

Joining Forces to

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Amplify Voice



Picture it. You hear about an amazing new title. The reviews are spot-on for what you need. You get your hands on the book and after reading it you are beyond motivated to connect with your students. You order this gem, and it is now a part of your school library collection. Your outreach has it flying off the shelves. The readers you thought might love it, do. New readers surface because they, too, feel a connection. For some, it's not a good fit, and that's OK, too. In the world of school libraries, this is what librarians call VICTORY! What could disrupt the parade of joy you are relishing on your way to making more perfect selections for your students?

Opposition surfaces. And this opposition is not your run of the mill, "no thanks" or "I didn't like it" or "I couldn't get into it" rejection. This one is picking up speed and attention. Unlike the usual individual dismissal of a book, this time the disapproval demands action. The concern over the book is public, vocal, and commands the attention of authority in your school community. Your confidence is rattled. Your competence is being questioned. Your emotions run the gamut. The complainant is asking for information and action.

Now What?

If you have been through a formal book challenge, you have experienced victories and defeats throughout the process. If nothing formal has been done yet, it is up to you to shore up your team, gather necessary information, and provide leadership in the process. If you don't have those allies, support systems, or resources in place, it's time to identify gaps and take immediate and strategic action.

Administrative Partners

"Tough" is an understatement to describe this year, and school administrators are managing a heavy load. Superintendents and principals are likely to be notified first with concerns about library materials currently available to students. If this is the first time you have interacted with this administrator, the process of responding may be more cumbersome. If you have maintained a solid working relationship, moving forward with the protocols will, ideally, be more collaborative.

As an instructional leader, you must keep your administrators informed about the mission, programs, initiatives, and instruction happening in and through the school library. Establish channels of communication that work for both of you and consistently share what the school library is doing to align with the school's and district's goals. Face-to-face meetings, library visits, social-media promotions, monthly reports, family outreach, and student and teacher feedback help grow a healthy working partnership with administrators. Equip your local school board with ongoing information, as well, so members are also connected. If concerns have surfaced or you sense an inquiry might go further, keep your administrative team on top of things so no one is caught off guard.

Early in this school year, book challenges were becoming more prevalent and impacting communities across the country. Call me paranoid or prepared, but I knew my department and district needed to update, clarify, and share protocols and procedures.

Honestly, I remember reviewing the materials selection policy each time I hosted an intern or graduate student.

I was confident I was adhering to the policy, but realized I was not particularly organized with having all necessary collection development materials at my fingertips.

My mission was to get my own act together, coordinate with my department, work with district leaders, and create a portal of resources necessary for collection development and potential inquiries. ALA's free "Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries" provides specific and research-based guidelines. The introduction to the toolkit states:

Every library — academic, public, and school (public, private, charter, independent, and international) — should have a comprehensive written policy that guides the selection, deselection or weeding, and reconsideration of library resources. The most valuable selection policy is current; it is reviewed and revised on a regular basis; and it is familiar to all members of a library's staff. The policy should be approved by the library's governing board or other policy-making body and disseminated widely for understanding by all stakeholders. (ALA 2018)

I quickly realized that my team had some work to do in the areas of familiarity for all stakeholders and regular review of the policy. Yes, our team has conversations about these topics, but—full disclosure—we had work to do. I took the lead and gathered the relevant material we did have. I curated those on a Google site for easy access and then requested a meeting with our department coordinator and our assistant superintendent. At this meeting, I shared what we had and what we needed to firm up. I was emphatic about the national movement and the

likelihood of concerns coming our way, as well.

I shared a checklist from the “Why Do I Need a Policy?” page of the ALA toolkit:

- Ensures that the selection of materials reflects the institution’s philosophy, mission, guiding principles, or other foundational documents
- Provides a framework for the consistent selection and acquisition of library resources in all formats using a standard set of criteria
- Avoids haphazard patterns of acquisition that will result in waste or overlap of content
- States who is responsible for selection and the parameters under which the individual(s) work, but allows for professional judgment
- Ensures a diversity of viewpoints on all topics, including those that may be considered controversial
- Identifies cooperative collection development arrangements such as resource sharing including interlibrary loans, agreements to purchase or lease e-content, and resource retention commitments (for example, archival materials, government documents, local author materials)
- Provides standards for collection maintenance and the removal of library resources that are out-of-date, inaccurate or no longer reflect the consensus of the field, in poor condition, rarely used, in an obsolete format, no longer fit the needs of library patrons, or have excess copies
- Supplies guidelines for consideration of gifts and donations

- Establishes a process by which individuals may share their concerns about library resources in a discussion with a librarian or, if their concerns are unresolved, invoke a formal reconsideration process
- Affirms the importance of intellectual freedom, referencing key documents such as the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the Library Bill of Rights, and the Freedom to Read Statement (ALA 2018)

Quickly, I recognized our gaps. If you are a new member of your school community or a veteran who needs to update information, you must take the lead. I could lament or be mortified about what I didn’t have clearly curated, but instead I made it my mission to get it together for our school community. Some of our materials were accessible and updated and some needed work. As I write this late in 2021, we still have some work to do and are working collaboratively to complete it. I follow up routinely with our assistant superintendent and director to ensure we have updated and revised materials, and have access to the same critical resources. I know our follow-up meetings are on the radar, but I will have to be persistent to keep moving forward. Legal backing, too, is significant and that is a piece that must happen at the district level, as well.

Make sure you have located all relevant materials, confirm they are updated, and establish a chain of command that won’t leave multiple parties scrambling to find what they need. Creating a shared folder, binder, drive, document, or website for internal use will help ensure members of the team can easily access materials they need. Updating the format, content, and accessibility of all relevant materials is important, too. For example, a policy written several years ago in my district still

referred to VHS and CDROMs on the Reconsideration Form. Though a simple fix, the form should be updated before it is needed. Potential changes or updates to existing documents may need school board, administrative, or legal approval, so make that a priority. Don’t wait to be asked to gather the resources—be proactive. Though policies are more difficult than simple forms to change, protocols and procedures are often in need of clarification and updating. Be a leader in advocating for these critical shifts.

Organizational Partners

Librarians have many professional resources at their fingertips to support a book challenge. At times, we may even seem to have too much to sort through. The ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom provides confidential support during censorship challenges to library materials, services, and programs and is a great place to start. Anyone can report censorship, even if they do not require assistance.

Finding resources to manage a challenge is not a difficult quest, but securing your community team to forge through the process at the district level can be more difficult without a plan. Clearly outlined policies and protocols related to materials selection, collection development and maintenance, reconsideration resources, and intellectual freedom must be in place and accessible for all stakeholders. As an instructional leader, make sure you have easy access to information and guidance about the library mission, objectives of a collection, managing donations, weeding, controversial materials, and the path of filing a request for reconsideration. Reach out to your library department, peers, and your regional, state, and national library organizations. Ongoing involvement

in these organizations will make connecting at time of need even more efficient based on the relationships you already have. Tap into the expertise of your professional network to assist in your preparation for a reconsideration challenge and ensure you have a clear point of access to these partners.

It is critical not to make assumptions about what resources are available within your district policies. Librarians must take the lead to identify strengths and gaps in the existing access to policies and protocols related to all aspects of collection development. If we fail to identify gaps, we are failing our community. In their 2020 article *Analyzing the Diversity of a High School Library Collection*, Sarah Jorgenson and Rene Burress direct school librarians to ensure their library collection represents the community. Those authors shared that “diversity covers many areas: race, culture, ability, sexual preference or identity, religion, gender, and class. In order to serve all students, school librarians must be ready to advocate and promote diversity within their own environment” (2020, 53). Failure to analyze the collection with integrity will not only provide a gap in meeting the needs of students, but also challenge the reality of policies and protocols when collection items are challenged.

In a recent *School Library Research* paper by Dr. April M. Dawkins and Emily C. Eidson, library leaders are reminded that “having a selection policy is important because no library can collect everything. In a school library the selection policy should serve as the foundation of a collection that supports an equitable, inclusive, and learner-centered environment” (2021). A selection policy and ongoing analysis of the collection will benefit the entire community.

Reaching Out to Stakeholders

In 2021 I reached out to stakeholders via a survey to ask for input about topics relating to book banning and individual choice. Students were asked about factors that help them decide what books to read. Parents/guardians were asked how their guidance, support, conversations, and beliefs influence what their children read, and about how parents/guardians would proceed if their child had a book that doesn’t align with parents’ beliefs.

All respondents were asked what they do if they don’t feel comfortable with a book they run across or that has been assigned for a class. All respondents were also asked questions about diversity of books in school libraries, book banning, and the school librarian’s role in providing access to diverse resources. Stakeholders were also given an opportunity to provide comments about their views on issues affecting individual choice.

The responses were interesting and thought provoking. You might want to do your own survey to get a broader perspective and to identify allies. Some of the responses to my survey have been included in the following sections.

Teacher Partners

School librarians can’t grow a reading community alone. Teacher partners are key players in conversations, outreach, and modeling. When students hear messaging from multiple perspectives about the power of choice, their confidence as a reader grows. Andrew Zupan, ELA teacher at Pine Grove Middle School, for example, shared how he models choice for his students. “When I come across a book I am uncomfortable with, I just walk on by it. Unless it defames a marginalized group, then I try to do something about it. In the past when I was uncomfort-

able with an assigned book, I still read it. I have never been assigned a book that made me uncomfortable through discrimination but through violence. That being said, it is important to read things that make you uncomfortable inside. That is how we grow and change as people.” Andrew shares his reading experiences in conversations with students and is teaching students how to use their voices in the process. You can’t, however, expect teachers like Andrew to be part of the support team in difficult times if you haven’t had a solid working relationship before that.

Many factors may impede strong teacher-librarian partnerships with the entire staff of a building. Schedules, staffing, content, and even a pandemic can all impact the depth and frequency of these working relationships. Some collaborations are organic, and some take more work to build. Foster solid partners who are aware of the mission of the school library, understand student involvement in the school library, are exposed to the collection, and are clear how the school library aligns with the instructional goals of the school and district.

Lisa DiCosimo, grade 6 ELA teacher, is a strong library advocate and instructional partner. Lisa is emphatic that “kids need to see themselves in literature to know they are not alone in their feelings about gender identity, those students of color and those who have [emigrated] from other countries so they can learn about others. I love the choices in our school library, and I try to read different kinds of titles for *First Chapter Fridays*, and the students love it!” Because of the culture she builds in the classroom, Lisa’s students are well equipped and empowered to come to the school library to ask for specific titles, subjects, and genres. They are equally comfortable in

sharing what they are *not* interested in and that comfort reflects student ownership in their reading journey. Conversations and modeling in the classrooms by teachers like Lisa play a critical role in growing a culture of literacy and building allies for the school library.

Family Partners

Every school has unique opportunities and challenges when it comes to making valuable connections between the school and families. In some communities, parents and families are embedded partners in growing a culture of literacy. Some students are exposed to author visits, book fairs, special events, promotions, public library collaboration, community outreach, summer reading programs, and overall support of literacy and the school library within their families. Often the school librarian will fit nicely into the existing literacy ecosystem and will continue to help these connections thrive. Other times, however, the librarian needs to start small and build partnerships one family at a time. Librarians need to continually assess their communities, identify gaps, and pursue potential areas of partnership. For example, some students may not be checking out books because of a negative experience with an overdue record from prior years that tainted their comfort level with checking books out. Families may have guidelines for what their children can or cannot take out, and understanding these concerns is helpful. A student may be experiencing challenges in using the online catalog or signing out audiobooks, hindering their access. Providing an easy way to identify what is NOT working for families is key in breaking down barriers. Parents and caregivers who are involved in their children's reading lives should be celebrated. Their input and meaningful conversations with



their children about their reading choices provide powerful guidance for students.

Parent Caira Cramer-Walter shared, "With my teenager, I make sure to show an interest in anything she is reading. She reads constantly. I will have her talk to me about the book, or I will read the book myself after she is done. We will have a book talk. If there are issues that pop up that go against our family beliefs/guidelines I make it a point to talk to her about it and look up information if needed. With my youngest, he isn't into any difficult topics yet, but I have already established a system where he talks to me about his book when he has finished a chapter or two."

Parent Mary B. said, "We talk to our son about his traits and what he likes to read, and those are the books he takes out and we buy for him. If we don't like a book he has, which hasn't happened yet, we would sit down with him and talk about why he wants to read it and what he thinks he would get out of reading the book."

Ms. Lenahan, an ELA teacher, is a valuable community advocate who sends clear messages to her students that they have the right to choose

what they do and don't want to read. She shared, "I think that it's the school's job to provide students with a safe environment to explore ideas, and the library is one of the sources of this. I think that it's a parent's responsibility to pay attention to what their child is reading and to have conversations with them about what they're reading—especially if it's sensitive material. If a parent doesn't want a student to read something, they should have the authority over that." Ms. Lenahan honors the role of a parent (family) in the decision-making process of considering a book challenge.

Parents and teachers who take an active interest in what learners read and value access to diverse materials of interest to diverse students can be strong allies for a school library.

Student Partners

Students. They are why we do what we do. Not only do we want to have a library collection that reflects each of them, but we also want learners to have the option to choose what works (or does not) for them. School libraries flourish when students feel a genuine connection to the program, the environment, the collection,



and the people. Librarians create authentic connections to students through direct instruction, classes, library programs, special interest groups, clubs, student volunteers, promotions, contests, class visits, guest speakers, authors, digital resources, books, and daily interactions.

When learners are equipped with the strategies to advocate for what they want to see in the school library and feel comfortable in choosing or passing on a specific title, genre, or subject, conversations are possible. When a parent/caregiver shares a concern or belief related to their child's selection, that input should be celebrated and acknowledged. In interactions that are centered around individual student-family expectations, the school librarian offers an important voice.

Our students are our most valuable advocates, and the library must be a safe, nurturing environment where they see themselves reflected. They deserve opportunities to choose, to refuse, and to have opinions.

Student DP, when asked about the role of the library, said, "I believe that it's to get books that teach kids about different things."

Eighth-grader Kayden shared, "Some people might be interested in a certain topic, and removing it is taking that away from them. Kids should be able to pick what matches them. When I find a book I don't feel comfortable with, I will probably return it. I also would be willing to tell the librarian just to let her know." She adds, "I think students should be able to choose what they want."

Kaleigh, another eighth-grader, expressed her belief that parents have the right to tell their kids not to read something, but other kids should be able to still read it to have a wide range of options. She continued, "Knowing that this library isn't one age group, some people might enjoy things others don't. If I find a book that I am not into, I return it. If a parent doesn't think a book is OK, the librarian should talk to the parent to see what they don't like and

work through it with their student, not decide for everyone."

Ariella, in grade 6, also believes that parents should talk to the teacher or librarian to see what their students can and can't read. She said, "All students should be able to read about people and their life stories. Even if a student is not like the character in the book, students can learn more about what matters to different people by reading it."

Seventh-grader Dorothy said, "I think that parents should have some control over what they want their kids to read or to not read. However, they should not make the decision to remove books for all students. Instead, the parents should be using their voices to add books to the library in order to grow it and its community."

Students like these can be powerful advocates for the school library and its collection.

Looking Forward

Ideally, our school communities are places where everyone is encouraged to have and share their opinions, and with a culture that promotes choice and voice. Ideally, the school is also a place for healthy discord that helps everyone grow as an individual. The school library is an essential component of such a community.

The reality, however, shows that some stakeholders want their perspectives and opinions to be the only ones or be recognized as the "right" ones. Though many people will celebrate the availability of a range of relevant and credible options for readers, some stakeholders will want to have greater control over exactly what is considered to be relevant or credible. Librarians must acknowledge that the interpretation of what is *inappropriate*, *profane*, *obscene*,

racist, immoral, or subversive will be as individual as each person who makes those claims.

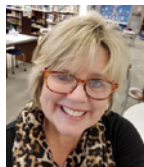
Some inquiries may warrant a conversation to resolve concerns, but others will need a more-formal path. Librarians are ambassadors of intellectual freedom and our mission is to connect our communities to ideas and perspectives to expand thinking. There will be times, however, when addressing a challenge needs to be less dialogue and more protocols. As passionate as we are about what we do, we will need to minimize emotion and opinion, and instead focus on the process for the formal inquiry.

Book challenges will happen. School librarians can provide the leadership needed to grow a culture of literacy that is a collaborative venture with administrators, teachers, organizations, families, and students. These partnerships may not reduce challenges or calls for material removal, but they will strengthen the foundation of a solid community to foster regularly occurring, open dialogue.

It is up to the school librarian to proactively cultivate partnerships. By means of effective leadership, the librarian must identify gaps and seize opportunities to create a program that continues to thrive and meets the needs of each community. Finding out what is missing is a cyclical process. Firming up access to policies, guidelines, and protocols that ensure an ethical and responsible collection is non-negotiable. It is equally important to continually identify what is streamlining access for all and what barriers may be standing in the way. Library leaders must have a keen eye on what is not working for community partners in terms of the content, format, perspective, voice, genre, and subjects of the collection. What adjustments or shifts are warranted to better

reflect community needs. Yes, hard work and leadership will strengthen a school library. We also must keep a critical eye on what shifts or changes are needed to expand the impact of the school library.

Are you ready?



Sue Kowalski is a middle school librarian at East Syracuse Minoa Central School District in East Syracuse, NY.

She is a past winner of the National School Library Program of the Year (AASL), I Love My Librarian Award (Carnegie/ALA), iSchool Alumni Impact Award (Syracuse University), Super Librarian Award (Central New York School Librarians), and Teacher Librarian Journal Leadership Award, and has been named a Library Journal "Mover and Shaker." Sue is passionate about the role of strategic leadership and the impact that has on strong school library programs. She is actively involved in the New York Library Association and its Section of School Librarians, Onondaga Cortland Madison Board of Cooperative Educational Services, Northern Onondaga Public Library Board of Trustees, New York State Board of Regents Advisory Council on Libraries, and AASL in varying capacities. Amplifying student voice is always her focus, and she works to do that through the iStaff library service program for school students, and multiple channels in and through the library. She shares the power of how school libraries connect to the school community and beyond, and continues to grow those collaborative partnerships. Sue believes librarians must #LEADOUTLOUD (bullhorn optional). Conversations happening on Twitter @spkowalski.

Recommended Resources:

To read more about growing a culture of literacy to prepare for challenging times:

- American Library Association. 2022. "Office for Intellectual Freedom." <www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/oif>
- American Library Association. 2018. "Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries" <www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/selectionpolicytoolkit>
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- Gustafson, Brad. 2021. *The 6 Literacy Levers: Creating a Community of Readers*. Chicago: ConnectEDD.
- Kowalski, Susan P. n.d. "Freedom to READ." <<https://padlet.com/skowalski2/freedomtoread>>

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