

Megan Schliesman

## Intellectual Freedom

The principles of intellectual freedom—the idea that a democracy is dependent upon citizens having free and open access to ideas—can face challenges on many fronts, but among the most volatile are those where the “citizens” in question are under the age of 18.

The American Library Association (ALA) regularly tracks censorship attempts in U.S. schools and libraries. Perusing the pages of ALA’s *Banned Books* list (Doyle, 2007), where information on attempted and successful challenges is compiled, is always enlightening. Sobering, but enlightening.

Here are a few (among the literally hundreds) of cases summarized in the most recent *Banned Books* publication:

- *Junie B. Jones and the Stupid, Smelly Bus*: challenged in the second-grade curriculum in the Harmony Township, New Jersey, schools in 1998 because “it sends the message that extreme emotions such as hate are fine.”
- *Baseball Saved Us*: challenged on the second-grade reading list in the New Milford, Connecticut, schools in 2006 because it contained the word “Jap.”
- *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*: challenged in the Owen J. Roberts School District, Bucktown, Pennsylvania, in 2001 because “the books tell children . . . that lying, cheating and stealing are not only acceptable, but that they’re cute and they’re cool.”

- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: removed from the freshmen required reading list in Annapolis, Maryland, in 2006 because “the book’s rape scenes and other mature content is too advanced for ninth graders.”

### THE SCOPE OF THE CHALLENGE

These four cases are representative of what those who study censorship attempts see over and over again: the determination of parents and other adults to “protect” children from words or ideas or images they perceive as harmful because they are in conflict with their own personal values. They may mistakenly believe that “anything goes” and do not necessarily realize that teachers draw on a wealth of knowledge, resources, and professional judgment in determining what children and teens are reading at school. Furthermore, they do not necessarily realize that their right to determine what their own child reads does not extend to limiting what other people’s children can read or will have access to in the classroom or library.

What does all of this mean for teachers and librarians today? It means they must understand the principles of intellectual freedom and how those principles are applied in the real world. They must be prepared to defend the rights of the children and teens for whom they have a professional responsibility. And they must be willing to acknowledge

their own biases and fears in decision making, and then move beyond them.

The teaching profession as a whole strongly supports the principles of intellectual freedom and the rights of students to have access to a wide range of materials to meet their diverse needs and interests. But those ideals cannot ease the tension or the fear among teachers who face a challenge to their choices.

### THE CCBC AND INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

I work in the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC), a library of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The CCBC is a state-wide book examination and research center for children’s and young adult literature. The library serves the students and faculty on the UW–Madison campus, as well as preservice and practicing teachers and librarians throughout Wisconsin. My colleagues and I present on new and recently published books, trends in children’s and young adult literature, and related subjects to students at the university, and to teachers and librarians across the state. We also field many children’s and young adult literature-related reference questions from teachers, librarians, university students, and others, and produce an annual best-of-the-year list, *CCBC Choices*, that highlights outstanding new books.

Since 2002, I have also coordinated one of the most valued

aspects of CCBC outreach efforts in Wisconsin: our Intellectual Freedom Information (IF) Services. Founded in 1977 by then-director Ginny Moore Kruse, the CCBC IF Services provide timely, critical information to Wisconsin librarians and teachers who are facing a book challenge or a potential challenge (a developing situation that could become a formal challenge).

In the 30 years the CCBC IF Information Services have been in existence, we have responded to over 2,000 requests for information. In each and every one of them, our goal has been the same: to provide information that can help librarians and teachers support the First Amendment rights of the children and teenagers with whom they work.

I think of the CCBC IF services in two ways. First, we provide tangible information: after receiving an IF call, we compile and send a packet that includes copies of all of the reviews and other professional assessments of the item, as well as material on intellectual freedom in schools and libraries. We also refer the caller to one of the area consultants at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Our second function is less tangible—but we hope no less valuable—in that we strive to decrease the sense of isolation and fear that librarians and teachers often feel when faced with a challenge situation. This starts by simply being there—a calm, reassuring voice on the other end of the phone line. But we also ask questions to help the caller think about the next appropriate step (perhaps reviewing the district policy with an administrator, or following up with the individual who expressed a concern or made

a complaint). We don't judge either the book or the situation, because challenges are local matters and require local resolution. But we do try to offer resources and insights that can contribute to informed decision making in that process.

And then we hope. If a formal challenge has been filed, we hope that there are board-approved policies and procedures in place at the school or library and that they are being followed. We hope those policies and procedures affirm the First Amendment rights of children and teens. And we hope that the materials we have sent can and will be used to support the professional judgment of the teacher, librarian, or committee that was responsible for choosing the material in question.

## THE POWER OF SELECTION

*Mirandy and Brother Wind. A Light in the Attic. The Chocolate War. The Giver.* Choosing books that children and teens will read, hear as a read-aloud, or have access to for independent reading is a powerful and empowering act that teachers undertake on behalf of their students. It is the first step on a journey that can open readers' eyes and minds to the power of words and language, and that can foster their ability to think deeply and critically and make astonishing, essential connections. Regardless of whether they are just learning to read or have mastered all the skills of proficient readers, students benefit from exposure to and interaction with a wide variety of texts that speak to their diverse experiences and interests and expand their understanding of the world.

But there is a profound irony inherent in the act of selection,

because the very act of making a choice opens the door to possible attempts at censorship. A book or other resource must be chosen before it can be challenged, so as teachers make those selections, many find themselves wondering which choices are likely to be scrutinized. For some, especially those who may have experienced a challenge, witnessed a colleague go through one, or worked in an environment where administrative support is in doubt, the question is much more pressing, and all the more frustrating because there is no answer.

The truth is that every book has the potential to offend someone. There is no such thing as a truly "safe" choice. That fact can be paralyzing . . . or liberating.

## THE BEST DEFENSE

So how can teachers prepare to defend their choices if they don't know which choices they may have to defend? In three ways: first, by making choices deliberately so that they are aware of the reasoning behind their decisions; second, by regularly communicating with parents, caregivers, administrators, and others about what is happening in the classroom; and third, by always following their school or district's board-approved policy for choosing and using materials.

It is important for teachers to think about *everything* in their classrooms in the context of the curriculum. Sometimes that thought process is a deliberate one, but not always, especially when it comes to supplemental resources. It is critical to be able to articulate the role that each and every resource plays in helping students achieve educational goals and objectives. Having copies of high-appeal titles, such as

Barbara Parks's *Junie B. Jones* and Dav Pilkey's *Adventures of Captain Underpants*, available in a second-grade classroom must be based on reasoning that a teacher can discuss with the same clarity used to explain why an entire eighth-grade class will be studying Terry Trueman's *Stuck in Neutral* or Mildred D. Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. The picturebook or novel read aloud to first-graders must be as thoughtfully considered as the book being studied by fifth-graders or the magazines, books, and multimedia resources available to them throughout the classroom.

Depending on the role of a resource, the answer to the question of how it supports the curriculum may be quite broad or very specific. Books that are part of a classroom library may be chosen to help improve skills, comprehension, and/or interest in reading by giving students a wide range of options so everyone can find material that is accessible and appealing. Required materials benefit from a more detailed explanation, one that articulates their specific role in the curriculum.

Thinking about all aspects of selection in this intentional way enables teachers to build a rich environment for learning while engaging in the critical thinking that is an essential part of defending their choices if a book or other material is ever questioned or challenged.

## TALK, WRITE, COMMUNICATE

Keeping parents and caregivers informed about what children are learning, reading, and doing in the classroom, and encouraging them to ask questions, is

also important. Provide them with information about some of the daily activities in which students are engaged and explain how they connect to classroom and curriculum goals. Classroom or schoolwide newsletters, school websites, open houses, and formal and informal conversations all present opportunities to share information about what and how students are learning.

Even if your reading list includes often-challenged books, such as Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* (most often challenged because of swearing) or Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (cited for "mature themes" such as euthanasia, infanticide, suicide, and sexuality), don't single out books for attention (unless your district requires permission forms or other communication about specific titles). Instead, provide an overview of everything you will be reading together. Explain that students will be challenged in many ways throughout the school year, including reading and discussing books that offer rich exploration of a wide range of themes relevant to their lives and the world in which they live. Express confidence in their abilities as thinkers and learners, and your ability as a teacher who can help them navigate challenging material. Invite families to ask questions and share their concerns about anything happening in the classroom.

Why is communication so important when it comes to defending classroom materials? In addition to helping further parents' and caregivers' understanding of a teacher's approach to meeting the needs of all students, it builds positive relationships that can make the difference between hearing about a con-

cern conversationally rather than confrontationally. Additionally, while regular communication won't guarantee that a parent or caregiver will never have a concern about classroom materials, it increases the odds that the concern will be just that—a concern shared directly with the teacher rather than a complaint to an administrator or board member.

Finally, communication with parents and others on a regular basis will help teachers internalize ways of talking about the connection between curriculum, learning, and classroom resources.

## POLICY AND PRACTICE

In Wisconsin, school districts are required to have a board-approved policy for choosing both curriculum and library materials. Around the country, the rules and regulations vary, but every teacher should make it a point to know and follow their district's official requirements for choosing materials for the classroom. Find out if there is a board-approved policy in place and what that policy says. Ideally, selection policies for classroom materials will also outline the procedures to follow in the event of a complaint about a book or other resource.

Teachers are often unaware of what their district selection policies state with regard to both guidelines and procedures for choosing materials, and the process for reconsideration. In some cases, informal practices that have been in place turn out to be a far cry from what official procedures state. Although policies will vary from district to district, knowing what the district policy states puts teachers in a much stronger position to defend their own choices,

as well as the First Amendment rights of their students. It's not a high-visibility issue in most districts unless they have recently dealt with a challenge; as a result, administrators may not make it a high priority or even emphasize it at building-wide or departmental meetings. In the event of a challenge to materials, however, it is the official policy that will—and should—matter.

It's possible that finding out what the district's policy states may raise more questions than answers, especially if long-held informal practices don't clearly align with official language. Teachers should ask for clarification from supervisors and administrators, and work with colleagues to raise awareness of the need for a common understanding among classroom teachers, administrators, and board

members of the district's policies, their meaning, and their procedures for implementation.

It is the right of any parent to ask questions and raise concerns about materials their children are using in the classroom. But a concerned parent (or community member, sometimes even a colleague or administrator) becomes a would-be censor when deciding that they have a moral imperative to assert what is best not just

## Selected Censorship and Selection Resources for Educators

### Organizations

**National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) ([www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org)):** The main censorship page on the NCTE website is at [www.ncte.org/about/issues/censorship](http://www.ncte.org/about/issues/censorship). Among NCTE's many resources related to censorship and selection are:

- **The Students' Right to Read:** This document affirms the First Amendment rights of students and how they relate to English language arts classrooms. It goes on to provide a sample policy and procedures for book selection and reconsideration of titles.
- **SLATE: Support for the Learning and Teaching of English:** SLATE serves as the intellectual freedom network of NCTE. They monitor book challenges and can provide assistance during a challenge, including rationales for many books.
- **Book Rationales:** NCTE has tips for writing rationales as well as existing rationales developed in collaboration with IRA (International Reading Association) for over 300 books.
- **Defining and Defending Instructional Methods:** Provides rationales for common methods used in English language arts instruction and methods for defending them.

**International Reading Association (IRA) ([www.reading.org](http://www.reading.org))**

- **Resolution on the Selection of Reading Materials ([www.reading.org/downloads/resolutions/resolution97\\_selection\\_reading\\_materials.pdf](http://www.reading.org/downloads/resolutions/resolution97_selection_reading_materials.pdf)):** Affirms that students have "free access to all materials that will enhance their

education." Includes suggestions of what to do before and after a challenge.

**Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) ([www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc](http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc)):** Intellectual Freedom links and resource information is available on the CCBC website from the main IF page at [www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/freedom/default.asp](http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/freedom/default.asp)). The CCBC provides two services related to intellectual freedom in libraries and classrooms:

- **Intellectual Freedom Information Services ([www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/freedom/ifServices.asp](http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/freedom/ifServices.asp)):** Provides book- and complaint-specific information for Wisconsin librarians and teachers facing attempts to censor materials for minors in their libraries and classrooms, as well as referral to an area consultant at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. If you are a Wisconsin resident and are facing a potential challenge or are in the midst of a challenge, call the CCBC at 608-263-3720.
- **What IF? Questions and Answers on Intellectual Freedom ([www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/freedom/whatif/default.asp](http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/freedom/whatif/default.asp)):** A question-and-answer forum for librarians, teachers, administrators, and others who have questions about what the principles of intellectual freedom look like in practice.

**National Coalition against Censorship (NCAC) ([www.ncac.org](http://www.ncac.org)):** NCAC is an alliance of 50 national organizations, including NCTE, IRA, the American Library Association (ALA) and many others. Its scope is vast and includes education, advocacy, and resources.

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for their own children, but for *all* children in the school or community. Policies and procedures for selection and reconsideration of materials are critical because they help ensure due process; that way, when concerns arise, the First Amendment rights of everyone involved are (ideally) respected and preserved.

## MAKING SMART CHOICES

If a concern or complaint does arise about material in the classroom, the question that teachers must be prepared to answer is not *why* a particular book with a word or picture or scene or idea

that someone has found offensive is in the classroom, but rather *how* that book—and all of the other materials required and available—supports the curriculum, the standards, and the learning environment they are creating for their students.

Even though there is no such thing as a “safe” choice, smart choices abound. They are made by knowing and following the district selection policy; by determining if reviews and other professional assessments support using the book with students in the grade in question; by not ignoring obvious concerns about a resource, but rather consider-

ing those concerns in the context of the work as a whole, and then the work as a whole in the context of its value to the classroom and curriculum. They are made by knowing the reasoning behind the inclusion of each resource in the classroom.

What is the alternative? The alternative is to become mired in “what-if” scenarios that leave lots of room for second-guessing and little room for peace of mind. The alternative is to deny students access to materials because of what *might* happen, turning the power of selection over to an imagined “someone.” The would-be censor doesn’t necessarily

## Selected Censorship and Selection Resources for Educators

- **Censorship in Schools ([www.ncac.org/education/schools](http://www.ncac.org/education/schools)):** This online NCAC guide includes an overview of the First Amendment in public schools, an overview of censorship issues, the rights and responsibilities of interested parties, and summaries of intellectual freedom stances of educational organizations.

### Books

***At the Schoolhouse Gate: Lessons in Intellectual Freedom*** by Gloria Pipkin and ReLeah Cossett Lent. Heinemann, 2002.

Two inspiring teachers recount the battles they faced to defend the First Amendment rights of their students in Bay County, Florida, during the 1980s. First the administration summarily restricted or banned books from the curriculum without due process; later, it also restricted the free speech rights of students on the high school newspaper.

***Censorship and Selection: Issues and Answers for Schools*** (3rd ed.) by Henry Reichman. American Library Association, 2001.

A comprehensive overview of the issues schools face with regard to First Amendment issues, including relevant case law and typical concerns cited, is combined with practical information for educators, from sample selection policies, to a

workbook chapter on writing policies, to “What Do We Do If?” which covers how to handle a complaint.

***Preserving Intellectual Freedom: Fighting Censorship in Our Schools*** edited by Jean E. Brown. National Council of Teachers of English, 1994. A collection of essays from the perspectives of researchers and educators on intellectual freedom issues in the classroom. Includes an essay titled “What Do I Do Now?: Where to Turn When You Face a Censor.”

***School Censorship in the 21st Century: A Guide for Teachers and School Library Media Specialists*** by John S. Simmons and Eliza T. Dressang. International Reading Association, 2001. How has the impact of the Internet and other changes influenced the way we teach and what we teach? How has it changed students and the way they learn? How do the changes that have occurred impact censorship in schools? This resource blends new insights with practical information on ways that teachers and librarians can be best prepared to meet the needs of children, as well as the questions that may arise about the materials they use to engage and challenge today’s students.

—Megan Schliesman

have a name—may not even exist—but censorship, in the form of self-censorship, has already occurred—an untenable situation for teachers and students alike.

There are no guarantees when it comes to materials selection. Some educators will retire without ever facing a materials challenge. Some will make what they consider “safe” choices and be challenged on those. Others will make dynamic, even “edgy” choices that never are questioned. And some will follow all of their district’s policies and procedures, only to discover they lack the support or understanding of administrators when they need it most.

That unpredictability is all the more reason for teachers to be proactive. With an open mind, informed perspective, and critical eye, they can enhance their learn-

ing environment with opportunities for students to engage with a wide variety of literature and other materials—materials that they are prepared to defend if a challenge should occur.

*Note:* All of the books mentioned throughout this article were drawn from the most recent edition of the *Banned Books* publication because they have been challenged in one or more U.S. schools.

### Reference

Doyle, R. P. (2007). *Banned books*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2007.

### Challenged Books Discussed

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Cormier, R. (1974). *The chocolate war*. New York: Knopf.

Mochizuki, K. (1993). *Baseball saved us* (Dom Lee, Illus.). New York: Lee & Low.

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McKissack, P. C. (1988). *Mirandy and brother wind* (Jerry Pinkney, Illus.). New York: Knopf.

Park, B. A. (1992). *Junie B. Jones and the supersmelly bus*. New York: Random House.

Paterson, K. (1977). *Bridge to Terabithia*. New York: Crowell.

Pilkey, D. (1997). *Adventures of Captain Underpants: An epic novel*. New York: Scholastic.

Rowling, J. K. (2000). *Harry Potter and the goblet of fire* (Mary Grand-Pré, Illus.). New York: Arthur A. Levine/Scholastic.

Silverstein, S. (1981). *A light in the attic*. New York: Harper & Row.

Taylor, M. D. (1976). *Roll of thunder, hear my cry*. New York: Dial.

Trueman, T. (2000). *Stuck in neutral*. New York: HarperCollins.

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## CALL FOR NOMINEES FOR THE 2008 CEL EXEMPLARY LEADER AWARD

The CEL Award for Exemplary Leadership is given annually to an NCTE member who is an outstanding English language arts educator and leader. Please nominate an exceptional leader who has had an impact on the profession through one or more of the following:

- work that has focused on exceptional teaching and/or leadership practices (e.g. building an effective department, grade level, or building team; developing curricula or processes for practicing English language arts educators; or mentoring)
- contributions to the profession through involvement at both the local and national levels
- publications that have had a major impact

Your award nominee submission must include a nomination letter, the nominee’s curriculum vitae, and additional letters of support (no more than three) from various colleagues. Send all the above by **February 1, 2008**, to Debbie Smith McCullar, *CEL Exemplary Leader Award*, 1502 S. Wolcott, Casper, WY 82601.

## What IF . . . Questions and Answers on Intellectual Freedom

Although the CCBC's Intellectual Freedom Information Services are available only to librarians and teachers in Wisconsin, the CCBC's's What IF . . . forum invites teachers and librarians across the country to submit questions that can arise as they think through what it means to put the principles of intellectual freedom into practice.

The online forum allows individuals to submit questions anonymously. Every question receives a personal reply, and many questions are anonymously posted, along with the response, as part of the What IF . . . library as a resource for others. To find out more about What IF . . . , to submit a question, or to read questions and answers, go to <http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/freedom/whatif/default.asp>

Here's a sample from the What IF . . . library:

**Question:** I'm a middle school teacher working as part of a group to select novels for the curriculum. Some of us are struggling with books we love that are strong overall but that have individual scenes or elements that we know might raise eyebrows. How much should we pay attention to that possibility in deciding whether or not to choose a particular book?

**Response:** You are certainly not alone in this struggle, which you probably share with most middle and high school teachers. We're so glad you are working as part of a group. One of the most valuable things teachers can do when choosing books is to talk with one another about the books they are considering for the curriculum. By discussing the value of the books you are considering, as well as your potential concerns and fears, everyone gains in their understanding and confidence regarding not only the books they are selecting, but also the support they have among colleagues.

Since you stated the books are strong overall, we assume this means your group not only appreciates them for their literary qualities but also their value to your curriculum. This is key. In order to defend any teaching choice you make, you must be able to articulate its connection and value to the curriculum and related standards.

There is no simple formula or checklist regarding how much weight to give an individual element, whether it's a scene or a word or an idea, in evaluating a book's suitability for the curriculum. Thankfully! Imagine how awful it would be to have to rule out books simply because they contain a certain word, action, or idea.

Instead, you must evaluate the elements that concern you in the context of the work as a whole. How? Ask yourself if the elements are necessary to expressing the theme, advancing the

plot of the novel, establishing character, or another literary purpose. If the answer is yes, then the book can be justified. If the potential "eyebrow-raising" scenes or elements to which you refer don't contribute to the book's overall literary quality, then you should let it go.

Of course, all of this can be very subjective, which is why having the opportunity to discuss the works with colleagues is so valuable. You may not all agree. Most likely you won't. But you can talk about your differing opinions, and those discussions may give you even greater insight into the book's suitability. They will also be invaluable when developing a rationale for your choice. For more on rationales, visit the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) website at [www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org).

You must also ask yourself if you can support using the book with students who are in that grade. Look at the age/grade ranges suggested for the books in professional review journals for librarians and educators. (If you need help locating reviews, ask your school librarian for assistance.) The reviews will give you a good idea of how your assessment of a book's suitability for a specific grade is supported by other professionals. You will want to pay attention to whether the grade for which you are considering the book falls into the range suggested among the various reviews.

If all the reviews recommend the book for students older than the grade in which you want to use it, then reassess your choice. Even if you are confident the students at your particular school are ready for mature or difficult content, you put yourself in a more vulnerable position—if a challenge were to arise—by teaching a book recommended by professional reviewers for older students. You may also be stepping on the toes of colleagues in higher grades if they are considering that particular book. (Make sure to pass it along to your colleagues teaching older students, if you believe they would find it of value and interest.)

Once you have evaluated the elements that concern you from a literary perspective, and once you know the professional age or grade recommendations for a book will affirm your choices, then you can be confident that you have given each book careful consideration and that your decisions about what to teach are informed ones. You'll know how and why those informed decisions were made, and you'll be able to articulate them with confidence. And if a challenge should arise, you and your working group will already have done so much of the work that is critical to defending teaching choices.

—Megan Schliesman and Ginny Moore Kruse