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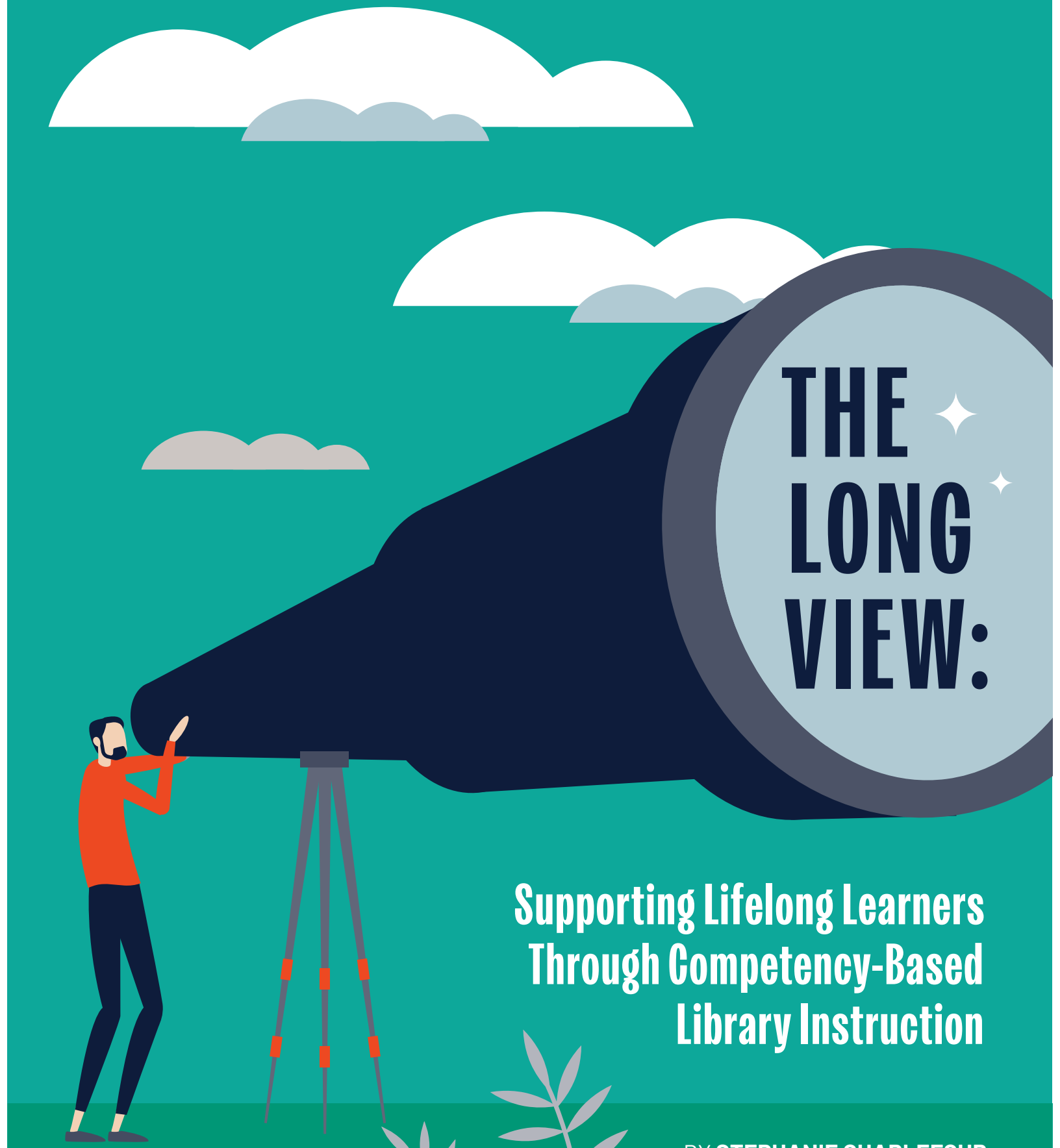

THE LONG VIEW:

Supporting Lifelong Learners Through Competency-Based Library Instruction

BY **STEPHANIE CHARLEFOUR & JESSICA REGITANO**

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School librarians and libraries across all grade levels play key roles in learners' educational journeys. As learners develop cognitively, socially, and emotionally from early childhood through adolescence, they need opportunities to engage with the world in increasingly sophisticated and nuanced ways.

The school librarian and library serve as essential resources for growing learners to develop the skills needed for whatever comes next—whether college, career, or community life.

The American Association of School Librarians' (AASL) *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* offers a cohesive framework for this work. These standards define the competencies learners need to think critically, create meaningfully, share responsibly, and grow continuously within both their immediate learning environments and the broader global community.

AASL Standards and Competency-Based Education

Before we can dive into how the AASL Standards can be best utilized across a range of learning environments, it is essential to understand their structure. A central feature of the AASL Standards is that they are designed within a competency-based education (CBE) model. This represents an important shift from the standards-based education (SBE) model that has guided much of PK-12 instruction over the past several decades (figure 1). Under the SBE model, learners are expected to meet specific benchmarks within predetermined time periods, usually by grade level. The timeline is fixed, and learners' progress is measured by whether each standard has been fully mastered.

With competency-based education (CBE), mastery is the constant, and time becomes the variable. The AASL Standards identify the competencies that all learners should master by the time they graduate high school. Learners work over time to achieve mastery, and additional instruction, feedback, and practice are expected and encouraged, acknowledging that learning occurs at different rates and allowing for personalized learning.

Since competencies develop gradually across the entire PK–12 continuum, learners encounter them repeatedly—from early experiences with book selection and guided inquiry to more independent research and information evaluation in upper grades. Therefore, not every competency needs to be addressed each year. Instead, competency development is cumulative. Learners encounter these competencies across a variety of contexts and work toward greater independence as they progress from primary grades through secondary school. Mastery emerges over time through practice, feedback, and authentic application rather than through one-time instruction or isolated lessons.

This allows us to make instructional decisions that reflect the realities of our own communities. Rather than treating the standards as an annual checklist, we can determine which competencies to prioritize each year as we work to help our learners reach mastery. Based on our communities' needs, we can work independently or in a larger group within our district or region

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to establish benchmarks that describe what developing competence looks like as learners move closer to graduation.

However, benchmarks do not function as rigid grade-level mandates, but as guiding expectations that help track growth and clarify how skills evolve. This approach makes space for differentiation, pacing, and repeated learning opportunities. It recognizes that learning is not linear and that some learners need more time and experience to reach mastery. It also positions competencies as habits of thinking and collaboration that are strengthened across disciplines and years. This is powerful because it allows instruction to become less about ensuring that all standards are addressed annually and more about cultivating deep, transferable skills that support learners in multiple contexts over the course of their lives.

Understanding the Structure of Competencies through Shared Foundations and Domains

The structure of the AASL Standards framework is designed to guide instructional planning. At the broadest level, the standards are organized into six Shared Foundations: Inquire, Include, Collaborate, Curate, Explore, and Engage. These Shared Foundations represent our core values, with Key Commitments communicating the endeavor of each foundation. Each foundation captures how learners interact with information, one another, and their world. Together, the Shared Foundations communicate the school library's role in cultivating thoughtful, civic-minded, and ethically responsible learners. Each Shared Foundation is further developed across four Domains: Think, Create, Share, and Grow. These Domains describe how learners engage with knowledge and demonstrate new understandings.

The relationship between Shared Foundations and Domains forms the structure for each learner Competency. A Competency, therefore, is not simply a skill to be demonstrated, but a combination of knowledge, behaviors, and dispositions expressed through one of the Domains within a Shared Foundation.

For example, work within the Shared Foundation of Collaborate may look very different depending on the Domain being emphasized (figure 2). In the Think Domain under the Collaborate Shared Foundation, Learner III.A.2. states, "Learners identify collaborative opportunities by developing new understandings through engagement in a learning group." However, in the Grow Domain of this Shared Foundation, Learner III.D.1. states, "Learners actively participate with others in learning situations by actively contributing to group discussions." Thus, learners move from a more passive role to an active one, and this progression may appear differently across grade levels—for example, from turn-taking in early grades to shared inquiry in upper grades.

By designing lessons through the Shared Foundations and Domains, we can intentionally connect school library instruction to classroom learning goals. This structure also provides a common language for collaboration, helping us align competencies with content-area standards and assess growth across disciplines.

Figure 1

Understanding Competency, Outcome, and Objectives

School librarians come from a wide range of backgrounds, some directly from subject-area classrooms and others who enter the school library through an alternative or second-career pathway. To ensure we all share a common working knowledge to build on, let's discuss competencies, outcomes, and objectives through the lens of the school library.

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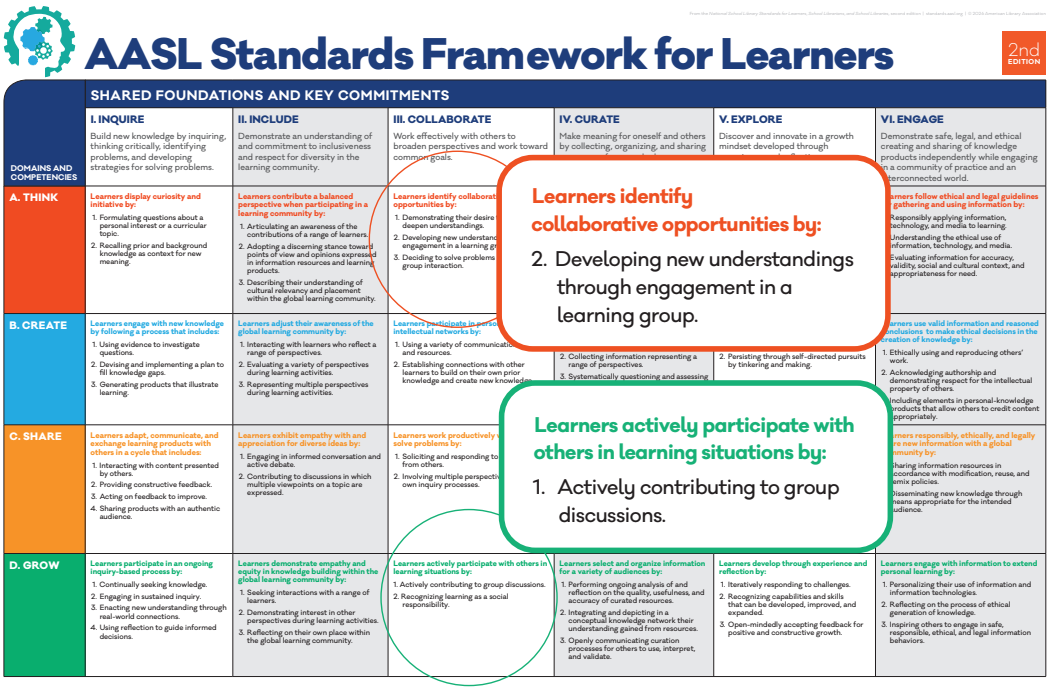


Figure 2

Within a competency-based framework, instruction and assessment are structured around a clear hierarchy of learning targets. The base is the Competency, a general statement that defines the mastery level—the essential knowledge, skills, and behaviors learners should possess upon completing an educational experience. This Competency is then tailored to individual learner needs and subject-area goals through the Outcome. The Outcome articulates what the learner will be able to accomplish at the close of a specific learning experience. Finally, the objectives represent the smaller, measurable steps necessary to achieve the stated outcome, providing a clear roadmap for instructional design and progress monitoring (figure 3).

Let's put this into practice using learner standard IV.A.2.: "Learners act on an information need by identifying possible sources of information." This is our Competency, or the general statement of what we expect a learner to master during their educational journey. The Curate Shared Foundation's Key Commitment is "Make meaning for oneself and others by collecting, organizing, and sharing resources of personal relevance." Keeping this statement in mind will help us consider how we can further apply this Competency in our lessons. Pulling out the collecting, organizing, and sharing resources helps guide us toward our Outcome.

It is our role as school librarians to guide the big picture. We turn Competencies into Outcomes. The Outcome statement helps us think through the purpose of the instructional opportunity. For younger learners, acting on an information need may begin with identifying where books about animals are located. For middle-grade learners, it may involve selecting resources from the library catalog. For older learners, it may include evaluating multiple databases to determine which sources best meet an information need. The Outcome helps guide the Competency toward a big-picture conclusion for the project, but for learners, the Objective's meaning may not be intuitive. For it to make sense to our learners, we need to turn the Outcome into at least one Objective, oftentimes more than one.

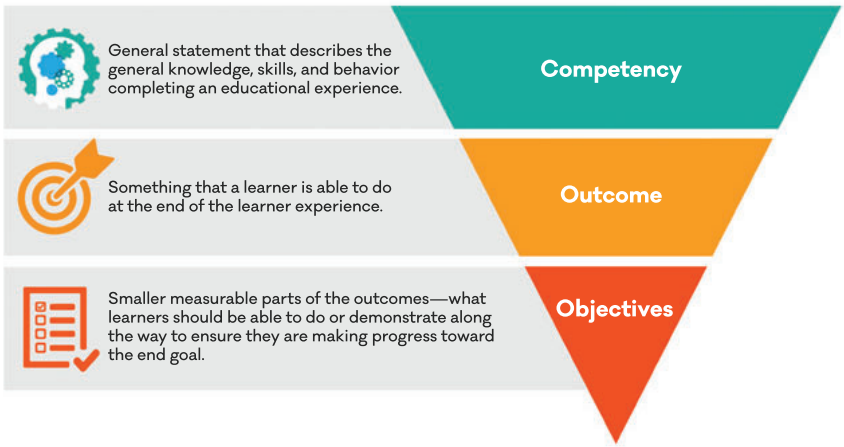
To achieve the Outcome, we need to give our learners a sense of how to meet it. Depending on grade level, these objectives will vary in complexity.

- **Elementary:** Learners will choose two books about their topic and explain how they know these books are helpful.
- **Middle:** Learners will locate three sources using the library catalog and evaluate their usefulness.
- **High school:** Learners will perform lateral reading to determine if the sources are reliable and create an APA Works Cited.

Using I Can Statements Across All Grade Levels

Often, school librarians may associate I Can Statements primarily with younger grades, but they serve an important role at all levels. I Can

Figure 3



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Statements are objectives written in learner-friendly language and can serve as a mechanism to measure learners' understanding after our instruction. Whether learners are beginning to articulate what they know in early elementary school or demonstrating independence in secondary research tasks, I Can Statements give learners ownership of their learning.

A key benefit is that I Can Statements serve to clarify learning outcomes directly for the learner, providing a transparent view of what they are expected to master. Furthermore, in the context of professional standards such as *National School Library Standards*, the I Can Statements provide the final, learner-facing component of a larger instructional planning framework: transforming an abstract Competency into a measurable Objective and, finally, into a clear I Can Statement. This framework is essential for aligning school library instruction with content-area curriculum. Table 1 shows how Learner Competency VI.A.3. grows and expands through Objectives and I Can Statements tailored to each grade band. We start with a Competency (the formal, general statement), and then turn it into an Objective (the smaller measurable parts of the Outcome), and finally into a learner-friendly I Can Statement.

Table 1: Competency to Objective to I Can Statement

GRADE BAND	COMPETENCY General statement that describes the general knowledge, skills, and behavior completing an educational experience	OBJECTIVE Smaller measurable parts of the outcomes—what learners should be able to do or demonstrate along the way to ensure they are making progress toward the end goal	I CAN STATEMENT Objective framed in learner-friendly language
Elementary	VI.A.3. Learners follow ethical and legal guidelines for gathering and using information by evaluating information for accuracy, validity, social and cultural context, and appropriateness for need.	The learner will identify the difference between nonfiction and fiction books to make choices that meet their information needs.	I can select nonfiction books for my research project.
Middle School		The learner will navigate to the provided resources and select the ones that meet their information needs.	I can determine which sources from the provided list will work best for my research project.
High School		The learner will use the Media Bias chart to determine whether the source shows bias and, if so, what concerns it raises.	I can critically examine sources, including their biases, and assess the impact of those biases on the source.

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To assess our objectives above, we need to determine whether our learners have met the intended Objective. To do this informally, we can give a quick exit ticket at the end of our lesson to determine what our learners are taking away with them. For elementary students, assessing their ability to recognize the difference between fiction and nonfiction could involve a book scavenger hunt, with books on the same theme spread out across the library. Learners rotate through the books, look through them to identify textual and visual cues to determine whether they are nonfiction or fiction, and record their answer for each book on a worksheet. Doing this activity in the class before launching into finding a book for their research project would continue reinforcing these skills and help them become sticky in their brains.

Middle school learners allow us to include reading for information through electronic resources. Reading for information and combining it with electronic resources is a valuable skill to reinforce in middle school. For practice, we can use a gamified information hunt to show our learners how to use control/command F to find keywords, copy and paste information into a digital notecard, and provide attribution for the information. Creating a digital escape room using a Google Form or Office 365 Form can create excitement, provide another way to practice with digital resources, and help us assess our learners to check for understanding.

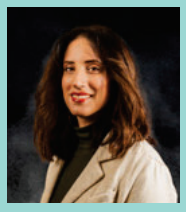
For high school librarians, we can get more granular to see whether our instruction is impacting our learners since we do not usually grade them. For Learner VI.A.3., we can assess what lateral reading means. We can do this on an index card, a half-sheet of paper, or via an online form. We can ask them a simple question, such as "What is one source you found for your research project and why did you select it?" In a simple sentence or two, learners can identify the source and state that they determined it was reliable after verifying information across multiple sources. To decide whether or not they have considered the bias of their chosen source, we could ask, "What bias perspective is your source, and how did you determine it?" If working on a device and using an online form, learners can copy and paste an APA citation for their source and say why they selected it. This helps us collect feedback to check understanding and gauge the effectiveness of our instruction at the point of need, rather than waiting until after the projects are turned in to identify deficiencies.

The AASL Standards remind us that mastery develops across the entire PK-12 journey as curiosity, collaboration, and reflection are nurtured. While the Competencies remain constant, how they are expressed varies widely—from an early learner picking out an animal book for their animal project to a graduating senior examining the decline of animal habitats due to deforestation and evaluating complex sources for credibility. This progression illustrates the power of our *National School Library Standards* to cultivate information-fluent learners prepared for life. When we design learning experiences through a competency-based lens, we empower learners with the skills and confidence needed to be lifelong learners and ethical participants in an information-rich world.

STEPHANIE CHARLEFOUR

scharlefour@gmail.com

Stephanie Charlefour is the Director of Library Services and Learning Technologies at Northfield Mount Hermon in Massachusetts. She served on the 2023–2025 AASL Standards Committee and currently serves on the AASL Publications Advisory Group and as chair of the YALSA Programming Committee. Her past leadership includes two terms on the ALSC/YALSA Odyssey Award Committee—first as a member and later as chair—along with service on the YALSA Printz Award Committee, the Best Fiction for Young Adults blogging team, and numerous other ALA, AASL, and YALSA committees over the past twenty years.



JESSICA REGITANO

jregitano@westhillschools.org

Jessica Regitano is a New York State certified Library Media Specialist and currently serves as the school librarian at Westhill High School in Syracuse, New York. She has spent her career working with children, including over a decade in public school libraries, where she works to build meaningful relationships and cultivate student-centered spaces where connection and creativity thrive. Whether students stop in to work, create, participate in a library program, or simply spend time with friends, Jessica is proud to be part of a school community where connection is at the heart of the work. Jessica is grateful to contribute to the profession through ongoing service with local, state, and national professional and community organizations. Most days, you'll find her in the library with a mug of tea, collaborating with teachers, working with students on the yearbook while listening to her favorite early 2000s jams, or planning the next library program with her fellow library professionals.