

THE QUESTION...

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF MY PRINCIPAL ORDERS ME TO REMOVE AN UNCHALLENGED BOOK?

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What Does the Field Say?

II. We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.—ALA Code of Ethics, <www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/codeofethics/codeethics.htm>.

The View from the Ivory Tower

Fear of a challenge is not one of the selection principles. It is not among the reasons we purchase resources, nor is it among the reasons we weed them. It's hard to get students excited about reading. Removing one that has proven value is counterproductive. Principals are paid to make decisions, and part of their decision-making process is to plan to avoid future problems. Given a problem, they will make a decision. However, the principal is not the librarian, you are. You have the training to make wise selection decision based on needs and interests of the school community. You need to be the wise counsel in this situation, not the principal. It could be that the principal is unaware of the ramifications of removing materials without due process.

Jumping Down from the Ivory Fence

Librarians will find excellent supportive resources on the American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) Web pages. Nothing will expressly prepare a librarian for this situation, and sometimes knowing that you are right doesn't help. It comes down to chain of command and responsibility. The principal is the chief executive of the school, and sometimes even the central office library supervisor has to bow to the principal's authority. However, it is the responsibility of the librarian to ensure that the principal makes informed decisions based on adequate and accurate information. Given this situation, it may be best for the librarian to prepare a calm and rational e-mail detailing the reasons the book was purchased, the district's challenged materials policy, and the court cases that set a legal precedent for keeping the book accessible to students. If the principal insists, then the librarian as subordinate to the principal must comply. When that happens, then another decision must be made,

which is whether or not to seek a position as a school librarian in another school.

Read More About It

There is a wealth of resources available on the OIF Web site <www.ala.org/OIF>. See especially "Coping with Challenges" and "Notable First Amendment Court Cases" for information on preparing answers for typical questions, statements and policies, and descriptions of the types of legal issues that can happen if just one parent or concerned citizen decides that the book should have not been removed. The ALA Code of Ethics also can be found on this page.

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IF YOU ARE NEW: Well, this is a fine kettle of fish that you've gotten yourself into right off the bat. You've tried to change the image of the library by buying materials that would appeal to your students, and you've been successful. No parent has questioned or challenged any of the resources, and you are seeing your circulation skyrocket. Your principal is alternately cajoling you—"you don't need any controversies when you first start"—and threatening you—"I'm the principal and I don't want a parent finding that book."

IF YOU ARE MID-CAREER: In mid-career, you know your community needs and student interests and your library use statistics show it. You've had challenges from parents before, along with principal and faculty unease with some of the resources students are finding, but never a situation this direct. You know that your decision has ramifications for your relationship with your principal and with the school faculty. You need to tread carefully.

1 CHOICE

Remove it! You are not self-employed, and your principal is your boss. If your boss gives you an order, you follow it.

WHAT'S THE WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN? The worst that can happen if you remove it: You may end up in court. Most of the case law around banned books stems from exactly this situation. If a parent sues the district because the removal of resources did not follow school board policy, the school board may wonder why you failed to protect the interests of the school and district. Your job may be in jeopardy anyway, along with your reputation.

I'M NEW: You know that your first and most important task is to build relationships. The most important relationship is with your principal. You know that he or she has the best interests of the students and their families at heart, and this is just one book. Maybe in a few years you can put it back and it won't strike the same nerve. Besides, your principal is right. Who needs to go through the public outcry of a challenge that may create more banned books. Pull the book and hide it. Maybe the students will think it just got lost.

I'M MID-CAREER: In mid-career, you know what battles you can win and which ones you can't. You've also faced many ethical dilemmas in which the ideals of the profession come face-to-face with the realities of daily school life. You've decided it will be better to lose this one skirmish rather than risk losing your principal's support, money, and trust as well as damaging the overall relationship. The book goes, but you stay. Overall, that's more important.

2 CHOICE

Refuse! You are ethically and legally bound to follow the procedures and policies of the school board. The school board is your ultimate employer, not the principal.

WHAT'S THE WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN? The worst that can happen if you refuse: You will lose your budget, your support, and, maybe, in the worst of the worst cases, your job. If you are nontenured, the principal may decline to request tenure for you. If you are tenured, your principal may work hard to make the working conditions intolerable. Without principal support, your ability to serve your students and faculty will be extremely limited.

I'M NEW: If you learned one thing in library school, it was the importance of supporting intellectual freedom. Now, just when students are getting excited over your new resources, you have to remove one of them. It would be different if there was a parent challenge, but the book has been there for a while now and you have not heard any complaints. You can list the court cases that you learned about in library school with this exact situation. You tell the principal that it is against school board policy and you can't do it.

I'M MID-CAREER: At mid-career, you know that principals come and principals go. It's true that libraries need principal support, but the principal depends on faculty trust and good will to be a success as well. Sometimes it's not that you refuse to do something, but how you refuse. Offering to quietly get the opinion of trusted teachers or parents might help. You can point out that removing books incorrectly has sometimes caused more disruption than keeping them. And finally, you can regretfully and respectfully take a stand. This may not be a battle the principal wants either.