

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM AND SCHOOL LIBRARIES

A Practical Application



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In 2017 AASL released the *National School Library Standards*. The revised standards were streamlined to reflect the attributes that dynamic school librarians, learners, and school libraries should possess. The standards provide school librarians with a framework for creating school libraries that support student growth (Hancock et al. 2019). They also articulate Common Beliefs that represent the core values of librarianship. Among them, still, is the belief that intellectual freedom is the right of every learner.

What Is Intellectual Freedom?

Intellectual freedom, specifically as it applies to students, encompasses two propositions: the right for students to receive information and the right of free speech. These rights are guaranteed by the First Amendment and have been upheld in courts (Chmara 2015). AASL updating its standards does not change the school librarian's commitment to First Amendment tenets, including:

1. Libraries should provide learners with sufficient access to resources that will enable them to pursue a variety of ideas and viewpoints that are of personal interest.

2. Libraries should also provide spaces where learners can engage in mutually respectful exchanges of ideas. (AASL 2018)

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Challenges Associated with Supporting Intellectual Freedom

While a significant number of school librarians support the idea of intellectual freedom, that support doesn't always translate into practice (McNichol 2016). Internal and external censorship can prevent building ongoing support for intellectual freedom for students. Data from a 2008 *School Library Journal* survey on censorship found that school librarians are most culpable when it comes to self-censoring (Whelan 2009). The survey found that some school librarians admitted to self-censoring. Out of 654 schools librarians, many indicated a tendency to avoid books with sexual content (87%), language (61%), violence (51%), homosexuality (47%), racism (34%), and religion (16%) because they fear parental backlash. Another

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article notes that self-censoring in school libraries is on the rise (Baillie 2017).

Additionally, intellectual freedom challenges come from external sources. As a result of these outside forces, some school librarians may choose to avoid programs, activities, services, or collection decisions that could be viewed as controversial. Such pressures reinforce self-censoring behaviors and prevent school librarians from engaging in advocacy work.

The American Library Association (ALA) urges librarians to think of the dangers to democracy that come

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from censorship. ALA maintains “freedom has given the United States the elasticity to endure strain. Freedom keeps open the path of novel and creative solutions and enables change to come by choice. Every silencing of a heresy, every enforcement of an orthodoxy, diminishes the toughness and resilience of our society and leaves it less able to deal with controversy and difference” (2004).

I’ve personally spent a significant amount of time speaking out against some of the community pushback libraries have received over the years. Some events have brought either local or national attention to libraries. Consider the impact that some of

these events might have had on the overall morale of libraries.

The bill to arrest librarians for providing access to books.

Lawmakers in Missouri proposed H.B. 2044, a bill that would penalize librarians for providing youth access to materials deemed age inappropriate. Under the proposed bill a parental oversight committee would be tasked with deciding whether content for youth is considered age appropriate. If passed librarians who fail to comply with the committee’s directives could receive a fine or serve time in jail. Tennessee proposed similar legislation, H.B. 2721, but the bill “was killed in the House Cities and Counties subcommittee” (Peet 2020).

The banning of Angie Thomas’s *New York Times* bestselling book, *The Hate U Give*, by Katy Independent School District (ISD) in Texas.

The Katy ISD received a challenge to Angie Thomas’s book from a parent, who strongly believed that the book’s use of foul language was excessive and inappropriate. In response the district removed copies of the book from its shelves. Although the district affirmed that the book was not technically banned but under a standard procedural review, the district removed copies of the book during their review process (Brust 2017). In their policy dated January 2018, the Katy ISD states that “access to challenged resources may be restricted during the reconsideration process. The district may deny access to a child if requested by the child’s parent” (Katy ISD



2018). In the case of Thomas's book, removing copies from library shelves implied that access was denied to all students.

The *Forbes* article titled "Amazon Should Replace Local Libraries to Save Taxpayers Money" that ignited a social media tirade.

The now-archived article, written by Panos Mourdoukoutas, argued that libraries were not relevant and detailed the potential tax benefits to residents should libraries close. Mourdoukoutas contended that libraries "once offered the local community lots of services in exchange for their tax money." According to Mourdoukoutas, the dispensability of libraries is due to the fact that other agencies can perform these services. In the article, he recommended that in lieu of libraries Amazon open bookstores in all local communities and Starbucks serve as community hubs.

The Aurora Public Library controversy. Aurora Public Library became the subject of intense scrutiny resulting from a decision to publicly display a controversial poem. The poem, "Hijab Means Jihad," was part of a three-week display featuring twenty different panels of artistry. Words from the poem, which were superimposed over a picture of a Confederate flag, seemed to condone (or perhaps even suggest) violence against Muslim women. However, that was not the author's intent. Author George Miller, a professor at Lewis University, originally intended for the poem to be satirical in nature (Farver 2018). The piece was intended to highlight the attitudes and injustices toward Muslims. Unfortunately, instead of shining a light on these types of injustices, Miller's work became an example

of the abhorrent behavior he was attempting to shun.

The library received a substantial amount of backlash for the display, which culminated in the resignation of the library's communications manager, Amy Roth (Crosby 2018). Roth admitted that she initially thought the piece was offensive but after rereading it she felt that she "had to stand up for Miller's rights to say what he wanted, as his words were not causing any imminent danger" (Crosby 2018). In contradiction to Roth's beliefs, the Chicago office of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the nation's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy group, believed the poem to be blatantly offensive. In a statement, the group confirmed their opinion "that the display itself was presented at face-value without any such context thus working to shock and threaten viewers, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, at a time in which anti-Muslim and anti-Hijab animosity is a serious problem" (CAIR 2018). Other community leaders also voiced opposition to the display. In response to community outrage, the library removed the display and issued a public apology on behalf of the library's executive director.

The banning of the book *Stick*. Beaverton School District (Oregon) sent notices to parents that the school's superintendent decided to ban Andrew Smith's young adult novel, *Stick*. The young adult author and high school teacher shared a news article about the book ban on his Facebook page where he was quoted and received an overwhelming amount of support (Jamison 2018). Described as an intense novel, *Stick* follows the life of 13-year-old Stark McClellan as he navigates the complexities of a tumultuous life.

Intense themes related to homosexuality, physical abuse, and bullying are intertwined throughout the story. In a public statement posted to Facebook, the district revealed that a formal complaint requesting reconsideration of the book's availability to students was made by a concerned parent. According to the post, board policies were followed in addressing the matter. A review committee, consisting of a diverse group of stakeholders—including the parent who initiated the complaint and a few district administrators—convened to discuss the appropriateness of the book's content. After deliberating, the committee tendered its recommendation to the district's deputy superintendent of teaching and learning. The committee recommended keeping the book and denied the parent's request for removal. However, the superintendent upheld the recommendation that prohibited middle grades, freshmen, and sophomores from accessing the book.

The story of Dee Ann Venuto and DaNae Leu. DaNae Leu worked in a school district where a parent objected to a children's book depicting the home life of a same-sex family. The parent started a petition to have the book removed. In response to the objection, the district pulled the book and instructed Leu, who worked at a different school from where the challenge originated, to remove copies of the book as well. Instead Leu put the book on display. In Venuto's case, a high school received a challenge to remove three books from its shelves because of subject matter involving LGBTQIA+ populations. The challenge later resulted in the removal of one of the titles (Adams, Leu, and Venuto 2015).

In light of so many challenges that not only threaten to undermine the sanctity of students' rights and delegitimize the professional work of librarians, school library professionals must find a way to keep fighting for the values that we espouse. We must defend our profession against all forms of censorship. The question is, How do we convince school librarians to fully support intellectual freedom when public support is grim?

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Leveraging the Standards

The revised AASL Standards make it clear that all learners should be able to think and grow. Critical thinking doesn't happen in a vacuum. Within the context of school libraries, the prevailing assumption is that critical thinking is a skill that is developed through the process of encountering and evaluating different types of information sources (McMullin 2018). These skills embody information literacy, an area of expertise taught in school libraries. Multiple perspectives add a richness to the learner's experience that is not unearthed by single narratives. Paulo Freire argues that education itself is not neutral; it either oppresses or liberates (1993). By teaching learners how to interact with ideas different

from their own, they can gain a broader understanding of complex issues. When access to different perspectives is stymied, opportunities to recognize biased or inaccurate information is also missed (Preddy 2015). Accept the fact that there will always be some type of opposition to what some may feel equates to the propagation of misinformation, bias, or agenda pushing.

Having standards will not automatically create buy-in. Standards will act as a guideline for professional best practices. While the guidelines may make sense to school library practitioners, they may appear to be nothing more than professional

jargon to others when defending a potential book ban. Therefore, it is important for school librarians to educate their respective communities on the role of libraries in supporting information freedom. Let administrators, teachers, parents, and students know what the standards require. Center discussions around the best interest and the rights of learners. Have collaborative discussions with multiple stakeholders to determine the best approach for using the standards to support intellectual freedom that includes all perspectives. These types of discussions are necessary to demonstrate what a free exchange of ideas represents. As the school librarian, take charge of those conversations. Show parents that a difference of opinion doesn't mean that common ground is unobtainable.

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Build Community Allies

Lastly, intellectual freedom supports inclusivity efforts and should not be siloed within communities. In an article for ALA's Office of Diversity Literacy and Outreach Services, I discuss how intellectual freedom supports diversity initiatives (Jamison 2018). By advocating for intellectual freedom, school librarians are working to change the narrative for marginalized groups. Discus-

sions about intellectual freedom are primarily focused on issues related to the censoring of controversial books. The connection between diversity and censorship is often viewed as two independent variables. However, diversity and intellectual freedom are not stand-alone issues. According to Shannon Oltmann, "Many of the most challenged books, year after year, feature voices from diverse communities (including those of women, racial or ethnic minorities, and LGBT people)" (2017). Oltmann argues that intellectual freedom is a vehicle that helps advance diverse perspectives. This, of course, is only true if school librarians are diligent in ensuring that patrons have equity in access to books that represent a myriad of different experiences.



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