

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM IN SCHOOL LIBRARIES

by Linda J. Shirley

What is a school library?

Unlike other library organizations, the school library is a twentieth century phenomenon. Without the technological breakthrough of Sputnik in 1957 and the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983,¹ school libraries would either not exist or be nothing more than classroom collections². School libraries differ from public libraries in that they are part of a much larger educational organization and do not have the autonomy or prominence of other libraries. An effective school library center is an active information center designed to meet the diverse learning needs of students and support the curriculum.

Although changes in the role of the school library media specialist have occurred because of rapid changes in technology, the basic mission of the institution remains unaltered. The mission defined in *Information Power*³ in 1988 remains the same in *Information Power*⁴ in 1998. *Information Power* defines the mission of the school library as ensuring that students and staff are effective users of ideas and information. Since education is supposed to prepare students to think critically so that they can function as adults,⁵ the role of the school library is paramount in the goal of information literacy⁶.

School libraries receive funds allocated by the parish school system, through the state department of education, grants, fundraisers and federal governmental programs designed to aid schools. Thus, the centers are subject to budget cuts when local school administrators decide to place revenue in other curriculum areas. School librarians must therefore provide the necessary research statistics to prove the necessity of school libraries for academic achievement. These library advocacy programs can be developed for each program through the community that the school serves, professional organizations, and curriculum design teams within the school.

WHAT ARE THE INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM ISSUES OF SCHOOL LIBRARIES?

The Internet

Like the public library, the question of whether to filter Internet access is the most complicated intellectual freedom issue facing us today. As a new manifestation of modern parental fears about protecting children from danger, negative publicity about the Internet has exacerbated the problem. Even though the school is required to act *in loco parentis*, the doctrine as applied to the school library refers to the safety and health of students, not the provision of censorship.

The school library is a voluntary access point for information. Jefferson's principle that "minds must be left free to choose"⁷ empowers school library media specialists. While the principles of the Library Bill of Rights⁸ apply equally to school libraries, the choice to filter is the decision of the parish school system. Many parish systems respond to parental and community fear with filters because of pressure from the electorate. Parents and school administrators should be made aware that the sense of security resulting from filtering is a false one. Frankly, filters do

not always work. Moreover, unless children are taught critical thinking skills, they will never develop the information literacy skills to evaluate online material.⁹

Collection Development

School libraries provide materials and information in various formats that are integrated into school curricula and that support the philosophy, goals and objectives of school districts to meet the diverse learning needs of students. *Information Power* states that the mission of the library media program is to ensure that all students and staff are users of ideas and information.⁰

The school library collection must meet the needs of all students, not perpetuate one dominant culture. Vandergrift states that changing demographics require school librarians to build collections that are gender fair and multicultural.¹ School librarians must accept the risk of representing people and alternative lifestyles in the collection. We must also guard against personal prejudices when selecting materials. School library media specialists build collections that encourage, not force, students to think critically. Therefore, the importance of free access to the widest possible resources, conveying the greatest amount of human ideas and experience, is important in order to meet the information needs of every student.²

Readers' Advisory Role

Censorship can come quite unintentionally from within the school library. There is a line between the role of reader's advisor and that of censor. At times, through simple curiosity or lack of discretion, school library media specialists, volunteers, and library assistants can interfere with student book selection. When the staff of the school media center does not respect privacy and the right to read, they are practicing censorship. According to the tenets of the ALA's Freedom To Read Statement, "a book should be judged as a book."³ Children should have the freedom to read and consider a broad range of ideas, not just those of the school media center staff.

RESPONSES TO INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM ISSUES

Proactive Policies

All school libraries should have a written collection development policy in effect before any intellectual freedom challenge. Research from the last half of the twentieth century demonstrates that written selection policies are vital in the retention of challenged materials.⁴ Among research studies focusing on this area are those by Fiske,⁵ Woodworth,⁶ the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction,⁷ Bracy,⁸ Jenkinson,⁹ Hopkins,⁰ and Folke.¹ Their research reveals that policies that include the Library Bill of Rights as the philosophical foundation of our profession aides in the retention of materials in schools.² The topics relevant to intellectual freedom included in the collection development policy are: Internet acceptable use policies, rules regarding the behavior of students, the Library Bill of Rights, confidentiality, collection development, and methods of handling a challenge.

Confidentiality Law

As in Louisiana public libraries, only parents are allowed to view student circulation records. Administrators, other teachers, parent volunteers, and students should not view information concerning circulated materials. Thus, school library media specialists should adopt policies recognizing the fact that circulation records and other records identifying the names of library users are confidential. Furthermore, school librarians should not divulge records to law enforcement agencies unless a court order from the proper legal authority has been issued. School library media specialists should respect the rights of children and young adults by enforcing the tenets expressed in the Confidentiality of Library Records Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights³ and the ALA Code of Ethics.⁴

The Library Bill of Rights

The New York case *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico*⁵ (1982) provided the basis for future guidelines dealing with censorship. However, the Stevanna case affirmed the importance of the Library Bill of Rights. In September 1995, in the United States Federal District Court for the district of Kansas, plaintiffs representing students and parents sued United School District No. 233 of Johnson County, Kansas, Superintendent of Schools Ron Wimmer, and Principal of Olathe South High School Lowell Ghosey⁶ over the removal of Nancy Garden's book, Annie on My Mind, from several school libraries. Because the school board approved materials selection policy included the Library Bill of Rights as a cornerstone, the court ruled that its principles been violated. Thus, the inclusion of the Library Bill of Rights is of vital importance, because the document serves, not as a law, but a catalyst for action and a form of protection.⁷

The Internet

First, school librarians should collaborate with other teachers to design units that provide students with the opportunity to acquire critical thinking and problem solving skills so that they can discriminate between accurate, reliable sources and unreliable sources. Second, school libraries should develop acceptable use policies that clearly outline the uses of the Internet in schools; each student and parent should be required to read and sign them. In this way, parents will be made aware of what the school will permit and the consequences for a violation. Further, the Internet should be incorporated into the entire school program with the school library providing excellent websites to guide students in the quest for information literacy. These websites should be developed into school library media webpages that link print resources, audio-visual resources, online database resources, and websites.⁸

Staff Development

In order to respond to the threat of censorship, the school library media specialist should provide proactive training for the school library media staff, student workers, volunteers, the administration, parents, community organizations and other faculty members. All of these groups need to become aware of the principles of the Library Bill of Rights, the right to privacy and the Freedom to Read statement. These training sessions can be conducted during staff development for teachers and as community outreach programs in conjunction with Parent Teacher Organization meetings. Other appropriate arenas for such training occur during

participation in Banned Book Week and other community outreach programs conducted by the educational community.

Handling Complaints

Intellectual freedom complaints come from organized groups, parents, and school personnel. Many complaints also occur internally from school boards, teachers, superintendents, and principals. Their efforts are often successful because of their positions of power in the school system, and materials are removed without going through a formal reconsideration process. To forestall such efforts, all complaints, not just those from outside, must be placed in writing.

It is important for school librarians to request help from Louisiana Library Association's (LLA) Intellectual Freedom Committee, ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the International Reading Association (IRA) when a title is challenged. It cannot be stressed enough that school librarians should actively educate their colleagues regarding the role of the school library in ensuring intellectual freedom and the right to read.

Notes

¹. United States. National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk: The Full Account*. Cambridge, MA : USA Research, 1984.

². B.E. Chernik, *Introduction to Library Services*. Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1992.

³. American Association of Library Association of School Librarians (AASL) & Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT). *Information Power*. Chicago: American Library Association and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 1988.

⁴. American Association of School Librarians (AASL) & Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT). *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning*. Chicago: American Library Association and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 1998.

⁵. Carolyn Caywood, "The Sky Is Falling," *School Library Journal*, v.43, no.7 (1997): 41

⁶. AASL & AECT, 1998.

- ⁷. Thomas Jefferson, *Governed by Reason*, 1801. Quotes available online at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations/jeff0700.htm>.
- ⁸. American Library Association, Library Bill of Rights. Available online at: <http://www.ala.org/work/freedom/lbr.html>
- ⁹. C.W. Folke, *Dealing with Selection and Censorship: A Handbook for Wisconsin Schools and Libraries*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1999.
- ⁰. AASL & AECT, 1998, p. 6.
- ¹. K. Vandergift, AA Feminist Research Agenda in Youth Literature, @ *Wilson Library Bulletin* October 1993.
- ². Carolyn Caywood, AReality Check, @ *School Library Journal* v.43, no.2(1997): 47.
- ³. American Library Association. Freedom to Read Statement, 1972 Available online at <http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/freeread.html>.
- ⁴. D.M. Hopkins, *Factors Influencing the Outcome of Challenges to Materials in Secondary School Libraries: Report of a National Study*. Prepared under Grant #R039A9004-89, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Library Programs. Madison University of Wisconsin-Madison, School of Library and Information Studies, 1991.
- ⁵. Marjorie Fiske, *Book Selection and Censorship*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1959.
- ⁶. M.L. Woodworth, *Intellectual Freedom, the Young Adult, and Schools*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1976.
- ⁷. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. *Censorship of IMC Materials in Wisconsin Schools. Part I: Focus on Middle/Junior High Schools*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Department of Public Education, 1980. *Part II: Focus on Elementary Schools*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1981. *Part III: Focus on Elementary Schools*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1981.

- ⁸. P.B. Bracy, *Censorship and Selection Policies in Public Senior High School Library Media Centers in Michigan*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1982. Dissertations Abstracts International, v.43, no.10, 3146A.
- ⁹. D. Jenkinson, *The Censorship Iceberg: The Results of a Survey of Challenges in School and Public Libraries*,@ *School Libraries in Canada* v.6, no.1 (1985): 19-30.
- ⁰. Hopkins.
- ¹. Folke.
- ². Bracy. Hopkins.
- ³. American Library Association, Policy on Confidentiality of Library Records, 1986. Available online at http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/pol_conf.html.
- ⁴. American Library Association, Code of Ethics, adopted by ALA Council, 1995. Available online at <http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/ethics.html>.
- ⁵. Board of Education, *Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982).
- ⁶. *Stevana Case et al. v. Unified School District No. 233, Johnson County, Kansas et al.*, 895 F. Supp. 1463 (D KS 1995).
- ⁷. D.M. Hopkins, *The School Library Media Specialist and Intellectual Freedom During the Twentieth Century*.@In Latrobe, K., ed. *The Emerging School Library Media Center*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1998.
- ⁸. Folke.