



My name is Ginger Tebo, and I am the Director of the St. Lawrence-Lewis School Library System. School Library Systems like mine support the work of school librarians in New York by providing professional learning opportunities, grants to member libraries, and coordination of shared library resources and services. School Library System directors help represent busy school librarians who are spending their time with students by communicating issues from the field to people who can make a difference, like I'm doing with you today.

School libraries and Boards of Education most often refer to book challenges as "reconsideration requests" or "objections", and I want to be very clear that reconsidering the placement or appropriateness of an item in the school library is not necessarily a bad thing. Librarians, as part of their professional work, make these decisions on a regular basis, and re-evaluate their collections regularly.

However, it's important to remember that the books in our school libraries are there to meet the needs of ALL our students. Certified school librarians curate their library collections with this in mind, and it's important to note that when you do this effectively, not every book will be right for every student. There will be books at various reading levels, about different content, and at various maturity levels. Students are actually *really* good at putting down a book that is not ok for them, and school librarians help reinforce this lifelong reading skill.

Certified school librarians also know that every child should be able to see themselves, their families, and their experiences reflected in their school library collection. They also should have the opportunity to explore other perspectives and experiences, which promotes empathy and cooperation. The First Amendment's right to the freedom of expression encompasses intellectual freedom, which is the right to seek and receive information from a variety of viewpoints. This is exactly what librarians offer by creating diverse, inclusive collections. Efforts to restrict or remove books based on moral, social, or political disagreements threaten intellectual freedom in schools, which is a fundamental aspect of students' First Amendment rights.

School librarians support the rights of parents to determine what is appropriate reading material for their own children. However, parents and others do not have the right to determine what other people's children may read. Recent, coordinated attacks against entire categories of books, such as those representing minority lives and experiences, endanger students' First Amendment rights in school and offer openings in which censorship may take hold. In 2021, the



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American Library Association documented 729 attempts to ban or restrict library materials (“National Library Week...”), and 781 attempts have been documented as of October of this year (“Unite...”). These are record setting numbers, higher than any the organization has reported in the last 20 years. Specifically, resistance to books examining race or to those with Black and/or LGBTQ+ characters has fueled much of the increase in book challenges over the past two years. At least 98% of the challenges I’ve seen or heard about in New York were related to books in these categories. Nine of the titles on the American Library Association’s current Top Ten Most Challenged Books list relate to these categories (“Top Ten...”).

It’s important to recognize that the performative aspects of challenging books is often the goal of those who would seek to restrict viewpoints that differ from their own, by making previously uncontentious topics controversial. When organized groups and individuals who have been influenced by them threaten to challenge entire categories of books, it has a chilling effect on school libraries. Librarians and administrators become much more hesitant to select certain titles, even though they may see a need for them within their student population. All students, regardless of their race or how they identify, need to see themselves reflected in the books they read, yet a 2022 School Library Journal survey showed that 32% of librarians “often” or “always” weigh the effect of controversial subject matter when making purchase decisions and 50% of them do so “sometimes” (Yorio). If even a small percentage of these librarians self-censor by choosing not to select these newly ‘controversial’ topics, we will have many libraries in which all members of the student body are not represented in the books that are available to them. Put another way, if librarians are asking “who might object to this?” instead of “do I have students who need this?” when deciding what to put in the library collection, censorship wins (Jensen, 2022).

The recent increase in challenges allows censorship to sneak into school libraries in other ways as well. If school leaders, however well-intentioned, simply remove titles from library shelves in order to avoid conflict or media attention, they may unintentionally abridge students’ constitutional right to access information. Every decision to reconsider or remove a book from a school library should be considered with the guidance of certified school librarians through the lens of Board policy.

In their daily work, librarians in New York’s school libraries support students’ right to seek and receive information from a variety of viewpoints, and we all need to work together to make sure that this fundamental First Amendment right is not threatened in schools. Comprehensive Board of Education policies and school library procedures for selection, deselection, and reconsideration provide a bulwark against such attempts at censorship; all New York State school districts should have them in place. Together, we can ensure that New York State schools can withstand the inevitable challenges they will face to the rights of their student bodies to access diverse information and ideas as part of their personal, educational, and civic development in our democracy.

## References

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