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Advocating for Our Learners' Right to Diverse Points of View

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Intellectual freedom is the right of every individual to seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. As school librarians, we must guarantee that right by ensuring access to materials that help learners make decisions and understand the world around them, particularly in this era of fake news where misinformation is rampant and diverse voices are marginalized or excluded completely. The articles in this issue provide resources, case studies, and thought-provoking discussions that will bolster you to continue championing the freedom to access information.

In their feature article, Angela Branyon and April Dawkins detail the history of intellectual freedom, emphasizing its continued importance in school libraries today. They detail the various iterations of intellectual freedom policies as they relate to libraries. This article serves as an excellent primer on intellectual freedom for new and seasoned librarians. Branyon and Dawkins provide historical information, but also summarize the multitude of resources available for school librarians to use to protect our learners' freedoms. It is an ideal advocacy tool for school librarians to share with their administrators and other stakeholders when discussing the absolutely vital role that school libraries and librarians play in ensuring physical and intellectual access to information.

One of the most important resources available to librarians that Branyon and Dawkins discuss in their article is the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*. This sprawling handbook is published by ALA's Office for Intellectual

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Freedom, and the latest edition, available later this year, offers new and improved guidance on some of the most challenging intellectual freedom concerns that we see in school libraries, including information about copyright, censorship and diverse representation in collections, and equitable access especially during periods of remote learning and instruction. Martin Garnar, the editor of the forthcoming 10th edition, Kate Lechtenberg, a school library educator, and Carolyn Vibbert, an elementary school librarian, discuss the manual and intellectual freedom issues prevalent in school libraries.

Stemming from that discussion it is clear that one of the most commonly faced and challenging issues related to intellectual freedom in school libraries is the censorship of materials and ideas. There is often pressure to accommodate views from a majority and sometimes even a minority voice in a school's community, but this can

do irreparable damage to those not represented by that group, and more importantly, it is contrary to the goal of intellectual freedom, a core tenet of librarianship. I have seen just how difficult it is to uphold that right to access information in my own personal practice. While working in an affluent and largely homogeneous district, I received a message from an involved and influential family condemning what they considered to be my over-inclusion of diverse books in the library collection. They asked if I was aware of the demographics of the school community and included a subtle threat of school board interference if I did not comply with their demand to remove some of the materials from the collection and replace them with ones “better suited for our students.”

It was an incredibly stressful experience, especially because I was a new school librarian at the time. However, I knew that protecting the rights of my students to see their own lives and the lives of others represented in the school library collection was the right decision. Removing that material would have been detrimental to all my students because it would have robbed them of the opportunity to develop their own view of the world, and that is precisely the freedom that we are tasked with defending as school librarians.

In addition to being guardians of intellectual freedom and champions of equitable access, school librarians are also essential resources for students to understand their own digital legacies. Associate professor Heather Moorefield-Lang’s article on this topic reminds us about the enduring nature of a digital footprint. While students need free access to the information that will shape their worldview, they also need guidance and direction about the permanence of their online activity. In this article, Dr. Moorefield-Lang details the relationship between digital citizenship and digital legacy and includes several resources to help school librarians incorporate these ideas into their instruction.

In the remaining articles in this issue, Andrea Jamison and Kristen Pekoll address the danger of restricting intellectual freedom. Jamison details incidents of community challenges to various materials in libraries and provides information on how to leverage the AASL Standards and allies to support the right to access information. Pekoll reminds us that attempts at censorship go beyond books, citing the rise in challenges to displays, author visits, and online resources. She notes that identity issues are often at the heart of these challenges. Both articles include real-world scenarios that contextualize intellectual freedom and remind us of the harm that censorship inflicts on our learning communities and society as a whole.

The fight for access to information has been long and arduous, and the outcomes continue to be contentious as evidenced by the growing number of challenges to materials, programs, and the community’s use of library spaces. However, guaranteeing that right to access information is one of the cornerstones of librarianship. For school librarians, universal access to information is one of our six Common Beliefs—the beliefs that create the foundation of our core values and practice—and it is an integral component of each strand of the AASL *National School Library Standards* that we use to direct our interactions with our learning communities.

Taken together, the articles in this issue conclude that even though we are the caretakers of information, we should not be the gatekeepers of information. We must continue to vigorously defend the right to access information even in the face of difficult challenges, and we must be equally vigilant about examining our own biases and resist the urge to self-censor for fear of controversy. However, it is important to note here that this does not mean that we should give equal consideration to inaccurate, racist, or otherwise harmful material that actively devalues or dehumanizes people. We can (and should) both defend intellectual freedom and also create safe and inclusive environments from which to access that information.

As you read through this issue, I hope that you are emboldened to continue advocating for your students and safeguarding their right to access not only your physical space and materials, but also the voices and ideas that will help shape their lives as readers and learners.

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