

THE FREEDOM TO LEARN



Jamie Gregory

gregorjm416@gmail.com

**Teaching Intellectual Freedom
Principles Using the AASL Standards**

No matter how school library standards evolve to address changes in society and educational research, certain intellectual freedom principles remain constant, including the principle to protect all learners' rights to freely access and explore information and ideas. AASL's *National School Library Standards* give school librarians an opportunity to re-envision how to embed the principles of intellectual freedom by identifying and posing "authentic, real-world problems to spark learners' new knowledge pursuits through critical thinking and problem solving" (2018, 107).

AASL identifies six Common Beliefs as core to the school library profession. All six relate in some way to intellectual freedom, most overtly number five: "Intellectual freedom is every learner's right" (AASL 2018, 13). That core value has not changed because all learning has intellectual freedom as its root. In fact, a number of appendices in the *National School Library Standards* are dedicated to explicitly setting forth guidance to ensure learners' intellectual freedom in the school library. My purpose here is to provide examples for everyday application of those guidelines through the AASL Standards, focusing on the Inquire, Include, and Curate Shared Foundations.

The AASL Standards focus not just on learner dispositions and outcomes, but also on how learning experiences are developed and implemented by school librarians. Indeed, the standards include school librarian Competencies for this very reason: school librarians should model the behaviors expected of students. School librarians must go beyond the traditional teaching of intellectual freedom in isolation. Celebrating Banned Books Week during one week of the academic

year does not provide learners with the opportunities to learn about the complexity and nuance of intellectual freedom and how it affects their everyday lives.

Inquire

The first Shared Foundation, Inquire, asks learners to display curiosity by formulating questions, continually seeking knowledge, and enacting new understanding through real-world connections (AASL 2018). Inquiry-based learning encourages student-centered explorations of units of study; these explorations occur in a "school library that gives [students] freedom to move through the inquiry process in a barrier-free, universally designed environment that allows equitable physical and intellectual access" (AASL 2018, 73).

Removing barriers to intellectual access is a much broader process than simply providing access to books. School librarians must allow authentic student choice of research topics, encouraging interests and curiosities despite their personal beliefs or what they may feel is important to the curriculum. In order to develop curiosity, learners must feel that they are in a safe learning environment "in which questions are welcomed and encouraged" (AASL 2018, 70).

During my second year as a high school English teacher, an administrator informed me that a student of mine who was researching abortion would no longer be permitted to do so because of the controversial nature of the topic and because my school district adhered to an abstinence-only approach to comprehensive health education. Censors in these situations are often motivated by fear of immoral behavior as defined by the censor;

however, public school officials should not dictate learners' individual learning choices based on projected fears or personal beliefs. Students should not be made to feel bad or ashamed of the inquiry choices they make.

In a school library inquiry unit on social injustice, I organized guest speakers from a local organization that helps women escape from sex trafficking, despite some school officials voicing concerns that it was "too scary." However, sex trafficking is a documented problem in my region, and learners shared personal stories of having been approached by untrustworthy strangers, proving that this topic was important and necessary to their safety. Students gave overwhelmingly positive feedback to this event, "enacting new understanding through real-world connections" and "using reflection to guide informed decisions," two learner Competencies for the Grow Domain under Inquire (AASL 2018, 68).

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The learners conducted additional research into this topic, creating authentic outcomes such as letters to elected officials and infographics.

School librarians should seek out opportunities to activate learners' curiosity and encourage questioning. Students are intrinsically motivated to learn when they are given choice and autonomy, and "by asking questions, students become more actively engaged in learning, stimulating cognitive processes and revealing their thinking frameworks" (Ostroff 2016, 91). Use the Question Formulation Technique (Rothstein and Santana 2017) to encourage students to learn how to ask questions. Explicitly teaching students how to ask questions "offers students the invaluable opportunity to become independent thinkers and self-directed learners" (Rothstein and Santana 2017, 3). This approach can be adapted to all learning styles and levels to ensure equitable access.

To spark curiosity during the beginning phase of an inquiry project I ask students to visit several stations that feature various types of information sources related to an overall theme. Instead of taking notes, I ask them only to ask questions as they browse the sources. This approach allows learners to realize that learning and research stem from asking questions that are then narrowed and refined as they seek answers. This activity can also be differentiated by reading and ability levels.

Ultimately, an inquiry approach depends directly on the freedom to pursue topics and information. Through inquiry, "students can construct new worldviews rather than having to take on the teacher's perspective or those mandated by the curriculum or textbook" (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, and Caspari

2015, 27). Learners must have unfettered access to information in order to do so.

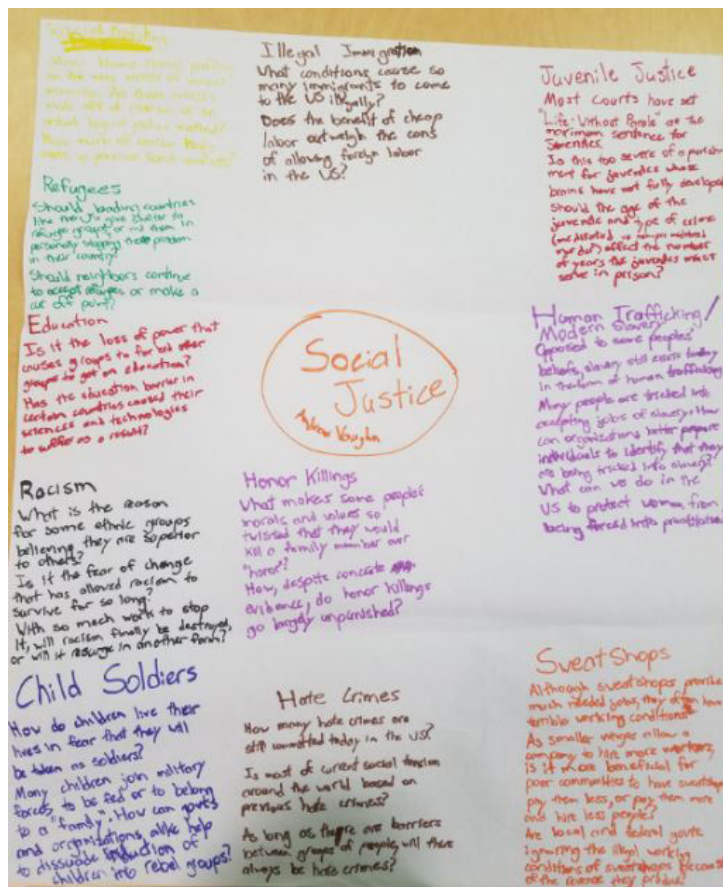
Include

Within the Include Shared Foundation, school libraries offer "diverse learning experiences that allow for individual differences in learners," feature "learning opportunities that include diverse viewpoints," and implement solutions that address barriers to equitable access to services (AASL, 2018, 77). There are basically three aspects of intellectual freedom at work here:

- the school library resources must be diverse,
- the learning opportunities provided must be diverse, and

- those diverse learning opportunities must be accessible to all learners to guarantee all students' intellectual freedom rights.

Meeting these standards requires that school librarians have extensive knowledge of their school communities. As an information specialist and program administrator, the school librarian should evaluate library resources in terms of how well they represent the school community. Are certain voices not included? Are voices included but stereotyped or otherwise misrepresented? Ask learners to help conduct a diversity audit in the school library and invite them to suggest titles for purchase. Utilize the We Need Diverse Books organization as well as the Own Voices movement.



Students use a questioning technique as they explore topics during an inquiry-based learning unit on social justice. (Photo taken by Jamie Gregory)

A broad lack of diversity in children's publishing has been well documented. According to data compiled by the Cooperative Children's Book Center and the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, 50 percent of children's books published in 2018 featured white characters and fewer than a quarter featured characters of other ethnicities and races. More books were published featuring animals (Huyck and Dalen 2019). Last fall I shared this information with a teacher cadet class, an introductory education course for students interested in becoming educators. I also provided the class picture books for the students to examine for diversity and inclusivity. This activity would be appropriate for all grade and ability levels. Seek out books that promote stereotypes or misrepresentations for learners to analyze and contrast with more representative and inclusive titles.

The American Library Association (ALA) recently released the list of the top-ten challenged books

in 2019, and once again there is a strong pattern of LGBTQ+ censorship; eight out of the ten titles on the list were censored for diverse content. Allie Stevens and Kaitlin Frick encourage librarians to examine their own implicit bias. They note the following questions for librarians assessing their collections:

- Do you have any fears or concerns about creating a more diverse collection?
- What materials are you most comfortable including in your collection?
- Which books/materials are you least comfortable with? (2018).

As ALA notes, "Refusing to select resources due to potential controversy is considered censorship, as is withdrawing resources for that reason" (ALA 2006). School librarians should evaluate their own attitudes as well. The National Coalition Against Censorship suggests educators "destigmatize LGBTQ

experiences through our everyday speech and actions, talking openly and kindly about LGBTQ issues and demonstrating inclusivity." One way school librarians demonstrate inclusivity is by valuing all voices and experiences and helping learners access diverse, valid, and accurate information.

In units of study, the school librarian should not only provide learning opportunities to encompass diverse viewpoints, but should also teach learners to identify missing voices. For example, when learning about the 19th Amendment, guide students to question whether this right was guaranteed for all women regardless of race. Another lesser-studied topic within voting rights is those for Native Americans. Much has been written about the lack of diversity represented in textbooks as well as historical accuracy. School librarians can identify topics in textbooks that warrant more in-depth study to work against the perpetuation of oversimplification and stereotyping. Utilize the "Teaching Hard History" document from the Southern Poverty Law Center (2018) for more information.

Introduce learners to the controversy surrounding Matt de la Peña's novel *Mexican Whiteboy* in Arizona during 2011–2012, which was removed from the curriculum of a Mexican-American Studies program in Tucson United School District for political reasons for a period of time (Gregory 2018). Does it teach students to resent white people, encourage ethnic solidarity, and promote the overthrow of the government (Winerip 2012)? Encourage learners to read the book and evaluate the controversial removal of the book, considering the value of the free exchange of all ideas, even those that may challenge the status quo.



Students at James F. Byrnes High School in Duncan, SC, participate in a Skype visit with author Matt de la Peña who discussed challenges to his novel *Mexican Whiteboy*. (Photo taken by Jamie Gregory)

Under the Create Domain, learners are asked to “evaluate a variety of perspectives during learning activities” (AASL 2018, 76). One successful teaching strategy that offers learners the opportunity to interact with a variety of perspectives is a modification of the four-corners activity. During a unit of study, help students create an argumentative thesis statement. Then ask them to modify it using four qualifiers: agree, somewhat agree, disagree, somewhat disagree. This activity allows learners to practice considering different perspectives fairly and accurately. Ask students to cite sources used, embedding a related information literacy skill and promoting ethical use of information. For more ideas about using this activity to teach First Amendment principles, read my article in the April 2020 issue of *Teacher Librarian* (Gregory 2020).

Under the Include Shared Foundation, school librarians “implement solutions that address

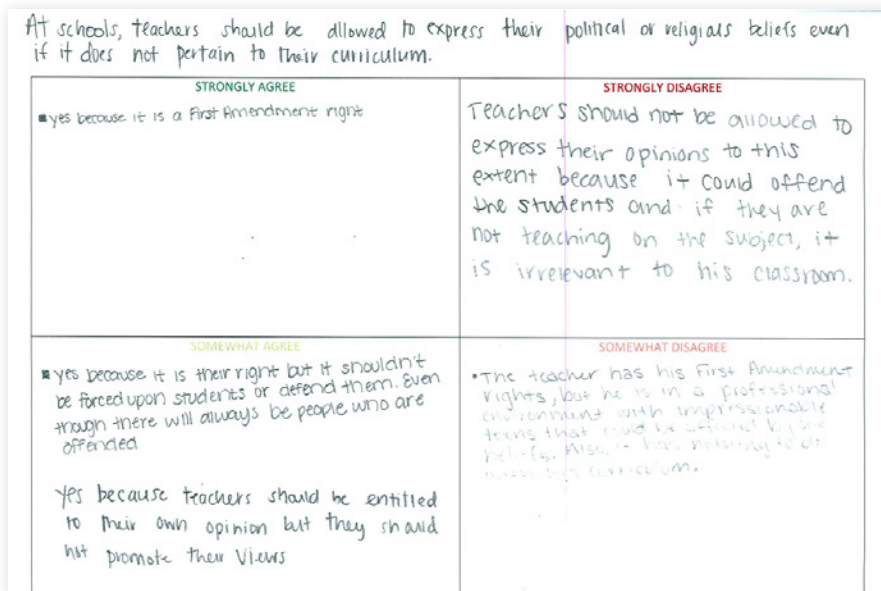
various barriers to equitable access of services” (AASL 2018, 77). Such barriers may include delivery of instruction and access to library programming and resources. All learners should be invited and given the opportunity to participate in library programming and instruction, including non-mainstreamed students such as English-language learners and those with disabilities. Consider how you differentiate learning as well as enable access to information. Ask: Am I preventing some learners from fully participating in my learning opportunities and library programming? This question has become even more pertinent due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Can students find information in databases on accessible reading levels? Is information provided in multiple languages? Are text-to-speech and large-print options available? These can be driving questions when purchasing decisions are made.

Curate

Under the Create Domain for the Curate Shared Foundation, learners are tasked with “seeking a variety of sources; collecting information representing diverse perspectives; and systematically questioning and assessing the validity and accuracy of information” (AASL 2018, 94). Teaching students to evaluate sources of information has long been the focus of the school library profession. However, given the recent surge in the amount of misinformation and disinformation found in online resources such as social media and other user-generated content, newer and more-specific information literacy skills are required.

School librarians model how to be critical consumers of information in an unbiased manner by ensuring that their own personal beliefs do not interfere with the information sources provided to students. Employ skills such as lateral reading to confirm accuracy, reverse-image searching, and exercising click restraint, among others. Ask learners to keep a chart of sources found when collecting information and then to analyze the sources for validity and accuracy, corroborating information from different sources if possible. When learners encounter biased information, challenge them to find a source presenting a different opinion, using appropriate citations. Explicitly teach students concepts related to misinformation and disinformation instead of employing the general term “fake news.”

Denying access to online information can inhibit students’ abilities to learn within the Curate Shared Foundation. If learners



Students practice writing opinion statements from multiple points of view, learning how to evaluate a variety of perspectives. (Photo taken by Jamie Gregory)

encounter Internet filter blocks while trying to access resources, provide them with the opportunity to learn about Internet filters in schools (ALA 2010). Students can track which websites are blocked at school and discuss whether the blocks unnecessarily limit their access to information. Databases such as EBSCO have faced challenges to content (LaRue 2018). Students should learn how databases build resources for users to understand how they provide information access to users. Learners can also consider which online resources are provided to them by their local public library system and how those decisions are made. County commissioners in Citrus County, Florida, denied funding for a local public library digital subscription to the *New York Times*, describing it as “fake news” (“The State of America’s Libraries” 2020), even though it would have allowed for broader user access than the print subscription. Learners can participate in case studies, evaluating how their ability to find information can be denied in a multitude of ways and how a public library setting differs from that of a school library.



Jamie Gregory is the upper school librarian and journalism teacher at Christ Church Episcopal School in Greenville, South Carolina.

She is a National Board Certified Teacher in Library Media. She is a blogger for ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom and is serving as a judge for the 2021 YALSA Morris Award. She is a member of AASL. She wrote the article “School Librarians Teaching the First Amendment” in the April 2020 issue of *Teacher Librarian*.

Conclusion

Successful implementation of the *National School Library Standards* requires widespread application of principles of intellectual freedom. Equitable access to library resources, allowing for diverse viewpoints, and “teaching legal-, ethical-, and social-responsibility concepts” are

embedded in each of the Shared Foundations (AASL 2018, 113); they are not stand-alone topics. Therefore, school librarians need to engage students in diverse learning opportunities through accessible, diverse resources in ways that are immersive, iterative, and intentional.

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