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# A Brief Statistical Snapshot of Idaho School Principals

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## A Brief Statistical Snapshot of Idaho School Principals

by *Rick Stoddart*

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Is there a more influential school library patron than the principal? Helping students and collaborating with teachers are obvious priorities for school librarians. However, school administrators are an equally crucial patron population. Principals and school administrators might not check books out from their school's library media center, but they are still patrons of library services due to their interest in the library's impact on student learning. Principals also provide the financial and administrative support needed for school libraries to be successful with students and teachers. Therefore, the more well-rounded an understanding a teacher-librarian has of their principals' goals and interests, the more successful their school libraries will be in meeting the needs of their most important patrons.

*The Idaho School Library Impact Study - 2009* (Lance, Rodney, & Schwarz 2010) found that school administrators learn what a strong library program looks like primarily through three methods: informal communication with school librarians, on-the-job experience, and personal experience (Lance et. al., 2010, p. 90). This is not surprising since most principals "think they learn the skills they need 'on the job'" and "learn by doing" no matter how they have been trained (Portin, 2003, p.1). Sadly, a significant amount of research indicates that many principals and school administrators are unaware of the purpose of school library programs, and receive very little education on the role of school librarians (Alexander et. al. 2003; O'Neal 2004; Levitov 2009, Levitov, 2010). One researcher has gone so far as to describe school librarians as "invisible" to most school administrators and principals (Hartzell 1997).

This visibility gap is not news to librarians in Idaho. An article published in *The Idaho Librarian* frames it as "the most critical problem of a school library" ("Resolving...", 1990). The article points out that graduate-level programs geared toward school administrators fail to convey the value of school libraries to future professionals, and encourages school librarians to take the first step in developing an ongoing communication relationship with their principals. In taking this first step, it is important for school librarians to "know their audience." It is imperative that school librarians develop an understanding of the expectations and background of their principals and school administrators. Otherwise these first steps might become missteps.

Librarians are adept at organizing their user population into a continuum of categories such as early-literacy patrons, children, young adults, millennials, digital natives, teens, students, parents, and seniors. These categorizations allow libraries to better serve their users with the proper materials, professional techniques, and communication strategies. Leveraging these patron profiling techniques and applying them to Idaho school principals and administrators might provide an opportunity for school librarians to better serve these important library clients. This information will be of value to new school librarians, as well as librarians who may have a new administrator joining their school.

By reviewing statistical information about school principals in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition* (2011), the *Idaho School Library Impact Study - 2009* (2010) and the State of Idaho's *Annual Statistical Report 2009-2010 Public School Certified and Non-Certified Personnel* (2010), we may draw some potential lessons. These lessons are only generalizations from which to begin your own profile. Each school principal or administrator will have unique characteristics, communication styles, and institutional goals that will influence your approach in how to best meet and advocate for your library's needs.

**Lesson One: A majority of school administrators in Idaho are male.**

The first lesson is a short observation regarding the gender differences in school principals and administrators. The average breakdown between gender of principals in the United States is 51% female and 49% male (NCES, 2009). Almost 60% of Idaho school administrators are male. In elementary school principals we find 53.08% are female and 46.92% are male. However, a wider gender gap exists in Idaho secondary school principals where 70.01% are male (State of Idaho, 2010, p.6). This fact may or may not impact how you approach working with your principal but is worth noting all the same.

**Lesson Two: Teachers are potential school administrators and principals.**

While this might seem obvious, it is important to highlight that most principals begin their careers as teachers (Education Administrators, 2011). According to the Idaho School Impact Study most school administrators in Idaho began working in K-12 education in 1987 and started their administrative careers in 2000 (Lance et al, 2010, p. 89). This means that most Idaho principals have spent significant time in the classroom. This is an important realization as The Idaho School Library Impact Study indicates that most school administrators develop their understanding of the role of a school library from on-the-job experiences (Lance et al., 2010). This speaks volumes to the importance of librarian outreach to and collaboration with teachers, as these activities will form lasting impressions. These impressions may impact future principal-librarian relationships.

**Lesson Three: Some school administrators and principals might not be as tech-savvy as you think.**

The average age of school principals in the United States is forty-nine years old (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). In Idaho almost 85% of school administrators are between the ages of 36-60 (State of Idaho..., 2010, p.18) including a significant portion (38%) over 50 and 5.6% over 60 years of age. Age is not necessarily an indication of technology awareness but it is safe to say that few school principals were "born digital." As a result, principals might not fully be aware of the technologies that impact library use and learning. A primary responsibility of school librarians is to remind, reinforce, and educate school administrators about the importance of library databases, computer competencies, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Standards. As any good school librarian already knows, not everything is found on Google. Are you sure that your school administrators know this?

**Lesson Four: School administrators most likely did not learn about the importance of school libraries in their graduate coursework.**

Most educational administration positions require a Master's degree in Education Administration or Educational Leadership (Education Administrators, 2011). According to State of Idaho, nearly 60% of school administrators have a Master's degree and less than 3% have a Ph.D. or Ed.D. (Idaho State, 2010, p.19). While this added coursework is desirable, previous studies have shown this is not a place where school administrators necessarily increase their understanding of the role and importance of school libraries/librarians to student achievement ("Resolving," 1990; Hartzell, 1997; Alexander et. al. 2003; O'Neal 2004; Levitov 2009, Levitov, 2010).

This fact was reiterated in the Idaho School Library Impact Study, which noted that teacher and school administrator education programs may be "doing a less effective job than those of earlier years at teaching future administrators about school libraries and librarians" (Lance et al., 2010, p.94). However, Levitov (2009) demonstrated that administrator education programs are a potentially rich space to inform administrators about the importance of library media specialists. The potential of graduate education to influence administrator library perception is especially important to take note of since 71.1% of Idaho school administrators' highest degrees were from schools in Idaho. Breaking it down further, nearly 32% of school administrators graduated from the University of Idaho, 6.9% from Boise State, and 21% from Idaho State (State of Idaho, 2010, p. 20). Since a majority of Idaho school administrators are educated in Idaho, there is a possibility for school librarians to advocate for a statewide graduate curriculum that might emphasize the importance of libraries to K-12 schools in Idaho. Such advocacy would pay certain dividends in the future.

**Conclusion**

With the statistical information given above school librarians can begin to construct a brief profile of what a principal patron might look like. For example the statistics suggest a typical principal in Idaho would be a male over 50 years old, with a masters degree from the University of Idaho, and been in an administrative position since 2000. Librarians will want to individualize their own profiles to include such things as their work environment communication styles, educational priorities of each principal or school district, or other

contextual features that may create a more meaningful and effective outline. With this profile, school librarians can start to develop effective strategies to tailor library services in a meaningful manner. Overall, creating a principal profile will allow you to compare, contrast, and adjust how you might approach one of your most crucial patrons to ensure that your school library will have strong administrative support long into the future.

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