

The Crucial Role of District-Level Teacher-Librarians in Enhancing BC's Educational Landscape: Advocating for Sustained School Library Leadership

by Cathy Fowler, Joseph Jeffery, and Shaunna MacDonald

I. Introduction: An overview of district-level teacher librarianship within British Columbia

In districts fortunate enough to have them, a district-level teacher-librarian (TL) or library coordinator plays a crucial role in enhancing the educational landscape. They provide professional library leadership, positively impacting all levels of a school district from individual schools to district-wide initiatives and beyond (Lewis, 2021; Armstrong et al., 2023). However, as budgets tighten, many in district leadership view these district-level positions and district resource centres (DRC) / district learning commons (DLC) as expendable, believing their removal will not impact the classroom. During the 2023-2024 school year, facing budgetary pressures, cuts were made in School Districts 41 (Burnaby), 57 (Prince George) and 61 (Victoria) to either the district-level TL, the DRC/DLC or both. Yet, from *Leading Learning's* "District Administration and District LLC Program Leader Partnerships" standard there are clear links between the existence of district leadership in school library learning commons, and increased outcomes across the system (Canadian School Libraries, 2023).

This paper will examine the benefits of these roles within districts and the broader provincial education system. While the focus of this paper will be centered on British Columbia, where the authors are located, the ideas presented are applicable to all provinces and territories in Canada. Though the title of the role used in this paper will be district-level TL, the role has many permutations and the intention is that this paper is speaking generally about all those variations using this definition from Armstrong et al. (2023) "a specialist teacher/teacher-librarian whose duties involve school library learning commons development and support for schools from the district level. This instructional leader facilitates professional learning and assures a consistent approach to library and instructional practices across the school district" (p. 25).

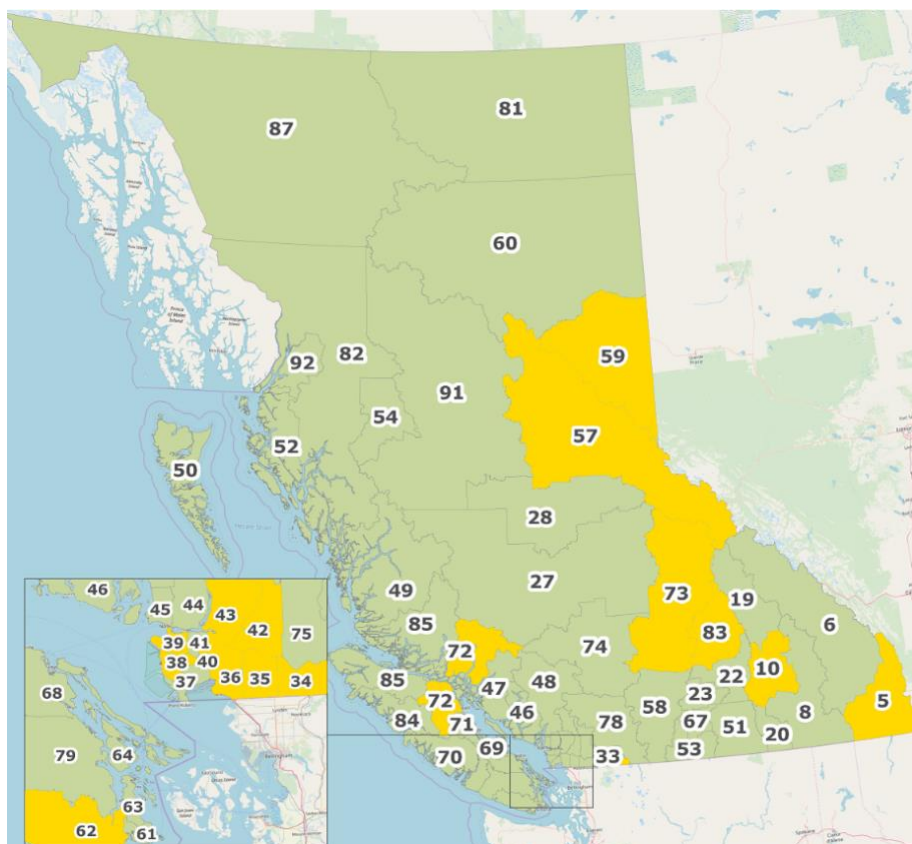
To facilitate this conversation, a few pieces of information are worth noting that pertain to BC's educational landscape: first, specialist staff to student ratios are embedded into the collective agreement of the BC Teacher Federation (BCTF). Provincially this is 1:702 for teacher-librarians, though some districts have improved

ratios such as School District 57 (Prince George) at 1:593, School District 36 (Surrey) at 1:500, and School District 72 (Campbell River) at 1:302. Second, the BC Teacher Librarian Association (BCTLA) is a provincial specialist association (PSA) of the BCTF and not a separate body. The BC District TL Network mentioned in this paper operates independently of these structures and primarily serves as a knowledge-sharing professional learning network.

British Columbia's public school system currently comprises 60 school districts, including 59 geographical districts and one province-wide francophone district (Fig. 1). Out of these districts, there are 17 district-level TLs that have been identified by the BC District TL Network.

Figure 1

Presence of District-level TLs in BC



Note. Adapted from [BC School/District Contacts \(gov.bc.ca\)](http://gov.bc.ca) map

These positions are not all created equally. Arrow Lakes, for instance, has a district-level TL, however, they are also the sole teacher-librarian for the district due to its small, but geographically spread out, population. Others, such as Campbell River,

are part time positions, or combined with other district roles. Table 1 details the full time equivalency (FTE) of district-level TL positions, along with the status of district learning commons or district resource centres.

Table 1

Analysis of the BC District TL Network - Positions, Presence of DRC/DLC and Enrolment Data from 2023-2024

District #	District	23-24 Enrolment	District Resource Centre / District Learning Commons	District TL FTE
5	South-east Kootenays	6043	DRC	0.5
10	Arrow Lakes	505	No	0.62 ^a
33	Chilliwack	14,841	No	1.0
34	Abbotsford	20,551	No	0.0 ^b
35	Langley	25,857	DLC	1.0
36	Surrey	83,259	No - Does have Learning Resource Department	1.0
38	Richmond	23,107	DRC	1.0
39	Vancouver	52,428	No - Does have 2 Library Services Catalogers	1.0
40	New Westminister	8,043	Media Services	1.0
41	Burnaby	27,147	Closing in 24-25 school year ^c	(1.0) ^d
42	Maple Ridge Pitt Meadows	16,913	DRC	0.6
43	Coquitlam	34,424	No - Does have processing and cataloging	Unknown
44	North Vancouver	16,864	No	0.0 ^e
45	West Vancouver	7,345	No	0.0 ^e
57	Prince George	13,535	DLC	1.0
59	Peace River South	3,724	DRC	1.0
61	Greater Victoria	20,855	No	(0.5) ^d

District #	District	23-24 Enrolment	District Resource Centre / District Learning Commons	District TL FTE
62	Sooke	13,236	DRC	0.2
69	Qualicum	4,800	DRC	0.0 ^e
72	Campbell River	5,636	DLC	0.5
73	Kamloops Thompson	16,321	DLC	1.0
83	K'wákwakwaka Secwepemcúl'ecw	6,707	DRC	0.2

Note. Data retrieved from <https://studentsuccess.gov.bc.ca/school-district/>

^aThis is the only TL in Arrow Lakes.

^bAbbotsford has a district principal of technology and learning commons.

^cInformation from page 22 <https://burnabyschools.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/2024-25-Preliminary-Budget-Report-FINAL.pdf>

^dThese districts had district-level TLs until the end of the 23-24 school year.

^eThese districts are part of the network despite not having a district-level TL.

II. BC's District Teacher Librarian Network

BC's District TL Network was originally formed by a group of Metro Vancouver district-level TLs, opening to a wider BC group during the pandemic when the group started meeting online. The Network addressed the urgent need for connection, consistent messaging and mentorship for district-level TLs across the province outside of the connections formed from the Provincial Specialist Association BC Teacher Librarian Association (BCTLA).

The varied roles of district-level TLs across BC, from mentorship to pseudo-managerial positions, make the Network essential for addressing unique library-related challenges. The Network facilitated discussions on library procedures, research, and misinformation during the pandemic, helping TLs navigate evolving COVID-19 knowledge. Currently, the Network addresses topics such as library software costs, book challenge procedures, and e-resources, driven by member interests, conference insights, and developments in the library profession.

Through the connections made in this network, the district-level TLs of BC are able to experience collegial support from others in similar positions, leaning on one another for advice, concerns, and best practices.

III. Financial Benefits to Districts

Investing in a district-level TL offers significant financial advantages for school districts. This role not only enhances the quality of library services but also ensures efficient resource management, professional development, and equitable access to educational materials.

A district-level TL can oversee the acquisition of new resources, significantly reducing the time and money spent by individual educators on researching and purchasing materials. With comprehensive knowledge of the district's diverse needs, the TL can procure resources that are frequently utilized, preventing them from becoming stagnant on shelves. This expertise is particularly valuable during new school builds or emergency replacements, as the TL can curate customized collections that reflect the local community and district's unique requirements. Contracting out this task often adds costs and lacks the local perspective that a district-level TL provides. Given the rapid expansion of schools in BC and issues such as seismic replacements, floods, and fires, the experience of district-level TLs is invaluable.

In districts with Resource Centres, the district-level TL plays a crucial role in creating, curating, and evaluating collections of resources, kits, and equipment. Schools and teachers cannot replicate these extensive collections due to time and budget constraints. The TL's expertise ensures a dynamic and effective resource pool that supports the educational needs of the entire district, maximizing the utility of available resources.

It is essential for district-level TLs to remain current on developing educational technology and trends. For this reason they work closely with the Educational Technology departments to oversee the management of digital content, educational apps, management systems and digital services, often making purchasing agreements that benefit the district. With access to the BC Network of other district-level TLs they can harness the power of many districts to help negotiate better contracts. For smaller districts this can mean having access to programs that may have been prohibitively expensive otherwise.

District-level TLs engage with all schools and programs, understanding the needs of teachers and administrators. Their team, including school TLs, clerical staff, and administrators, provides valuable input into financial decisions. This collaborative approach helps avoid overlap and unnecessary expenditures, particularly in the procurement of digital and print resources.

Utilizing the critical foundation of Equity of Access as a guiding principle, the role of a district-level TL is indispensable in ensuring that all students have access to high-quality library services regardless of their size or funding (Armstrong et al., 2023). Through the implementation of district-wide standards, supporting teacher-librarians, and ensuring consistent access to quality resources, district-level TLs play a pivotal role in fostering an equitable educational environment for all students.

The financial benefits of having a district-level teacher-librarian are multifaceted. From efficient resource management to professional development and enhanced student achievement, this role provides strong financial benefits to districts. By ensuring equitable access to high-quality library services, a district-level TL supports the educational goals of the district while maximizing financial resources.

IV. Variety of Leadership Roles

District-level TL roles and responsibilities differ throughout BC. Within this section different areas of leadership will be examined, as well as examples shared of aspects of the authors' own responsibilities. While each example is categorized under a specific responsibility, there is inherent overlap between and within the work.



Leadership in Advancing Educational Standards

District-level TLs are pivotal change-makers in advancing the educational standards of a district's library and library-adjacent environments. Through in-depth knowledge of provincial and nationwide standards such as the Canadian School Libraries *Leading learning: Standards of practice for school library learning commons in Canada* (2023) and *Foundations for school library learning commons in Canada: A framework for success* (2023), as well as publications by established library organisations such as the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), district-level TLs are able to ensure their district's library practices are adapting to evolving standards and moving toward growth. Through this in

depth knowledge of professional library standards integrated with local district educational goals and priorities, district-level TLs are able to inform policy development, advocate for funding where need is identified, as well as liaise with district-based and school-based administration to educate on the integral role of school libraries to student achievement and literacy development (Pickett & Combs, 2016; Ness et al., 2022).

Leadership in Collaborative Engagement

As the District Teacher-Librarian (TL), I convene monthly meetings with our Lead Teacher/Coordinator team. During these sessions, we collaboratively plan projects, lessons, and workshops, and coordinate our resources to ensure they are easily accessible. This includes not only physical resources but also leveraging our collective areas of expertise. In my role as District TL, I provide support by supplying resources from the Education Centre and by being knowledgeable about the resources available within individual schools. This enables me to facilitate connections between schools and the appropriate resources or personnel. The process of developing demonstration lessons and curriculum plans is significantly streamlined when I am involved, as opposed to each Coordinator independently discovering, locating, and sourcing their resources

Cathy Fowler, Campbell River District TL

The role of instructional leader enabling collaborative engagement with teachers district-wide and other district-level teachers is an integral part of the role. Schultz-Jones & Oberg (2015) describe the instructional leadership at the school level as “a qualified school librarian works in concert with teaching colleagues to provide the optimum learning experiences for students” (p. 44). This extends onto the district-level TL to provide optimal learning experiences through district-wide initiatives and professional development, often co-planning and co-presenting with other district-level staff. Just as the school library is “integral to the educational process” (IFLA & UNESCO, 1999, para. 14) district-level library programs are key to unlocking the full potential of district-level teachers in supporting their colleagues to improve practice through demonstration lessons, curriculum development and resource acquisition. This can be through the integration of technology or information literacy (Ness et al., 2022); through literacy and reading promotion (Schultz-Jones & Oberg, 2015); or inquiry teaching and learning (Schultz-Jones & Oberg, 2015).

Leadership in Resource Management and Collection Development

District-level TLs bring with them extensive experience in collection development that helps support school-based TLs with selecting, weeding and evaluating their collection. They may highlight new titles, evaluate titles for local usage or that may need removal. There is limited time in schools for dealing with collection evaluation, let alone challenges to library materials. District-level TLs often support with, as defined in district policies, these challenges, as well as pre-emptively examining learning resources for current suitability.

My role as the District Learning Commons TL involves a lot of work building and curating our physical and electronic resources. Twenty years ago items would have been cataloged individually, however, since around 2010 we generally bundle resources together into kits that are easy and intuitive to use. The idea is to give the teacher options that will fit their needs and provide a self-service portal to get them the resources they want in a timely manner. Coordination and growth of this collection is important as it allows resources to be shared and knowledge about their use built up collaboratively over time.

Joseph Jeffery, Prince George District Learning Commons Teacher-Librarian

While not all districts have them (see Table 1), management of the DLC / DRC and the development of the resources therein is an important role that supports classrooms across the district beyond the already mentioned financial benefits. Schools want to innovate and support students with interesting resources that enhance their learning and the launch of the revised curriculum in BC in 2016 brought with it an increased focus on innovative learning experiences, inquiry learning and experiential learning.

Thoughtful combinations of items, books, puppets, dress up clothing, technology or STEAM activities create kits that allow a class to open a box of wonder such as in figures 2 and 3. Creating resources like this meets the needs of the curriculum and allows students an opportunity to explore hands-on learning which adheres to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Berra, 2014, p. 6). This allows teachers access to professionally curated items designed for their needs as teachers.

Figure 2

2015 Kindergarten Imagination Bin - Emergency Worker



Figure 3
2024 Spirituality and Culture Around the World Kit



Leadership in Mentoring

One of the fundamentally important roles district-level TLs play is in mentorship. Lance (2024) through the longitudinal SLIDE project, has examined the decline in certified school librarians in the United States and the resulting need for mentorship. Though all states have requirements that they be certified, the amount of funding has declined and the presence of training programs has followed suit. While in British Columbia the presence of a teacher-librarian is mandated by the BCTF collective agreement's non-enrolling ratios, there is no set implementation of the position. Across BC this means that while some districts insist on trained staff, there are many districts for whom additional library qualifications are only a preference.

This makes mentorship all the more necessary. When you are the sole teacher-librarian in your school and you need help, you cannot just ask the teacher across the

corridor like you can in many classroom positions. As Jakubowicz (n.d.) points out “any other mentor, regardless of their experience as a classroom teacher, reading specialist...will be unable to help your school librarian learn these essential and practical skills” (para. 16). Having a district-level TL who can provide mentorship in both formal and informal ways is invaluable for building competency and allowing new TLs to survive. Perritt (2021) puts it succinctly that “the school library is a hub of activity and it never seems to stop. It is easy to get lost in the activity, especially as a beginning librarian” (para. 1) and it is the constant flow that can drown new TLs, both early career ones and those experienced teachers who have moved into the role.

As the District Teacher Librarian Helping Teacher, my primary focus is on advancing our Library Learning Commons (LLCs) in alignment with district priorities and national library standards. Through an active Microsoft Teams platform for Teacher Librarians, monthly virtual meetings, workshops, inquiry groups, and other relevant library initiatives, I can ensure TLs across our large district are well-connected with each other and aligned with broader district and national priorities. Additionally, I can provide one-on-one support to TLs in their libraries during instruction time, assisting with planning, envisioning, co-teaching, collaboration, and mentoring. My district-level position allows me to facilitate between TLs, local and province-wide, as well as other district Helping Teachers enabling me to envision and implement the strategic direction of our LLCs, ensuring they are at the forefront of best practices and leading into the future.

Shaunna MacDonald, Teacher Librarian Helping Teacher, Surrey School District

The kind of mentorship offered differs on an as-needed basis, but may include practical skills training in elements such as the integrated library system (ILS) and library lessons and management (Jakubowicz, n.d.), emotional support (Jakubowicz, n.d.), and a modelling of best practices (Perritt, 2021). These best practices come from the other leadership roles and reflect the work that TLs need to do to be school-based leaders in their own right.

Finally, mentorship can also be about capacity building and cheerleading. It is easy to get bogged down in the idea of a mentor only being needed at the start of your career, however, mentors can also be critical friends who challenge preconceived patterns of thinking and help you see yourself in new ways. In terms of the district-level TL this can be someone who celebrates the successes going on and champions them to others as seen in Reid (2017) and Berra (2014). Organization of professional development and tapping people on the shoulder to stand up and share their expertise is an often overlooked form of mentorship.

V. Future Implications for 21st Century Learning in the Library

As schools march on into the future, it is important to contemplate the future of our school libraries and the future-ready students we hope to send into the world. For school libraries to be successful they need the critical foundations of strong policy, robust funding, and equity of access to ensure their effectiveness, as outlined in Armstrong et al. (2023). While building these foundations at the school library level is essential, so too is having a district perspective that aligns these foundations in a consistent approach across schools. This is the pivotal function of the district-level TL and why their role should be considered essential staffing within a district.

Examining the Critical Foundations



Strong Policy: When policy around school libraries is being written, a district teacher-librarian is a knowledgeable, informed consultant bridging district-specific considerations with provincial and national standards. A district-level TL is also utilized in cases where library policy is challenged – they are able to ensure the policy is being upheld from a district standard and are able to speak to the policy in detail.

Robust Funding: A district-level TL is able to advocate for continued adequate funding for school libraries, with knowledge of policy and district priorities this funding contributes toward. They are also able to identify and advocate for areas of need where an injection of funding is needed. This could be areas of neglect, or areas of change that need addressing through increased funding, as discussed next.

Equity of Access: Districts with a district-level TL are prioritizing professional staffing and recognizing the vital role professionally staffed libraries have in the educational context. The district-level TL is able to identify areas of change that need to be addressed in the system to ensure equitable access to the school library and library resources. A recent initiative spearheaded by many district-level TL is the deep dive into

diversity audits and the issue of representation in our school libraries, as well as how Indigenous texts are housed in our collections.

Without the district-level TL role, these foundations fall on TLs already working a full workload at the school level and without the benefit of the broader district view. Relying on side-of-the-desk volunteer work to inform policy, funding, or equity is a recipe for a failing school library future. The district-level TL's leadership, skills, and professional knowledge uphold the critical foundations to lead their district's LLCs into the future.

VI. Conclusion

It is clear that the district-level TL is a crucial, multi-faceted role for school districts that value their teacher-librarians to drive progress and change within their schools. Teacher-librarians are expected to be instructional leaders, advancing the learning goals of the whole school community (Canadian School Libraries, 2023; Lewis, 2021; Ness et al., 2022). While the school-based principal sets the individual school goals, it is a team approach fanning out from a well-supported school library learning commons that helps achieve those goals (Pickett & Combs, 2016). Therefore, clear direction, professional development, and mentorship at the district-level are essential to support individual teacher-librarians in their school-based instructional leadership roles. Districts such as Surrey School District, recipients of the 2022 Canadian School Libraries' Leading Learning Award, have demonstrated that substantial investments in school-level teacher-librarians and district-level teacher-librarian leadership yield significant benefits. With investment in these essential pillars of a district's educational community, library learning commons can continue to enhance the educational landscape and increase outcomes across the system.

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