

CHALLENGING OPPORTUNITIES: DEALING WITH BOOK CHALLENGES

By Sabrina Carnesi



It is the librarian's duty to ensure that all users have equal access to library books. When a librarian is faced with a parent, teacher, or another member of the community who feels a particular library book is inappropriate for a patron to read, the librarian and staff should be able to knowledgeably follow through with a set of clear procedural measures that ensures the successful handling of the complaint.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES ARE THE FIRST STEPS TO TAKE

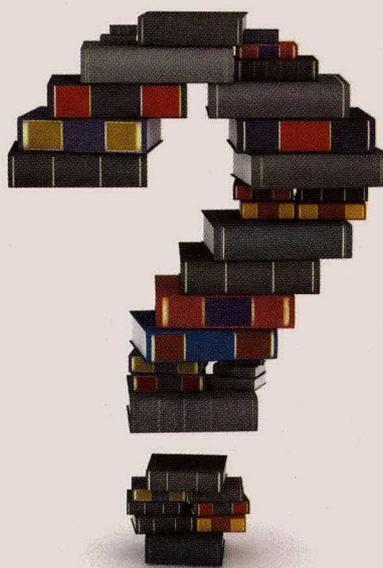
To be fair and to protect everyone's intellectual freedom, these first steps taken in a complaint should always be preventive ones similar to the following:

1. Use the links on your state and national organizations' websites to help familiarize and/or reacquaint yourself with the concepts of intellectual freedom, censorship, and the First Amendment.
2. Use ALA's Challenges to Library Materials site, www.ala.org/bbooks/challengedmaterials, to familiarize yourself with additional challenge terminology for expression of concern, oral complaint, written complaint, and public attack.
3. Create/review/update your selection policy.
4. Create/review/update your procedure for handling complaints.

SEQUENTIAL STEPS FOR AN ACTIVE CHALLENGE

If preventive measures do not prevail and your library becomes involved in an active challenge, here are a few sequential steps to follow:

1. Form a school committee of at least a) the librarian, b) the principal, c) a classroom teacher, and d) a parent.



2. Make certain all committee members are aware of their responsibility to read the entire book.
3. Create a list as to why this book falls under your selection policy. Make sure you always have a list of your selection policy present at all meetings regarding the challenge. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has a CD for the rationale of over 200 books and additional support on how to generate rationales (www.ncte.org/action/anti-censorship/rationales).
4. Get support from colleagues: ALA, NCTE, PLA, and your state organization. Talk to others that have successfully faced challenges. Discuss your situation with your school staff and your library supervisor.
5. Gather up support for the book. Did it receive rewards? Is it on a standard bibliography list? Is it on any Best Book lists? Is it or has it ever been a required read or been suggested as additional reading for a class in your school district? Have students write supportive statements, especially

students who can relate to the issues with which the book deals. Collect respected reviews from professional journals.

6. Take into consideration the situation from which the complaint arose. Did the student choose to read this book or was it required reading? Was the entire book read by the student? Did the challenger read the entire book? Is the challenger bringing attention to the book challenge via the media or community groups and organizations?
7. Make sure to report the challenge to your state organization, ALA, and NCTE.

School librarians, in particular, have additional responsibilities to uphold when faced with a challenge. In a school library, the emphasis for First Amendment rights goes beyond intellectual freedom to include academic freedom. Academic freedom guarantees a teacher's right to select academic materials that provide a broad enough selection of resources to provide opportunities for the student to develop a critical perspective on a given subject or idea. A school library shelf that is reflective of only one viewpoint does not support opportunities for this development to take place. With clear and defined guidelines such as this, the personal element in settling a complaint is minimized and the decision for inclusion becomes student-centered, which is the basic purpose behind the selection of materials for a school library overall.

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