

American Library Association. Office for Intellectual Freedom

Strategies and Tips for Dealing with Challenges to Library Materials – School Libraries

<http://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport>

School librarians play a key role in making sure that students have the broad range of resources and ideas they need to develop critical thinking skills. Challenges to materials provide a “teachable moment” that can help you build understanding and support for the principles of intellectual freedom, including First Amendment rights, student rights of access and professional ethics.

### **Applying the principles of intellectual freedom**

- Connect academic freedom with intellectual freedom. Academic freedom guarantees the teacher’s right to teach and to select classroom and library resources for instruction.
- Make sure everyone involved understands the right of people in a democratic society to express their concerns and that all people have the right to due process in the handling of their complaints.
- Explain the obligation of the school district to provide intellectual and physical access to resources that provide for a wide range of abilities and differing points of view.
- Define intellectual and physical access when appropriate. Intellectual access includes the right to read, receive and express ideas and the right to acquire skills to seek out, explore and examine ideas. Physical access includes being able to locate and retrieve information unimpeded by fees, age limits, separate collections or other restrictions.
- Emphasize the need to place the principles of intellectual and academic freedom above personal opinion, and reason above prejudice, when selecting resources.
- Connect intellectual freedom and access. The freedom to express your beliefs or ideas becomes meaningless when others are not allowed to receive or have access to those beliefs or ideas.
- Stress the need for teachers and librarians to be free to present students with alternatives and choices if students are to learn and use critical thinking and decision-making skills.

### **Protecting students and staff with a materials selection policy**

- Update your materials selection policy. Include a formal reconsideration process for textbooks, gift materials, electronic and other resources used in classrooms, laboratories and libraries. Seek board of education approval.
- Be sure to include the educational goals of the school district and to relate the selection policy to these goals.
- Emphasize the positive role of the selection policy in clarifying the use of educational resources and in ensuring stability and continuity regardless of staff change.
- To ensure uniformity and fairness in dealing with complaints, delegate the responsibility for dealing with complaints and requests for reconsideration to the principal in each school.

- Inform all your school staff (including nurses, secretaries, cafeteria workers and custodians) about the materials selection policy and reconsideration process. Review the policy with staff at the beginning of each school year.
- Distribute a copy of the policy with a simple statement that explains its importance in protecting students, teachers and librarians against censorship.

### **Preparing for challenges**

- Develop rationales for the use of required materials in each department and/or grade.
- Introduce the rationales at Parent's Night or open houses or through the school newsletter to help parents understand what materials are being taught and why.
- Work with administrators, teachers and librarians to prepare a list of alternative materials for instructional activities.
- Prepare a packet of materials, including the school district's educational goals and materials selection policy, to give to those registering concerns.
- Review all policies dealing with access to ensure that school rules are conducive to free and open access to the library.
- Prepare an audiocassette that explains principles of intellectual and academic freedom contained in the materials selection policy and reconsideration process for staff members to listen to at home or in their car.
- Inform staff and board members that complaints and requests for reconsideration made by them will get the same due process as from a parent or community member.
- Engage students in discussions and activities related to intellectual freedom. An educated and informed student body can provide a strong support group for the school when educational resources are challenged.
- Remind school administrators that to ignore or override a board-approved materials selection policy can place them in legal jeopardy.
- Unite with other groups in your community that are concerned with intellectual freedom issues. Make them aware of the rights of children and young adults.
- Educate administrators, teachers and other school personnel to the importance of the school library and the role it plays in the education of the student as part of in-service training.

### **Helping everyone understand the reconsideration process**

- Be clear that materials under reconsideration will not be removed from use, or have access restricted, pending completion of the reconsideration process.
- Emphasize that parents can request only that their child be denied access to materials being reconsidered.
- Develop a time frame to guide the reconsideration process. For example, the building principal should act within 20 working days.
- Emphasize that the reconsideration process is to collect information in order to make thoughtful decisions.
- Keep careful and accurate records of all requests for reconsideration, even those settled informally.

- Report all requests for reconsideration to the superintendent and other staff members. It is important to demonstrate the ability and commitment to protect the rights of students and staff and still provide due process for those registering their concern.
- Provide clear instruction to the appointed reconsideration committee. Have the committee focus on principles rather than attempt to define or interpret materials or parts of materials.
- Keep the request for reconsideration form uncomplicated and non-threatening.
- Direct the reconsideration committee to prepare a report presenting both majority and minority opinions. Present the report to the principal when the process is completed.
- Keep staff and administrators informed about the reconsideration process and progress toward resolution. Rumors and speculation can distort everyone's perceptions of the situation.
- Explain the benefits of a board-approved materials selection policy, which guides staff in the selection of materials and minimizes the arbitrary and personal element. Such a policy also clarifies to the community how the school decides what materials will be used.