



*We do not need to protect our students from the world, we need to protect their right to read—and to learn.*

### **Who's Protecting Whom? AASL and Intellectual Freedom**

Sara Kelly Johns, 2007–2008 AASL President

“When you start your new job as a school librarian, one of the first steps you must take is to ask to see the district’s book selection policy. If there isn’t one, write one. Right away. It protects you, the teachers, and the district.”

That advice was part of my school library administration course at the School of Library and Information Science, State University of New York, Albany—a very long time ago. Our assignment that week was to research policies and write a sample policy. As I did, it became very obvious to me that the principle that it protected was intellectual freedom—the right to read, for everyone, including the school-age children who would be my students. I understood quickly that one of the core tenets of the library profession, one that I would be protecting throughout my career, is intellectual freedom.

As I researched, it didn’t take very long for me to also realize that, if I ever became involved in a serious book challenge, one of the first places I would call for assistance would be the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF). That intellectual freedom connection led me to not even question becoming an ALA member when Jim Bennett, then our state school library organization’s president and a long-time ALA Councilor, put a membership form in my hand and said, “Fill it out and send it in. It’s your professional duty.” Of course it was. I made sure to check off MY division, AASL.

The vulnerability of a solo school library media specialist in defending the principles of intellectual freedom while selecting books and other materials and also implementing an active school library program can be terribly daunting. I followed the Island Trees <[http://supct.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC\\_CR\\_0457\\_0853\\_ZS.html](http://supct.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0457_0853_ZS.html)> case through its long court battles with interest, a bit of fear, and determination to be ready for such a challenge myself (Cornell 1982). Would I be the person defending the books my students signed out of the library media center?

For my whole career, I have been a library media specialist in libraries serving grades six through twelve. Their collections had to meet the needs of students from the age of eleven through nineteen, with reading levels from second-grade to college and adult. Collection development often is like walking on eggshells. As a singleton librarian, I would feel less confident choosing excellent but edgy materials without ALA and AASL at my back.

Other articles in this issue give us a picture of how important it is to develop clear selection policies, to keep those policies up-to-date, and to be sure your administration and school board understand them and are ready to follow them. OIF’s value is stated again and again. AASL’s contributions to the defense of intellectual freedom are designed to focus on the needs of school librarians. We face the everyday challenge of providing balanced collections of resources to both entice readers and to open their minds as well as the occasional crisis of facing a challenge to a book or a list of books.

Many of you followed the process as AASL recently reconsidered the standing committees and recommended the dissolution or reconfiguration of several, including, in the preliminary task force report, folding the Intellectual Freedom and Legislative committees into an umbrella Advocacy Committee. The final report accepted by the AASL Board in June 2007 retained these as three separate committees with the charge to communicate more formally. Advocacy, legislative lobbying, and leadership for intellectual freedom issues are all core activities of AASL as our national voice for school librarians.

The AASL Intellectual Freedom Committee, chaired by Helen Adams, is charged to gather, prepare, and disseminate information on Intellectual Freedom issues and available support services pertinent to school library media programs. The committee provides a program at the ALA Annual Conference and maintains resource guides on the AASL Web site that are targeted specifically for school library media specialists <[www.ala.org/aasltemplate.cfm?section=aaslif](http://www.ala.org/aasltemplate.cfm?section=aaslif)> (AASL 2007). There are materials on both book challenges and Internet filtering, which, along with restrictions on social networking tools, limit students' access to information and learning.

As AASL president, I have chosen to focus our attention on the issues of intellectual freedom and censorship not only through my support of the Intellectual Freedom Committee but also by selecting Susan Patron, author of the 2007 Newbery Medal book *The Higher Power of Lucky*, to speak at AASL's Presidents Program (Patron 2006). She will be followed by a panel presentation of library media specialists on Friday, June 27, 10:30–noon at the ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim.

As a library media specialist, I have had to defend the books in my library to parents and community members, but I've never had a full-blown book censorship divide my school and community (that happens only too often when a book is challenged). One of the reasons for that, besides luck, has been the words that were on the tip of my tongue that come from the workshops, articles, and position papers from my professional organizations. I can speak with confidence because I have learned from experts—people who write and present, make materials available, and answer phone calls requesting more information or help. The principles behind the First Amendment are upheld over and over in our courts through the OIF lawyers' legal prowess, and I know where I stand.



## Are you interested in a full scholarship to earn your Master of Library Science?

The Partnership for Underserved Urban Children and Families: Connecting LIS Education, Libraries and Museums is an exciting program sponsored by St. John's University, in conjunction with partners organizations and The Institute of Museum and Library Services, the primary source of federal support for the nation's 122,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. The program is seeking to fund 40 committed students interested in working with youth in public and school libraries. Award recipients will receive laptops and full-tuition scholarships to enter St. John's Master of Library Science program. Further information about the IMLS project at St. John's is available at [www.stjohns.edu/libraryscience/imls](http://www.stjohns.edu/libraryscience/imls).

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“How wonderful that you know what your child is reading!” That is a statement that several parents have appreciated as they shared their unease about specific titles from our school library. That opening has given me a chance to explain that parents always have the right to decide what their children can read, but not what other parents allow their children to read. A discussion then follows about the library’s role to represent all sides of an issue and to have materials to help students challenge their thinking and to grow. These positions

Read how another school librarian, Cheryl Youse, <<http://www.ala.org/ala/aasl/aaslpubsandjournals/kqweb/kqarchives/volume36/362/362youse.cfm>>, leveraged a once-a-year event into a collaborative teaching experience to raise the awareness of her entire school community about censorship and, using students’ research investigations <<http://www.colquitt.k12.ga.us/cchsmedia/banned.htm>>, integrated intellectual freedom into the curriculum.

have served me well—so far. Only once have I had to pull out the “Citizen’s Request for Reconsideration of Library Materials” that is part of our selection policy and, luckily, that form was never filled out.

It is with confidence that I plan Banned Books Week <[www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/bannedbooksweek.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/bannedbooksweek.htm)> activities with my faculty, such as mock censorship trials in social studies classes and creative writing classes in which students take the role of parents, read a banned book, fill out the reconsideration form, and write a letter to the editor about their disapproval or, most often, support for the book (ALA 2007). (When I do Banned Book Week book talks, I always characterize most book banners as concerned, loving parents who want to protect their children. Students understand that.)

Not a year has gone by without a display of banned or challenged books, many borrowed from our elementary school. The activities have always included reading the ALA *Banned Books Resource Guide* to find out why the title in question was banned (Doyle 2007). It’s part of the display, and many students and teachers have thumbed through it, exclaiming at the Bible’s entries and noting how long the entry is for the Harry Potter series, Judy Blume, and *Catcher in the Rye*. Such displays led a former superintendent’s son to declare to his girlfriend from

another school that, “HIS librarian sure didn’t put controversial books under the counter, SHE put them on display!” as opposed to the girlfriend’s librarian.

As I became more involved in my state school library organization and AASL, I attended conferences. I not only felt less isolated on my job, I learned of the profession’s heroes, those who survived challenges to their materials, defending their decisions on the solid ground of our First Amendment rights. The librarians who said “no” to FBI agents without their subpoenas, the school librarians who kept Sendak’s *In the Night Kitchen* without painting on diapers, the school boards who refused to take books off their library shelves when challenged by individuals and organized groups—they all became my heroes. I was, and am, so impressed with their courage. I applauded Elliott and Eleanor Goldstein of

SIRS, who pioneered the sponsorship of intellectual freedom awards at every state conference and through AASL. The AASL Intellectual Freedom Award continues, currently sponsored by ProQuest. The winners of that award deserve our appreciation for keeping a core principle of our profession strong.

As with many of you, I have many war stories about intellectual freedom to tell after a long career in school libraries. So far, I have won the battles. And if someone in my school district fills out a reconsideration form and turns it in to the superintendent’s office, there is a policy, we have procedures, and I will be pulling resources from the AASL Web page and calling OIF. No one has to be alone. We do not need to protect our students from the world, we need to protect their right to read—and to learn.

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