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Book Challenges Popping Up All Over: What Do School Principals Need to Know?

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Chapter 2

Book Challenges

Popping Up All Over: What Do School Principals Need to Know?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides practical advice and reasons for school leaders to support students' intellectual freedom through their support of school libraries and school librarians. The chapter begins with a short but critical literature review that includes case law on the topic of censorship in schools. The concerns of teachers and librarians from a recent study are summarized and help build the foundation for practical and ready to use advice for any school leaders to uphold the intellectual freedom of all students.

"I went 18 years without having anything challenged. And then poof, all of a sudden, it's popping up all over" – Tracy

Tracy, a veteran classroom teacher captures the climate in today's schools and libraries where book challenges seem to be popping up everywhere. In this chapter we share what school principals need to know about dealing with book challenges in their schools. For the purpose of this chapter, we will define a book challenge as a formal complaint about material in a library's collection or any effort to restrict or remove a book from a library or classroom collection or instruction. To support a principal's foundational knowledge, we will draw on the data from interviews conducted with school librarians and teachers like Tracy who experienced a book challenge. Their stories provide insight into the different types of book challenges, the impact of a book challenge on school staff, and the kinds of support they received from principals. We also share their advice about knowing district policies and who to turn to

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in the school for assistance. We focus particularly on the school librarian, a building level professional educated in the principles of intellectual freedom.

INTRODUCTION

Principals are the leaders of their school. They work tirelessly with their teachers to ensure appropriate instructional strategies are implemented, they meet with students to address concerns and behavior, they oversee all support staff, and much more, usually through the course of just one day. Much of the training school administrators go through during their graduate work and mandated continuing education highlight big picture views and foundational knowledge, like data-informed leadership, educational law, improvement plans, and how to be an instructional leader. Often these courses and workshops discuss tools and resources that are accessible to improve or enhance the student (and consequently all faculty and staff) experience while in their building. Yet these courses and workshops rarely include training on the selection of educational resources for libraries and classrooms and how to prepare for book challenges and other attempts at censorship. On the other hand, the school librarian in their building was trained in collection development as a significant part of their professional preparation.

Not surprisingly, many administrators do not have a clear understanding on how and why materials, policies, and procedures in the library exist. This leads to an exaggerated ignorance of the purpose of a school library and the true value of a collection curated by a professional librarian. In a time when libraries, books, and materials are a source of debate, this ignorance is increasingly dangerous. School leaders need to have a comprehensive understanding of the purpose and value of a school library and the professional preparation and role of a school librarian. This deep and foundational understanding will build trust, enhance collaboration, extend support, and better the students educational experience while in their building and beyond.

An often untapped resource, school librarians curate and provide materials to support curriculum in the classroom, enhance interests out of the classroom, and promote curiosity. The materials can include print books, databases, and curated websites, but a school librarian is also an instructional designer who collaborates with classroom teachers to support instruction and resource collection for well rounded experiences. Many schools count on their school librarian to teach basic life skills like digital citizenship, how to perform research, how to search for materials on their own, and responsibility with borrowed items. A core professional value of librarianship is access to information and ideas. The library profession has always taken a strong stance against attempts to deny access and all types of censorship by investing in an Office of Intellectual Freedom and adopting strong documents such as the *Library Bill of Rights* (originally crafted in 1939) which states, “Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment,” and an Office for Intellectual Freedom.

BACKGROUND

School Librarians: An Overlooked Resource

Little research has focused on awareness from principals and other school leaders regarding the position of librarians related to censorship and book challenges. Instead a lot of the school library research about

how principals perceive the role of the school librarian has focused on the instructional role (Church, 2008; Church, 2010; Hartzell, 2002, Shannon, 2009). This focus is likely because of advocacy efforts to demonstrate the impact of school librarians on student learning as well as the value and purpose of appropriately staffed school libraries.

The importance of the school administrator's support to the success of school library programs has also been emphasized in the research. Oberg (2006) analyzed resources as old as an 1944 issue of *The School Review* and as recent as 2006 that emphasized the vital importance of principal support of school libraries in the overall success of the educational system citing data from still relevant studies such as Baldwin (1996), Charter (1982), Gehlken (1995) that demonstrated the critical need for principal support. Additional studies that found positive principal attitude and encouragement correlated with school library implementation and use (Corr, 1979; Farwell, 1999; Hellene, 1974; Turner 1980; Yetter, 1994). Despite this demonstrated need for principal support, these studies often found that principals and school administrators limited their support due to a lack of knowledge and understanding about the purpose, value, importance, as well as the management and function of school libraries (Gallagher-Havashi, 2001; Hartzell, 2002; Hartzell, 2003; Lent, 2008; Mcghee, 2005; Shannon, 2009; Wilson, Blake, & Lyders, 1993). Knowledge of the school librarian's application of material selection principles and intellectual freedom issues were not mentioned in these studies and one must assume this is part of the gap in principals' understanding of the role of the school librarian.

School Librarians in Partnership With Principals

A primary challenge for school librarians remains positive working relationships with school administration (Croft, 2022; Croft, 2021; Lewis 2021). The relationship between a building principal and school librarian can be built on many of the similarities between both roles. Both librarians and principals must have broad views of the entire school's educational journey at the forefront of decisions they make which are centered on the students' educational opportunities. For example, Peters (2020), a former school administrator, noted that the International Literacy Association lists reading as a fundamental human right because it "giv[es] each student the capability to access information that can allow them to reach their fullest potential." Additionally, both professionals deal with the majority (if not all) staff and students daily. The principal and school librarian need to be cooperative and involved for educational programs to be successful (Lent, 2008). Their partnership is key to successfully dealing with challenges to library and instructional materials.

Once principals and other school administrators see librarians as leaders and gain an understanding of the library and its purpose, their support increases (Alexander et al., 2003). This foundational understanding and support in library programs is essential for school administrators to support their students' intellectual freedom. As the primary instructional leader, principals need to be fully informed about the library and its purpose to be able to promote, properly communicate about, and utilize the library (Hopkins, 1995). This demonstration of outward support from a leader promotes the facilitation of library resources and more funding dedicated to future library resources. This is not limited to the materials and staff of the library; the principal also needs to be aware and well versed in policies that affect the procedures and guidelines of the library and enforce them appropriately (Lent, 2008).

Dealing With Censorship Attempts in Schools

Censorship is not a new challenge to educational environments; a seminal study (Fiske, 1959) on censorship in school and public libraries highlights the level of control the principal has within their building when it comes to censorship and upholding students' intellectual freedom. The power a principal wields can be used to support libraries and learn about their value. On the other hand, that power can also be misused if principals are not aware of policies and procedures that drive library collection decisions by removing library materials without completing a challenge process or denying approval for purchases that meet the collection development guidelines. Almost sixty years later, Dawkins (2018) finds similar struggles to still be present at both the librarian level, as librarians are afraid to even try to purchase material that may be considered controversial, and at the principal level represented in actions such as not approving purchase requests for similar fears.

There are ways principals may avoid potential legal implications, press coverage, or general frustration. Lee (1988) recommends principals implement instructional programs that focus on teaching values and the respect of one another; stay updated on current censorship trends; inform all teachers of current censorship trends to keep everyone on the same page and model transparency as this is not a topic limited to school libraries or Language Arts classrooms; and encourage a variety of resources so there is something for everyone. This preparation should not be rooted in fearful anticipation of challenges or difficult discussions that may occur, but rather be rooted in what is best for the students, best practices, legal decisions, and the school's mission. Gibson (2007) echoes the need for principals to go to school librarians first when a potential challenge occurs, as they are formally trained in censorship and intellectual freedom issues. As a former administrator, he recommends talking with a school librarian before any potential issue arises. Librarians can serve as a valuable resource for students, teachers, and administrators, in times of need and want.

Many of the experiences school librarians have faced regarding censorship have support in federal, state and local court cases that have upheld students' intellectual freedom. Without the important foundational understanding of policies, a principal may unwittingly violate school policies, such as removing a book without a challenge process, and pave the way to a First Amendment lawsuit by trying to minimize a complaint. A 1982 survey (Anderson & Wetzel) of legal knowledge of high school principals when it comes to censorship found an average score of about 40%, not passing by any typical educational standard. Though the principal was often a source of support during challenges from community members, challenges from school staff and faculty did not often adhere to school policies (Hopkins, 1995).

Legal Precedents in School Censorship

The Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico (1982) is currently the only US Supreme Court case that serves as precedent for school board and administrative control when it comes to students' right to read and access information. The decision of that New York case upheld students' intellectual freedom and first amendment rights against the vested interest of school boards. There are many other court cases across the country that solidify students' intellectual freedom both inside the classroom and beyond. Perhaps most remarkable, was former United States district judge of the United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts Joseph L. Tauro's ruling in the 1978 case about the contested removal of a book of poetry. Tauro noted that "the library is 'a mighty resource in the marketplace of ideas.' There a student can literally explore the unknown, and discover areas of

interest and thought not covered by the prescribed curriculum. The student who discovers the magic of the library is on the way to a life-long experience of self-education and enrichment. That student learns that a library is a place to test or expand upon ideas presented to him, in or out of the classroom. The most effective antidote to the poison of mindless orthodoxy is ready access to a broad sweep of ideas and philosophies. There is no danger from such exposure. The danger is mind control” (*Right to Read Defense Committee of Chelsea v. School Committee of the City of Chelsea*, 1978).

Various court cases at different levels of jurisdiction have almost always come to the conclusion that students’ first amendment rights have more weight than the opinions others may have on a particular material. Whether the title of concern was a sacred text, a literary classic, a textbook, a magazine, or a contemporary piece of literature, the court has always ruled in favor of the materials remaining accessible to the students. Though many of these cases are at the state level, notable cases span a broad geographical spectrum including Kansas, California, New York, Michigan, Massachusetts, Ohio, New Hampshire, Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, Florida, and Virginia. (*Case v. Unified School District No. 233, Johnson County, Kansas*, 1995; *Evans v. Selma Union High School District of Fresno County*, 1924; *Matter of Rosenberg v. Board of Education, City of New York*, 1949; *Todd v. Rochester Community Schools*, 1972; *Minarcini v. Strongsville City School District*, 1974; *Right to Read Defense Committee of Chelsea v. School Committee of the City of Chelsea*, 1978; *Salvail v. Nashua Board of Education*, 1979; *Loewen v. Turnipseed*, 1980; *Campbell v. St. Tammany Parish School Board*, 1995; *Sund v. City of Wichita Falls*, 2000; *Counts v. Cedarville School District*, 2003; *Smith v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County*, 1987; *Virgil v. School Board of Columbia County*, 1989; *Mainstream Loudoun v. Board of Trustees of Loudoun*, 1998).

At the time of publication, there are two pending cases on the topic of censorship that are unprecedented and the decisions will have a remarkable impact on students’ right to read and access information. The first case is *Pen American Center v. Escambia County School District* in Florida which was filed on May 17, 2023 and is a federal court lawsuit. The plaintiffs include authors, whose books have been removed or restricted, and parents and students who can not access relevant and appropriate titles through their public school system. The lawsuit claims the school district violated the first amendment rights of the students, authors, and publishers as well as the Equal Protection Clause of the constitution. Additionally, a lawsuit in local Arkansas courts brought about by parents and the public library are claiming the county violated the first and fourteenth amendments by prohibiting libraries and booksellers from having specific books available to their patrons and customers. Though the outcome of this case will have less wide spread and immediate impact, it is clear that students’ intellectual freedom is something all educators should be aware of.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

While knowledge of legal precedents is important, principals may also wonder what it means to be involved in a book challenge. The role the principal plays and how they best support school staff facing a challenge has a great impact on their staff and students. Research employing a multiple case study method was conducted to address the question: In what ways do teachers and school librarians who have been involved in book challenges within U.S. public schools describe their experiences? In depth interviews were conducted with seven educators who responded to a national call posted on multiple professional lists for school librarians and teachers who had experienced a book challenge on the job.

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Each of their cases was unique and portraits of the individual cases are detailed by Sachdeva et al.(2023). Interviews were conducted by the research team via web conferencing; each lasting approximately 45 minutes. In each interview, the participants mentioned the role played by the principal in dealing with the book challenge. Table 1 lists the seven participants, their role, and a quick overview of each “case.”

Table 1. Participants’ roles and an overview of each “case”

Participant	Role	A Case of What?
Beatrice	Librarian	A very public challenge brought by an organized political group.
Jared	Librarian	A parental concern shared with the librarian and dealt with through a conversation.
Maggie	Librarian	A parent’s concern about the use of the word “bitch” in a slim informational title about puppies is brought as a formal written challenge brought to the school board.
Sam	Teacher	A case of soft censorship where administrators direct the removal of books from classrooms and libraries without following district policies.
Sarah	Librarian	A case of multiple incidents of censorship including pre-emptive institutional censorship where book orders are scrutinized for controversial titles particularly about LGBTQIA+ topics.
Tracy	Teacher	A case of a classroom teacher following procedures but facing challenges about book selections.
Zoe	Teacher	A case of a classroom teacher engaged with a formal challenge and reconsideration process where the book was ultimately retained.

Every educator interviewed had advice for other educators and administrators about dealing with a book challenge. Some of their advice about policy and procedures represent best practices, but other lessons from their stories were less obvious such as understanding the emotional and ripple effects a book challenge may have on faculty, including those not directly impacted by the experience. Book challenges come for a variety of reasons and from a range of sources that include but are not limited to parents, other educators, and even administrators. The reports of these educators offer advice to administrators to understand the breadth of book challenges faced by educators, the impact on school staff, the importance of following policies and procedures, and finally the role a school librarian can play in addressing book challenges. Data from these interviews related to the role of the principal were isolated for this book chapter and analyzed for major themes presented below.

Understand the Breadth of Book Challenges

Administrators need to be prepared that complaints against books may come from a variety of sources and for a wide range of reasons. It’s difficult to anticipate what will be challenged and by whom. In the seven interviews the challenges that were described ranged from a parent complaint to an organized political challenge to library materials. Jared was a school librarian when a parent complained about the word “scrotum” in *The Higher Power of Lucky*. Despite being prepared, Jared was surprised when the parent came in holding a copy of the book and he realized, “wait a minute, this is a thing.” Maggie also talked about how you might feel prepared to deal with challenges but “you just never know what somebody is going to find offensive.” In Maggie’s case, it was a slim book about puppies in a popular non-fiction series that was challenged for the proper use of the word “bitch” for the mother dog. Mag-

gie's case went all the way through a reconsideration process. Maggie reflects on the kinds of challenges faced by educators that include formal book challenges where a written challenge is filed with a school board or other authority.

I think a bigger piece of that is understanding that you prepare yourself for the bigger challenges. You prepare yourself [for] the LGBTQ or controversial subjects, things that are more socially relevant. And you, you have your mindset for that. But really what you need to have your mindset for is Captain Underpants. That those are things that you need to be aware of, the breadth of the things that are challenged. The fact that communication and relationship can de-escalate so many situations to where you don't have to get to the point of it being a formal book challenge.

Jared's case illustrates the power of communication and relationship. He sat down with the parent to discuss their concerns and shared how the book was selected and the process if the parent wished to pursue a formal challenge. In this case, the challenge was handled at this level. Considering the range of reasons for a book challenge, Maggie mentions that it's often language that is the concern:

When the principal or even a student has come and said, oh this book has bad words in it. I've said yeah, yeah it does and that's because in real life, bad guys don't say, "oh gosh." They don't say "shucks," you know, that's not real life, and as you get older, and you start picking up books that reflect life, you're going to see more reality in those books. (Maggie).

While Jared and Maggie both describe cases where the parent first brought the concern to the school librarian, this is not always the case. Beatrice was called to the superintendent's office one morning to be told that a group of people had brought a challenge to three LGBTQIA+ books in her collection directly to a school board meeting. Her case resonates with contemporary, high profile book challenges that are in the media. As she said, "They're terribly organized. You know it's not just one parent. And they had backing from a national organization. So that was more difficult than maybe one parent coming in and complaining."

Censorship efforts from school administrators are not uncommon. Sarah shared how the superintendent scrutinized her book orders and would not allow her to order several titles related to LGBTQIA+ issues and another case where an English teacher who was friends with the superintendent simply removed books from the library collection. These instances are not unusual and are difficult to quantify because they do not involve a formal process but are more examples of soft or stealth censorship where the removal of books occurs without following a formal and transparent process. In Sam's case, when the book *Thirteen Reasons Why* about teen suicide became a streaming TV series, an edict came down from the superintendent to remove the book from classroom and library collections. "[The] superintendent told the school librarians to get it taken off the shelves, and he told classroom teachers if you've got a copy, take it off your shelves. So it was a real quiet sort of soft censorship situation going on there."

School principals are often involved in a book challenge. In many cases, it's a matter of the school librarian or teacher keeping the principal in the loop. Jared immediately went to his principal, who told him, "this is your arena, and I'm going to let you handle it, just keep me informed." On some occasions the principal was the one who first heard about the concern and then shared it with the librarian or teacher. In today's climate, teachers and librarians told us they are looking for supportive principals. They encourage other educators to ask about policies when interviewing for positions and to know up front

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what they might expect from the principal. The educators in our study identified some of the ways they felt supported by their principals and the importance of knowing “Admin has your back.” Zoe describes how her principal artfully handled one parental concern about the book, *Deliverance*:

So, my principal who is far brighter than I am, said, have you read the rest of the book, because she [the parent] was saying, “On page 36!!” And she said “no!” And he said, “Well, then we’re going to stop right here. And you’re going to go home and read this book. And then you come back and tell me whether you want your daughter to read it or not. So we’ll see you next Tuesday.” She comes back and throws the book on the table and says “this is horrible,” and he said, “You know, that’s so great because literature is supposed to evoke strong emotions, and it sure did with you.” And the woman changed her mind.

Understand How a Book Challenge Impacts Your Staff

It may be easy when in the midst of a challenge to overlook the ripple effect of a challenge on faculty morale and well-being. These educators commented on how overwhelming the experience of a book challenge could be. A principal needs to be aware of the impact a book challenge will have on those most directly impacted by the challenge and by the ripple effect on faculty and staff. Tracy put it succinctly, “because it’s so hard in these professions to not take it personally.”

The librarian or classroom teacher who is faced with an upset parent will often feel the brunt of that parent’s anger and concern. They may want to please the parents and be afraid that they are in trouble or even in danger of losing their job. Sarah dealt with multiple book challenges including *You’re in the Wrong Bathroom* and *Gender Queer*.

It makes things a whole lot more stressful, when I’m trying to get stuff done. It kind of puts you on edge a little bit about what you are doing, and are you going to get in trouble for doing this. So that’s the biggest thing, that it makes you second guess what you’re doing. Even if you know this is a good thing to be doing; it seems like a bad feeling just lingering. If I do this, am I going to get fired? (Sarah).

Social media has exacerbated the stress for educators. Tracy learned about one parental challenge to *The Hate You Give* through Facebook. “And someone texted me and said, go to this Facebook page. You’re being talked about. And so, this parent had never reached out to me. But he went straight to Facebook and was talking about this horrible book that was being taught.” When a challenge goes public, it can be particularly upsetting such as the case for Beatrice who was faced with a politically fraught challenge: “In the long run, it was a very hideous experience. It was terrifying in some ways because this was an ugly group, and they were local. And they wrote very nasty emails about me, to the superintendent, and it was, it was very ugly, and to the point where ALA [The American Library Association] offered me a place to get away if I needed to.”

Even with a lot of community and administrative support, a formal challenge may put an educator in an unfamiliar experience of speaking publicly about the issue at a venue like a school board meeting. As Zoe shared, “Although I didn’t feel alone in my attempt to protect the novel, it was me at the podium that night. I’d been nervous for days before that. And when it was all over it was just a big, ahhhh.”

A book challenge may have a chilling effect on educator choices about what books to share with students. Sam discussed how “it really makes you second guess everything” and how that ultimately impacts the representation of diverse perspectives. He describes curricular choices, “one of my colleagues was

rewriting seventh grade curriculum this year and added more diversity, and the books she chose were pretty much the same books that we had before, but with diverse characters instead of White characters. Stepping away from any kind of issue books or issue themes that might be in some of these books.” The impacts ripple to students, “I feel like the students are really losing a great opportunity to discuss these topics in an appropriate environment where they can really learn something from it as opposed to just kind of reading it on their own and maybe enjoying it and maybe not quite getting the point.”

Tracy also reports how teachers shy away from trying new titles with students, “Let’s find something new. But most of the other teachers are younger, and are like, nope, I just want to be able to cruise through. And I keep trying to explain that if you do it right, your principal will support you. I know not all teachers have that luxury. I know of a few principals that I’ve worked for that would have totally thrown me under the bus.”

Know the Policy and Process for a Formal Challenge

Book challenges are stressful, but many of the complexities surrounding the challenge can be managed by knowing and adhering to policy. Zoe described her school system’s policy and procedures as “Orwellian” as she describes, “If you wanted to add a new novel or anthology to the curriculum, you had a whole long sheet of questions that you had to answer very thoroughly, and take that with a copy of the book to the Board of Education, and they either said thumbs up or thumbs down, and I thought why are they looking over my shoulder? But the first time I got a book challenge, it wasn’t my problem. It was the district’s problem because they had already approved the novel.” Board and challenge policies often detail the procedure to be followed if a formal request is received to remove a book from the library or curriculum. Maggie summarizes a typical reconsideration procedure:

The challenge had to be a written challenge. They had to read the entire book, do a written challenge, and submit that, and then that went before our school board. The school board then designated one member to form a committee and the committee had to be comprised of a librarian, an administrator, that school board member, a teacher at the level it was being challenged, and a parent. So there were five of us on that committee that reviewed the book, and all of us had to read the book prior to meeting.

In Maggie’s case the administrator named to the committee was the school principal. Zoe also described the procedure if a parent didn’t want their child to read a classroom text as the parent meeting with the principal, guidance counselor and teacher or school librarian to choose an alternate text for the student. Zoe concludes her advice about having a policy in place by saying, “that’s more important than being midstream and saying, where’s my paddle?” Tracy reminds educators not to become complacent about potential challenges, “know what the policy is and know how to deal with it, because I went 18 years without having anything challenged. And then poof, all of a sudden, it’s popping up all over.”

Knowing the policy and being sure all of your staff understand the policy is key. Unfortunately, our participants gave us examples of superintendents and school board members who attempted to subvert policies. As noted above, Sam shared the case where teachers and librarians were quietly directed to remove *Thirteen Reasons Why* from their shelves. In Maggie’s case, a conservative school member attempted to challenge library purchases but a school administrator, “offered to buy him a copy and they would read it together over the month and then decide together, if it should go through the formal book challenge, but that it would need to go through board policy as he was a board member, that he would

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not be able to circumvent that.” In Sarah’s case, books were simply removed or as she says “stolen” from her library by staff members with the knowledge and approval of the superintendent. Sarah did share that there was now a new superintendent, “I heard he would never try and remove a book for being LGBTQ, because he is like, you cannot touch it, that’s a lawsuit.”

There’s a Librarian for That

A principal may find themselves navigating a book challenge and wondering where to go for assistance. There is generally a professional in each building whose training included learning about the legal and educational ramifications of selecting and removing materials from classrooms and libraries: the school librarian. Across the cases, it was heard that censorship and handling book challenges were included in the preparation of librarians but not in the preparation of teachers or administrators. Sam in particular had administrative training and said it did not include anything about dealing with attempted censorship. While librarians have received training, information about working with these professionals is acknowledged as also missing from principal preparation. Beatrice suggests, “Because I don’t think they address librarians at all in administrative educational programs. They don’t know what to do with us, they don’t understand our profession at all whatsoever.” As the school principal, you are not alone in your building. The school librarian has been trained in book selection, collection policies, and intellectual freedom.

Librarian preparation focuses particularly on policy but as Sarah remarks, she knew about book challenges but “not in the non-traditional way that I’ve had to deal with.” Sarah, however, did know where to turn and looked to the American Library Association for resources to model a selection and reconsideration policy on. Beatrice reminds us that professional organizations such as the American Library Association and the National Coalition Against Censorship offer confidential services that are free to all, not just members. They can share talking points and tips for remaining professional in the face of a challenge.

Considering the ripple effect of a challenge on the entire school staff and the possibility that any member of a school faculty may be faced with a challenge or tempted to remove books from the library or curriculum, principals are encouraged to educate their staffs about policy and procedures. Beatrice persuaded her principal to allow her to address the staff:

He agreed to allow me to do a presentation to the entire staff on why we were fighting this, and even some of the most conservative people on our staff understood why we were so serious about the challenge, that we were not just going to remove these books, and why I particularly was, you know, it gave me an opportunity to educate people about a librarian’s code of ethics, which sounds really easy, in theory, but when you put those ethics into practice... That’s why it’s a profession. Because you have to. Upholding those ethics is not always easy.

DISCUSSION

Practical Guide to Support Students’ Intellectual Freedom

Though systematic change in principal training and certification programs is an ongoing effort, there are currently no mandatory courses or training for school leaders to have an understanding of the value,

purpose and importance of school libraries. We would strongly advocate for the inclusion of the role and importance of school librarians as part of the professional training of principals and other school administrators. In addition, we've compiled some suggestions for change and action that current and soon-to-be school leaders can use in the guides below.

Librarians as Resources

Although the number of schools without full time certified school librarians is staggering, there are still over 40,000 certified school librarians throughout the country based on the SLIDE study (Lance & Kachel, 2021). School librarians should be well versed in their collection, both physical and digital, collection development guidelines, and potential ways to deal with opposition for students' right to read. The school library should be an administrator's first stop when learning more about students' intellectual freedom. School administrators should have at least a foundational understanding of their school's library collection, the mission of the library, how materials are acquired and weeded, and what initial steps might be when someone challenges students' right to read or access relevant information.

Role of School Library

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) has emphasized the critical importance of school libraries preparing learners for life outside of school by creating a “dynamic learning environments that bridge the gap between access and opportunity for all K–12 learners” (American Association of School Librarians, 2018). While learning and enhancing the curriculum through resources and materials is the primary emphasis on school library collections, it is also a place where students should feel safe and supported in exploring personally relevant questions related to their identity. Certified school librarians help maintain collections to meet those standards as well as foster and support life-long learning in both students and staff.

PRACTICAL GUIDE TO UPHOLD STUDENTS' INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM IN LIBRARIES

Part I. Understand the Breadth of Book Challenges

Book challenges seek to remove or restrict access to information that professionals deemed relevant and appropriate for the library's patrons. It is important to take the time to consider the harmful effects of book challenges, even those that are untimely overturned. Efforts to limit access to vital information and place a boundary on students' access erodes trust and confidence in their educators.

1. Know administrators are likely not experts in the library field

Isolated and hasty decisions can have unintended consequences for students and staff that can be long lasting. While there are former school librarians who go on to have school administration roles, it's important to acknowledge that there are many other paths to school administration positions. As most school administrators do not have formal library training, talking with certified and trained librar-

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ians (even if there aren't any in the district) before making any decisions affirms the value of students' intellectual freedom. Consider additional workshops or training opportunities lead by a school librarian.

2. Know the materials and resources in your physical library

Visit your school library and the staff who work there every day. Walk around and browse the shelves. Check out what is new and how things are organized. Ask questions about signage.

3. Know the materials and resources in your digital library

Many schools also offer digital resources in addition to the print collection. The resources may include curated websites, research guides, subscription databases and educational technology tools, and digital libraries. Educate yourself on what types of digital resources are available and how to access them.

Part II. Understand How a Book Challenge Impacts Your Staff

Similar to the shift in students' trust and confidence, book challenges can create similar emotions and dip in morale among staff. All educators, school librarians included, are formally and extensively trained to educate students within their speciality. Book challenges can limit the ability and assurance educators have to perform at their best.

4. Understand the expectations and rules about your school library

Different schools and different levels of schools have distinct circulation guidelines for how physical and digital resources are checked out and for how long. Some schools still implement fines for late items and most schools have lost item fees. Additionally, digital resources may have specific expectations for circulation periods and login information that would be foundational to an administrator's understanding of the vast resources available to students. Having a structural understanding for your library's rules and expectations allow you to speak with authority when someone may raise incorrect information as part of a challenge.

Part III. Know the Policy and Process for a Formal Challenge

In order to speak with expertise, you must have an awareness of the policies and procedures that guide decisions made in your school, specifically your school library. This includes school board policies, school code, policies, procedures, and administrative regulations that may be specific to your district or building.

5. Know reconsideration and challenge policies and procedures

Most school libraries have challenge policies in place and many school boards adopt reconsideration policies that allow community members or guardians a place to formally request that school material be removed or relocated. It is important that these policies and procedures exist and are updated with some regularity. Find your school's reconsideration policy and challenge procedure. If your school does

not have one, it is of critical importance that one is adopted as soon as possible. The American Library Association's website includes example policies and highlight best practices for a formal challenge.

6. Know how to respond to concerned community members or guardians

While it is not the norm for guardians or community members to reach out about library materials, it is best to be prepared to speak with that person quickly and calmly to prevent outcry or misinformation. Talking points like the ones listed below can help create an environment of understanding for the concerned party and will be best received if the administrator has already taken time to familiarize themselves with the collection, policies and procedures.

Example concerned citizen script:

We curate our collections based on the district's mission statement, best practices, and quality resources that are accessible and representative of our community and our world. All library resources are choice reading; nothing is required or mandated reading.

Would you like to continue this conversation with the librarian and myself?

If a consensus cannot be reached through the script or meeting with librarian and administrator, the concerned citizen should be notified of the challenge procedure and given the opportunity to fill out a formal written challenge form. Additionally, just like best practices and policy examples can be found on the American Library Association's website, additional talking points can be found there as well.

Part IV. There's a Librarian for That

Although it has been stated numerous times throughout this chapter and has been cited in various studies, one of the easiest and most important ways to protect students' intellectual freedom is by making sure your building has a qualified school librarian and supporting the librarian in best practices.

7. Foster and maintain a relationship with your school librarian and library staff

The trained and certified school librarian is the most knowledgeable person about the school library space, resources, materials, and policies that allow the library to function and serve students and staff. In the event of a challenge, or simply a question about a resource, a conversation with the librarian should be the first step. On the other hand, the librarian should also be the first person you collaborate with to ensure resources, materials, and spaces are designed with students' best interests in mind.

8. Understand the basic procedures for acquisition, purchasing, and weeding

These are cyclical occurrences for school libraries and they vary greatly from library to library. Similarly, purchasing power and policies also can be very different in various spaces, but so is staffing and available time for school librarians. Having a foundational understanding of how librarians curate their list of materials or digital resources for purchase is instrumental to supporting students' intellectual freedom. Just as important is understanding how materials get removed, deselected or weeded from the collection

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in a routine manner. Often materials and resources are removed for a variety of reasons including, but not limited to: poor physical condition, circulation statistics, or out-of-date or inaccurate information. Lastly, understanding the typical timing of when the library staff orders new materials or weeds a collection is helpful, too. These procedures are often referred to as selection (and potentially deselection) policies. Additionally, reconsideration policies exist for an unweeded removal of a book. Examples of all these policies and best practices can be found on the American Library Association's website.

While becoming familiar with your school library resources, staff, policies and procedures is a vital part of upholding students' intellectual freedom, there are many resources that provide continued education and specific learning for school libraries and their importance. Perhaps attending a training on inclusion through a library lens could be a professional goal, or seeking out leading library organizations for resources such as American Library Association, American Association of School Librarians, Association of Independent School Librarians, or your state or regional organizations.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The findings shared here were from a small number of educators who voluntarily responded to a call for interview participants. Each of their cases are unique and cannot be generalized. Future research directions might include a national survey of educators about their experiences with book challenges and principal support. While a few participants expressed the opinion that school administrators have not been trained to address intellectual freedom, little empirical research exists to confirm this perception. More research could address the educational preparation of administrators as well as their experiences with censorship and library practices and materials. Society takes for granted that young people today have unprecedented access to information, but we cannot take for granted that those youth at most risk, who are from marginalized or lower-resourced communities have access to literature that is representative and affirming of their experiences. As educators at all levels express concerns about reaching every student, research is needed into the impact of censorship on their access and well-being.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we provide background information on how school librarians function within their school and in partnership with their principals, censorship in schools, legal precedents as related to this topic, before we share what educators told us about book challenges and the support of their principals. Often the principal was on the front lines of a book challenge along with the educator and their support was viewed as key. As principals have a responsibility to the whole school, understanding the ripple effects that a book challenge has on all staff and on curricular and pedagogical decisions is vital. Challenges may come from unexpected sources and be directed to unanticipated types of materials. Knowing and sharing school district policy is crucial to the success of any school leader. If policy is incomplete or non-existent, principals need to advocate for the development of policy and procedures to address the selection of curricular and library materials along with reconsideration policies. Relationships with all stakeholders from school board members to teachers to students and their families will facilitate meaningful conversations about intellectual freedom and the rights of students, parents, and educators. A school principal's ultimate interest is in student learning. The educators interviewed for this study were

committed to student learning and to the access to diverse ideas and experiences. School administrators should also be encouraged to reflect on their role of support for intellectual freedom and access to ideas and information for all students.

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