

Advocating in a Time of Book Challenges

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In a time where challenges and new bills restricting access to books are sweeping the country, it is easy to feel helpless. For library professionals who are not personally facing book bans and challenges there are still tangible ways to prepare yourself as an ally for helping library professionals and educators.

Spread the Word

Stay up-to-date on current book challenges by reading publications like *Book Riot* and ALA's *The Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy*, staying abreast of local and national news, and following hashtags on Twitter including #book-challenges and #bookbans.

PEN America (<https://pen.org/>) has a study on the increase in book bans that could be helpful to read. Be mindful of checking sources to ensure information is accurate before sharing it with your network and beyond.

Focus on the Now

When making book displays for Banned Books Week, consider focusing on books currently being challenged, like *Maus* and *Gender Queer*, instead of historically challenged titles, like *Lord of the Flies* and *The Great Gatsby*, which have received plenty of challenges throughout the years.

Learn about Different Types of Censorship

Public book challenges are the most publicized and recorded. However, quiet censorship exists when materials are never included in collections in the first place. This could be because the items go against the beliefs of the purchasers or because the educator or librarian doing the purchasing is worried that the items may be challenged. This type of censorship is not recorded, although it happens quite often. Think about your own purchasing tendencies and see what checks and balances can be put into place at your organization to stop quiet censorship.

Prepare Yourself

Familiarize yourself with your library's collection development policy and how books are brought into the building. Talk to your workplace supervisors about preparing a written response if anyone challenges books. Keep your supervisors aware of challenges across the country, and ensure your organization is on the same page if anything happens in your location. Keep abreast of available organizations that can assist you, like the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, PEN America, and the Freedom to Read Foundation.

Write Letters and Attend Meetings

If there is trouble in any areas near you, attend library or school board meetings where these titles are being addressed. Make sure that you have updated contacts for your local school board, library board, and city council. Opposing groups are coming out in droves, and it's important to resist. Even if you're not making a statement, you can show support. If you're not able to attend a meeting, write a letter to local boards and legislators stating your stance.

Practice Constant Vigilance

It can be easy to let advocacy slip to the side or to become complicit, especially with everything else on your plate. However,

that's when things can fall apart. Do your best to ask and answer questions about why certain books are being purchased while others are not. It's important to encourage and expect engagement on the information in your library.

Be an Ally

When meeting other librarians or educators, introduce yourself as an ally for keeping books in libraries. Don't be quiet about it, and don't assume everyone knows you're an ally. If you see someone having trouble, don't hesitate to reach out and offer support in any way possible. Remember that book challenges, bans, and quiet censorship are not a thing of the past but of the present. As librarians, we can do our best to advocate for one another while pushing against censorship. &