

A photograph of a person's arm and shoulder lifting a dumbbell. The person is wearing a light blue tank top. The background is a blurred gym environment with yellow walls and a wooden floor. Another person is visible in the background, wearing a red shirt and black shorts, also lifting a dumbbell.

FEATURE

CHAMPIONING INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

A School Administrator's Guide

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School administrators want to believe that they are champions for the rights of the students they serve. They strive to provide students with a secure, enriching environment to aid in their intellectual and social development. Through their leadership, administrators have the responsibility to guide and redirect students to help them achieve at high levels and develop into responsible, contributing members of society. These are lofty ideals befitting of a champion. There are times, however, when school administrators find themselves in situations where student rights or parental prerogative come into conflict with what the administrator believes to be in the best interest of the student. Censorship and access to print and electronic resources are areas where the choices for the administrator do not always lead to clear-cut decisions. In these areas, it is easy for administrators to find that they are *not* champions for student rights. If not adequately prepared, administrators also can find themselves in situations that are, at a minimum, embarrassing and, perhaps, illegal—subjecting themselves and their schools to lawsuits.

Consider the following case. An obviously irritated middle school study hall supervisor enters the principal's office brandishing a book she took from an eighth-grade girl. In a deliberate tone, she explains that the girl, who brought the book from home, disrupted the study hall when she passed it around among her friends, which led to outbursts of laughter. The principal takes the book and tells the supervisor he will follow up. The book happens to be from a popular contemporary series of novels aimed at teenage

girls that many in the school read for entertainment. The principal reads a few random sections of the book and concludes that the material might be a bit too mature for middle school students. He sends an e-mail out to the school staff instructing them to inform students that they may not bring books from this series to school, and requires staff members to confiscate any such books that they see.

Here is another situation. A high school principal picks up the phone and hears an assertive parent demand that a book with sexual content be removed from the school library. Responding to the intensity of the discussion, the principal assures the parent that she will personally pull the book from the collection.

Both of the above situations are real. What both of these principals have failed to realize is that, through their actions and despite their good intentions, they have placed themselves, the school, and, most importantly, their students' rights in jeopardy. At a minimum, the administrators may be embarrassed to find out that they have to retract their decisions and live with the consequences. In a worst-case scenario, they may be found to have violated students' First Amendment rights and end up embroiled in a lawsuit.

Challenges to books and other school materials are not a new or infrequent phenomenon. In fact, the American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) reports that it has documented almost eight thousand book challenges since 1990 (OIF 2007). Despite the large number of incidents, too many school administrators are unprepared

for these situations. Complicating the situation is that administrators may feel personally that a complainant has presented legitimate reasons to act. It is critical that administrators curb the tendency to act out of emotion or personal bias. Acting quickly without understanding the legal ramifications can have serious consequences.

To whom can administrators turn for help? The answer is to team with the school's library media specialist. School library media specialists (SLMSs) have specific training in censorship and other intellectual freedom issues. Just as SLMSs are valuable resources for students and teachers, they can serve the same role for school administrators. The SLMS can assist with questions of materials selection, the process for handling book challenges, and a variety of other intellectual freedom issues. To support both administrators and SLMSs, ALA provides valuable resources on intellectual freedom. A school administrator needs to be up to speed on district policies related to these issues, as well as on state and federal laws and legal opinions. The time to do this is *before* the irate staff member or assertive parent calls; there is no substitute for being prepared. In addition, the administrator would be wise to involve the rest of the school or district's professionals in discussion of the issue to help dissipate the emotion-charged atmosphere that often accompanies a challenge.

What would have been a reasonable course of action in the cases mentioned above? In the first situation involving a student bringing mature-themed material to school and disrupting the study hall, the principal would have been well-served by first focusing on the discipline

situation. To borrow a phrase made popular on a bumper sticker, “Books don’t disrupt study halls, students do.” The real issue was the student’s inappropriate behavior, not that of the book’s content. Concerns about the student’s maturity level, not that of the book, are a valid discussion points for a parental conference. Banning the book from the school did nothing to deal with the real issue, and probably raised many questions about students’ rights to bring parent-approved reading material to school. A conversation with the SLMS could have helped the principal to focus on the real issue without crossing the line of infringing on all students’ First Amendment rights. By focusing on the book, the principal opened the door to be challenged and did nothing to elevate his stature as a champion for students.

In the second situation, the principal acted before thinking the situation through. Again, being familiar with district policies and gaining some breathing space by tapping into the experience of the SLMS would have been more likely to lead to a better decision. At a minimum, the principal should have followed district policy and aligned herself with the status of being a champion of student rights.

Being a champion for students’ intellectual freedom can be a daunting task. In an effort to appease the complaining party, an administrator can violate school district policy and open the door to a First Amendment lawsuit. By partnering with a SLMS, the administrator can more effectively manage challenges to intellectual

freedom. More importantly, he or she can rightfully claim the title of a champion for their students.

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