



# PREPARING FOR A CHALLENGE

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School library media specialists (SLMSs) and teachers have the professional responsibility to select instructional materials. What happens when someone objects to a material? Although parents are responsible for deciding whether a specific instructional material is appropriate for their student, they do not have the responsibility for deciding what materials other students use.

As you prepare before any challenge occurs, you also are developing your confidence in being able to deal with complaints about instructional materials. This article provides tips in five areas on coping with challenges by developing a process that ensures that the burden of the concern is shared by the school system and community. In the long run, this removes the emotional component and ensures everyone has a fair hearing.

### Establishing Policy

When writing selection and instructional materials review policies, keep the language succinct and the process focused. The superintendent, principal, SLMS, and teacher will seek verbiage from these policies to use as talking points to defend material under consideration. Further, I recommend that the selection and review policy be presented to the school board for approval. Then, if the complainant wishes to pursue the concern further, the individual will need to initiate a civil suit.

The policy should state that the item will remain on the shelf throughout the review process. Consider stipulating that only parents or guardians may initiate a formal review; this ensures that

those directly using the material are involved. Require that the book or resource be read in its entirety by the complainant. Set a date when the reviewed material may be eligible for reevaluation. This prevents the book from repeated reviews while allowing the material to be reconsidered at some point in the future. Write the selection policy that:

- defines the objectives of a selection policy;
- indicates who is legally responsible for selection—this is typically the school board;
- identifies the people responsible for selection, such as teachers and SLMSs;
- defines the criteria for selecting material;
- identifies procedures for selection;
- refers to both traditional and newer formats;
- outlines the access policy for print and digital resources;
- defines procedures for gifts; and
- develops guidelines for reconsideration of instructional material.

To see one example of such a policy, search for “selection and review of instructional materials” on the Henrico County Public Schools Web site <<http://webapps.henrico.k12.va.us/policy>>.

### Develop a Process

If the process is clear, all school personnel will know what steps they must take when a complaint is received. When the reconsideration process is part of the school board policy, the expectations are clearly defined and open to the public. The reconsideration complaint should begin with the teacher if the item is

from the classroom and the SLMS if it is a library resource, progressively move from the building level to the district administrator.

Institute an Instructional Materials Review Committee (IMRC) with members who serve three-year staggered terms. Choose parents to represent the community as well as a teacher, administrator, SLMS, district-level administrator, and school board member.

### Create Tools

The deliberations will go more smoothly if you use several forms to focus the process. A request for reconsideration of materials form helps the complainant formally articulate his or her concerns. It provides a written explanation of the objections for the review committee to consider logically. Secondly, a checklist of questions related to the book or other material focuses the committee members on the elements they must consider in order to arrive at a decision objectively.

### Preparing for a Formal Review

Begin by obtaining several dates and times convenient for the complainant to meet. Next check with review committee members and schedule a meeting when all are able to attend. Compile a packet for committee members composed of reviews of the item, a blank copy of the checklist, a copy of the completed complainant form, and a copy of the source under consideration. Members are expected to have read the resource in its entirety and completed their review of the packet before the meeting. Include a memorandum with the packet that states the date, time, and place of the meeting. Prepare an agenda to be given out at the meeting that includes introductions, meeting

guidelines, and an overview of the review process. This is an open public meeting where the committee reviews the complainant's concerns. Keep the meeting informational and prepare some nonthreatening, neutral questions to ask, such as, "Can you tell us about your child's reaction to the material?"

After the decision, the chair of the review committee is responsible for writing a brief summary of the discussion. Some districts tape the meeting to ensure an accurate record. The summary contains both the parents' concerns, the review committee members' comments regarding those concerns, and the final recommendation. This document will assist you when meeting with the superintendent and the school board. If the school board is expected to consider the committee's recommendation, each member should receive a copy of the review committee summary, a copy of the parent complaint form, and a copy of the material to read.

### **Educating School Personnel**

In preparing for a specific complaint, educate all school personnel from the school board down to the individual teacher about the reconsideration process. Initially describe the review process, and then update the

community regularly in order to avert rumors and speculation. Keep accurate records of all requests for reconsideration, even if they are settled informally. In addition:

- explain that the reconsideration process is designed to collect information in order to make a thoughtful decision;
- emphasize that materials under reconsideration will not be removed from use, or have access restricted, pending completion of the reconsideration process;
- stress that parents can only request that their own child be denied access to the material under consideration; and
- focus the reconsideration committee on the resource in its entirety rather than on defining or interpreting sections.

If your selection policy is board-approved, it will clarify for the community how the school decides what materials will be used. This minimizes the arbitrary nature of the review process because the policy is open to the public. A board-approved policy demonstrates the procedure is the same for all materials and all concerns.

In conclusion, no resource is exempt from a parent complaint; material that is suitable for one child and

family might not be for another. For example, Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* (HarperCollins, 1977) was targeted for review in the Henrico school district. A short time later, a parent challenged Rodman Philbrick's *Freak the Mighty* (Blue Sky Pr., 1993) and suggested that *Bridge to Terabithia* could be used instead. An ironic example, but it points up why the review process protects every individual's right to intellectual freedom.

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### **Additional Resource**

Henrico County Public School Board. "Reconsideration of Instructional Materials." *Policy and Regulations, Section P7-05-008*. <<http://webapps.henrico.k12.va.us/policy/chapter.asp#P7-05-008>> (accessed 6 Nov. 2007).