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THE CHOSEN BOOK

Writing Library Policy to Avoid Challenges in Jewish School Libraries*

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Abstract: The issue of intellectual freedom and its maintenance under the onslaught of those whose personal priorities and agendas dictate the censorship of library materials, is not one that is confined to any one type of institution. Challenges to textbooks and library books have increased alarmingly in the last few years in public and private, religious as well as secular, schools and libraries in our society—to the point where librarians must question the possibility of controversy in titles on the Holocaust, along with the more traditional confrontations over sex and witchcraft.

What is the psychology behind this insidious trend? What can one do when one's library materials are challenged either by members of the community or by administrators? Who can one call upon for help? Most important, how can this problem be avoided altogether, or defused when it does occur? This paper contains the answers to all of these questions. In addition, it suggests how to actually begin writing a policy for materials selection which contains the mechanisms for dealing with attacks on our First Amendment freedoms.

Background

Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl is prominent on the list of the 33 most frequently challenged books in U.S. libraries, in good company with such acknowledged classics as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Catcher in the Rye* (Hulsizer, 1989, p. 5). Extremists on both ends of the political and social spectrum have designated these and too many others as unsuitable for a variety of reasons, and their purpose is to remove them or restrict their circulation in libraries. In fact, anything that does not

conform to their political or social agendas can be attacked and challenged, and often is. Poetry, films, and plays—not to mention items on sex education and drug abuse prevention—are continually on the firing line. In 1992, People for the American Way, a civil liberties monitoring organization founded by TV producer Norman Lear in the early 1980s, reported 173 challenges to school library materials alone, up from 70 the previous year (*Attacks on the Freedom to Learn*, 1991–1992). These statistics reflect only those challenges monitored by People for The American Way; other organizations concern themselves with censorship as well.

Although intellectual freedom is protected by Amendments 1 and 14 of the United States Constitution, examples of flagrant disregard for these basic principles of democracy are increasingly frequent. Witness the following example: the school superintendent/principal of the only school in Young, Arizona, ordered the school librarian to “get rid of” a number of books in the library which he deemed “unsuitable” and which “promoted unacceptable life-styles.” Among topics represented were teen suicide, child abuse, and date rape. He did not stop there, however. He asked teachers to incorporate the Bible and Christian teachings and principles (without non-Christian influences) into the curriculum and to teach *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl* as fiction! He was subsequently found to have ties to known hate groups that particularly target Jews (*Attacks on the Freedom to Learn*, 1991–1992, pp. 33–34).

This particular superintendent of schools used publications produced by Mel and Norma Gabler, self-described watchdogs of curriculum materials in Texas and elsewhere through their Educational Research Analysts organization. Other religious and far right groups that challenge, and support challenges of, educational materials are Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum; Beverly LaHaye's Concerned Women for America; Don Wildmon's American Family Association; and

Pat Robertson's National Legal Foundation, National Association of Christian Educators, and Citizens for Excellence in Education, the last of which was heavily involved in the Rainbow Curriculum controversy in New York City.

The Left has made its share of challenges as well, frequently to “protect” minority interests, without considering the era or context in which many classics were written. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been designated a racist polemic, Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* is considered antisemitic, and the works of Martin Luther and Thomas Aquinas have been deemed sexist in some quarters. The psychology at work is well expressed by People for the American Way's 1990–1991 report, *Attacks on the Freedom to Learn*:

Such efforts to limit freedom of speech invariably occur in a political context. Challenges to expression generally reflect disagreement with the themes and attitudes expressed. For example, when the President [Bush] proposed a ban on flag-burning his constitutional amendment sought to restrict the expression of views critical of the government.

Attacks in the schools tend to reflect a political agenda as well. Efforts to ban AIDS education often reflect an intolerance of homosexuality. Challenges to classic works of literature frequently are grounded in a fundamental disagreement over the presentation of information or experiences at odds with the objector's own world view.

It is the diversity in American society that challengers find threatening, and they respond by attempting to impose on America a sectarian-based homogeneity. In the instance of the public schools, the classroom is not seen as an appropriate forum for a vigorous and healthy clash of views and ideas. The need to teach students to analyze, evaluate and make principled decisions

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is dismissed. The preference is for schools that narrowly enforce parental and Scriptural authority by teaching simple right and wrong answers to complex questions; by condemning, rather than understanding and accepting those who behave and believe differently; and by instilling in children an unquestioning acceptance of received wisdom, rather than a sense of curiosity and wonder (pp. 3-4).

The important concept to bear in mind is that this bid for control of hearts and minds is by no means restricted to the secular and/or Christian world. One can see parallels between censorship initiatives of all times and places. Jewish schools and libraries around the world, not just in this country, have faced and are still dealing with these issues. This writer has been approached by librarians from as far away as Australia and Israel and as nearby as Suffolk County, New York with personal accounts of having been censored in a Jewish environment. The rest of this paper discusses methods of protection against challenges and what to do if, in spite of every effort, one does occur.

Avoiding a Challenge

The two most important means of deflecting criticism and challenges to any library collection are excellent public relations strategies and a *written* policy for selection, acquisition, circulation, donations, and weeding of materials. Be forewarned: nothing is foolproof, but if both safeguards are in place, experience has shown that the chances of trouble diminish significantly.

Public Relations—A public relations (PR) effort begins with knowing thoroughly the community for which the PR effort is designed, especially community composition and values. Being intimately familiar with the branch of Judaism to which the school or institution belongs (including major tenets and customs), the ages and interests of patrons (which can be determined by a carefully constructed survey), and the vision held for the institution by the rabbi and trustees are all basic to building an effective PR and library program.

The librarian in a Jewish school must reach out to the rabbi, the principal or director, the synagogue or institutional board of trustees, members (of a synagogue), teachers, and especially students. In the event of a challenge, these

people can become invaluable allies by providing moral support, by exerting peer pressure and by serving on a materials selection committee.

When the librarian takes the trouble to know, understand, and respect the community, the community is likely to reciprocate, showing interest in the librarian and what he/she does and why. A job description developed and delivered to "the powers that be" may encourage the consideration of the position as a professional one, opening the way for more respect and concern. Still more important, though, is bringing the library to its constituency by speaking about it and its collection at every opportunity, at least once or twice a year at Board of Trustees meetings, and at membership and new member meetings whenever possible.

Another tactic that often works is to invite groups—the rabbi, principal, and teachers, for example, or parents and other members—for refreshments and talks on new books or other materials of interest. Establishing a library committee to help with library chores, as well as catering for booktalks and parties, also brings positive exposure. Lastly, requests and suggestions for materials should be solicited among all potential patrons, and scrupulously honored whenever they are commensurate with the selection policy of the library.

Writing Selection Policy—A selection policy should be very simple but all-inclusive. The New York Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Roundtable (1987, p. 38) recommends the following components:

1. Community profile
2. Goals of library
3. Support of documents of the American Library Association, such as the Library Bill of Rights, the First Amendment to the Constitution, etc.
4. Authority for selection decisions (ultimate and delegated)
5. Qualifications of selectors
6. Standards of selection
 - A. Relevance to community
 - B. Existing subject coverage within library
 - C. Authority of author
 - D. Critical reviews/selection sources
 - E. Accuracy
 - F. Suitability of format for library use
 - G. Price
 - H. Popular demand
7. Challenges to materials
 - A. Procedure for handling complaints
 - B. Reconsideration form
8. Clientele

9. Format
10. Subject
11. Gifts
12. Revision of policy
13. Approval by governing board
(Acquisition procedures may be included.)

Following this format, there can be few questions as to the thoroughness and care with which books and other materials are chosen. In addition to preparing a policy, it is advantageous to have a materials selection committee (see items 4 and 5, above) composed of a member of the congregation, an administrator, and one or more representatives of the school, to have a hand in deciding what to add or discard. Choose its members carefully, as this committee can also serve to deflect challenges by participating in the decision-making process on controversial material. It should be understood by all that the *librarian* makes the final decisions. If members of the congregation or school have a stake in the library, support is almost certain to follow. When this group convenes, three precepts should guide its function:

1. *Select books on both sides of an issue.*
2. *Try not to let personal prejudices interfere with selection.*
3. *The committee and/or librarian does NOT have to agree with and endorse every idea in every book ordered.*

Utilize standard reviewing media, and list these in the selection policy. Avoid publishers' catalogs, as reviews in them are generally biased. Keep a record on each book ordered, and retain it for at least three to five years. The record should indicate whether reviews were positive or negative, and the rationale for ordering (based on selection policy criteria). This information can prove valuable during a challenge.

When the books arrive, the librarian must become familiar with them. If there is a question of suitability in spite of all the preliminary work, the selection committee should be convened at once to review the title.

The Challenge

In spite of everything, if someone challenges books or other materials, DON'T PANIC! Stay calm at all costs. Make sure that the selection policy is in place and be ready to explain it to the complainant, notify the selection committee, and gird yourself by thinking carefully about the following:

Those who present challenges have had time to think about what they want to say. They have very strong feelings about the issue or concern that they are presenting. Often they have the support of others, and may even have an organized group feeding them information and boosting their efforts. Those of us who must respond to those challenges must have the same kind of preparation and support groups.

The key person in any challenge is you. And the first thing that you must do to prepare yourself is to take some time to ponder your personal beliefs about censorship and intellectual freedom. Force yourself to look critically at what you believe is right and proper for yourself as a caring human being, as a participant in and defender of a democratic way of life, as an educator who has the responsibility of helping young people to deal effectively with an ever-changing and demanding environment, as a [librarian] who has accepted the responsibility of protecting people's rights to privacy and rights to access information, and, for many, as a religious or spiritual person whose freedom to worship or not to worship is tied directly to freedom of choice and freedom from oppression. What do you believe? Will you defend that? Will you allow others the same right? Will you defend other persons' rights? (Barron, 1991, p. 49)

Remember that any librarian in a serious confrontational situation over materials need not face the crisis alone. A few of the organizations dedicated to the freedom of access to information in all libraries and information centers that will give help upon request are:

American Civil Liberties Union
132 W. 43rd Street
New York, NY 10036

American Library Association
Office of Intellectual Freedom
50 East Huron Street
Chicago, IL 60611

National Coalition Against Censorship
132 W. 43rd Street
New York, NY 10036

National Council of Jewish Women
15 East 26th Street
New York, NY 10010

People for the American Way
2000 M Street, N.W., Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036

The watchwords are BE AWARE AND BE PREPARED, whether or not the dreaded occasion arises.

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