INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM ISSUES IN SCHOOL LIBRARIES
AND MEDIA CENTERS
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Today more than ever intellectual freedom is essential to the operation and maintenance of a democratic society. Nowhere is it more important to foster this democratic ideal than in school libraries and media centers. Here young people acquire the critical thinking skills necessary to function in an increasingly pluralistic American society and complex global environment. Intellectual freedom promotes the atmosphere of free inquiry, free speech, and free access essential to the development of a discerning and informed citizenry.

The objectives of this essay are threefold: to provide a brief overview of the intellectual freedom implications of the role of the school librarian, to highlight recent Internet legislation impacting intellectual freedom in school media centers, and to list a few key Web sites that maintain current and comprehensive information on the topic.

Intellectual Freedom Implications for the School Librarian

While school librarians may find it challenging to stay abreast of current intellectual freedom issues affecting schools, four considerations remain constant. School media center personnel should contemplate: how they provide intellectual and physical access to resources including the Internet, a written collection development policy, procedures for handling challenges, and how intellectual freedom is promoted as a democratic ideal. Access means the unimpeded availability of a wide variety of resources in various formats commensurate with the mission and instructional objectives of the school and local community. Librarians promote the use of internal resources as well as access to the Internet, networks, and public libraries. The media center manager works closely with faculty and administrators to make the library an integral part of instruction. Barriers to access may include age and grade level restrictions, fees, requiring permission from parents or teachers, and the establishment of restricted shelves or closed collections.

A current collection development policy is essential. It defines the library’s mission in line with the broader objectives of the school and district. Library acquisitions and access policies directly reflect the goals and objectives outlined in the document. The policy acknowledges cultural diversity and the pluralistic nature of modern society as well as characteristics unique to the school or local culture. Appropriate intellectual freedom statements such as the American Library Association’s Library Bill of Rights offer credulous support and may be significant in the retention of challenged materials. Other collection development policy topics relevant to intellectual freedom include Internet and database use policy as well as confidentiality of patron records.

Every collection development policy must have a clearly articulated section that outlines procedures for the reconsideration of materials. The guidelines should be systematically applicable to each challenge and allow for parents and others to respectfully submit complaints with the assurance their concerns will be addressed in a fair and timely manner. Public school parents have the right to question materials made available to their students and most frequently express concerns about sexually explicit materials, profanity, morality and obscenity. Often queries do not turn into challenges once parents understand the media center selection process.

In addition to creating a venue for the redress of grievances, a well-written collection development policy becomes the basis for selecting and deselecting library materials and allows for ongoing evaluation of the library’s collection. Selection of school media center resources ideally involves input from students, teachers, parents, school administrators, and district personnel. Resources selected are appropriate to the developmental and age level of students, support the curriculum and the school mission, and present diverse view-
points in current and historical issues. Sound educational criteria are applied in the selection process including the use of professional selection resources. The personal, political, social, or religious views of those procuring library materials do not enter into the decision making process. The policy should be reviewed every three years to reflect changes in the school environment and innovations in information access.

Finally, school librarians are charged with promoting intellectual freedom as an educational and democratic ideal essential to an enlightened citizenry. Increasingly, this means advocating for funding, personnel, legislation, and recognition of the role the school media center plays in educational achievement. School library advocates seek to influence public policy and increase stakeholders’ knowledge so that informed citizens become proactive in the support of both libraries and intellectual freedom.

**Intellectual Freedom Implications of Recent Legislation**

Internet use by children, both at home and at school, has grown considerably over the past several years. School librarians struggle with Internet use policies that strike a balance between safe and unfettered access for students. Librarians are charged with providing students the fullest possible access to constitutionally protected materials and modes of expression.

The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA) and the Children’s Internet Protection Act of 2000 (CIPA) raise issues related to intellectual freedom in schools, some of which are clearly unresolved. While the implications of these laws are briefly summarized below, school librarians are advised to consult their local school district’s policy regarding COPPA and CIPA.

COPPA seeks to protect the personally identifiable information and online privacy of children under the age of thirteen. Commercial Web sites must obtain parental permission to collect or disclose information from underage children. They must also post privacy policies and demonstrate how collected information is used. Monitoring and enforcing of COPPA is under the jurisdiction the Federal Trade Commission.4

Schools continue to debate how the protective provisions of COPPA should be implemented. Unlike public libraries, schools do assume some in loco parentis or “in the place of a parent” duties to act on behalf of children.5 While some schools may authorize teachers and librarians to act on the behalf of parents, most seek consent by having parents and students sign an Internet acceptable use policy at the beginning of each school year. Decisions regarding Internet use are frequently made at the school board level for the entire district.

CIPA requires school and public libraries that receive federal E-rate or Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funding for Internet connectivity to filter computers with online access. Minors are to be protected from pictorial depictions of obscene and pornographic materials. Other provisions mandate that schools adopt a policy to monitor the online activity of minors and address unauthorized use or “hacking” by minors. For the 2001-2002 school year and thereafter, schools were required to certify that their safety policies and technology were in place or that necessary steps were being taken before receiving federal E-rate funding for the next year.6

After a lower court ruled CIPA a first amendment infringement and inapplicable to libraries, the United States Supreme Court upheld its constitutionality in U.S. v. American Library Association in June 2003.7 Controversy continues to surround the law, particularly as librarians question the effectiveness of Internet filtering.

**Sources for School Librarians**

Clearly, the issues of intellectual freedom in school media centers and libraries are dynamic, legalistic, and often complicated. For these reasons, the following quick references have been compiled. Not intended to
be comprehensive, these resources provide current and authoritative information that in the very least may serve as a starting point for school librarians.


NCTE official guideline that affirms the principle of intellectual freedom in schools.

Endnotes


