

A Board's Guide to Book Challenges in Public Libraries



Presented by: Ron Kirsop



Why Are We Discussing This Now?

1. Significant increase in the number of Book Challenges in the United States.
2. Increase in the intensity of Book Challenges in the United States.
3. Efforts in other States to file criminal charges against librarians for housing certain titles.

“Parents, activists, school board officials and lawmakers around the country are challenging books at a pace not seen in decades,” the New York Times reported in January 2022.

Book Challenges and Banning is Not a New Phenomenon

- School boards debate issues surrounding books on a regular basis.
- What is unusual is the frequency and intensity of these challenges.
- Highly charged political component weave their way throughout many of these challenges. One side or the other is fueling legislation.
- In some cases, entire book lists focused on promoting diversity and inclusion have been slated to be banned by certain groups.
- Library Boards are not immune to this situation, some have had internal struggles related to book censorship.

A shared concern by authors and librarians alike is that removing books from libraries will make it harder for students to talk about difficult situations.

Banning authors and subject matter stigmatizes certain conversations and encourages negative feelings about groups of people.

Banning vs. Challenging

Challenge: An attempt to remove or restrict materials, based on content.

Banning: The removal of materials based on content.

Reasons for Challenges

1. the material was considered to be "sexually explicit"
2. the material contained "offensive language"
3. the materials was "unsuited to any age group"

66%

According to ALA's 2019 data, a majority of book challenges happened in Public Libraries. Of those challenges, library patrons and parents secure the largest percentage of groups that challenge books.

Handling Book Challenges at the Public Library

Policy

1. Ensures that the **selection of materials reflects the institution's philosophy**, mission, and guiding principles.
2. Provides a **framework for the consistent selection** and acquisition of library resources.
3. **Avoids haphazard patterns of acquisition** that will result in waste or overlap of content.
4. States **who is responsible** for the selection.
5. Ensures a **diversity of viewpoints on all topics**, including those that may be considered controversial
6. Identifies cooperative collection development arrangements such as **resource sharing** including interlibrary loans, agreements to purchase or lease e-content.
7. Provides **standards for collection maintenance** and the removal of library resources that are out-of-date, inaccurate or no longer reflect the consensus of the field, in poor condition, rarely used, in an obsolete format, no longer fit the needs of library patrons, or have excess copies.
8. Supplies **guidelines for the consideration of gifts and donations**.
9. Establishes a **process by which individuals may share their concerns** about library resources in a discussion with a librarian or, if their concerns are unresolved, invoke a formal reconsideration process.
10. Affirms the **importance of intellectual freedom**, referencing key documents such as the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the Library Bill of Rights, and the Freedom to Read Statement.

ALA Selection Policy Toolkit

Draft Selection and Reconsideration Policy

Responding to Challenged Books

Steps to Take

1. Have a proactive policy.
2. Follow your policy.
3. Allow patrons to submit a “reconsideration of material form.”
4. This form should be taken to the appropriate committee.
5. The determination should be written and kept on file.

The main goal is to document the process as well as the determination in a way that supports the library's mission, policy, and intentions.

Things to Keep in Mind

1. Stating a committee in your policy will help a challenged book conversation follow the correct procedure.
2. If a book is challenged in your school district, you can be proactive in evaluating the material ahead of time at your public library.
3. The board oversees the governance, while the director oversees the management of day-to-day operations; collection development falls into day-to-day operations.
4. If there is concern a book challenging group will make an appearance at your board meeting, be sure your Public Comment Policy is up to date.
5. Do not let popular opinion, personal opinion, or any other opinion sway a decision that should be made with the best interest of the library in mind.

Statements of Support

- The Freedom to Read Statement by the American Library Association offers a strong argument to preserve the ability to disseminate ideas and information even in the event of a challenge or ban.
- ALA Statement on Book Censorship opposes widespread efforts to censor books in U.S. schools and libraries.
- ALA's Library Bill of Rights affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas, and that the following basic policies should guide their services.
- NYLA Position Statement on the Defense of Intellectual Freedom shows our statewide advocacy organization in support of Intellectual Freedom and the opposition to the restriction, removal, and/or censorship of books.