

FEATURE



INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM 101

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The November/December *Knowledge Quest* and *KQ* on the Web are devoted to the many aspects of intellectual freedom in a school library media program. Articles range from using a collection development policy, to preparing for a challenge, to living through a series of challenges. A school library media specialist (SLMS) and former American Library Association (ALA) president has written about international school library professionals striving to preserve intellectual freedom without First Amendment legal protections, and a library educator from Minnesota describes the relevancy of strong First Amendment court cases as they relate to school library media programs. In yet another article, an elementary SLMS in Virginia describes negotiating the use of First Amendment and intellectual freedom tenets in the Bible Belt. And the list of articles, webliographies, and ideas from *KQ*'s columnists goes on.

Intellectual freedom is one of the core values of the library profession, and *Information Power* articulated six goals for the school library media specialist related to intellectual freedom. Two key goals include:

Promote the principles of intellectual freedom by providing services and resources that create and sustain an atmosphere of free inquiry, and by serving as an active advocate for intellectual freedom within the school and in the larger learning community.

Guard against barriers to intellectual freedom, such as age or grade-level restrictions, limitations on access to

electronic information, requirements for special permission to use materials and resources, and restricted collections (AASL and AECT 1988, 93).

ALA has numerous intellectual freedom policy statements that shape and guide the actions of school library professionals as they interact with and serve their school communities. The *Library Bill of Rights (LBOR)*, *Code of Ethics of the American Library Association*, and *Freedom to Read* are the primary statements from which other policies are derived.

A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.

The *LBOR* was originally adopted by the ALA Council in 1948. It has been amended three times, the latest in 1980, when the word "age" was inserted into Article V to provide support for the use of libraries and library resources by minors. Article V now states, "V. A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views" (ALA 1996).

The *LBOR* is not a static document. In 1996, the American Library Trustee Association (ALTA) voted to reaffirm the word "age" in the document because of potential challenges that might restrict minors from accessing some library materials. ALTA also requested that the ALA Council reaffirm the *LBOR* including the word

"age," and the Council complied. The ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee reviews the *LBOR* periodically as issues arise and as new editions of the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* are prepared. The committee also monitors the library community for issues that may require a new *LBOR* interpretation.

Currently, eighteen interpretations of the *LBOR* have been written to define and clarify its guidance on such topics as privacy, challenged materials, and economic barriers to information access. Not every interpretation includes counsel for SLMSs, but there are nuggets of beneficial advice worth reviewing in nearly all of them. One of the most pertinent is "Access to Resources and Services in the School Library Media Program," which lays out the role of the library media specialist in promoting and defending intellectual freedom principles. "Free Access to Libraries for Minors: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights" projects a powerful statement related to minors' First Amendment free speech rights: "Constitutionally protected speech cannot be suppressed solely to protect children or young adults from ideas or images a legislative body believes to be unsuitable for them" (ALA 2004). The *LBOR* and its eighteen interpretations articulate the principles of intellectual freedom that school library media specialists translate into practice.

The *Code of Ethics of the American Library Association* has served the library community for nearly seventy years. Three articles speak directly to the school library media specialist's responsibility in preserving access to information and library users' intellectual freedom:

Article II: We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.

Article III: We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.

Article VII: We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere . . ." (ALA 1995).

At each ethical crossroad, the ALA *Code of Ethics* offers a direction and provides a moral framework that school library media specialists may use in their daily decision-making. The applicability of the ALA *Code of Ethics* to a Web 2.0 world has been the subject of much discussion by the ALA Committee on Professional Ethics and ALA members, a process that will continue during the 2008 Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia. In addition, during the ALA Annual Conference in 2008 in Anaheim, California, AASL, ALSC, and YALSA will be sponsoring a program with a variety of speakers interpreting the ALA *Code of Ethics* and its applicability to the ethical issues associated with social technologies, privacy, intellectual property, censorship, access to information, leveling and labeling a collection, and selection in school library media and public library youth services programs.

The *Freedom to Read* statement, a joint statement by ALA and the Association of American Publishers, begins with

the dramatic words, "The freedom to read is essential to our democracy" (ALA and AAP 2004, 2). In this time of encroaching government intrusion and information gathering in the private lives of citizens, our democratic way of life may depend on the not-so-simple responsibility held by school SLMSs to ensure that students have access to a collection covering a wide range of issues from multiple viewpoints.

While many battles to preserve the intellectual freedom of minors using school library media centers

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have been fought by school library professionals and their supporters, more remain. Five hundred forty-six challenges were reported to the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) in 2006, and OIF staff estimate a large number are unreported (ALA 2007). Current statistics tell us that 71 percent of reported challenges target school curricular and library media center resources. If all school library professionals who experienced a challenge, no matter its outcome, would add their information to ALA's challenge database, it would provide a more accurate picture of the state of intellectual freedom in United States schools and could be used to compile

the list of most frequently challenged books announced annually during Banned Books Week (ALA n.d.).

The ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom has maintained a confidential database on challenged material since 1990. ALA collects information from two sources: newspapers and reports submitted by individuals, some of whom use the Challenge Database Form <www.ala.org/ala/oif/challengesupport/reporting/challengedatabaseform.html>. Challenges reported to ALA by individuals are kept confidential. In these cases, ALA will release only the title of the book being challenged, the state, and the type of institution (school, public library). The name of the school or district and its town will not be disclosed (ALA, "Reporting" n.d.).

Why do individuals and groups attempt to censor school library media program resources? According to ALA (2007), the top reasons why challenges occurred in 2006 include:

- sexually explicit language (*The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* by Carolyn Mackler);
- homosexual theme (*Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell was the most challenged book in 2006);
- offensive language (*Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison);
- the occult and Satanism (the "Scary Stories" series by Alvin Schwartz);
- unsuited to the age group (*The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky); and
- to "protect" children (any title that offends parents and others).

Frances Beck McDonald, an intellectual freedom advocate,

library educator, and author from Minnesota, expressed the rationale of some parents to censor:

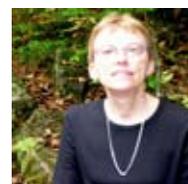
While some of the onslaught against the First Amendment stems from deeply held religious beliefs, other attempts to restrict access stem from concerned parents trying to protect their children from unpleasant depictions of human behavior. These parents seek a verbal and visual world in which nothing will be scary, nothing will be silly, nothing will be unpleasant, and nothing will be real. They rally to remove resources they view as threatening to the cocoon in which they wish to raise their children (McDonald 1993, 2).

In addition to book challenges, there are two areas in school library media programs of particular concern to First Amendment

advocates—filtering of Internet access in schools, which keeps students and teachers from accessing educationally appropriate Web sites, and the labeling and leveling of school library media program collections to support computerized reading incentive and management programs, such as Accelerated Reader and Scholastic Reading Counts. This occurs where there is pressure to support “homegrown” elementary literacy programs or strategies recommended by such experts as Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, authors of *Matching Books to Readers: Using Leveled Books in Guided Reading, K-3*, and others.

Whatever the issue, there are continuous skirmishes and few clear-cut or easy answers to safeguarding the intellectual freedom of minors. What is required is that courageous, knowledgeable, and prepared SLMSs step forth whenever a student’s right to read or access legal information on the Internet is threatened in a

school library media center. The information in this issue of *Knowledge Quest* and *KQ on the Web* is meant to be shared by you with those in the wider school community—principals, teachers, parents, and students—in the hope that it will educate and empower others to stand with you in defense of First Amendment rights and other intellectual freedom principles.



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