



Challenges to Materials and Programs: The Role of Library Trustees & Board Members

1. Be Prepared with Strong Policies and Procedures

Policies and procedures are the necessary foundation for any library in successfully navigating a challenge to materials or programs. In addition to a strong collection development policy and reconsideration procedure, every library should also have a board code of ethics, a crisis communications policy, and a number of other essential policies in place. United for Libraries maintains a list of key policies related to challenges to review and revise, with links to samples: www.ala.org/united/advocacy/challenges.

2. Ensure All Board Members Receive High-Quality Training

Having strong policies in place is not enough if they are not followed. Board members need to know the library's policies related to challenges inside and out. In-depth training should be provided to all new board members and all board members should periodically review these policies, both as a refresher and to ensure they remain current. The goal should be that every board member knows these policies and procedures well enough to educate other members of the community about them.

3. Stay Informed

Many local challenges in our libraries are in fact part of broader national trends. Staying abreast of challenges taking place elsewhere in the country can help you to think through in advance how you will handle a similar challenge if it comes to your own library. Following how other libraries handle these challenges can also give you a sense of what to do — and what not to do — when you face a similar situation. The blog of ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom is one great resource to follow to keep tabs on trends with challenged materials and programs around the country: www.oif.ala.org/oif

4. Talk through Scenarios as a Board

Consider reserving time during a board training for talking through hypothetical challenge scenarios and how you would handle these together as a body. You can use real recent challenges you've read about as examples. This exercise will help you to identify areas of misunderstanding or contention regarding current board policies and help all members of the board feel more confident in navigating a challenge if and when one should occur.

5. Know Your Lane (and Stay in It)

If and when a challenge comes, always keep in mind your appropriate role as a Trustee versus the role of designated professional staff. Understand your board's legally bestowed powers, responsibilities,



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and liabilities with regards to materials challenges and censorship. Be prepared to explain the library's values and policies and how they can raise their complaint formally. But never promise to personally resolve a complaint.

6. Speak with One Voice

During a challenge, it is critical that the library speak with a single voice. Not every challenge needs to become a crisis for the library. However, a strong crisis communication policy will ensure that if the challenge becomes the subject of public interest, all board members know their role, to whom they can speak on the matter, and if so, what message to share.

7. Lead by Example

Library Boards of Trustees set the tone for their institutions. In all conversations and public meetings where challenges are discussed, keep your cool and comport yourself professionally, regardless of how members of the public may address you. Avoid politically partisan language and emphasize points of common ground: for example, the shared belief that parents should determine what is appropriate for their own child to read. Remember in all interactions that a complainant would not be involved if they did not care about the library. Let a shared love of the library be the foundation of every conversation.

8. Take Care of Your Employees

Navigating a contentious challenge for a Trustee can be exhausting — but as leaders, we need to remember that however exhausting it is for us, it can be exponentially more trying for our directors and frontline library staff. Check in with your staff regularly. Send flowers and notes of support. Hear from a member of a community that they appreciate what the staff are doing? Make sure to tell them to let staff know directly. If staff are bombarded with negative messages everyday, one simple phone call of support from a patron could be all it takes to get them through that next work day. Discuss as a board how you will handle harassment or threats directed at staff, including via social media, and ensure staff understand how the library will respond. Review your resources and personnel policies related to staff mental health. For example, is it clear in your policies that employees' banked sick hours may be used for mental health days?

9. Know When to Ask for Help

Well-trained Trustees working from a foundation of clear policies and procedures start from a position of strength. But even the best boards may sometimes need help. ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom is one trusted source for confidential challenge support — to report a challenge, visit www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/report. The National Coalition Against Censorship also administers a book challenge crisis hotline (<https://ncac.org/book-challenge-crisis-hotline>) and many state library associations also have their own support networks.



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Material challenges are full of legal issues. Every library should have a relationship with an attorney familiar with library issues and law in your state. Call your local bar association if you need help finding an attorney. Many bar associations also have pro bono programs where practicing attorneys will assist for free. Having an attorney attend public meetings and talk to staff about what they can do can be both helpful and empowering. In general, follow the principle of “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” and consult your lawyer at the start of a challenge. The cost is worth it.

In rare instances, such as threats of violence, it may also be necessary to consult with local law enforcement. You may also consider consulting with law enforcement about assistance with keeping order in public meetings during a particularly contentious challenge.

10. Stay the Course

Breathe. Remember that even the most contentious challenges are eventually resolved and the public moves on. Your response will shape whether your library emerges from the crisis stronger or weaker. How can you use this challenge as an educational opportunity for the community? How can you use this challenge to build a stronger board? How can you use this challenge to demonstrate to staff that this is an organization that cares about their well-being and where they can be proud to work?

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