is matched with a veteran librarian who checks in periodically with them throughout their MLIS journey. These veteran librarians become official mentors when cohort members begin working in a school library. From the beginning of their studies, cohort members are welcomed and celebrated by the rest of our librarians and are invited to participate in all our professional learning opportunities. They are also added to the district email group, receiving the same weekly communications as practicing librarians. All these efforts ensure the cohort members feel connected to other librarians and our work, even before they step foot in their own library.



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The University of South Carolina provides many additional layers of support. UofSC has streamlined and fast-tracked the graduate school application process for cohort members, allowing them to focus more on their new academic responsibilities. Once cohort members are selected, UofSC conducts a separate orientation event just for them. A UofSC library school faculty member is assigned as a special advisor and mentor for each cohort. This faculty member leads the orientation, provides additional information throughout the program, monitors academic progress, and is the designated point of contact for any issues the cohort members might encounter during their time

at UofSC. It's incredibly reassuring for the cohort members to know they always have someone to reach out to for help and guidance.

Beyond the contacts and connections from the school district and university, cohort members have several other benefits and opportunities. Each cohort member is provided a copy of the AASL *National School Library Standards* book during their first semester. UofSC pays for student memberships to the South Carolina Association of School Librarians (SCASL) and for them to attend the annual SCASL conference. As cohort members begin their school library job search, they are invited to sessions hosted by CCSD to discuss possible interview questions and explore ways to leverage their classroom and cohort experiences during the interview. They are also sent immediate notices about library openings, including background information about the school and collection and other relevant details that might help them decide if they would like to pursue the job opening. Once cohort members are hired for a library position, they have monthly check-in and growth meetings, plus regular district library staff visits where they are offered support and help with problem-solving.

Benefitting from Cohort Contributions

Both CCSD and UofSC have greatly benefitted from the cohorts. The most immediate impact is that our district's school libraries have been fully staffed since 2018! Knowing that students in all seventy four of our school libraries have a certified librarian teaching students and serving the community is incredible. We aren't just filling positions; we are building capacity while growing and improving our profession, bringing positive attention to our school library programs, and refocusing conversations about hiring, responsibilities, and opportunities. The cohort members have hit the ground running and become leaders in their schools and in our school librarian community. Some members of our first cohort are now in their fourth year as librarians. They serve as mentors, have joined CCSD's Teacher Librarian Advisory Team, have taken on leadership roles in our local and state library organizations, created curriculum connections, won grants, partnered with community organizations, won Teacher of the Year, and regularly shared their ideas with others. They are practicing everything they learned as cohort members in UofSC's program.

UofSC has been able to share this cohort model with other districts, replicating and tweaking the program for each district's particular needs. Perhaps one of the most significant benefits for UofSC has been a closer working relationship between the iSchool and its students and alumni. School library faculty frequently present professional development at CCSD events. Several CCSD school librarians are now iSchool adjunct instructors and serve on the iSchool's School Library Program Committee, helping to keep the curriculum current and relevant with their expertise and experience.

UofSC takes advantage of its CCSD contacts and social network connections to promote participation in its continuing education programs. CCSD school librarians and cohort alumni are often among the first to participate in federally funded training and research projects such as "Online Ready: Designing Culturally Competent and Impactful K-12 Online Learning" and "EQuIP: Educational Quality Through Instructional Partnerships." Recently CCSD school librarians and classroom teachers were able to participate in professional development sessions sponsored by a Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources grant, including virtual book clubs and workshops on integrating primary sources and graphic novels. Events and programming paired school librarians and classroom teachers together, giving them space and time to collaboratively plan instruction using Library of Congress resources.

The close connection between CCSD and UofSC has also bolstered the university's presence and commitment to the South Carolina Association of School Librarianship, a partnership in full display this summer as SCASL and UofSC's iSchool joined forces to host the 2022 International Association of School Librarianship conference.

Making a Difference Today and Tomorrow

Charleston County School District currently has twenty-one cohort members serving in school libraries, a number slated to grow as more cohort members are hired to fill retirements and transfers for the upcoming school year. There is definitely a culture shift as cohort alumni develop their school library programs and help shape the direction of our district's school library system, creating a higher expectation for quality and a fuller understanding among CCSD school administrators of what the school library program is capable of contributing.

The cohort approach to "growing our own" teacher librarians hasn't just generated passionate, well-trained librarians; it's also fostered an invaluable partnership between a school district and university that is meeting current staffing needs, creating better school libraries, and filtering into school library efforts across the state and in our national school library organizations and international communities!

We hope that by sharing the story of Charleston County School District, the University of South Carolina's School of Information, and its collaborative partnership, we have inspired you to pursue these relationships in your state. As we have witnessed first-hand here in South Carolina, the CCSD-UofSC cohort program built trust and mutual regard between the two organizations over time, equipping school librarians, school administrators, district leaders, school library faculty, and UofSC graduate students to identify, articulate, and employ the skills and resources available across both systems—all benefitting South Carolina students, our state's leaders of tomorrow!

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