

Informational Brief: Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement

New York Comprehensive Center

October 2011



Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
INTRODUCTION	5
TEACHER/SCHOOL LEADER PREPARATION AND EFFECTIVENESS.....	6
EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES	8
RAISE GRADUATION RATES FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS	9
CURRICULUM AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.....	11
ASSESSMENT	12
KEY TAKEAWAYS AND CONSIDERATIONS	14
DECLARATION OF RESEARCH SOURCES	16
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	17

Informational Brief: Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement

Executive Summary

As more and more schools and districts are confronted with difficult fiscal decisions, school libraries are often one of the first line items to be sacrificed. However, extensive research shows that schools that have relied on their libraries to support student growth, specifically in the areas of literacy, information literacy, technological skills, and access to resources and equipment, have seen increased motivation, higher assessment scores, and ultimately higher graduation rates.

To demonstrate the positive impact of school libraries on the implementation of the Regents Reform Agenda in New York, the New York Comprehensive Center (NYCC) was asked in the Spring of 2011 to prepare a brief which highlights specific examples of programs in states that have had success utilizing school libraries to improve student achievement. These successes align with five key elements of the Regents Reform Agenda in the following ways:

1. **Teacher/School Leader Preparation and Effectiveness:** Through collaboration with meaningful goals, and by providing students with access to technology (coupled with technology instruction), school libraries have helped improve teacher effectiveness. Schools and districts may be more reluctant to cut school library spending if they understand the positive impact libraries have on teacher and leader effectiveness, and, in turn, student growth.
2. **Early Childhood Learning Opportunities:** When early learners have greater access to the books, literary materials, literacy supports, and technological instruction that school libraries and school librarians provide, there is a greater likelihood that they will develop into accomplished readers. Students who demonstrate on-grade literacy levels by the third grade perform better on standardized assessments and in classrooms throughout elementary and secondary school years, tending to save schools and districts money through reductions in remedial and special education placements.
3. **Raise Graduation Rates for At-Risk Students:** School libraries and school librarians support at-risk students through personalized instruction, networks of support, and access to 21st century technology and technological skills. Schools with effective library programs have seen increases in graduation rates and higher performance

levels beginning earlier in students' academic careers. Increased infrastructure, access, and staffing for school libraries can potentially increase graduation rates and narrow the achievement gap.

4. **Curriculum and Professional Development:** There is evidence of increased student achievement as well as more active teacher leadership in school environments where school libraries assist in the alignment of curriculum to state standards and in school-wide professional development activities. These functions are all the more critical with the shift to the Common Core Standards and the attendant focus on 21st century skills.
5. **Assessment:** An increase of librarians in school libraries tends to correlate with higher school assessment results. Schools and districts that provide resources and place a priority on the establishment of effective school library programs can see direct returns on their investments through such increases in assessment scores.

Based on the conclusions from the research cited in the brief, it is clear that school libraries play an important role in student achievement, curriculum development, and instruction. Through political and fiscal state support, effective school library programs can serve as consistent drivers for student achievement in times of constant change and churning educational reform. To read the comprehensive brief, visit:

http://nycomprehensivecenter.org/initiatives/inits_elearn/resources

The brief was prepared by the New York Comprehensive Center (NYCC), one of 16 regional comprehensive centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education, which supports education leaders in our state as they strive to meet the goals of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and improve achievement outcomes for all students.

The mission of the NYCC is to develop the capacity of the New York State Education Department (NYSED) and its networks and agencies to assist districts and schools in improving achievement outcomes for all students. In doing so, we strive to engage with state education leaders in:

Thinking systemically about the relationships among all elements to create coherence and articulate a common purpose;

Using research-based findings and rigorous evidence to evaluate impact, refine practices, seek new solutions, and meet learners' needs;

Acting strategically to maximize opportunities and make the best use of available resources; and

Working collaboratively across leadership levels and organizations to leverage resources and overcome barriers.



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Informational Brief:

Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement

As education across the United States evolves, policymakers have placed a renewed emphasis on the skills and competencies that will be required of 21st century students. Effective schools are improving student outcomes through the implementation of innovative support systems to help students master the array of skills required for success. By integrating the essentials of 21st century learning into all curriculum areas, grade levels, and achievement levels, school libraries support the development of student skills and improve student achievement (American Association of School Librarians, 2011).

As more and more schools and districts are confronted with difficult fiscal decisions, school libraries are often one of the first line items to be sacrificed. However, extensive research shows that schools that have relied on their libraries to support student growth, specifically in the areas of literacy, information literacy, technological skills, and access to resources and equipment, have seen increased motivation, higher assessment scores, and ultimately greater graduation rates.

While research on the effectiveness of school libraries has been conducted over the last few decades, truly rigorous impact studies only became possible in the last 20 years. The dissemination of such research began in the 1990s due to the rise of standardized testing, which became the norm for measuring student learning. The earliest studies examined the relationship between student language arts assessment scores and various components of school library programs (Kachel, 2011). Since then, impact studies have been utilized to examine various relationships between school libraries and student achievement, including demographic data, technology, budgeting, staffing, professional development, and collaboration.

These studies, collectively known as the “School Library Impact Studies,” include research dating back to 1993 from 22 states and one Canadian province (Kachel, 2011). The studies generally concluded that school libraries have a positive effect on student outcomes, as they teach 21st century skills, promote achievement, and play a major role in closing the achievement gap. These studies are referenced to support the claims in this brief, and constitute the most reliable body of research to date.

School Libraries in Support of the Regents Reform Agenda

In New York, the current education policies and programs are designed to achieve the goals of the Regents Reform Agenda (RRA). Hence, school libraries and school librarians¹ can play a considerable role in supporting their successful implementation. Specifically, school libraries can assist in: strengthening teacher effectiveness, supplementing early childhood education, raising graduation rates for at-risk students, providing professional development and support for aligning curriculum to standards, and preparing students for high-quality assessments. To demonstrate the impact of school libraries on the implementation of the RRA, specific examples from states that have had success utilizing school libraries will be highlighted along with how they align with five key elements of the RRA:

1. Teacher/School Leader Preparation and Effectiveness
2. Early Childhood Learning Opportunities
3. Raise Graduation Rates for At-Risk Students
4. Curriculum and Professional Development
5. Assessment

1. Teacher/School Leader Preparation and Effectiveness

According to the New Teacher Center, teacher effectiveness can be determined, in part, by the rate of growth in student learning (New Teacher Center, 2009). Additionally, other measures must be considered when assessing effectiveness; such as evidence of research-based teaching practices and evidence of teacher leadership (New Teacher Center, 2009). Considering these factors, school libraries and school librarians impact teacher through instructional support to teachers and facilitating student access to infrastructure and instruction.

School libraries and school librarians provide teachers with materials and the refinement of research skills that can be infused into their teaching practices. School librarians can collaborate in the preparation, delivery, and assessment of student learning activities. School libraries and school librarians also promote teacher effectiveness by contributing to student learning through access to resources and tools

¹ A note on the terminology used when referring to school librarians: In 1960, with the release of the fourth set of standards for school library programs by the American Association for School Library Programs, school librarians were expected to be an instructor as well as librarian (Neuman, 2004). In 1969, the term “media specialist” was introduced and the job functions of librarians and instructors of education technology mixed (Neuman, 2004). Furthermore, in 1975 the sixth iteration of national standards pegged library media specialists as instructional technologists and designers (Neuman, 2004). In 2008, the national American Library Association/American Association of School Librarians conducted a wide scale research survey to formulate a consensus on terminology and identified “school librarian” as the most appropriate title (AASL's National Longitudinal Survey of School Library Programs, 2008). As such, the research cited in this brief refers to both librarians and library media specialists as school librarians.

such as computers and reference books, which assist in the development of information literacy.

State Impact Studies

Collaboration between Teachers and the School Library

Collaboration between teachers and the school library through cooperative planning, identification of educational resources, and imparting information literacy skills, positively impacts teacher effectiveness and promotes student growth.

- Colorado: A study conducted in 2000 showed that students in elementary schools with highly collaborative relationships between teachers and school librarians scored 21% higher than students with less collaborative relationships on the Colorado Student Assessment Program, or CSAP (Lance, Rodney, & Hamilton-Pennell, 2000).
- Indiana: A 2006 study showed that when principals put an emphasis on in-service opportunities for collaboration between teachers and school librarians, there was an increase in test scores of 29.5% compared to those who placed a lower emphasis on such activities. Additionally, collaboration in curriculum design and delivery of instruction resulted in a 7.8% increase in test results. It should be noted that these relationships were evident in both the elementary and high school grade levels (Scholastic , 2008).
- Illinois: A 2005 study involving high schools showed that American College Testing (ACT) scores were highest for 11th graders when there was a high degree of collaboration between school librarians and teachers across a range of activities such as identifying materials, planning lessons, and motivating students to read.
- Oregon: A study indicated that schools with the best Oregon Statewide Assessment reading and language scores had teachers who were twice as likely to collaborate with school librarians. Furthermore, students in such classes were over 3 times more likely to visit the school library (Scholastic , 2008).

Access for Students

Providing access for teachers and students to school library facilities and resources, including through flexible scheduling, helps support students and has a positive effect on retention, work performance, and grades.

- Delaware: A study noted that teachers and faculty placed high value on school libraries due to their role in providing students with technology access, as well as ensuring information source quality and diversity. The study concluded that teachers believed that such access helped them perform their responsibilities and duties better (Todd & Heinstrom, 2006).

- Illinois: A study involving schools that provided increased access to the school library through flexible scheduling found that fifth grade students performed 10% better in reading and 11% better in writing on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) compared to those schools with less access. Similar results were seen in high school, where there were 5% differences between schools on the ACT (Lance, Rodney, & Hamilton-Pennell).
- Michigan: A study demonstrated that teachers and students in schools with the highest reading scores on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) were four times more likely to have access to the school library on a flexibly scheduled basis than those in the lowest scoring schools (Rodney, Keith, & Christine, 2003).

School libraries and school librarians have helped teachers identify valuable resources and materials through collaboration with meaningful goals, such as curriculum and lesson development. This type of collaboration helps infuse research-based content into teaching practices and has resulted in increased test scores, as seen in several studies across the United States. Additionally, school libraries support teachers by providing students with access to technology - coupled with technology instruction - to develop information literacy. Finally, school libraries that are more available and open to students during the day and those that provide heightened access to information through technology have been linked to increased test scores. These increases in test scores reflect the increased effectiveness of teachers thanks to collaboration between teachers and school librarians.

2. Early Childhood Learning Opportunities

Early learners, as defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), are children from birth to age eight. School libraries can support early learners as they develop into participatory, literate, and independent learners. The school library serves a major role in the facilitation of these skills by motivating and engaging early learners to read. Additionally, school libraries play an important role in the development of reading skills in early learners by providing access to materials and books. The relationship between access and reading was deemed statistically significant, and this finding was consistent across factors such as poverty (Krashen S. , 2006). Further, schools can alleviate such factors from affecting early learners' literacy development through the provision of books to children. As a study by Jeff McQuillan states, more access leads to more reading, which ultimately leads to better reading (Krashen S. , 2006).

State Impact Studies

Motivation and Engagement in Reading

A direct result of school libraries and school librarians is the exposure of instructional support to young students. This exposure increases the likelihood that a student would voluntarily read and become a participatory, literate, and independent learner.

- Delaware: A study noted that early learners in elementary schools reported various ways that the school library helped them with reading. The library encouraged them to read more, to identify their interests, to read at a higher level, and to enjoy reading as an activity (Todd & Heinstrom, 2006).
- Ontario, Canada: A study indicated that the greatest predictor of reading enjoyment by third graders in Ontario schools is the support of a school librarian. Additionally, on standardized tests, those schools without trained library staff scored lower on Ontario standardized reading tests from the Education Quality and Accountability Office (Scholastic , 2008).

Access to Materials

Early learners benefit from access to the resources needed for them to learn, such as books and computers, and with more access to these resources, students will read more, acquire a broader skillset, and perform better on tests.

- Iowa: A study demonstrated that early learners in elementary schools were more affected by the exposure to content and media from school libraries compared to those who were not. The study found that reading scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills were highest in schools in which students use 2.5 more books or other reference materials per school library visit than those students in schools with the lowest reading scores (Scholastic , 2008).

Early learners benefit from the additional support that school libraries provide as they begin their educational pathways and learn critical skills needed to become independent learners. School libraries help early learners become more experienced readers, and also promote motivation and engagement in reading. The more access that early learners have to books and materials, along with increased access to literacy supports and technological instruction that school libraries and school librarians provide, the greater the likelihood is that they will develop into accomplished readers.

3. Raise Graduation Rates for At-Risk Students

The impact of school libraries on graduation rates extends beyond the provision of physical space for students to study, work, or read. School libraries and school librarians

play an integral role in helping students to graduate when they collaborate with school staff to design specialized activities and strategies to help students learn (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2010). Additionally, school libraries are important in supporting the development of 21st century skills, including those that require technological literacy. The digital divide that many at-risk students face can be alleviated with the resources and technological instruction school libraries offer. Finally, school librarians have the ability to personalize guidance for at-risk students and to support aspects of learning in academic, social, and behavioral contexts (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2010).

State Impact Studies

Academic and Social Support

Students come from a wide range of backgrounds, and this diversity requires a network of supports that school libraries can provide to help all students progress through their educational pathways.

- Ohio: A survey of 13,123 students indicated that 99.44% of them felt their school library and school librarian had helped them in regards to academic achievement and supporting their educational progress. Specifically, 85% of the students reported that the school library had helped them do school work better; 89% reported it helped them get better grades on projects and assignments; and over 75% reported that it helped them to get better grades on tests and quizzes, as well as to think critically and be more confident in doing school work. Importantly, the data indicates that school libraries are not only beneficial while students are at school, but also when they are out of school, by helping them discover interests and providing them with strategies to study at home. Further, students reported that school libraries helped students find information; stay organized; and provided support to deal with personal concerns or issues (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2004).
- California: The Department of Education's School Library Survey analyzed standardized test scores in English Language Arts, Social Studies, and U.S. History, and found a significant correlation between school library services and student achievement throughout all student performance levels. The strength of these correlations increased throughout grade levels and resulted in sustained success, increasing the likelihood of graduation annually (Achterman, 2008).
- Colorado: A study comparing the proportional differences between performance levels of the highest and lowest achievers compared to their schools' utilization of school libraries showed a significant difference between assessment scores for students who attended a school with a highly utilized school library and those who did not. This relationship held true both for the highest and lowest performance levels. From this study, it was concluded that school libraries could play a significant role in improving assessment outcomes and in turn close the achievement gap (Francis, Lance, & Lietzau, 2010).

Access to Technology and 21st Century Skills

School libraries support many at-risk students who do not have access to technology or possess the technological literacy skills to succeed as 21st century learners.

- New York: A study concluded that schools with school librarians certified to teach 21st century skills received higher fourth grade English Language Arts scores than schools with no such staffed position. Additionally, there was a significant negative correlation between test scores and school library staffing. High-need schools were less likely to have access to a librarian and as a result had lower test scores, whereas scores were significantly higher in schools with certified librarians (Small, Snyder, & Parker, 2009). Furthermore, the same New York study concluded that school librarians teaching 21st century skills, such as information gathering and analysis, motivated students to continually improve in their studies, and ultimately to graduate at a higher rate (Small, Snyder, & Parker, 2009).

School libraries play an important role in lowering achievement gaps and supporting at-risk students on their pathways to graduation. They provide both academic and social supports by helping at-risk students raise their grades and perform well on assignments, and they motivate students with strategies to continue learning and improving after the school day. In addition, school libraries provide an environment where students can utilize technological equipment that they may not have access to outside of school. Finally, the simple provision of a physical location to focus on schoolwork is important for at-risk students as it empowers them to excel in school with the assistance of school librarians.

4. Curriculum and Professional Development

School libraries have been essential in supporting the design, development, and deployment of curriculum in schools across the nation. With the current shift towards the Common Core Standards as the framework for curriculum development, school librarians can be called upon to provide the tools and resources necessary to make curriculum accessible to all students and teachers. Professional development opportunities for teachers, which school libraries and library staff can lead or participate in, serve as a means to explore curriculum and develop clear plans for successful implementation.

State Impact Studies

Curriculum Access

School libraries, and more specifically school librarians, promote student achievement by helping to synthesize the necessary skills needed to align standards with curriculum.

- Pennsylvania: A study analyzing assessment results for elementary, middle, and high schools conclude that the more time library staff spent incorporating information literacy into curriculum and into a school's plans to meet academic standards, the higher the test scores (ERIC Development Team, 2001).
- Colorado: A study found links between assessment results and library staff involvement in curriculum development and integration. It concluded that schools with library staff that participated in curriculum and standards committee meetings with faculty saw increased assessment scores (ERIC Development Team, 2001).

Professional Development

School librarian involvement in professional development activities creates a school environment that promotes leadership and achievement.

- Colorado: A study that focused on professional development activities and their affect on school-wide achievement concluded that such activities promoted improved leadership amongst school librarians and teachers, and had a positive influence on school-wide achievement (ERIC Development Team, 2001).

School libraries have made many contributions in ensuring that students meet state standards, especially in situations where school librarians are able to provide their expertise in the development of curriculum incorporating 21st century skills. As mentioned earlier, school librarians have taken on leadership roles to promote teacher effectiveness and student outcomes school-wide through the facilitation of professional development.

5. Assessment

There have been many links between school libraries and student achievement. Schools with effective libraries and librarians tend to have higher assessment scores than schools that do not have such entities (Rodney, Keith, & Christine, 2003). Many assessments require fundamental skills that library programs tend to focus on, such as reading, writing, information literacy, and critical thinking to support student growth.

State Impact Studies

Staffing Effects on Student Achievement

Effective school libraries and school librarians help close the achievement gap, directly resulting in higher state assessment scores.

- Alaska: Secondary schools saw a large increase in assessment scores when the schools had full-time library staffing. More specifically, these schools were twice as likely to score average or above average as compared to those schools without full-time library staffing (Scholastic , 2008).
- Colorado: A study focusing on third through fifth grade CSAP scores from 2007-08 showed that schools with at least one full-time librarian scored higher, on average, than schools with less than one full-time librarian. Additionally, more students from schools with a full-time librarian earned proficient or advanced reading scores as well as fewer unsatisfactory scores on the CSAP. Similar findings were seen with school libraries that had increased funding, a large periodical and video collection, and more visits per week by classes (Francis, Lance, & Lietzau, 2010).
- Illinois: A statistical analysis of 657 schools concluded that the number of hours per week of school library staffing directly related to scores on assessments. The effects of staffing can be seen at all grade levels, with 7% to 13% increases in elementary through high school in reading. There were also substantial increases in writing scores in elementary and middle school of up to 18%. The changes on the ACT were comparable, with a 5% improvement in scores with increased staffing levels (Lance, Rodney, & Hamilton-Pennell).
- Michigan: Elementary, middle, and high schools with more library staffing and resources show higher scores on the MEAP. The differences in assessment scores were significant in reading performance, as the range of improvement spanned from 8% in high schools all the way to 35% in elementary schools. In elementary schools, assessment scores rose directly with the number of weekly hours of school librarian staffing, the number of hours spent per week by students with school library staff, the number of hours open for access, and the amount of resources, materials, and technology available to students. In middle schools, assessment scores rose with an increase in the number of computers networked to library resources, increased staffing, flexible scheduling and greater access to library space, and increased collaboration between library staff and classroom teachers. In high school, assessment scores rose with increased weekly and total library hours, increased professional staffing, materials, and resources, individual visits to the school library, and more money for operations (Rodney, Keith, & Christine, 2003).
- Florida: A study found a 9% improvement in test scores in elementary schools where the school libraries are staffed 60 hours per week or more when compared to those staffed less than 60 hours per week (Scholastic , 2008).

The effects of school libraries and school librarians on assessment outcomes have been seen in numerous studies throughout the United States. Furthermore, this correlation is evident in a linear, dependent relationship: an increase of librarians in school libraries tends to correlate with higher school assessment results.

Key Takeaways and Considerations

School libraries and their librarians have been easy targets during budget cuts. School districts often seek to protect the sanctity of the classroom when deciding how to reduce costs, looking first to cut traditionally non-instructional areas and then to cut areas of instructional support they believe can be provided in alternative ways.

As the research linking school libraries to student achievement demonstrates, there are improved student outcomes relating to strong collaborations between libraries and schools. Students are in need of the learning experiences and support that school libraries offer, such as the effective utilization of media and the development of information literacy. In fact, students tend to value instruction that better employs effective practices to aid their learning. More specifically, students value instruction from school librarians who support them in not only becoming better users of informational technology, but by helping them to apply their own knowledge to make the media and resources work for them (Todd R. , 2008).

Based on the conclusions from the cited research, it is clear that school libraries play an important role in student achievement, curriculum development, and instruction. In these times of fiscal constraint, states should look for ways to enhance the partnership between schools and libraries in order to more effectively leverage existing resources, rather than sacrificing those resources and, as a result, student achievement. The following are considerations for how school libraries and school librarians can support the State's implementation of the RRA.

1. Teacher/School Leader Preparation and Effectiveness

As various studies across the nation have found, school libraries and school librarians support teacher preparation and effectiveness. Given that investments in teacher and school leader preparation and effectiveness correlate to increased student achievement, schools and districts may be more reluctant to cut school library spending if they understood the positive impact libraries have on student growth, specifically through collaborative activities and access to facilities, resources, and information.

2. Early Childhood Learning Opportunities

School libraries and school librarians have played a major role in the development of literacy skills for early learners. They have motivated, engaged, and provided access to early learners as they develop the necessary skills to read at grade level. Students who demonstrate on-grade literacy levels by the third grade perform better on standardized assessments and in classrooms throughout elementary and secondary school years, tending to save schools and districts money through reductions in remedial and special education placements.

3. Raise Graduation Rates for At-Risk Students

School libraries and school librarians support at-risk students through personalized instruction; networks of support; and access to 21st century technology and technological skills. Schools with effective library programs have seen increases in graduation rates and higher performance levels starting earlier in students' academic careers. By acknowledging the role of school libraries and school librarians in advancing students to graduation, and by supporting this role through increased infrastructure, access, and staffing, schools statewide can potentially see increased graduation rates and a narrowing of the achievement gap.

4. Curriculum and Professional Development

Many states have found links between assessment scores and school librarian involvement in curriculum development. Specifically, alignment of the curriculum with state standards and school-wide professional development activities has promoted student achievement and established increased leadership in school environments. The functions of school librarians are all the more critical with the shift to the Common Core Standards and the attendant focus on 21st century skills. Schools should rely on school libraries and school librarians to help develop curriculum aligned with the Common Core Standards, which in turn will increase school performance measures.

5. Assessment

One of the most concrete ways to see the direct effects of school libraries and school librarians in schools is to look at assessment data. Numerous studies across the nation have documented higher assessment scores in schools with effective library programs as compared to schools with under-supported library programs or without such programs at all. Schools and districts that provide resources and place a priority on the establishment of effective school library

programs can see direct returns on their investments through increases in school-wide assessment scores.

By continuing to support school libraries and school librarians through the New York State School Library Systems (SLS), New York State has the opportunity to help students at all grade levels and of all abilities succeed, ultimately closing the achievement gap. SLS provides access, content, and training for students as well as for the educational community, and have a specific focus on promoting standards-aligned information literacy, technology, and professional development. SLS is therefore in a unique position to impact student learning and achievement. Through political and fiscal state support, effective school library programs can serve as consistent drivers for student achievement in times of constant change and churning educational reform.

Declaration of Research Sources

Resources and research used, on which the Informational Brief: Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement is based, was culled from three primary sources:

The Regional Educational Laboratory – Northeast and Islands (REL-NEI) provided us with the key research on school library issues as they relate to P-12 education. REL-NEI is part of the Regional Educational Laboratory Program.

The New York State Education Department Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Instructional Technology – specifically with the assistance of John P. Brock, Associate in School Library Services.

The sources cited and further reading appendixes from the New York State Library research brief, entitled, School Librarians are Essential for Achievement and Learning – by Dr. Joanne Shawhan, Associate in School Library Services and Elyse DeQuoy, Graduate Assistant.

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