



# SCHOOL LIBRARIANS *and the* INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM MANUAL

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In 2020 the tenth edition of the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* will be published by ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF). As with each new edition, this one includes guidance on the latest issues, the newest policy statements related to intellectual freedom (IF), and the core documents that outline the library profession's commitment to free expression, free access to information, privacy, and other intellectual freedom principles.

In this article Martin Garnar, editor of the tenth edition, talks with Kate Lechtenberg, a school library educator and former school librarian, and Carolyn Vibbert, an elementary school librarian, about what's new in the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* and how intellectual freedom connects with AASL's *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*. Changes to the manual include new interpretations of the *Library Bill of Rights* approved by the ALA Council since the last edition, information about when to call the police, an essay about censorship beyond books (e.g., programs, displays, databases, etc.), expanded content about developing library policies that support intellectual freedom, and an expanded "Glossary of Terms."

**Martin Garnar (MG):** Kate and Carolyn, I'm really looking forward to this conversation about the latest edition of the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*. As always, there's a lot of good information in the manual for library workers of all types, including school librarians. When I'm not editing, I work in an academic library, so I'd love to get your perspectives on the current concerns and issues facing school librarians with regard to intellectual freedom.

**Kate Lechtenberg (KL):** Martin, thanks in advance for all your work updating the manual! It's such an important resource for all of us, and I look forward to the new edition. As a former school librarian and current school library educator, I look forward to seeing how this important resource grows with the times. I also work on OIF's *Intellectual Freedom News*, a weekly newsletter that compiles current articles about censorship, privacy, First Amendment issues, social media fake news, so it will be interesting to see how policy statements and guidance continue to evolve in an age when new challenges arise every day.

**Carolyn Vibbert (CV):** I agree with Kate one hundred percent that the work being done to keep resources current related to intellectual freedom in libraries is of critical

importance. As an elementary school librarian, I admit that there are some days that IF issues seem far from the realities of dealing with the day-to-day tasks of keeping a library open. I think many school librarians, myself often included, would underrate their understanding of current issues and best practices related to intellectual freedom. And yet, we face situations every day related to intellectual freedom and may not even realize [it].

In school libraries, one of the biggest challenges is encouraging these hidden champions.

**MG:** Kate, the new edition of the manual does include topics that have emerged or continued to develop since the last edition, such as Internet filtering, social media issues, religion and politics in libraries, and controversies around meeting rooms and invited speakers. While some of these topics may not always seem germane to school libraries, the underlying principles of equity, access to information, and privacy are still applicable. Having said that, I think what Carolyn said about school librarians is really interesting. As we did in the last edition, the new edition includes some discussion starters for each main topic area, such as access, censorship, and collections. The hope is that

these can be used to spark conversations and provide opportunities for library workers to think about how these principles apply to real-world situations.

For school librarians, what would you say are the biggest concerns regarding intellectual freedom today?

**CV:** School librarians are champions of literacy as it relates to intellectual freedom. Every day we promote the right to read. At the elementary level, this often means resisting book leveling or reader leveling as the primary selection criteria for book choice. In libraries serving older students, it means providing books students need emotionally and socially without censorship. In these current times, I have faced more challenges related to copyright. Many teachers are unaware that copyright law exceptions are not limitless simply because they are educators. In the past months, I've been more

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present in coaching teachers through fair use, copyright law, and how this impacts instruction.

**KL:** I think the constant barrage of challenges to children's and young adult books that feature LGBTQ characters and issues is one of the most pressing intellectual freedom issues in schools today.

In 2019 Alex Gino's *George* was again the most-challenged book in the country, and eight of the ten most-challenged or most-banned books are due to parents or other adults feeling compelled to act on their belief that representations of LGBTQ children and families are a threat to children's morals, their understanding of family, or their religious perspectives. In addition, many LGBTQ children's books are inaccurately called "sexually explicit" when they include characters who reject non-normative gender identities, despite the fact that gender identity and sexual orientation are two different aspects of a person's identity. To me, this enduring and increasing pattern of attack on books that represent our LGBTQ students and families is a clear call for school librarians to make it clear to families that they have the right to make reading choices for their own children, but that they cannot stop all young people from reading quality literature that represents the diverse peoples and experiences of our community. School librarians need to guard against the pressure to censor or self-censor LGBTQ books, and we need more outreach to our LGBTQ patrons as well.

**MG:** The manual provides guidance in all of these areas. A number of pertinent interpretations of the *Library Bill of Rights* and the *Code of Ethics* have been updated since the last edition, including "Rating Systems," "Diverse Collections," "Copyright," and "Access to Library Resources and Services Regardless of Sex, Gender

Identity, Gender Expression, or Sexual Orientation."

School librarians can find the latest guidance on those issues in those interpretations and can also look to the interpretations in the manual that are specific to school libraries for more support of the librarian's role as an intellectual freedom advocate and expert.

Speaking of school librarians, I've been reviewing the *AASL Standards Framework for Learners*, looking for connections to intellectual freedom. Either directly or indirectly, I can make the case that intellectual freedom is necessary for all of them, whether it's having access to a full range of information; feeling empowered to ask questions about all topics, including unpopular ones; and feeling secure that your research activities won't be held against you. Having said that, I'm curious if there are specific standards that stand out to you with regard to their connection to intellectual freedom.

**KL:** Intellectual freedom is definitely intrinsic to all the standards, and I think the fact that intellectual freedom is explicitly included as one of the six Common Beliefs attests to its foundational importance. The fifth Common Belief reads, "Intellectual freedom is every learner's right. Learners have the freedom to speak and hear what others have to say, rather than allowing others to control their access to ideas and information; the school librarian's responsibility is to develop these dispositions in learners, educators, and all other members of the learning community" (AASL 2018, 13). This statement affirms that freedom of speech, access to information, and the freedom to choose resources are essential for every act of inquiry, inclusion, collaboration, curation, exploration, and engagement.

**CV:** Kate is absolutely right about intellectual freedom being embedded into all the standards. With students, the work then begins as we promote specific intellectual freedoms within our instruction. By promoting students' freedom to read "widely and deeply" (V. 4. I. Explore, Think). As we help students understand not only how to cite sources, but why (VI. B. Engage, Create). As we teach a generation of learners to not only curate sources but to analyze those sources (IV. D. I. Curate, Grow) and to include content from diverse perspectives (I. C. I. Inquire, Share). Even with our youngest learners it is important to keep intellectual freedom a focus in our instruction. With strong instruction they will grow as advocates for their intellectual freedom and for others.

**MG:** I'm heartened to see how intellectual freedom is woven into all the standards, and Carolyn's last comment about developing students as intellectual freedom advocates is a great springboard for the next topic. To help these students become advocates, what do school librarians need in terms of education, training, and support regarding intellectual freedom? More importantly, are those resources available?

**CV:** Resources are available, but as with most, it takes work on the part of the educator to go find them. I think following the Office for Intellectual Freedom's blog [<https://www.oif.ala.org/oif/>] is a great first step. The Freedom to Read Foundation [<https://www.ftrf.org/>] has resources and an online community to join. As you've reminded us, Martin, the manual has resources included for launching discussions and more. I think beginning the conversation with our peers is critical. I've made strides in adding more LGBTQ books to my collection and have shared my work locally and

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—Martin Garnar

at conference sessions. The conversations related to IF need to continue so that we can empower students to do the same.

**KL:** I agree that it all begins with conversation, whether that's on a blog or online community or with colleagues. And I think one of the most important resources school librarians can draw on is teachers. School librarians don't have to do this work alone; in fact, our message about intellectual freedom will be more effective when we collaborate with colleagues who are experts in their own areas. Elementary teachers will know how to connect the principles of intellectual freedom to their students' levels and to recent learning, science teachers can help us connect to debates about evolution and climate change, social studies teachers can help us examine the constitutional and historical aspects, and so on. School librarians are the point person in a school for intellectual freedom, but we need to expand our conversation so that students, parents, and community members see it as essential to all areas of learning.

**MG:** Kate, your point about teachers and other allies is really important, and it ties in with what Carolyn said about resources: we're not in this alone, and we need to turn to each other and to what's already out

there for support. Ensuring that our students and our communities are able to access the information they need and have the skills to understand and analyze that information is a group effort, and it's always important to stay up to date on both the basic foundations of and latest developments in intellectual freedom so that we're ready for the next challenge.

As we wind down this conversation, if there's one thing you'd want to tell school librarians about intellectual freedom, what would it be?

**KL:** I think the key is pro-active communication and education for students, teachers, administrators, and parents. We cannot wait until Banned Books Week or until a book is challenged to start talking about intellectual freedom.

If it really is the foundation of all our standards, school librarians should look for opportunities to embed intellectual freedom principles into every lesson, book talk, program, and meeting we are a part of.

**CV:** I think perseverance and grit are what we try to teach our students, and it's what we should remember too. One step forward at a time is a step forward. It doesn't matter how large of a step it is. Intellectual freedom

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seems so vast a topic. Pick one area and read a bit more about it, be a bit more intentional in your instruction, share a bit more with colleagues. Just small steps will make an impact in this endeavor for our students.

**MG:** Communication, perseverance, and grit—that’s a great summary. Making sure people know what our principles and values are is essential to their understanding of why libraries and library workers are so passionate about free speech, free access to information, and privacy.

Perseverance and grit are necessary when we have to defend those principles and values. I couldn’t have said it better myself.

Carolyn and Kate, thanks so much for having this conversation with me. I really appreciate your insights on what’s important to school librarians, and I hope that they will benefit from the information and guidance provided in the new edition of the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, which should be available in December 2020.



**Kate Lechtenberg**

recently earned her PhD in education at the University of Iowa, where her research focused on

text selection and teaching controversial issues in classrooms, libraries, and schools. A former school librarian and English teacher, she teaches courses in young adult literature, collection development, and critical literacy, and is also the news editor for the *Office for Intellectual Freedom*.



**Carolyn Vibbert** is a

National Board Certified school librarian at Sudley Elementary School in Manassas, VA. She is a

past president of the Virginia Association of School Librarians. She has served on several AASL committees and presented at AASL National Conferences. She holds Master’s degrees in elementary education from Truman State University and in library science from Appalachian State University. Her wide range of professional interests include connecting new librarians to professional networks, advocacy, gaming in libraries, and intellectual freedom.



**Martin Garnar** is the director of the Amherst College Library. Previously he served as dean of the Kraemer Family Library at

the University of Colorado Colorado Springs, and as the head of research and instruction at the Dayton Memorial Library of Regis University. His research and professional interests are focused on intellectual freedom, professional ethics, and equity, diversity, and inclusion. He is currently serving as chair of the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee.

### Work Cited:

AASL. 2018. *National School Librarian Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*. Chicago: ALA.

