

Dear Rita,

I want to carry a wide variety of resources in my library but my school community is ultra conservative. When I go shopping for books, I'm always worried about what some of the parents, students, or teachers will say about my selections. They wouldn't hesitate to complain to the administration about books they find controversial and to push for their removal from the library. They get upset because they think some books are too violent, too sexually explicit, too immoral, or too rude. I don't want to antagonize my community, but I believe in freedom of choice and feel I am neglecting to provide a balanced collection for all of my students. I want to have the kinds of books that other schools in my board have on their library shelves. Any advice?

Censored by the Community

Dear Censored,

This is one of the biggest issues that arises at one time or another for teacher-librarians. But don't despair, many of your colleagues have been in this situation and have found ways to deal with challenged materials.

First of all, point out that it is your obligation to uphold the rights and freedoms of the students in your school, and not to censor. The Ontario Library Association states, "intellectual freedom requires freedom to examine other ideas and other interpretations of life than those currently approved by the local community or by society in general and including those ideas and interpretations that may be unconventional or unpopular". In addition, "freedom of expression includes freedom for a creator to depict what is ugly, shocking and unedifying in life." (Go to www.accessola.com link to About OLA/Membership and then to OLA Issues for the complete statement.) Where else can our students go to find information on sensitive issues and be provided with balanced and unbiased answers?

Secondly, stress that the school library serves all students from a variety of different cultures, religious backgrounds, and family sexual identities and needs to have resources that address all students. Also, stress that students are never forced to take out any one book. They are always encouraged to choose from a wide variety of materials in the school library.

Having said this, a teacher-librarian will have a much easier time involving challenged materials if his/her board has a selection policy to refer to for support. It usually states the main reasons materials are purchased, and covers such arguments as supporting curriculum and providing balance in the collection. It often points out that materials are

selected for their whole, and not for individual words, pictures, etc., which may be taken out of context. There is often a procedure to follow in the case of challenged materials. If your board does not have one, perhaps you can initiate the process.

The Cass City School Board (Michigan) provides an example of a "Challenged Book Procedure": <http://www.casscityschools.org/Sec9Curriculum/CLibraryBooks/tabid/527/Default.aspx>.

Some boards go so far as to have equity policies that require resources to be available on a variety of sensitive issues. To heighten awareness of our role in providing choices of materials for all of our patrons, why not celebrate Freedom to Read Week by making it an event in your library? For more information, go to <http://www.freedomtoread.ca/>.

Rita



Do you have any school library concerns or gripes? Need advice?

Just ask Rita! contact Rita at rita@accessola.com You'll never regret it!

She's reliable, reasonable, rich in experience... and always right!