

Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee or a guest writer. Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the [IFC committee](#).



Intellectual Freedom Committee

Oregon Library Association

March 2019 Tuesday Topic: When it's not your (library's) book being banned.

The phrase “banned books” usually leads librarians to think about challenges to items held in school or public libraries. However, many challenges instead target books and materials in the K-12 school curriculum. For example, a parent or community member may object to a particular novel read by entire classes.

Books such as “The Catcher in the Rye”, “The Color Purple”, and “Of Mice and Men” have been frequent targets and have been removed from schools in the past. In Oregon, Sherman Alexie’s “Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian” was [removed from the high school](#) in Crook County in 2008, and the same book has been challenged in [Grants Pass](#), [Sweet Home](#), and [Lake Oswego](#) as recently as 2014 (without success). “The Handmaid’s Tale” was challenged in 2015 as an assigned book for students in an [AP English class at Albany High School](#), but was retained.

Most districts have an approval process for any materials used in the curriculum, called the “adoption” process. Textbooks and novels are usually listed on the school board agenda, made available for review by the public during a comment period, and finally approved or rejected by the school board.

Library books, on the other hand - where students choose a title for themselves, rather than as an assignment - fall under the library’s collection development policy, and library staff do not need school board approval for each item purchased. There is a clear distinction between “independent reading” (each student chooses a book from the school or classroom library) and “assigned reading” (every student in a class or small group reads the same novel).

Most districts also have a policy that allows parents/guardians to “opt out” their own students from classroom assignments. Students in the class may be assigned a book to read, but students whose parents/guardians object are able to choose a different novel or do an alternative assignment. For curriculum materials (such as the health/sex education curriculum) parents/guardians may choose to have their student leave the classroom during certain lessons.

However, sometimes parents or community members want something entirely removed from the curriculum. This may be a book or materials such as textbooks, films, activities, worksheets, etc. The challenger may also demand that the title be removed from the library, though this is not always the case. This is an intellectual freedom issue because one person or group attempts to decide for all students, not just their own children.

To address challenges to books and materials in the curriculum, as well as independent reading selections, groups such as the National Council of Teachers of English have adopted policies and guidelines:

[National Council of the Teachers of English on the Student's Right to Read
NCTE Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship](#)

The Oregon State Library encourages library staff to report any challenges to intellectual freedom issues– including challenges to curriculum that may be occurring outside the library. No identifying information will be published and they may submit incident reports anonymously. Here's the reporting link: <https://libguides.osl.state.or.us/oifc/report>.

So why do librarians care when school curriculum materials are challenged or removed, especially in cases where the book in question is still available in the school library? The simple answer is that our own [Bill of Rights](#) calls us to do so. Article VI states “Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.” Cooperating with those teacher colleagues with whom we most closely work seems like a great place to begin.

But if “because ALA says I should” is not enough reason to care about curriculum censorship, consider these points: Opposing censorship in school curriculum sends a clear message to the students we serve that we support their right to read, in AND out of the library. It also creates a tremendous learning opportunity to help these future voters understand the importance of intellectual freedom, helping to guarantee its defense in future generations. Furthermore, supporting our teacher colleagues through such challenges increases the likelihood of garnering their support for challenges of library materials. Doing so also helps strengthen the message that school librarians don't work just in their own silo, but care deeply about and are intentionally integrated into the entire educational process.

And ultimately, because if we care about intellectual freedom, we don't care about it only in our libraries, but in all of society. School curriculum is often a flashpoint for intellectual freedom and censorship issues. We can work with our teachers and faculty members to oppose censorship and ensure that students have opportunities to read freely, and to read materials that may be controversial.

Miranda Doyle

OLA Intellectual Freedom Committee member
District Librarian, Lake Oswego School District
doylem@loswego.k12.or.us

Steve Silver

OLA Intellectual Freedom Committee member
Library Director, Northwest Christian University
ssilver@nwcu.edu