

Ready, Set, Respond

Becoming a Challenge-Ready Library Professional

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Imagine you are setting up a new display when a community member approaches you about a book their family checked out. They feel that the book is inappropriate for their family to read. You may feel a variety of emotions: fear, anger, defensiveness. If you are not in a position to make decisions in your organization, you may also feel uncertainty and helplessness.

However, no matter your position in the library, you can personally develop a confident approach to intellectual freedom challenges and bring that lens to your wider organization for greater team unity and preparedness.

Policy and Procedure Foundation

In the tense moment of an intellectual freedom challenge, your library's policy and procedure will be your solid foundation. They



present a neutral third point in the face of a query that can trigger a strong emotional response from both the library staff and the inquirer.

Ground in Your Selection Policies

Youth services staff should first be deeply familiar with their library's selection policy. If asked, you should be able to articulate why a book is in the collection and why it was placed in the juvenile, tween, or young adult section. Whether you have a direct role in the selection of youth services materials or your materials are selected centrally, it is essential that you know what guidance informed the selection of the book. While busy days full of programming or administrative commitments can push materials selection to the back burner, taking time to know and apply your selection policy consistently will save you from stress and conflicts down the road.



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conference presenter, Maegan has held multiple positions in the Wisconsin Educational Media and Technology Association and the CCBC's Friends Board. Maegan is currently a member of the CCBC's Charlotte Zolotow Award Committee. **Becky Calzada** is the district library coordinator of the Leander (TX) Independent School District. She is also a cofounding member of Texas #Freedom Fighters and is the president-elect of the AASL for 2024-25. She was selected for ALA's fourth Policy Corps cohort, works as a member of the Policy Corps' cadre for Proactive Advocacy on Book Banning, and is a member of ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee. Becky is the recipient of several intellectual freedom awards and was honored by People magazine in their 2023 Women Changing the World portfolio. The trio are authors of the new book *Prepared Libraries, Empowered Teams* (ALA Editions, 2024).

If the selection policy has been followed, with a little research you will be able to share the criteria that was applied to selecting the book and determining its location in the collection. Referring to policy helps you avoid personal value judgments or criticism that are likely to escalate the situation. When you can share the straightforward fact that the book was selected in alignment with board-approved policy, you can then move forward with the patron in selecting a book that better fits their family's preferences.

Know and Apply Your Reconsideration Policies

Second, get to know your reconsideration policy and process. What happens when a patron is not satisfied with the book selection information provided? What do you do when they insist the book be removed from the collection? Do you pull it until a reconsideration process is completed or does it stay on the shelf? Which staff members are authorized to share the reconsideration process with patrons? The answers to these questions should be included in your library's reconsideration policy. Again, knowing the next steps in the process will help you maintain composure and professionalism when challenging emotions may be surging.

Advocate for Updates

In the event that your policy and procedures are not proactive or protective of intellectual freedom, take the opportunity to advocate for an update. Since policies are typically voted on by the library's governing body, identify the individuals in your organization, if not you, who can take your concerns to those who can make change. Encourage your organizational leaders to consider updating in-house procedures even sooner, as these departmental guidelines may be simpler to change than board-approved policy. If you have faced a challenge already, share the areas that the policies and procedures did not serve your library staff or the tenets of intellectual freedom. If you have not yet faced a challenge, provide scenarios—either imagined or real examples from the news—to demonstrate the urgent need for change.

Awareness Smooths the Path Forward

When planning and professional development focused on responding to inquiries and challenges is not a regular part of your library's structure, there are steps you can take as an individual. Having ensured that you are informed about the policy and procedural guidance to which your library is bound, you can use your awareness of your community and happenings in other libraries to guide your planning. While you may need to start this work independently, be alert for opportunities to discuss and share with colleagues within your library and those with whom you are connected in other library settings.

Your most valuable action at this stage is to understand that inquiries represent patrons motivated by a variety of different factors. It is important to listen for the underlying concern and respond with questions and information sharing that deepens your understanding of the situation. Using intellectual freedom reports from the American Library Association's (ALA'S) Office of

Intellectual Freedom (OIF) to become aware of what is happening across the country will help you plan a response in your setting.

Be Attuned to Trends

Making sure you are aware of your patrons' and communities' stances on a range of social issues will help you to anticipate the type of concerns that may be raised in your library. How are issues around mental health, diversity, and reproductive information portrayed in the local media? What concerns do citizens raise at local school board or city council meetings? What language is used to describe these concerns and how are solutions identified? This type of awareness will help guide anticipation of an inquiry and formulation of a response that works toward resolving the concerns rather than escalating to a possible challenge.

Plan Library Programming with Intentionality

When you set up a display, create a reading list, or select books for storytimes, be intentional in your choices. Engaging with your patrons, asking for suggestions and feedback keeps you connected to your library users and aware of their reactions to what they and their children experience in your space. This practice allows you to be prepared with an explanation about the relevance of these materials to your community and how they are in keeping with your library's policies should you be questioned.

Build Your Professional Network

Opportunities to connect, learn, and build relationships with fellow librarians and like-minded community members abound. Recall like-minded classmates from your library coursework. Maintain contact with cooperating librarians from your field work experiences. Establish an active member presence in your local, state, and national professional associations. Volunteering with and learning from librarians in similar roles can provide you with an abundance of thought partners and collegial support to get through tough times.

Think beyond your immediate circle and form relationships with your local school librarians, bookshop owners, and members of your library's friends groups and fundraisers. This cohort of peers and contacts can make all the difference in your preparedness for challenges and in helping ensure that you do not face difficult work in isolation.

Communication and Relationships Rally Support

Established protocols and communications for collection development processes and procedures are foundational components for a strong library system. Interrelated in this, is the importance of the relationships between team members. The successful gathering and dissemination of library information is dependent on your reliance and confidence on the delivery of this communication. If these elements are in place, your team will be challenge-ready and share consistent information to whomever requests it.

Review Communication Pathways

But where do you begin? This is a multi-step process that begins with an evaluation of the current communications in place in your workplace. What is the process in your workplace? Who needs to be contacted within your system should a concern arise? Who should review communications and consider what updates need to be made? Understanding the communication protocols are where the opportunities lie for you to be a proactive and contributing member of your library team.

It's important for you, as a member of the library team, to learn the location and establish procedural information such as an FAQ or a landing page on a library website where information is shared. Should you determine an information gap, consider passing your suggestion along. Your contribution of information strengthens your organization, informs your community, educates all library workers in your library, and systematizes consistent messaging at all times.

Rehearse for a Confident Response

Sharing current processes with a team is a starting point but using practice scenarios helps to hone communication skills and allows you to practice and reflect on how to approach an inquirer. Your response and body language impacts a conversation and there are actions that facilitate or escalate communications. "Practice makes perfect" is an adage that applies; the more you engage in rehearsal, the more confident you will be at having conversations about questions that arise.

Use situations based on challenges in other libraries and formulate a response that you might give to a patron were you to receive that same inquiry. Scripting and rehearsing, even on your own, will make you better able to address a patron's concern calmly, respectfully, and knowledgeably. Ideally, you can share with a colleague or two within your library or externally to discuss possible responses and reactions. Any exchange for which you are prepared will have a more positive outcome. Your anticipation, collaboration, planning, and rehearsal of inquiry scenarios provides the best chance for a constructive and positive outcome for your library and your community.

Lean on Your Coalition

As your confidence builds, be sure to also recognize when to lean on others for questions or when coping with the emotional struggles that may result from these sometimes heated interactions. The persistent book challenges across the country can take a toll on your mental health. It is incumbent on you to be mindful of this and seek out help and support whenever the need arises.

Help might come from an attentive friend outside the field willing to listen. It may also look like members of your curated professional network who can relate to your experiences. Do not overlook the patrons you serve. The transparency provided in your communication strategy can develop regular library visitors into strong library advocates who can speak on your behalf at a town

Prepared Libraries, Empowered Teams: A Workbook for Navigating Intellectual Freedom Challenges Together (ALA Editions, 2024).



Whether a book challenge is upon you, on the horizon, in your rear-view mirror, or not yet in sight, now is the time to start envisioning what a challenge-ready team looks like in your organization. This unique workbook will equip you and your colleagues with the tools and resources to tailor a challenge preparedness action plan to the needs of your library and community.

Preliminary data for 2023 from ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) shows an all-time high number of book challenges, shattering the previous record set only the year before. Anticipating and preparing for challenges can only be done effectively when the library has a unified team. This workbook will help library directors and managers at all types of libraries ensure that all members of their staff understand the essential role they have to play when challenges arise. Simultaneously, it will guide you toward managing the stress of the circumstances with lessened impact on team well-being and organizational reputation. Solo librarians will also find resources for coalition-building in the absence of library colleagues within their institution.

hall meeting or library board session. Intentionally build your coalition to include all kinds of supports on deck. Even if you never have to call on them during an intellectual freedom challenge, your team of supporters will enrich your work in so many ways.

Conclusion

With this solid grounding, you can prepare to avoid doing this work in isolation. Look beyond your team if necessary to prepare yourself for this work and to have support systems in place. You can also position yourself to be a support to others as they encounter questions around intellectual freedom. Ensuring that strong collegial relationships are part of your professional network is a necessary foundation for delivering high quality service.

To use this preparation to support your team, monitor the news around intellectual freedom and identify opportunities to engage in conversation around this topic. Even a brief exchange can improve team members' readiness to field an inquiry. This "of the moment" approach will help in defending intellectual freedom and in staying on your library team's radar.

Still feeling stuck? You are welcome to contact the authors for conversation and support. #StrongerTogether &