

September 13, 2023

Superintendent Cynthia McCabe
Board of Education Members
Carroll County Public Schools
125 North Court Street
Westminster, MD 21157

Dear Superintendent McCabe, President Herbert, and Board Members:

Today, more than ever, students must learn to navigate an increasingly complex information landscape to succeed in school, in the workplace, and in the community. We have recently learned of the removal of the school library supervisor and that over 50 school library books have been challenged and temporarily removed from circulation. We urge you to support your school librarians and Carroll County Public School students by reinstating leadership knowledgeable in effective school libraries. We also strongly encourage you to reevaluate and amend the district's reconsideration policy that allows for the removal of materials upon a single complaint, before undergoing a process that fairly evaluates the concerns raised about the book in a transparent and open process.

An effective school library should have a professionally certified district-level supervisor knowledgeable in school library operations and actively contributing to the administrative team.¹ More than 60 studies from across the country conclude that student achievement—from reading scores and digital proficiency to graduation rates and post-secondary success—is higher in schools with professionally staffed libraries.²

These findings are no accident. School librarians are the heart of their schools and central to their district's goals. School librarians align their work with content area and technology standards and facilitate students' engagement in authentic learning; collaboration towards individual and common goals; examination of diverse perspectives and experiences; reflective practices that nurture exploration and innovation; and capable and ethical use of information technologies.

As educators, school librarians are trained professionals whose education, professional values, and experience prepare them to make careful decisions in selection and collection development. They have a deep understanding of student needs and as such curate and build school library collections on a wide range of topics that support students' personal and academic growth in order for them to thrive as independent 21st century learners and reach their potential in becoming knowledgeable, responsible, and caring citizens prepared to engage as adults in a world where persons possess differing backgrounds, beliefs, and identities. Assuring that an experienced, trained school librarian is

supervising the school libraries and staff will help assure that Carroll County students are receiving the best possible library service to support their educational achievement.

Additionally, it is our understanding that new book selection procedures have been implemented with the removal of the school library supervisor. We understand, as well, that current school policy allows for the removal of challenged materials pending review. This is not a policy in the best interest of the school community. It allows for mass challenges which negatively impacts staff time and resources as well as restricts access to information—negatively impacting student learning. Inefficient and cumbersome book selection procedures, based on vague language and measures, are an unnecessary stopgap that ultimately denies students access to information.

Well-written selection and reconsideration policies for library and instructional materials assure that your school librarians have the guidance they need to develop a varied library collection that reflects the wide range of abilities and interests of the students you serve. Such policies establish objective standards for even-handed collection development and establish orderly procedures for selection and reconsideration of library materials that allow for a fair and thorough evaluation of any claim that a book is not suitable for the library collection.

Under the best professional standards, reconsideration policies ask those charged with reviewing a challenged book to set aside their personal beliefs and evaluate the work in light of the objective standards outlined in the materials selection policy. Passages from the work should not be considered out of context, rather the work's value should be assessed based on evaluation of it as a whole. Until this process is completed, the book should remain available for checkout. Such policies protect the students' right to read by making sure that a book is not removed or restricted simply because someone does not like the book.

Moreover, any decision to remove or restrict titles because of some individuals' objections to the ideas or views expressed in the books may constitute unconstitutional censorship in violation of the First Amendment. Courts have long held that school boards may not remove books from school libraries when the "substantial motivation" for the removal is the board's disagreement with the ideas expressed in the book. (*Case v. Unified School Dist.*, 908 F. Supp. 864 (D. Kan. 1995). More recently, the Office of Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education has expressed its concern that the removal books that include themes addressing race, racism, or the experiences of LGBTQIA persons is discriminatory activity that creates a hostile educational environment for students based on sex, race, color, or national origin under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Carroll County's school librarians impact every learner, fostering a culture of reading and inquiry that reflects the needs and interests of every member of the community. They collaborate on planning, instruction, and assessment with teachers and embed literacy and inquiry across the curriculum—vital for navigating a world full of misinformation and disinformation. The 50 books currently under review, like many books, may not be right for every student in the District, but there are students who want to read and learn from these books with the support of their families. The school library has a responsibility to represent a broad range of views in its collection and to meet the needs of all the

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students in the community it serves. Parents and students may rightfully voice their concerns and select different materials for themselves and their children, but those objecting to the books should not be given the power to restrict other students' rights to access the material.

We appreciate Carroll County Public Schools' commitment to excellence, and its effort to provide a safe and orderly learning environment and a diverse program of studies with a global perspective that is designed to meet students' educational goals and foster students' success and life-long learning. We respectfully ask the Board to fulfill these promises to the families of Carroll County Public Schools by reinstating the certified school library supervisor and reevaluating and amending the current reconsideration policy so that materials remain available while under reconsideration. Protecting the right to choose – for every student, family, and parent – is key to creating a successful and safe educational experience for all learners.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Deborah A. Caldwell Stone'.

Deborah Caldwell Stone
Director, Office for Intellectual Freedom
American Library Association

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Courtney Pentland'.

Courtney Pentland, President
American Association of School Librarians

cc: Jennifer Sturge, President, Maryland School Library Association
Tif Sutherland, President, Maryland Library Association

¹

https://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org.aasl/files/content/advocacy/statements/docs/AASL_Position_Statement_Effective_SLP_2018.pdf

http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org.aasl/files/content/advocacy/statements/docs/AASL_Appropriate_Staffing.pdf

² <https://kappanonline.org/lance-kachel-school-librarians-matter-years-research/>