

FEATURE

CREATING A
Culture
OF INTELLECTUAL
Freedom
THROUGH LEADERSHIP AND ADVOCACY



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*I was in my second year as a librarian, thrilled to have been hired for the high school in my new community. Mr. D., the venerated thirty-year-veteran principal, welcomed me with quiet and authoritative wisdom. And then, my fellow librarian and I discovered that Mr. D. was removing issues of *Rolling Stone Magazine* from the library mailbox and discarding them. Of course I knew that intellectual freedom was a foundation to my profession. But Mr. D. was like my grandfather!*

When I summoned the courage to confront Mr. D., I finally understood what it took to be a librarian. It was not enough to proclaim a belief in intellectual freedom. I

had to stand up for my students' rights to access information and express their views. I had to become a leader and advocate in order to build a culture of intellectual freedom in my school.

Culture involves behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and invisible norms and expectations. The question for school librarians is: How is a culture of intellectual freedom built, and what is the role of the librarian? School librarians are expected to be instructional leaders from "the middle." They are not in positions of authority over other teachers, and yet they provide connective tissue across the school and often influence instructional strategies, the implementation of inquiry-based teaching, a focus on independent reading, the use

of technology and resources, and the integration of skills instruction across the curriculum.

One would think that any environment of teaching and learning, especially one where inquiry and independent reading are promoted, would naturally foster intellectual freedom. Unfortunately, my early experience as a school librarian proved the fallacy of that assumption. If school librarians want to establish a culture of intellectual freedom, they must exert strong leadership and sustained advocacy.

Just as leadership does not mean having the authority to tell others what to do, advocacy does not mean telling other people what you

do or believe. Advocacy is not a marketing campaign about your own priorities. Instead, advocacy means focusing on the priorities of others and developing a continuous and strategic effort to facilitate changes in behavior, beliefs, and attitudes that will enable others to reach their goals. A culture of intellectual freedom, through equitable access and freedom of expression, empowers individuals and even schools to grow and change.

School librarians must lead and advocate for a culture of intellectual freedom by enabling their school communities to take action in several realms: connections, policy, access, and student empowerment through inquiry and independent reading.

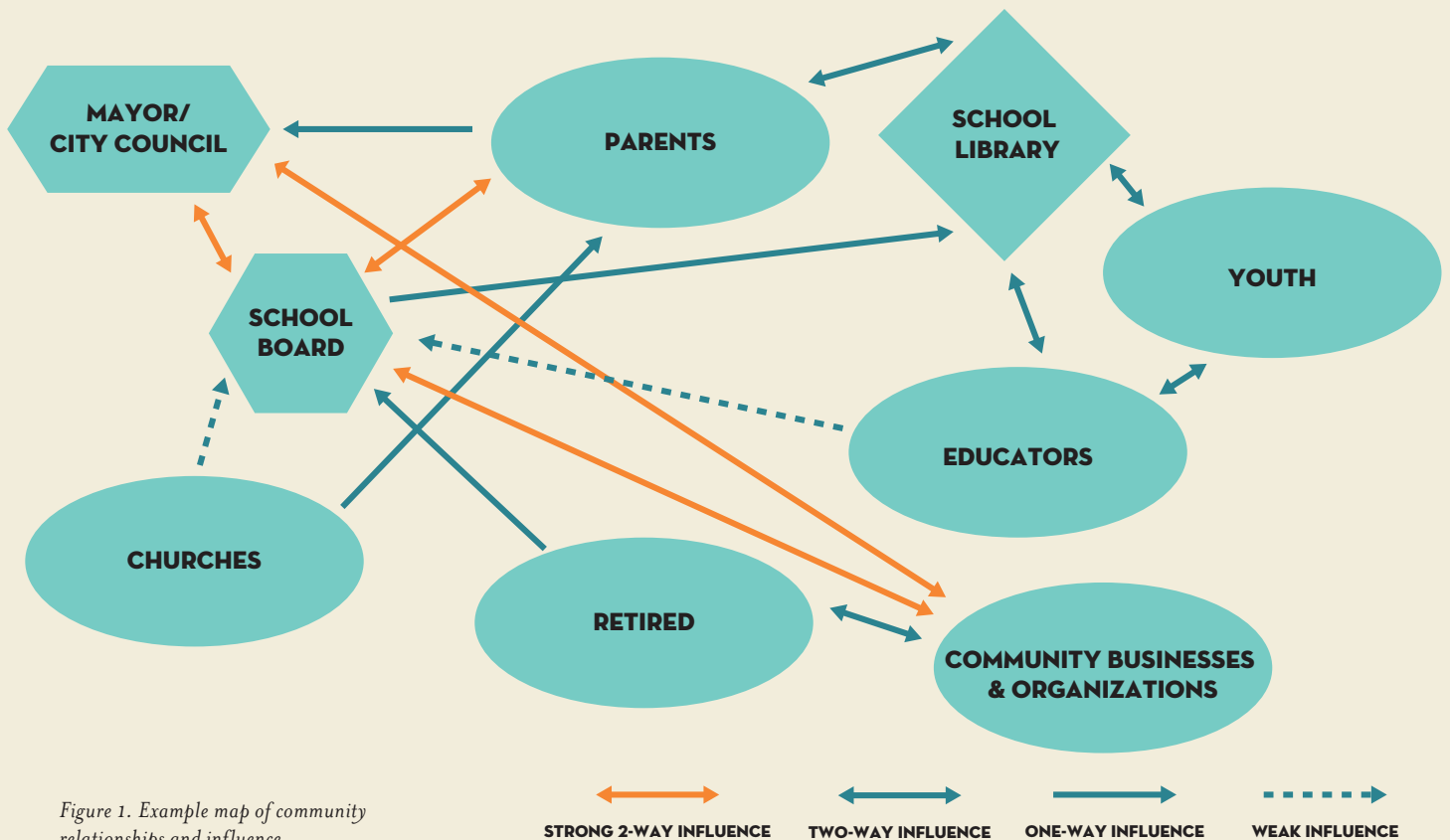


Figure 1. Example map of community relationships and influence.

Building Connections

By establishing connections with parents, other educators, administrators, students, the school board, and community leaders, school librarians weave a collaborative network of influence that leads to actions and real change.

First, map the community in terms of size, influence, and interactions of groups and individuals. Figure out what constituencies might have the most influence in actively promoting (even demanding) intellectual freedom. Determine how individuals and organizations or groups are connected and who influences whom. In the example in figure I, note the constituencies that have two-way influential relationships and those that are influenced by, but have no influence over, another group.

If, for example, a school librarian wanted to be sure that the school board adopted policies that supported intellectual freedom, then a strategic relationship to develop would be one with parents who have a strong influence over the school board.

Second, school librarians can use connections to establish clear linkages between the priorities of others and intellectual freedom. Parents often say they want their children to develop confidence and competence to pursue continued education or find a good job. Librarians can make it clear through examples, stories, and evidence that students develop those attributes in an intellectually free environment. When students have equitable access to multiple perspectives, for example, they develop the skills to differentiate between credible and inaccurate information and draw their own

conclusions. Furthermore, they develop confidence in their ability to express their opinions supported by authoritative evidence.

Establishing Policies

Policies that support intellectual freedom principles are essential. A school librarian would be well served to review and perhaps revise key policies for approval by the administration and school board.

A collection-development policy ensures that the resources available (both physically and digitally) through the school library fulfill the promise of intellectual freedom and equitable access as stated in the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights (ALA 1996) and interpretations (accessible online from the "Library Bill of Rights" page). The policy should include attention to diverse student needs and interests, professional standards of evaluation/selection of resources in all formats, and criteria for guiding students in the selection and use of online resources and social-media tools. A challenged-materials procedure must be a part of every collection-development policy. The procedure should include clear forms and processes through which challengers provide the rationale and evidence for their challenges, and the review committee considers the requests in a fair and consistent manner.

School librarians must also make sure that their school or district has an appropriate-use policy (AUP) that protects the rights of students and specifies student responsibilities in the online environment. The policy should

A third policy that is becoming increasingly important is a social-media policy. School librarians must exercise both leadership and advocacy to shepherd the development and implementation of a social-media policy that maintains First Amendment rights and fosters the development of social responsibility in all students.



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include both an affirmation of the educational value of online access to information and a clear description of acceptable and unacceptable behavior in use of the Internet. The policy should include statements about the importance of students' maintaining personal safety and privacy, complying with copyright regulations and fair use standards, and employing the skills and responsibilities of digital citizenship.

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Maintaining Equitable Access

Equitable access to resources, whether they are situated in a physical library or online, is fundamental to a culture of intellectual freedom. School librarians provide equitable access by responding to changing demographics, balancing print and electronic resources, providing multiple perspectives, curating and guiding the use of online resources, and accommodating a wide variety of reading levels.

School librarians may have to advocate for changes in filtering practices. Some districts and schools employ very restrictive filters, far beyond what is required to receive federal E-Rate funds under the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) of 2000. CIPA requires only that schools implement protection measures that "block or filter Internet access to pictures that are: (a) obscene; (b) child pornography; or (c) harmful to minors (for computers that are accessed by minors)" (FCC 2014). School librarians offer the antidote to overfiltering by teaching students the necessary skills and attitudes to behave responsibly online.

School librarians may also need to respond to parents and educators who want to assign labels and ratings to library resources to "warn, discourage, or prohibit users or certain groups of users from accessing the resource" (ALA 2015). The librarian must exercise leadership, resist these efforts, and maintain a school library collection free of prejudicial labels.

Empowering Intellectual Freedom through Inquiry and Independent Reading

Young people who are empowered to be independent, responsible, and engaged participants in the world are the embodiment of intellectual freedom. School librarians must be leaders and advocates to create an atmosphere in which the characteristics of empowerment are fostered. Those characteristics include challenge, choice, voice, confidence, and competence.

When the school librarian teaches inquiry skills, students learn to challenge the validity and authority of the information they find and

challenge themselves to form their own opinions and conclusions based on evidence. Inquiry enables students to make choices and develop their own path of acquiring and sharing knowledge.

Challenge and choice are also embedded within independent reading. Students who have the opportunity to make their own choices in their independent reading selections regularly challenge themselves to explore new ideas and pursue interests in depth. They choose to read materials that allow them to explore their own identities and connect to the real world.

Students develop their voices when librarians enable them to present, create, and perform the new understandings gained from inquiry and independent reading through products such as podcasts, videos, research-project presentations, debates, music productions, photo essays, performance of original scripts, and digital storytelling. Through learners' productions and presentations, the school library is transformed into a vibrant learning commons of discovery and self-expression.

When school librarians teach the skills and dispositions of inquiry and facilitate independent reading, students develop both competence and confidence. Students become intellectually free when they have both the capability and the self-assurance to pursue their own paths to intellectual and personal growth.

School Librarians as Leaders and Advocates for Intellectual Freedom

Threats to intellectual freedom are calls to action. Though

constitutionally guaranteed by the First Amendment, intellectual freedom may be denied to students by the policies and practices in schools and districts across the country. School librarians have a responsibility, even a mandate, to lead and advocate for intellectual freedom in our schools.



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