

Ontario School Libraries in the 2020-21 School Year: A Survey of Ontario School Boards

Introduction

The Ontario School Library Association (OSLA) membership consists of more than 1,000 members who are front-line educators and school library staff essential for delivering Ontario’s primary and secondary curriculum.

OSLA is aware of the significant impact of COVID-19 on Ontario's students and educators, including school library staff. As school boards across the province began to release plans for the 2020-21 school year, the Ontario Library Association (OLA) and OSLA were deeply concerned that many boards had decided to drastically reduce or eliminate their school library staffing, and limit or end access to school library materials.

From September 21 to October 19, OSLA conducted a survey to track the scope and scale of staffing reductions across the province.

Survey respondents

The survey was sent primarily to Ontario School Library Association (OSLA) and Ontario Association of Library Technicians (OALT) member. As a result, most of the respondents were themselves school library staff.

Based on People for Education’s annual survey, 9% of elementary schools and 6% of secondary schools staff are neither teacher-librarians nor library technicians.¹ At many more boards, especially those serving northern and rural areas, school library staff work at multiple schools. Because it is difficult to reach boards with few or no school library staff members, the results are skewed towards staffed school libraries.

	Individual Responses	Boards represented	Private Schools
Secondary	175	36 of 72 boards	5
Elementary	263	40 of 72 boards	9

Findings – Publicly Funded Schools

As the 2020-21 school year started, plans for school libraries were still being announced. This survey, administered between September and October, was timed to capture responses after the initial policies had been communicated within schools and boards. That said, school boards are constantly revisiting their school allocation in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19 and we anticipate further adjustments throughout the Fall semester and into the new year.

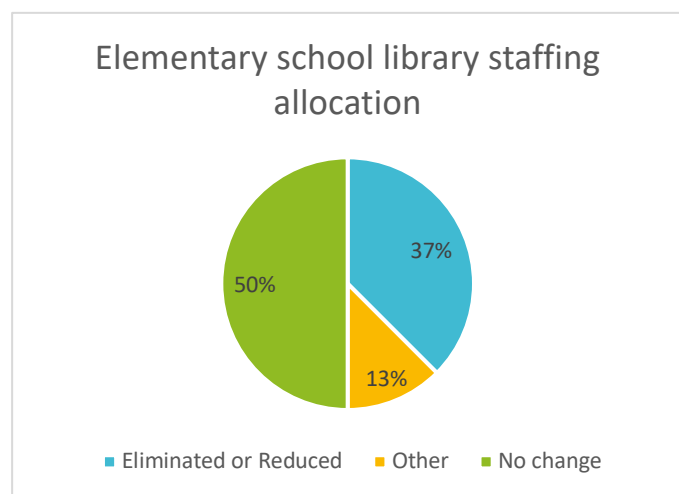
The results presented here are aggregated by school board. We understand that even within school boards, schools are making local decisions regarding both their school library staffing and the school library space. We have included any notable variation within school boards in the analysis below.

1. School library staffing reductions

School library staffing decisions varied widely between and within boards. While some boards have made board-wide decisions, including notably Toronto District School Board, York Region District School Board, Grand Erie District School Board, and Halton District School Board, most board staffing decisions are made by individual schools. While school library staffing has been reduced or eliminated at some schools within a board, library staffing at select schools in the same board may be unchanged.

1.1. Elementary school libraries (40 boards responded)

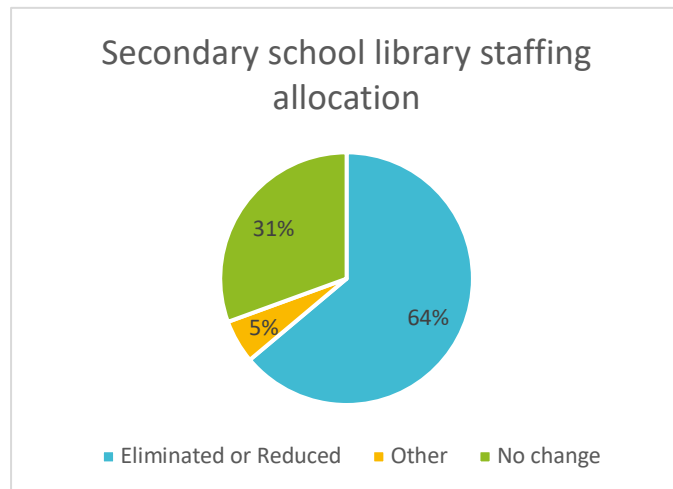
37% of school boards out of the respondents (15) reported that their elementary school library staffing had been reduced or eliminated.



- An additional 8% of boards (3 boards: Renfrew County District School Board, Limestone District School Board and Windsor Essex Catholic District School Board) reported that their school libraries had already been eliminated prior to this school year¹.
- 50% (20) reported no change in their elementary school library staffing allocation at any of their schools.

The majority (80%) of boards who had eliminated or reduced staffing allocations in elementary school libraries reported that staff had been reallocated within the board. Teacher-Librarians were most often reallocated to the classroom (either virtual or in-person) and library technicians were most often reallocated to the office.

One school board, York Region Catholic District School Board, laid off all of their library technicians.



1.2. Secondary school libraries (36 boards responded)

64% of school boards (23) reported that their secondary school library staffing had been reduced or eliminated.

- 33% (11) reported no change in secondary school library staffing allocation.
- The majority (86%) of boards who had eliminated or reduced staffing allocations in secondary school libraries reported that staff had been reallocated within the board. Teacher-librarians were most often reallocated to the classroom (either virtual or in-person) and library technicians were most often reallocated to the office.

¹ Rushowy, K. (2011, May 16) [Library shelved as school boards look for cutbacks](https://www.thestar.com/life/parent/2011/05/16/libraries_shelved_as_school_boards_look_for_cutbacks.html?rf). Toronto Star. https://www.thestar.com/life/parent/2011/05/16/libraries_shelved_as_school_boards_look_for_cutbacks.html?rf

2. Reduced access to the school library

2.1. Elementary School Libraries: Access to physical library space (38 respondents)

All boards who responded to this survey reported that access to the elementary school library space was restricted at all or some of their schools. Many boards reported that they were using the school library space to promote physical distancing of staff and students:

- At 34% of boards (13), schools are using the closed library space as staff workspace.
- At 32% of boards (12), schools are using the closed library space as an alternate classroom space.
- At 21% of boards (8), schools are using the closed library space for storage of furniture and/or unused materials.

At two boards (5%), respondents noted that while some elementary school libraries are closed, students at some schools were permitted some limited access to the elementary school libraries, including class visits and in-person book exchanges.

At 73% boards (29), staff have access to the school library space.

2.2. Secondary School Libraries: Access to physical library space (34 respondents)

At 28 boards (82%), access to secondary school libraries was restricted at all or some of their schools. Some noted that this was because of insufficient resources to clean the space. Most, however, noted that the space was being used in order to support the physical distancing of staff and students:

- At 14 boards (39%), schools are using the closed library space as an alternate classroom space.
- At 7 boards (19%), schools are using the closed library space as a study hall or lunchroom.
- At 12 boards (33%), schools are using the closed library space as staff workspace.

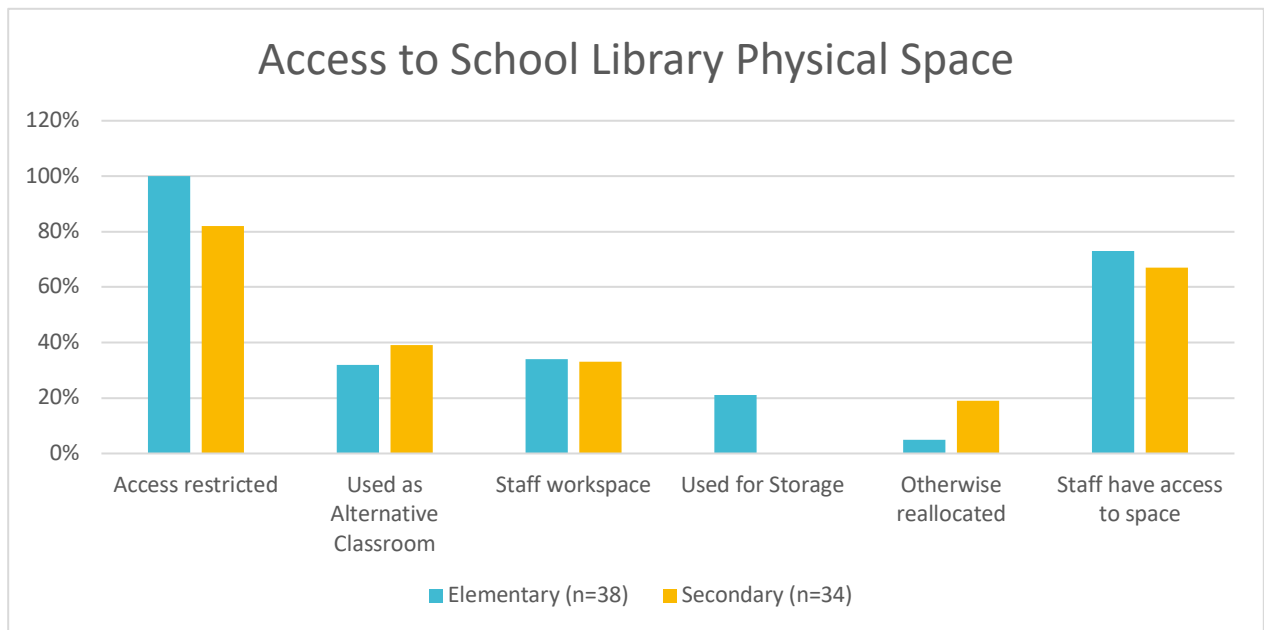
At 10 board (28%), some schools granted students some limited access to the secondary school libraries space.

- Almost all respondents noted that restrictions had been made in how students can access the space. This included restricting access to the stacks, requiring that students

be accompanied by a teacher, or permitting students to retrieve materials, but not use the space.

- 6 boards (17%) noted that classroom visits were still permitted at some of their school libraries.

At 24 boards (67%) staff have access to the secondary school library space.



3. Access to School Library Materials

3.1. Elementary School: Access to Physical Library Collection (35 respondents)

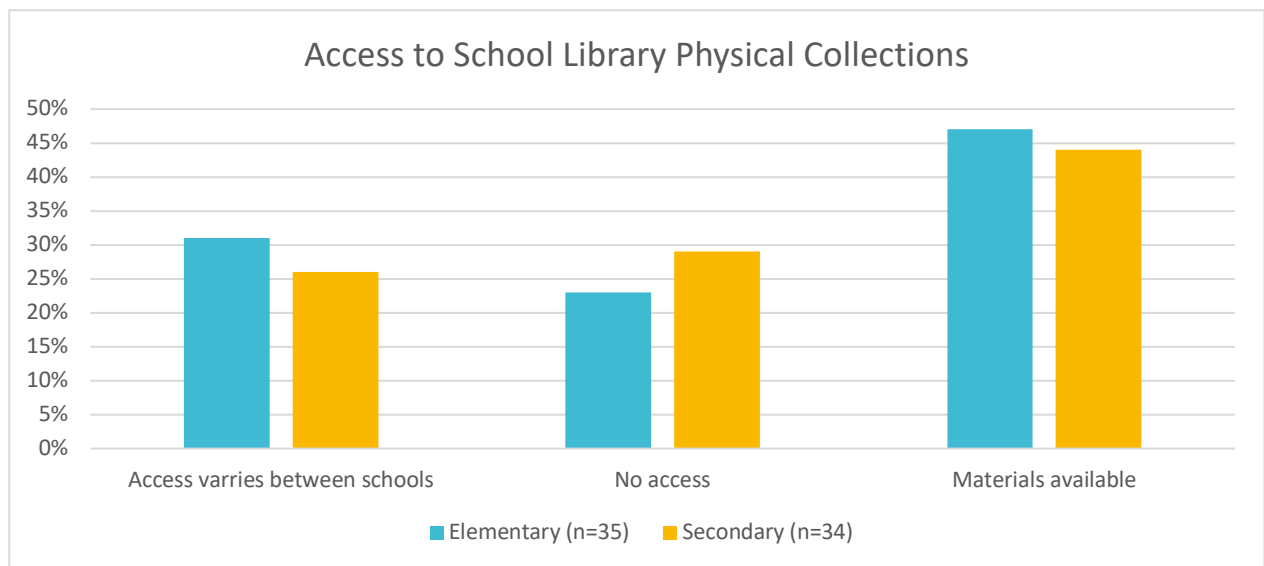
- At 31% of school boards (11), policies varied between elementary schools within each board. This means that at some schools, students have access to collections, while at other schools, students have no access to collections.
- At 23% of school boards (8), students have no access to the physical library collections.
- At 47% of school boards (16) students have access to the physical collection, either by request (15) or at the library (4).

One respondent noted that while in general students do not have access to school library collections, there are some exceptions: "We encouraged the students to bring books from home but there are students that are in families with limited income and through arrangement

with teachers, we have put together a small collection of books, and once returned, they will be in isolation for three days and then wipe down with a gentle, effective cleaner (Lysol)”

3.2. Secondary School Library: Access to Physical Collection (34 respondents)

- At 26% of school boards (9), the policy varies between secondary schools within the same board. This means that at some schools, students have access to collections, while at other schools, students have no access to collections.
- At 29% of school boards (10), no students have access to the secondary school library physical collection.
- At 44% of school boards (15), materials are available, either by request (15) or at the library (3).



4. Additional Findings

Two school boards (Moosonee District School Area Board and CÉP de l’Est de l’Ontario) noted an increase in their elementary school library staffing. Moosonee DSAB noted that this was the first year that they had a Library Resources Teacher and previously the library was unstaffed. These are promising findings but not reflective of the larger trend towards reduced school library staffing found across the province.

Findings – Private Schools

This survey collected responses from 14 private schools – 9 elementary private schools and 5 secondary private schools.

5. School Library Staffing (n=14)

- At 7 private schools, library staffing allocation has been reduced or eliminated
- At 7 private schools, library staffing allocation remains the same

6. School Library Space (n=13)

- At 12 private schools (86%), access to secondary school libraries was restricted.
 - 1 was using the closed library space as an alternative classroom
 - 6 private schools had otherwise reallocated the space
- At 9 private schools (64%), staff have access to space
- At 2 private schools (14%), students still have access to the library space

7. School Library Collections (n=12)

- At 4 private schools (33%), there is no access to school library physical collection
- At 8 private schools (67%), materials are available either by request or at the library

The impact of the school library on students

Numbers alone cannot capture the impact of school libraries and what it means for students to be without these valuable resources this school year. The elimination of school library staff has a dramatic impacts on student learning and success.

Access to library space and book circulation is only one element of the school library experience. School libraries are critical to successful online learning, ensuring that students achieve curriculum objectives, and curating the digital and print resources they need to succeed. Even in boards with access to digital resources, without the support of school library staff, it will be extremely difficult for teachers and students to navigate and use these resources effectively.

The impact of school libraries is well-established:

- School libraries foster students' love of reading, which research has shown has a positive impact on success in science and math, literacy scores, and students' social and civic engagement.ⁱⁱ
- Schools with trained library staff see better outcomes on the Grade 3 and 6 EQAO assessmentsⁱⁱⁱ.
- For secondary students, teacher-librarians and school library professionals are instrumental for building research and information literacy skills to prepare students for college and university.

Teacher-librarians are literacy leaders and technology partners in each school. During the early months of the pandemic, school library staff have continued to demonstrate the value they bring to their boards. [According to an OSLA survey conducted in April 2020^{iv}](#), school library staff are providing leadership in the following essential functions:

- The curation of digital learning resources,
- Support of students, parents, and teachers in using distance learning technology,
- Sharing virtual programming options with students and teachers,
- Co-teaching classes and supporting curriculum linkages, and
- Moving in-person programming such as read alouds, book clubs and maker activities online.

We cannot afford to sacrifice the long-term learning success of our children by eliminating the school library program.

What students say

October 26, 2020 was Canadian School Library Day, a day to celebrate all school libraries and school library professionals and the work they do in their school communities. The Kindergarten to Grade 8 students at Castle Oaks Public School at Peel District School Board^v had a lot to say about their library, which is currently closed. Here's just a few highlights:

- I love the library because it is a safe, inclusive place where I can go to explore, learn, experiment, create, and discover books to read! What I miss most about the library right now is being able to drop in whenever I want and need! It is a place that always lifts me up!

- The library makes me calm.
- My favourite thing about the library is that the library is an open and safe community which allows you to read and think. I like how our school's library is big and free it allows any students to open up creativity and participate in fun and well-organized clubs.
- The library is a great place to study and has a Lego wall and so many resources.
- I miss painting with water on the board.
- The library makes me feel calm and not pressured.
- I love the library because my imagination can be free to explore through the books and the Lego.
- I miss reading on the couch.
- Snack stations and maker space crafts!!
- The library makes me feel like home.

ⁱ People for Education. (2019). [Connecting to success: Technology in Ontario Schools – People for Education – 2019](#)

ⁱⁱ People for Education. (2011) [Reading for Joy](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ People for Education & Queen's University Faculty of Education.(2006) [School Libraries and Student Achievement in Ontario](#). Ontario Library Association.

^{iv} Ontario Library Association. (2020). [Ontario School Libraries – response to COVID-19](#)

^v Brown, Jenn (2020). Canadian School Library Day 2020: Castle Oaks Public School: <https://spark.adobe.com/page/FaXw0wX1f5nK8/>