

# What Do Students Need From School Librarians in an AI-Shaped World?

 The answer is much bigger than books.



CATHY COLLINS, ED.D.

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Years ago, while white-water rafting, my river guide discovered that I was a school librarian and asked me a question I still remember:

**“Do you really need a degree for that?”**

I laugh about it now. Sort of.

Most school librarians probably have their own version of that story. The person who assumes our primary job is checking out books. The colleague who thinks of the library as a place rather than a learning program. The well-meaning question about what we actually *do* all day.

But lately, I've been thinking about that rafting conversation differently.

At a moment when students are encountering AI-generated answers, algorithmically curated feeds, synthetic images, misinformation, sponsored content and an overwhelming volume of information, perhaps the question isn't simply, *What does a school librarian do?*

Maybe a better question is:

**What do students need school librarians to do now?**

## **More Than a Job Description**

Last school year, I explored this question from a different angle in an article I wrote for AASL's *Knowledge Quest*. The article looked at professional reading through the lens of AASL's five roles of the school librarian:

 **Teacher**

 **Instructional Partner**

 **Leader**

 **Information Specialist**

 **Program Administrator**

At the time, I was thinking about these roles as a useful framework for professional reflection and advocacy.

I'm returning to them now because they feel even more relevant in our rapidly changing information landscape.

These aren't simply five categories in a professional framework. Together, they describe much of what students need in order to learn, question, create and participate responsibly in today's information world.

## **Teacher: Helping Students Ask Better Questions**

School librarians have always taught students how to find and use information.

But increasingly, students aren't necessarily starting with a search.

They may begin with an AI-generated response, a TikTok video, an Instagram post, a YouTube recommendation, a search-generated summary or something a friend shared.

That changes our teaching.

Finding information still matters. But so does helping students slow down and ask:

**Where did this come from?**

**What evidence supports it?**

**Can I trace it to an original source?**

**What might be missing?**

**Why am I seeing this particular piece of information in the first place?**

In an AI-shaped world, teaching information literacy isn't only about helping students locate answers. It's about helping them interrogate the answers that arrive before they've even asked the question.

## **Instructional Partner: Making Information Literacy Everyone's Work**

One of the most powerful aspects of school librarianship is that our work crosses disciplines.

Credibility isn't just an English class issue.

A questionable health claim might appear in science. A misleading graph could surface in math. A manipulated historical image belongs in social studies. An AI-generated source could show up in almost any research assignment.

That's why the instructional partner role matters so much.

When librarians and classroom teachers plan together, information literacy becomes part of learning rather than an extra lesson squeezed in before a research project.

Students begin to understand that evaluating information isn't something they do only when they're told to "check their sources."

It's a habit of mind.

## **Leader: Helping Schools Navigate Change**

Leadership in school libraries doesn't always come with a title.

Sometimes it looks like introducing colleagues to a new verification strategy.

Sometimes it's raising a question about an AI tool before the school adopts it.

Sometimes it's advocating for intellectual freedom, equitable access or thoughtful technology use.

And sometimes it's simply being the person in the building willing to say:

**"Let's look at this more closely."**

That kind of leadership feels especially important right now.

Schools are making decisions about AI, devices, digital resources, information access and emerging technologies at an extraordinary pace. Librarians bring something valuable to those conversations: a professional tradition grounded in inquiry, access, ethics, credibility and intellectual freedom.

## **Information Specialist: Teaching Discernment**

This may be the role that connects most directly to the work I've been exploring through *Smarter News Literacy in an AI World*.

The information specialist isn't simply the person who knows where to find something.

Increasingly, we're helping students decide **what deserves their trust**.

That means teaching students to move beyond surface-level signals of credibility. A polished website can be misleading. A confident AI response can be wrong. A photograph can be authentic but presented out of context. A viral post can contain a kernel of truth while leaving out information that completely changes its meaning.

Students don't need to become professional fact-checkers.

But they do need habits that help them pause, investigate and make better judgments.

And those habits don't belong only in the library.

## **Program Administrator: Creating the Conditions for Learning**

This may be the least visible of the five roles, but it makes the others possible.

Strong library programs require intentional decisions about collections, technology, budgets, accessibility, programming and learning spaces.

In other words, the behind-the-scenes work matters.

The resources we select influence what students can discover. The technology we recommend affects how they interact with information. The collections we build help determine whose experiences and perspectives students encounter.

Administration isn't separate from learning.

It creates the conditions for it.

## **A Role Worth Making Visible**

When I wrote my *Knowledge Quest* article, I ended by reflecting that revisiting these roles isn't an exercise in nostalgia. It's an act of professional clarity.

I believe that even more strongly now.

At a time when information is abundant but understanding isn't guaranteed, school librarians occupy an unusual and important space.

We teach.

We collaborate.

We lead.

We curate.

We question.

And perhaps most importantly, we help students develop the habits they need to navigate a world in which information can be instant, persuasive, personalized and sometimes completely wrong.

That work can be difficult to capture in a job description.

But it is becoming harder to imagine schools without it.

## **A Question for You**

If you're a school librarian, educator or administrator, which of these roles feels most important in your school right now?

And which one do you wish others understood better?

I'd love to hear your thoughts in the comments.

*This post grew out of my article, "A Professional Reading Lens on Best Practice Across the Five Roles of the School Librarian," published in the May/June 2026 issue of AASL's Knowledge Quest (Vol. 54, Issue 5, pp. 52–57). I've revisited and expanded on those ideas here through the lens of our rapidly changing information landscape.*

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