

School libraries abroad: What's happening in Anchorage, Alaska?

By Holly Godfree and Lisa Sam

Snapshot

In this interview, Holly Godfree speaks to Lisa Sam about school libraries in Anchorage, Alaska (population 287,000), the interview shares the initiatives, challenges and successes of school libraries in this beautiful slice of the world.

Introduction

In this interview, Holly Godfree (former coordinator of the *Students Need School Libraries* campaign) speaks to Lisa Sam (Library Services Supervisor for the Anchorage School District) about school libraries in Anchorage, Alaska (population 287,000).

Why does this matter? Because Australian schools can benefit from learning how school library systems are operating elsewhere in the world. What might we want to emulate? To learn from? Alaska (roughly the same size as the Northern Territory) and Australia have some interesting similarities - a relatively small, highly-urbanised population in an enormous landmass far from other population centres which is peppered with significant regional and remote communities in extreme climatic conditions.

Read on to hear about the initiatives, challenges and successes of school libraries in this beautiful slice of the world.

Who works in school libraries in Anchorage public schools?

There are two types of people working in school libraries in the Anchorage School District (ASD): the librarian and the library assistant. The librarian is a certified teacher with an endorsement in school librarianship. This endorsement can be a Master's in Library Science or a shorter graduate endorsement program in School Library Studies. The library assistant role requires a high school diploma, and all the necessary library training happens on the job.



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Except for our charter and special schools, all our high schools have a full-time librarian and a library assistant. All middle and elementary schools have a full-time librarian, and a few of our larger elementary schools have a library assistant as well.

What happens if a school doesn't have a librarian? What happens when a new person joins the profession?

So, anyone who wants to pursue either an endorsement in school librarianship or get a master's degree has to either go outside to the 'Lower 48' [Note: *This is 'Alaska-speak' for the Continental US*] or complete a program online because our state university system does not have a library science program. Because of that, we do have a shortage of people to fill openings.

In 2015, we had 11 openings and not enough qualified applicants. So we opened a 'Grow Your Own Librarian' program where someone who already has a teaching certificate and is working for the district may move into a library position as long as they're enrolled in and have an intention to complete the endorsement program within the next two years. That program has been very successful, and I support new practitioners with on-the-job training, too. In fact, I spend about 50% of my time on site visits with an emphasis on new librarians and ones needing the training program.

I'm super happy that we have engaged librarians who are excited about their work. It's the best job in a school.

We also have a really strong member mentorship program through a joint initiative with the Anchorage Education Association [Union] (affiliated with National Education Association-Alaska [Union]). This is available to all certificated staff, and the library mentor program is really strong. Experienced librarians get trained to be mentors, and they spend about 40 hours over the course of a school year outside of the school day with their mentee. Usually, this is a weekly or bi-weekly check in. It's a commitment that they get paid an addendum for doing. We have a lot of success with that because they have a particular person with experience they can bring their questions to.



All new educators (who are either new to education or new to their position) are eligible. So, for example, a high school teacher who switches to second grade can qualify for mentorship support. The mentors are paid an addendum which is determined by contract [Note: *This is equivalent to an Enterprise Agreement in Australia*]. The mentees can obtain continuing ed credits for participating. The program also includes substitute teacher pay for two days which means the mentor can visit the mentee at their school or, one of the most powerful ways they can use that sub time, is for both people to get subs and go

visit other libraries together. Usually the program goes for the first year of their new job, but sometimes it can be granted for the second year, if, say, they are studying for their librarian endorsement in that first year. I always recommend that our new librarians sign up for it. We know that mentorship really helps with retention. I think that's why the district and the union are so supportive. Anything to help with that, right?

Also, one of our librarians is paid to run our school district's cohort program: a monthly

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meetup for interested librarians which covers topics based on the group's needs and through which they can earn the continuing education credits required by our contract. It could be lesson plan topics, library management topics, new books, new lesson ideas, just any kind of thing. It's a nice mix. We end up having experienced librarians who enjoy the camaraderie and being able to talk about library stuff - you know when you're at your building you don't have anyone else to do that with - and also the new people go and benefit from the people who've been around for longer and also share new ideas that they learned in their recent training.

Tell me about the community of practitioners here. Who does what?

The main level of support for school librarians is within our district. We do it ourselves because there are 80 of us. The other larger districts in our state have librarians but Anchorage has the largest group of school librarians in Alaska.

We have an annual conference run by AKLA [*Alaska's State Library Association branch of the American Library Association (ALA)*] and there is some professional learning for school librarians there, but the Alaska Association for School Librarians would be our next level of resource. They do some nice work with having scholarships available and they're offering a credit course this summer that's a free credit for members.

There were, I think, eight of us that went to the National AASL Conference in Florida in 2023, but that's a 9-hour flight (not including airport time). National conferences are often on the East Coast so that can be really difficult to get to, especially with the thought of getting a sub and getting the funding and all of those things. I know when I went, it was so rewarding, but our state conference tends to be a better opportunity for most people. Even though the travel's very daunting, it is so amazing to be connected with so many people at a large conference. I especially





enjoyed meeting all these people that were doing my job at the district level. I do have a counterpart in Fairbanks, and that's super helpful because we both have the Alaska perspective, but it was great to meet other people supporting librarians on a large scale.

Union-wise, the school librarians are members of the National Education Association and are considered in a teaching position within our district.

I'm curious about staffing levels in school libraries across the Anchorage School District.

So, pretty much every school (with the exception of some of our charter schools) has a librarian position - much like how each school has a principal, front office staff, a nurse and a counsellor. Those are the 'core' positions where there is one full-time equivalent for each school. The reality these last couple years is there have been library positions that haven't been filled but they put in a long-term sub for these. So, they maintain that position until a permanent librarian can be found.

Since I started this position in 2020, we've had double-digit turnover every year in terms of librarians, mostly due to retirements. So, the district opened up that 'Grow Your Own Librarian' program when there was an emergent need. So, yeah, even with more than 10 out of the about 80 schools changing annually, we've had total staffing coverage every year because of that great policy.

Oh my goodness. People in Australia are going to be just drooling over that idea...

We know we're very fortunate because, even in our state, there are disparate situations in our districts. For example, a small village district might have one single teacher for multiple grades.

It's not state mandated at all to have librarians in every school. It's a district thing with strong community support which is again why we're so happy about it and really always want to advocate and show the need for this to continue.

Indeed! Let's talk about school library advocacy.

Advocacy is 100% in the forefront of my mind. I'm so proud of what we have, and I know it's just central for our students and our staff to have the support of a librarian. So, the advocacy part is always constant. I don't ever take support for granted because I realise how easily it could disappear.

Falling in love with reading and books happens at a library. There's just a huge opportunity there to make that connection: if we want strong readers, we need strong libraries.

A lot of the things that librarians do can seem invisible because they're not part of anybody else's workflow. The things that we think about and have to deal with are just different. So, we talk a lot about making that invisible work visible. When principals look at schedules and see their other specialists having students while librarians have these breaks without students, it has to look like more than just a hole in the schedule. We need to show them that there's other stuff that we do that requires time away from students, but it is in fact supporting students and staff. That's a constant thing that needs to be explained and shown.



So, I'm assuming that you would be encouraging/coaching librarians about certain statistics or reports they should be sharing?

Yeah, absolutely. We fold that in with continuing professional learning for our librarians.

Let's talk about the sorts of things that are provided by you and your team in the Central District Office.

We have a team of five - myself and four cataloguers.

I support all the school librarians, providing training, coaching and coordinating professional learning. I'm the point person for any problems with TLC [*Note: This is the library management system from The Library Corporation*], and I also advocate for technology needs in terms of explaining to our IT department what libraries need to function.

Our cataloguers enter records for new books to TLC for all our libraries. This support allows the librarians' time to be forward-facing with the students. The school librarians can later add a copy to any record we already have in our system.

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The cataloguers also do other support. Like we will pack up a collection to go into storage while the building is getting renovated, recarpeted or rebuilt from earthquake damage [*Note: Believe it or not, an average of a 1,000 earthquakes occur in Alaska each month!*]. Expecting a librarian to pack up a library after the last day of school is not going to happen. So, they do things like that.



We also offer summer book processing here. So, librarians who have orders that come in at the end of the year can send them here and my team (who works year-round) can process those books and return them to them in the fall with spine labels, ready to go.

Finally, we have a really big world language immersion program, and we do cataloguing for seven different languages. I'm just amazed at what the cataloguing team does.

Let's skip to a bit of your professional story. What do you do now and how did you get there?

I'm the Library Services Supervisor in the ASD. I supervise a team of cataloguers but I do not have any supervisory role over the librarians; that is all based with their principals. I got my Master of Library Science from the University of Washington in 2010 and then worked as a school librarian in an elementary school for 10 years. I had always wanted to be a librarian. I didn't think I'd ever do anything else. I loved that job and was prepared to just finish that out. When my predecessor announced that she was going to retire, though, I started talking to her about doing this job. My own children had grown up, and I was the only one still on a school schedule! Since this job is year round, it was a good time to make that change.

I would say that the number one priority is to have solid policies and procedures at the ready because when the challenges come..

But, I didn't know that when I left for spring break in March of 2020 that it would be my last time in front of students. We went remote for the rest of that year, and I accepted this job in May of 2020. The person who preceded me was the only person who had the position (for 13 years since it had been created). She did a wonderful job and was such a wonderful mentor (Still is!). So, those were big shoes to fill. It was also very topsy turvy from the pandemic, of course. I really feel like this year has been the first more 'normal' year that I've had in the role.

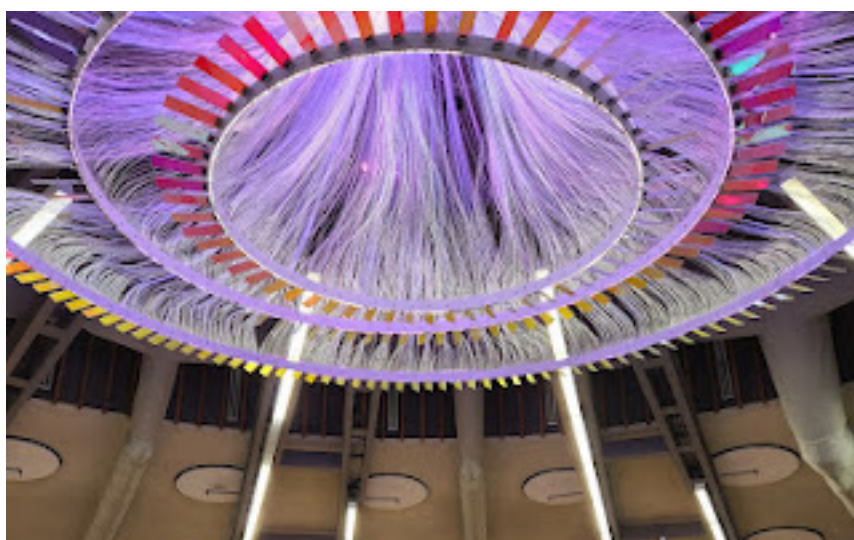
What's going well in school libraries in Anchorage?

Well, the fact that we're here and we have certificated librarians in 80 schools is amazing to me. I'm super happy that we have engaged librarians who are excited about their work. It's the best job in a school. We have a lot of different types of school sizes and school populations and you get to respond to what your school needs. For example, one school took on Habits of Mind and the librarian made their collection reflect that.

ASD has just adopted a new language arts curriculum for K-3 based on the science of reading with an emphasis on specific knowledge content, and next year it will be our full elementary language arts curriculum. I've been hearing from librarians saying the kids are really getting into these units of study and asking for more information on the topics. So, this summer our curriculum committee is going to take a deep dive on some of those topics to see how we can build collections of supporting texts to offer when the kids are getting excited about these topics. It's so exciting to get to respond to new things that are popping up.

We have a really large Battle of the Books that happens as a huge, statewide competition for grades 3-12 [See *Further Reading*]. The elementary district competition runs for four afternoons with two teams from each of our 60 elementary schools to determine the one team that will compete in the state final. Having team competitions for kids (even if they don't want to do sports!) is important.

They answer questions about the books and battle from the school all the way up to the state level. I am usually the Challenge Judge for the secondary competitions. If they think the answer is from a different book, they have two minutes to find proof in the book where that thing happened and show me. It's so impressive. They get really into it, and I love seeing students so passionate about reading.

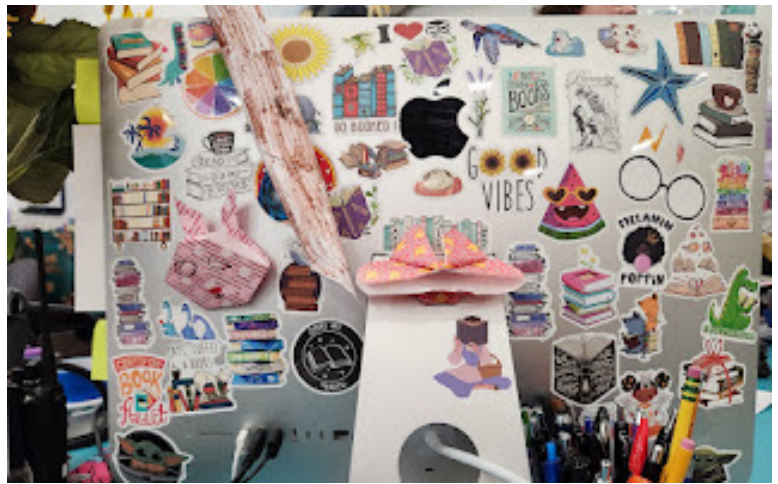


On a slight detour: What would you say the primary focus is between supporting basic literacy and encouragement of reading for pleasure versus information literacy and research skills? How are people spending their time?

I think sometimes that's individually decided by the person or the school's strategic goals and that there is also a flow from elementary to secondary. The interesting thing is you would think that at secondary they need the information literacy (which they totally do!) but I think the collections at secondary really support free reading. Choice: that's what kids come to the library for.

We've really noticed that in high school, you used to build your reference collection and nonfiction books for research, but so much of that has moved online that they need the information literacy to find that stuff digitally. So, then the print collection is supporting their manga love and things like that. That's a really interesting thing to me.

Yes, you may be weeding a lot of your print and nonfiction but, boy, you need to make room because they get their free reading in the library. That's what they're coming to use, in terms of print, and then information resources are digital.



I think that's always a challenge for a librarian - balancing 'traditional' literacy and information literacy. So many of us became librarians because we love books and we love reading. We love being in libraries and want to share that. I tell my elementary librarians (because they get a guaranteed seat with students once a week from K to 5): We have those six years to sell them on the idea of libraries. After they leave fifth grade, students have to seek out libraries on their own for the rest of their lives. You've got to sell them on this and make them lifelong users of libraries and lovers of libraries.

Okay. Let's just talk generally about things that are hard at the moment.

Well, you know... not having enough time in the day to get all to all the things, making sure that you do have time to do the library management and development. It takes time to sit down and make decisions about orders and then place the orders.



We also have new responsibilities like managing one-to-one devices in Chromebooks. It's tricky to manage equipment with little people using it. Librarians want to be there to help, and I do see it as a natural fit for them to support the use of information technology, but making the devices and technology do what we need them to do, learning how to do that and then sharing that with everybody in your building is tricky.

Getting substitute teachers, getting enough people in the buildings every day has been such a challenge since 2020, and it's just getting worse. So, librarians (and all specialists in schools) will have their programs cancelled and be used to plug holes. Not that there's another choice for the school, but it's sure frustrating because then you really don't have enough time to do the things that you need to do.

What's been happening with book challenges in Anchorage, and what advice might you give to other practitioners around the world?

So, in 2021, someone sent a letter to the school board about a book they were surprised was in our collection (*Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe). We had one copy in one school library and the superintendent decided to have that book removed. At that time, we did not have a robust challenge policy in place. I will say that one of the good things that came out of that situation was that it was determined we needed a different, more robust and comprehensive policy.

So, my director and I built a committee of ASD employees to rewrite that policy. We looked at what other districts do and used the ALA toolkit and many other resources. It was a really robust exercise involving administrators, teachers and librarians who came together to make something in agreement which was then put in administrative regulation across the district.

Since that policy came out, we've had one challenge which went through the process. They filled out the form, the committee met and made decisions. You can read all about it on our website. It was a really good chance to test out the policies and the book. I'm really happy with how the policy came out [*See Further Reading*].

I would say that the number one priority is to have solid policies and procedures at the ready because when the challenges come up it generally starts with someone being upset about a book. It's not a good feeling, even if you're ready and prepared. I've had very experienced librarians just say 'Oh, my stomach is turning'. They're not fun phone calls or emails or whatever, and it just can happen so quickly.

The other issue we came up against was when someone came to some board meetings and was reading aloud from books that they felt were not appropriate for young readers. Again, the policy helped because it clearly outlined their right to go and speak at a board meeting and made it clear that you have to put in a challenge to formally object, and the district held to that. So, in that case, there was some discomfort, but we received no formal challenges.

The policy is also really good because when those things come up, you have a lot of people who are not librarians asking questions. I'm the only librarian in this whole district administration building, and so I take it as a chance to explain what we do and why we do it and why those things are important. For example, there were questions when it came out that *Gender Queer* was an adult book. I was asked 'Why do you have adult books in the library?' So, we discussed





that at a high school level you're going to have lots of popular adult authors (like James Patterson or whatever) in the collection. So, again, the chance to explain what we do, why we do it, why it's important and why it's important for our kiddos. Some of our students did a good job of explaining why those things were important to them as well.

This is a less interesting question than what we were just talking about, but thinking about the district policy for challenges, I wonder if you also have district policies for selection criteria or other aspects of collection development.

We have board policies and administrative regulations that are district-wide about broad prescriptive things like libraries in general and there is a very broad collection development policy that applies to all schools. Some schools use that as their collection development policy but they're welcome to develop their own site-based collection development that might have a special emphasis or some things they want to highlight about their collection (like a foreign language) as long as it doesn't contradict the broader district one.

Sometimes there are centralised purchases - like sometimes our Indigenous Ed department will buy a book for all the schools - but budgets and most purchasing is site-based. Each school librarian determines what collection codes they use and how they're organised. For example, we have some genrefied libraries and some that are traditional Dewey.

I run an electronic hub for the librarians that has all those resources and also links to the challenge materials. We've worked really hard to revamp these and revisit them recently and it's been a good process. Librarians need to know where the policies and resources are to be prepared and effective. I think we had grown complacent because prior to 2020 there hadn't been any challenges for over a decade. So, people might think 'Well, that's not going to happen', and then it just hits. I've always been advised that challenges come in waves, and they sure do. We just happened to be riding one of them right now.

Can you touch on some broad challenges that are unique to Alaska in general? I'm thinking, for example, of the similarities between Alaska and Australia with the population spread between large urban centres like Anchorage as well as remote villages and small towns.

Well, book fairs as fundraisers are an example. Scholastic Book Fairs are huge in the Lower 48. We all see them on Instagram and Facebook with these beautiful big metal carts rolled off from trucks to unfold, but we don't get the shipping up here. As far as I know, Anchorage is one of the only places that can even have Book Fairs at all. They send them to us in cardboard boxes with little pop-up cardboard stands, and even that's gotten so expensive that they'll only

send it to schools that make a minimum amount. They've asked if we can consolidate - have one school receive the book fair and send it to another school to use before then sending it back. Every year, I'm waiting for them to say 'Oh, we're not even going to send them anymore'. The shipping and the geographical constraints mean we can't do things like other states.

I know that for small communities even more remote in Alaska having a book fair or something like that just isn't going to happen. A couple of times, we have pulled together some supplies for multiple schools into a single shipment to catch a break on the shipping with a bulk order for book covering, tape and stuff like book carts, shelving and story rugs. Those are the things where you just get really hit with shipping, and I can't imagine the expense for rural places to do that kind of stuff. In remote communities, items are either flown in or sent by barge when the waters are high enough, and it impacts prices greatly.



Yeah! I remember at the education conference that I went to here in Anchorage, all of the teachers from remote communities were taking extra apples and fresh fruit from the breakfast table. They were just so excited to have it!

Oh, yes! My husband grew up in a rural community, and things like that (or even hot food like takeout pizza) are so hard to come by (because there's no pizza delivery in many small rural locations). It's amazing what's different.

What's sparking your interest from an advocacy point of view around the United States?

I'd say Science of Reading has hit the biggest. I believe over 30 states have adopted laws about applying the Science of Reading to reading instruction. Alaska has the *Alaska Reads Act* with a new reading curriculum that we started this year for K-3. We are moving to the Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) Curriculum, and that movement is huge.

For our advocacy, we say 'How can you get rid of libraries when you're trying to promote reading?' It's just the natural fit. Like I said, when we're writing our curriculum we're looking at supporting those units of knowledge as that new curriculum rolls out which has very



prescribed units of study, in terms of the knowledge base. I'm super excited about it. The librarians this year are reporting that students are coming in and asking for books on those topics. I've heard it multiple times - the kids are getting intrigued by these units. So, my team are really looking at supporting that.

There's a real opportunity here. We know that reading improves

people's lives in so many ways, and we all understand the importance of having good, solid readers. So, I see that as an opportunity to say libraries are a big part of this. We want free readers and people who are excited about books. We're here to provide that for them and get them interested in that.

Back when I was going to library school in 2008 was when e-readers were coming out and everyone said 'Oh, everything's just going to go digital. We will not need libraries because we can all just Google materials.' I mean, we all know that kids will stick their face in front of a screen but when we first did get e-books, I could not get my students interested in them. They wanted print for that type of interaction. It's those ribbon bookmarks inside or gold edges or whatever fancy things that can't come across digitally. Print stuff is important. Falling in love with reading and books happens at a library. There's just a huge opportunity there to make that connection: if we want strong readers, we need strong libraries.



Last question: What do you mean when you talk about 'Free Reading'?

Free reading means people are freely choosing to spend their time reading and they're getting to choose what they read. The kind of reading with no judgement on reading level, no reading log to fill out, book report, or other assigned project associated. Just pure enjoyment.

When I was running my own library, I remember one of my teachers would pick up her class – they were first graders – and she'd say, 'Hold up your book so I can see what you picked!' and

they were all so excited to show her and she would high five each of them for their choice, no matter what they had checked out. I loved this!

I bet most librarians became librarians because they love reading and that is what they can share with their students. There are different types of reading, and school libraries need to support the teaching that is happening in their school and also build that love of reading for the sake of reading. If students think of reading only as work, they are missing out on one of the great joys of life. If that is all they get in school, that reading is a chore, they may miss the opportunity to experience the magic of books. School librarians are there to provide support for learning and develop the love of reading that enriches lives.



Further reading

[Anchorage School District Libraries](#)

[Anchorage School District Challenge](#)

[Battle of the Books](#)

Holly Godfree spent five months living in Anchorage, Alaska in 2024. She is an educator with 24 years' experience in primary and senior secondary public schools mostly in Canberran public schools, and she was the founding coordinator of the national Students Need School Libraries campaign. Holly's writing has been published in numerous professional and public publications, and she has presented for national conferences and webinars. She currently works at Lake Tuggeranong College (ACT) and the School of Information Studies, Charles Sturt University and was named the ASLA Australian Teacher Librarian of the Year (2019).

Lisa Sam has lived in Alaska for 32 years. Upon earning her MLIS from the University of Washington, she was an elementary school librarian for ten years before moving to her current position as Library Services Supervisor with Anchorage School District in 2020. Lisa is President-Elect of the Alaska Association of School Librarians (AkASL).