65 YEARS & COUNTING

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AASL AND SCHOOL LIBRARIANS—STILL CHAMPIONS OF INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

The American Association of School Librarians and its members have always been champions of intellectual freedom. It is a core value of school librarians and has been—and remains—an integral part of AASL's culture. Intellectual freedom is deeply embedded in AASL's standards, position statements, member-focused publications, conferences, award criteria, and leaders. You can trace the deep roots of intellectual freedom in AASL in figure 1.

Librarians on the Front Lines

AASL's efforts in the area of intellectual freedom and privacy are just half the story. Although AASL and the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) provide guidance and support, it is school librarians who confront threats to students' right to read or their privacy.

What are school librarians facing? James LaRue, executive director of OIF, considers school libraries an intellectual freedom hotspot. His list of school-related perils to intellectual freedom includes:

- over-filtering because the filters are selected and installed by IT,

- direct attacks on minor's free speech through enforced speech codes and social media monitoring,

- fear of diversity influencing many challenges,

- growing pressure for parental notification of required English class readings according to a label (e.g., sexually explicit)…even when the students are 16 and 17,

- casual disregard of student confidentiality about circulation records, and

- continued disappearance of school librarians (2016).

AASL's leaders and members are the true force behind all efforts to support students' intellectual freedom and their First Amendment right to read and access information in school libraries.

Lack of Understanding by Administrators

Administrators are leaders in the educational community, and they influence every aspect of its climate and management. Kristin Pekoll, assistant director at OIF, says, "The number one problem school librarians share with me is administration. I don't want to malign an entire professional group, but we need to educate superintendents [and principals] about the role of the First Amendment in education and the principle of intellectual freedom. We need more librarians to publish and speak within the professional audience of school administrators" (2016).

Challenges to Library Resources

The threat of a challenge to a library book weighs heavily on the minds of many school library professionals. Although there have always been attempts at censorship, Malinda Lo's analysis of a decade of the OIF's most frequently challenged books showed 52 percent included diverse content, and the OIF staff's analysis of the 2014 most frequently challenged books concluded that eight out of ten contained diverse content (ALA 2015, 15). Based on Lo's research, the OIF defines "diverse content" as resources containing:

- non-white main and/or secondary characters;

- LGBT main and/or secondary characters;

- disabled main and/or secondary characters;

- issues about race or racism;

- LGBT issues;

- issues about religion, which encompass in this situation the Holocaust and terrorism;

- issues about disability and/or mental illness; and

- non-Western settings, in which the West is North America and Europe (ALA 2015, 15).

A quick look at the most frequently challenged books in 2015 reveals that diverse content is again heavily represented. LGBT-themed books for teens have been challenged with increasing frequency. However, Kristin Pekoll observes a change, "Now we're seeing books that have a younger audience being targeted including: *This Day in June, My*

Figure 1. Examples of AASL's strong support for intellectual freedom.

- AASL's *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* contain the common belief that "Equitable access is a key component for education" (2007, 2), meaning a direct correlation exists between the education of youth to be knowledgeable, productive citizens and their First Amendment right to access information. Under Standard 3, one of learners' responsibilities is found in 3.3.7: "Respect the principles of intellectual freedom" (2007, 6).

- **AASL Position Statements** include "Confidentiality of Library Records" with its conviction that "children and youth have the same rights to privacy as adults" (AASL 2012) and "Labeling Books with Reading Levels" (AASL 2011), which promotes students' free access to books and opposes restricting choice to an arbitrary reading level.

- *Knowledge Quest (KQ)* **and** *School Library Research (SLR)* have spotlighted intellectual freedom in a variety of ways over the years.

  - *KQ*'s "Tough Choices" columns in 2006–2007 often provided advice for actions to take when confronted with intellectual freedom dilemmas. In recent years, *KQ* has published three intellectual freedom-themed issues: 2007 ("Intellectual Freedom 101"), 2010 ("Intellectual Freedom Online"), and 2015 ("Intellectual Freedom—Enduring Values in a Changing World"). Individual *KQ* issues frequently contain standalone articles on intellectual freedom topics, written by members and AASL leaders.

  - *SLR*, AASL's open-access research journal, has included intellectual freedom, access, and equity-related research articles since its first volume in 1998.

- **The *KQ* Blog** regularly incorporates posts dedicated to intellectual freedom topics.

- **Legislative advocacy efforts,** such as encouraging passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, are supported by AASL and members to ensure that every student has access to an effective school library program.

- **To protect student data,** in 2015 AASL joined forty other organizations to support the "Student Data Principles," which you can read at <http://studentdataprinciples.org>.

- **Informative conference sessions** on intellectual freedom and student privacy are sprinkled through the program at *every* AASL National Conference.

- **Intellectual freedom documents:** The AASL "School Library Bill of Rights" was written in the 1950s and withdrawn by AASL in 1976 (ALA 2010, 94–95). In 1986 ALA created "Access to Resources and Services in the School Library Media Program: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights" specifically for school libraries. The interpretation charged school librarians with "assuming a leadership role in promoting the principles of intellectual freedom" (ALA 2014).

- **Banned Websites Awareness Day**, a member-initiated observance approved by the AASL Board of Directors in 2011, spotlights the overly restrictive Internet filtering in many schools.

- *School Libraries Count! National Longitudinal Survey* **extra questions** queried the school library community on topics such as social networking (2008), access to services and resources for English language learners (2009), and the level and effects of Internet filtering (2012).

- **AASL Intellectual Freedom Committee**: Although disbanded in 2013, during its years as an active member-driven group the committee developed the AASL "Position Statement on Labeling Books with Reading Levels" (2011) and a downloadable brochure "What Is Intellectual Freedom" (2008, updated 2010) available at <www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org.aasl/files/content/aaslissues/intellectual_freedom_brochure1210.pdf>.

- **AASL Intellectual Freedom Award**: First presented in 1982, the award recognizes individuals who have upheld the principles of intellectual freedom.

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Princess Boy, *Jacob's New Dress*, and *George*." Pekoll also sees a trend with religion becoming a lightning rod for challenges and provides these examples: "Students and parents are questioning whether it is a breach of the separation of church and state by having a Bible in the school library collection…. Parents' fear that schools are indoctrinating their children with Islam because a children's book [*Nasreen's Secret School*] includes the phrase 'Please Allah'"(2016). Not surprisingly, diverse books are the theme of the 2016 Banned Books Week observance September 25 through October 1.

Internet Filtering

The Internet provides access to a wealth of educational content, primary sources, and connections to experts, but fear-based misinterpretation of the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) and overly restrictive filtering have reduced the resource to a shadow of its potential for student learning. The effects of excessive filtering in schools were well documented in the 2014 ALA-initiated report "Fencing Out Knowledge: Impacts of the Children's Internet Protection Act 10 Years Later" <http://connect.ala.org/files/cipa_report.pdf>.

For years school librarians have advocated for creating a balance between meeting CIPA requirements and ensuring student safety through digital citizenship instruction, thereby allowing educators and students to utilize the power of the Internet and Worldwide Web. Unfortunately, Internet filtering is the subject of a continuing battle in many schools—a battle with only minor victories for intellectual freedom.

Expanding Privacy Issues

School librarians are aware of the connection between students' First Amendment right to read and receive information in a school library, and their need to feel confident that the topics they research or books they read will not be revealed. The recently approved ALA "Library Privacy Guidelines for Students in K–12 Schools" make clear the need for a strong library privacy policy approved by the school's policy-making body. The guidelines assert, "Library privacy policies should define when school library records can be shared (and under what conditions) with parents or guardians, school staff and teachers, and third-parties such as online service providers" (ALA 2016).

Beyond the school library, there has been an explosion of data collection to monitor student progress and customize students' learning experiences. As a result, school librarians need to advocate for protection of students' data, its use, retention, and dissemination.

The Issues Keep Coming

One article cannot possibly review all the intellectual freedom issues facing school librarians. In addition to those already described, another heartbreaker for school librarians is seeing children's reading choices restricted because of class requirements to select books only within their Accelerated Reader (or other computer-based program) reading level instead of books that pique students' interest or curiosity.

Funding, of course, is a perennial issue. Although school library budgets increased an average of 20 percent for the 2015–2016 school year, funding still lags behind the larger budgets in 2010–2011. The upward trend is positive, but school librarians struggle to provide equitable access to resources for students with special needs such as English language learners and those with learning disabilities (Barack 2016).

Self-censorship and labeling and ratings systems continue to be concerns; however, the most serious issue is the shrinking number of school librarian positions in schools, reducing the number of voices protecting and advocating for students' intellectual freedom and privacy.

ESSA and a Potential Opportunity

Sylvia Norton, AASL's executive director, understands the enormous intellectual freedom issues facing school librarians, yet she also knows that they have always been protectors of students' privacy. Looking back, she says, "Ethical use of information has long been a key foundation for the school library profession. The school librarians who used a black magic marker to remove student names from circulation cards led to considerations as those early technology innovators set up automated systems. When schools established websites, school librarians looked at the images and text and encouraged a process to safeguard students" (2016).

According to Norton, "AASL joined other educational organizations last year in supporting the Student Data Principles, ten fundamental values for safeguarding student personal information. They will inform educational policy as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is implemented" (2016).

ESSA includes a lengthy list of provisions in Part A, Section 2101, for uses of formula grants to states; these uses include "to train teachers on the appropriate use of

Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA)

PART A--SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION

SEC. 2101. FORMULA GRANTS TO STATES.

(c) State Uses of Funds.

(4) State activities.

(B) Types of state activities.— The activities described in this subparagraph are the following…:

(xx) Supporting and developing efforts to train teachers on the appropriate use of student data to ensure that individual student privacy is protected as required by section 444 of the General Education Provisions Act (commonly known as the 'Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974') (20 U.S.C. 1232g) and in accordance with State student privacy laws and local educational agency student privacy and technology use policies.

Source: Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. Pub. L. No.114- 95. <www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/ BILLS-114s1177enr/pdf/BILLS- 114s1177enr.pdf>.

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student data…" (ESSA 2015, 116). Figure 2 contains the text for this part of the law. Norton sees an opportunity in ESSA for school librarians, stating, "Student data privacy has emerged as a major issue in education. The challenge of student data privacy has been heightened by an emphasis on assessment, accountability, and the increased use of technology. The security of software vendors or service providers often becomes the focus, yet it is personnel errors that are frequently the cause for concerns about privacy. The ESSA teacher training option provides a possible *opportunity* for school librarians to step forward to involve themselves through informal guidance and formal professional development for their colleagues. In this way, school librarians may have a chance to proactively affect change in student data practice" (2016).

The Big Question

Despite expanding challenges, will school librarians and AASL remain champions of students' privacy protections and intellectual freedom? My answer is "Yes," and 2016–2017 AASL President Audrey Church affirmed that opinion stating:

> Intellectual freedom and the right to privacy have been with us throughout the history of

school librarianship. The issues are the same, but the formats, the situations, and the contexts have grown.

In the area of privacy, our challenges will be both instructional and professional. First, as we instruct students in the concepts of digital citizenship, we must continue to teach them that they have the right to privacy in this digital world, give them the skills to protect their own privacy, and help them to understand the importance of safeguarding their privacy. Secondly, as professionals, we must protect our students' privacy in the context of library usage and library records: no one else has the right to know the questions they are asking, the topics they are researching, or the books they have checked out. A larger issue comes to us from student data which we do not directly control, data collected, for example, by vendors or by educational agencies. Here we must stand firmly as champions for students' right to privacy.

In the realm of intellectual freedom, we will protect students' right to read, of course, but beyond that, we will continue to advocate for students' right to access to information of all types and in all formats. Access to information is not possible when sites are unnecessarily filtered in our schools. Access to information is limited for students in areas of the country with limited access to broadband. Access to information is not possible when students are not served by a certified school librarian.

Equity becomes an issue as these students are deprived of the information and services that they deserve. We must work to meet these challenges. (2016)

Historically, AASL and school librarians have met the challenge of protecting students' intellectual freedom and privacy, and there is *no doubt* we will continue to champion these rights. Guided by the ALA *Code of Ethics*, standing up for students' intellectual freedom is simply the right thing to do.

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