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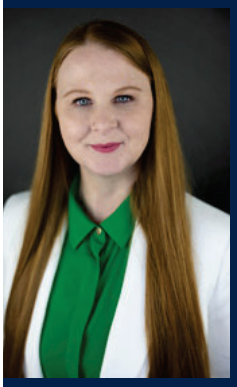
Stephanie Charlefour
scharlefour@gmail.com



Ashley Cooksey
ashley.cooksey2@gmail.com

Amanda Hunt
thenextgenlib@gmail.com

From Curiosity to Mastery: Building Learner Competency Across Grade Levels with the AASL Standards

In an age of constant information expansion, change, and complexity, learners must be equipped not only with knowledge but with the skills and dispositions to learn, unlearn, and relearn across their academic journey.

SCHOOL LIBRARIES—GUIDED by the *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*—are uniquely positioned environments for building these vital lifelong learning competencies.

But how can school librarians intentionally and systematically support this growth across grade levels? How can we establish a progression that is both developmentally appropriate and intellectually challenging? How do we ensure that learners are not only exposed to the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) Standards but also develop increasing depth, autonomy, and confidence as they move from grade to grade?

The *AASL Standards Framework for Learners* provides a robust structure through its six Shared Foundations—Inquire, Include, Collaborate, Curate,

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Explore, and Engage—each supported by four key learning domains: Think, Create, Share, and Grow. These Shared Foundations can guide scaffolded, developmentally appropriate learning experiences, from early elementary through high school, as learners grow in independence and complexity of thought.

Laying Foundations in the Early Grades

In the early elementary grades, learners are naturally curious. They're just beginning to ask questions about the world and explore how to find answers. At this stage, the Inquire and Curate Shared Foundations provide an ideal starting point for developing curiosity and basic research skills.

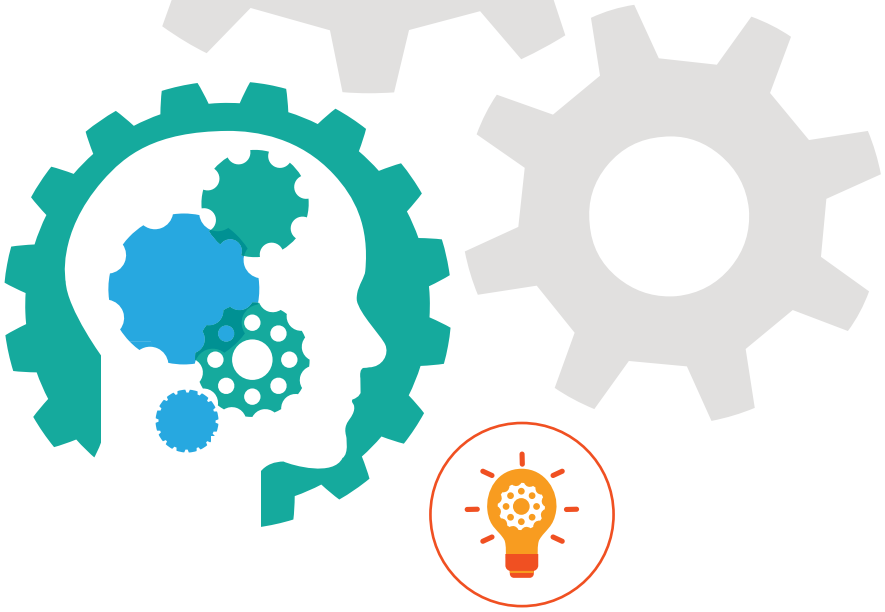
For example, a first-grade project on animals or weather might utilize age-appropriate nonfiction texts and digital tools to gather facts. School librarians can guide learners through developing questions (Think) to gather information (Create), share findings with peers (Share), and reflect on what they've learned (Grow).

Even at this young age, learners can begin to understand that not all information is the same. They begin to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction—foundational concepts that grow in complexity as they progress through later years. These introductory lessons build essential skills that provide the scaffolding for developing research literacy.

Building Bridges in Upper Elementary and Middle School

As learners enter upper elementary and middle school, they are more capable of nuanced and analytical thinking and their social awareness deepens. Here, the Collaborate and Include Shared Foundations take center stage, helping learners build empathy, appreciate diverse perspectives, and work in teams to solve problems.

Learners may be part of literature circles that feature books addressing different cultural perspectives or projects focused on global issues. Librarians can help learners analyze identity, bias, and point of view (Think), leading to robust discussions. Learners can then develop projects, such as recording book trailers or podcast episodes (Create), share their insights with classmates (Share), and evolve their own perspectives through critical reflection (Grow).



This stage is also an ideal time to reinforce digital citizenship and ethical use of information through the Engage Shared Foundation. As learners engage more with online content, school librarians can guide them in evaluating websites, citing sources appropriately, and respecting intellectual property—key components in becoming responsible digital citizens.

Advancing Autonomy in High School

By high school, learners are ready to take greater ownership of their learning. The Explore and Inquire Shared Foundations now become more self-directed, empowering learners to pursue research, creative expression, and personal interests in meaningful ways.

Whether learners are tackling capstone projects, developing senior research papers, or launching initiatives, these activities all provide authentic opportunities for high school learners to explore topics of interest (Think), design knowledge products (Create), present their ideas for real-world audiences (Share), and reflect on both the product and the process (Grow).

School librarians at this stage serve as coaches and mentors, guiding learners to dig deeper into inquiry while supporting their growth as independent learners and ethical information users. Learners may be curating digital portfolios, designing multimedia content, or participating in civic discourse. Through it all, the AASL Standards ensure that their work remains reflective, ethical, and purposeful—hallmarks of true academic and personal growth.

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From Exposure to Mastery: The Power of Vertical Alignment

The key to building competency across grade levels lies in intentional vertical alignment—ensuring that the skills introduced in early grades are revisited and expanded upon in later years. The AASL Standards are not a linear checklist; they are cyclical and developmental. Each Shared Foundation builds upon itself, allowing school librarians to tailor lessons to the cognitive and social-emotional levels of their learners.

For example:

- A second grader might be introduced to source credibility with a simple question (e.g., "Is this book written by a real scientist?").
- A fifth grader may begin evaluating websites using criteria like currency and relevance.
- An eighth grader compares multiple sources to determine bias and accuracy.
- A 12th grader synthesizes diverse perspectives to defend a research thesis.

To ensure continuity, this progression requires intentional curriculum mapping, collaboration with classroom educators across disciplines, and documentation of skills taught. By leading these conversations, school librarians can build a powerful K-12 instructional arc that integrates both academic and information literacy goals.

Reflection and Assessment: Making Learning Visible

To ensure that learners are building competency across the Shared Foundations, school librarians must embed formative and reflective assessments into instruction. Exit tickets, digital reflections, rubrics, and self-evaluations are all tools to help make learning visible and measurable.

The Grow Domain is particularly powerful here, as it emphasizes metacognition—helping learners recognize how they are developing as learners. When a third grader reflects on a group project or a senior revises a research paper based on peer feedback, they are learning to think about their thinking—these moments of reflection are essential for internalizing the learning process.

School Libraries as Learning Laboratories

School libraries are more than repositories of books—they are dynamic learning laboratories that evolve alongside the learners they serve. Guided by the AASL Standards, school librarians can create cohesive, equitable, and developmentally appropriate experiences in this environment that mature with learners across all grade levels.

From asking their first "why" in kindergarten to defending a thesis in high school, learners grow not just in academic knowledge but in curiosity, critical thinking, creativity, empathy, and ethical reasoning. They develop the skills, dispositions, and responsibilities they will carry into the wider world.

By intentionally weaving the Shared Foundations into every stage of the learner's journey, school librarians empower learners to be more than just passive *consumers* of information. They cultivate thoughtful, reflective, and engaged *citizens* who are ready to navigate a complex world with confidence and purpose.

STEPHANIE CHARLEFOUR

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.

ASHLEY COOKSEY

Ashley Cooksey, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor and School Library Media Program Director at Arkansas Tech University in Russellville, Arkansas. She completed her Ph.D. in Change Leadership with an emphasis in Digital Age Curriculum and Instruction in 2025 with a dissertation examining school librarian leadership through phenomenological research. Ashley holds a 200-hour yoga teacher certification and brings a "people before content" philosophy to her teaching and scholarship. You can find and follow her work at https://linktr.ee/ashleycooksey.

AMANDA HUNT

Amanda Hunt, aka TheNextGenLibrarian, is a 6th–8th middle school library media specialist in Texas. She is passionate about reading, is a certified educator, ambassador and trainer for over 70+ edtech tools, as well as an Adobe Innovator. Follow her across social media @thenextgenlibrarian.