
Interpreting the Library Bill of Rights For Elementary and Secondary Schools

Gerald G. Hodges

Headline, *Des Moines Register*, May 21, 1987: "Pulitzer Prize-Winning Book Banned by Iowa School Board."

As we are all too well aware, censorship of school materials has been rampant in the last few years. The Iowa case is only one of many examples of efforts by "concerned" citizens, both within and outside the organized educational system, to suppress the flow of information to today's young people. The horror of the Iowa case is not so much the title of the offending work, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, but two small bits of information embedded in the news story: (1) the school librarian said that the school board did not consult him before deciding to ban the book, and added that he hopes the school board will soon adopt a formal policy for handling complaints about books; and (2) a school board member told the press that the removal of Styron's book has not caused any local problems: "It's no kind of controversy at all, but the papers think it is." (*Des Moines Register*, May 21, 1987, p. 3).

Obviously, as in this legally questionable situation, local school systems continue to express their outrage at "whatever" by attempting to cleanse the contents of materials available to young people. There is no time like the present for schools to consider seriously the interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights adopted by the American Library Association in 1986 entitled "Access to Resources and Services in the School Library Media Program." One of the major uses of this document is to educate our colleagues (and remind ourselves) of how intellectual freedom for children and young adults can be safeguarded in our nation's schools. School boards need to be required by law or by state departments of education rules to adopt selection policies. The endorsement of this interpretation as a basis for such policies could enable educators to take a strong stance in promoting intellectual freedom.

A major purpose of this paper is to highlight portions of the interpretation and discuss prac-

tices which adhere to concepts adopted by our professional association. Additional comments regarding the issue of confidentiality in school library media centers are appended.

The school library media program plays a unique role in promoting intellectual freedom. It serves as a point of voluntary access to information and ideas and as a learning laboratory for students as they acquire critical thinking and problem solving skills needed in a pluralistic society. . . Through resources, programming, and educational processes, students and teachers experience the free and robust debate characteristic of a democratic society. ("Access to Resources and Services in the School Library Media Program: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," hereafter, "Access").

If school boards endorse the interpretation, then they endorse this particular definition of the role of the library media program and of one of the functions of education. School librarians can work with other educators very effectively in living intellectual freedom through their actions and their policies. Some junior high schools report that units on book banning, designed cooperatively by the media specialist and the teacher, have helped students come to a greater understanding of the insidious nature of censors and the effects of abridgement of the rights of minors.

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Students can become their own best advocates for their rights, once they are made aware of them. Celebrations in many schools of "Banned Books Week" have helped students become more sophisticated in their understanding of this phenomenon and, blessedly, more scornful of what appears to them as the silliness of adults who strive to protect them and in so doing, really betray them.

If media centers are to serve as a learning laboratory, then students will need the opportu-

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nities to assess various points of view, some of which may be truly unacceptable to the majority. As either Dorothy Broderick or Mary Kay Chelton said, "Libraries will have something to offend everyone." This is inescapable and should be saluted as a cardinal truth. With this as a given fact, we begin to work from a position of strength rather than from a position of fear.

Let's suppose, on the other hand, that a school system does not choose to view school libraries or education in the same ways espoused in this Library Bill of Rights interpretation. (This is probably not as rare as we might hope). In this instance, the function of education may include a steady diet of facts or of a point of view with no encouragement for students to reflect, consider, evaluate, or otherwise use their higher order thinking skills. There would be no need for a learning laboratory, since the teacher and the "great" books (text and otherwise) would be the sources of all knowledge. Intellectual freedom could be put on the back burner for now as something students would earn when they leave school. How truly exciting! Many of today's adult censors show evidence of being unable to think other than categorically, in blacks and whites, and we may be educating a whole new generation of censors—a wonderful hidden curriculum agenda. In this scenario, libraries would rarely need various points of view because no one would check out these materials. Even having a library might be a frill except for the requirements of accrediting agencies or of some nostalgic conception that having a library is right and proper. Clearly, having a librarian who works at no more than maintaining a warehouse would be appropriate. School boards should be made to realize that not endorsing concepts of intellectual freedom has consequences.

The school board adopts policies that guarantee student access to a broad range of ideas. These include policies on collection development. . . . Members of the school community involved in the collection development process employ educational criteria to select resources unfettered by their personal, political, social, or religious views. Students and educators served by the school library media program have access to resources and services free of constraints resulting from personal, partisan, or doctrinal disapproval. School library media professionals resist efforts by individuals to define what is appropriate for all students or teachers to read, view, or hear. ("Access").

1987 has been proclaimed "The Year of the Reader," and 1987 is the year in which we want every child to have a public library card. Let us now proclaim 1988 as "The Year of the Selection

Policy," a year in which every school board in America either adopts or revises a selection policy for instructional and library materials. Let us also make certain that these policies are dynamic and carry as much weight in a school system as any other school policy, e.g., smoking, drinking, dress, behavior, etc. Having a selection policy which is stuffed in some notebook and brought out only to satisfy some accrediting or regulatory agency is foolish. Materials selection is a daily practice, and we must always keep in mind our stated objectives for selection, criteria for selection, roles and responsibilities of all involved in the process, etc. There are a great many examples of selection policies which can be of assistance in the development stage, but each system should adopt one which is meaningful for the educational goals of that particular system. Merely copying a model policy with no thought given to the implications of the objectives or the criteria for the local system makes little sense and can lead to all sorts of problems. Every effort should be made to guarantee that the policy which is developed carries the force of "law" in the system and enables educators to work in a climate of openness to possibilities. Even the most "liberal" or "conservative" communities are not homogeneous, and selectors of materials need not be hampered by worry that an illustration, a word, or an idea might offend someone. Being able to select materials in terms of educational objectives is the right of every educator, and school boards should acknowledge that fact no later than December 31, 1988. Meaningful selection policies also help the librarian and the media advisory committee establish priorities for budget expenditures and for weeding collections in terms of stated objectives and criteria.

School library media specialists also need to help educate board members, administrators, teachers, and parents about the complexities of intellectual freedom. School libraries are the primary access point to recorded information for boys and girls and we need to understand the implications for youth of taking stands such as "We'll just let the public library buy books by that author" (e.g., Stephen King, Judy Blume)" or "That book (*The Confessions of Nat Turner*) has been censored in the next county, so let's not get into that situation by buying it." State departments should never place themselves in the position of encouraging such stands by having lists or shelves in examination centers of "dangerous" or "questionable" titles.

Policies include procedures for the review of resources about which concerns have been raised. Such policies

provide for a timely and fair hearing and assure that procedures are applied equitably to all expressions of concern. School library media professionals implement district policies and procedures in the school. ("Access")

Even in a Broderickesque climate of no challenges to materials, but particularly in the current Reaganesque times, we must safeguard the materials we have purchased by having a legal, rational, and fair process for the reconsideration of titles. No selection policy is complete without such a section, and a process which complies with the legal requirements of due process is recommended. Informal resolution of complaints is likely the best approach, but that has never meant just informally removing the book from the shelves, particularly by the principal or the media specialist. If informal resolution cannot occur, then the complainant should complete in writing a reconsideration form. A committee of educators and lay people should be in place to hear complaints so that the established procedures may be followed expeditiously. Some school systems use this committee to consider titles which librarians have designated for weeding so no decision to remove, for whatever reason, is unilateral and private. An appeals process which protects the material and the complainant should be included in the procedures. However, all meetings of the committee which hears the complaint should be open—censors flourish much better in the dark than in the spotlight. This also means that all proceedings be handled in a rational, even legalistic, manner so that the potential for emotion is minimized.

Policies, procedures and rules related to the use of resources and services support free and open access to information. Major barriers between students and resources include: imposing age or grade level restrictions on the use of resources, limiting the use of inter-library loan and access to electronic information, charging fees for information in specific formats, requiring permission from parents or teachers, establishing restricted shelves or closed collections, and labeling. ("Access").

The greatest irony in this whole discussion would be that our own in-house policies turn out to be infringements of access. We must always answer honestly why we engage in the procedures we have and if any of our actions could be those of the censor. Why do we guide the second grader who reads at the sixth grade level away from certain books written at the sixth grade level? What message is sent when a sixth grader reading at the second grade level has in hand a book labeled "second grade?" Why do we permit sixth graders to use the videocassette recorder, but do not let

second graders? Why do we not engage in inter-library loan of paperbacks? Do we contact the public (or other) library when a student's information need is not met? Why are certain magazines on reserve? Why do we spend tax dollars on certain materials and then house them in the work room or "under the counter?"

The answers to these and many other questions should always be viewed in the light of access. Are our actions increasing or restricting access? Are our actions motivated by protecting students or by providing the best materials for students? Are our actions motivated by protecting materials and equipment? If our states have confidentiality of library records laws, do we conform to them? Do we expunge records of individual circulations once the material has been returned? Do we use a black magic marker to obliterate a student's signature on a book card once the material is returned, or do we leave the record open for all to see? What, indeed, are our motivations for any library policy? All of our considerations should be firmly grounded in a knowledge of, and respect for, the developmental realities of children and young adults.

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Acting *in loco parentis* is another pitfall to avoid at all costs. Library media specialists cannot be in the business of determining what a child may not read, hear, or view. Parental rights (and some have cogently argued that this is not even a parental right, but that is another matter) are different from ours, and we have too many other responsibilities to be worried about that anyway. We must, however, make clear to parents that there is a major distinction between "I don't want my child to read this book" and "I don't want any child to read this book."

Perjorative labeling serves little purpose and is too subjective a practice to expend the incredible effort needed for serious content analysis. Having a "racist" shelf and a "sexist" shelf and an "ageist" shelf and an "outdated by Newbery winner" shelf would be confusing and likely insulting to even adult library users. Consider once again the motivation and the effect on children and young adults.

This new interpretation to the Library Bill of Rights underscores the fact that school library

media specialists are integral members of the library and information professions and promotes in very clear ways the foundation of school librarianship, i.e., our clients, who are minors under the law, have rights of access to the information they need, when they need it, where they need it, and in the needed format. We have the privilege and the responsibility to help safeguard these rights for our users. William Styron's response to the banning of this book in the case noted above was "I wouldn't blame Iowa. It could happen in Minnesota, Connecticut, or Virginia, I'm sure. It does say something about a kind of American ignorance ... I think it is pretty terrifying when people are so benighted that they are willing, utterly thoughtlessly, to take it upon themselves to grab books off a shelf and symbolically burn them." (*Des Moines Register*, May 21, 1987, p. 3). Let us pledge that we as school professionals will strive to see no more headlines with the words "book" and "banned" in the same phrase.

... censors flourish much better in the dark than in the spotlight.

References

In the spirit of the Library of Congress, the following are recommended to "read more about it."

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North Carolina Librarians Win Depository System

Legislation passed unanimously (August 11, 1987) by both Houses of the North Carolina General Assembly will provide for a system of statewide acquisition, storage, and dissemination of publications issued by North Carolina state agencies. Depository legislation, introduced by Sen. Kenneth C. Royall Jr., will replace the current unfunded and unenforceable law that has been in place since 1979.

The legislation will require each state agency to designate a publications officer responsible for supplying the State Library with copies of its publications. Funding provided by the Legislature will allow the State Library to establish a publications clearinghouse and enable the State Library to produce microfiche copies of each publication. The new depository legislation goes into effect on October 1, 1987. It is expected to provide state agencies with wider and more efficient distribution of the information they produce, while improving public access to the material, and assuring that the future information needs of officials, historians, and citizens can be met.

Members of the Depository System Committee of the North Carolina Library Association Documents Section, spearheaded the efforts to revise the current law.

CAUTION!

SOME PEOPLE CONSIDER THESE BOOKS DANGEROUS

AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY • THE BIBLE • ARE YOU THERE, GOD? IT'S ME, MARGARET • OUR BODIES, OURSELVES • TARZAN ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND • THE EXORCIST • THE CHOCOLATE WAR • CATCH-22 • LORD OF THE FLIES • ORDINARY PEOPLE • SOUL ON ICE • RAISIN IN THE SUN • OLIVER TWIST • A FAREWELL TO ARMS • THE BEST SHORT STORIES OF NEGRO WRITERS • FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON • ULYSSES • TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD • ROSEMARY'S BABY • THE FIXER • DEATH OF A SALESMAN • MOTHER GOOSE • CATCHER IN THE RYE • THE MERCHANT OF VENICE • ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF IVAN DENISOVICH • GRAPES OF WRATH • THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN • SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE • GO ASK ALICE

CELEBRATING THE FREEDOM TO READ