



Well-crafted selection policies serve as a record of the proper ways to develop school library collections as well as guidelines for school librarians to reference when in doubt about whether a resource or book will fit within the collection.

Balancing Beautiful Collections

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“You love buying books! How hard can it be?” my husband said to me when I sat down at home one night with my computer in my lap to put together a book order. He’s right. I love buying books, but as all of my fellow school librarians know, it isn’t as easy as it sounds. Collection development is both a science and an art. Thankfully, the more we do it, the easier it gets, but having a good policy to follow also helps.

A few years ago when my school district faced a challenge to a book in the library, the district committee that was pulled together to discuss the book was unsure how to handle the process because we had a policy for choosing instructional material but not for choosing library resources. These two types of material have very different uses and purposes, the committee determined, and the same criteria may not apply. There was a lot of discussion about how they would be offended if their child were expected to read the book in question, but if “someone else” chose to read it, wasn’t that different? This led to our school board reviewing and rewriting the selection-development policy for library materials.

Backing up a little, we first need to think about school library collections. These must be general collections of materials, encompassing as many topics, interests, subjects, etc. as possible. Balance of all types of resources is needed: fiction stories of all genres and formats as well as nonfiction of all topics and formats. Yes, we have to ensure that our school curriculum is well represented and that we provide resources that will help our learners extend their thinking about what is

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taught in each class. However, we also need to provide a variety of materials that can spark the interest and imagination of any learner in our school. We need as wide a variety of topics, situations, experiences, characters, formats, and stories as we can afford because our collections should spark a myriad of links between educational thought and the imaginations that visit them. Collection development is not just buying what looks good to us as individuals.

This is where the science of “library science” comes in. Ensuring a balanced collection of materials means looking at a lot of different pieces and making choices based on what is current, relevant, new, necessary, and popular. It means knowing about a lot of different subjects and what the current theories are. Developing and maintaining a balanced, relevant

collection means keeping a finger on the pulse of a variety of youth interests. It means monitoring the number of checkouts, the copyright dates, the projects being assigned in the classrooms, and all changes in standards or curriculums. The art involved is making this look easy.

Unfortunately, in today's political climate, many members of the general population appear to have ignored all of this expertise, thought, and effort by searching for anything that offends their personal ideals or sensibilities. The delicate balance is being ignored, and school librarians are perceived as people who just "buy books," possibly according to an agenda. Now a lot of people are out to find materials they personally find offensive and insist on their removal. Removal of materials that had been carefully selected for the collection upsets its balance, which upsets the balance of our learners' education. Of course, removal of materials of interest and value to our learners also upsets us as school librarians.

This reality is why selection policies are vitally important to explain the processes by which we choose the materials for school libraries. Well-crafted selection policies serve as a record of the proper ways to develop school library collections as well as guidelines for school librarians to reference when in doubt about whether a resource or book will fit within the collection. These policies are locally developed to ensure that local input and standards are reflected. When my district rewrote our policy a few years ago, much discussion surrounded everything from whether the school librarian should get to participate in the writing of the policy, to whose role it was to choose the books for the library, and what types of materials should be represented within our collection. Ultimately, I am glad to say, I was included in writing the policy, and school librarians are still the choosers of the materials.

While we were rewriting our selection policy, we also reworked our reconsideration policy to include library books, as they differ from instructional materials in that library books are not assigned to students. Our reconsideration policy follows a few steps: speaking to the school librarian, speaking to the librarian and building principal, and filing a formal request for reconsideration that is reviewed by a standing district committee. The district committee members read the book in question and discuss it in relation to the selection policy to see if the challenged book fits the selection criteria.

If you are currently working on rewriting your selection policy, or you are just beginning the process of creating one, I recommend starting with ALA's "Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, and Academic Libraries." We relied on this heavily for information on background, word choice, and content for my district's policy, and everything I needed was included.

Not only is it time to return to our policies and remind others of the science of our profession, this is also a key time to look toward our art of collection development and school librarianship. For the sake of our learners, we must use the art of persuasion to return the focus to how great school libraries contain something to *inspire* everyone. We must persevere through the current negative discourse and shine light on the wonders that come out of school libraries: the new understandings developed by our learners and the inspiration that a true, open, and honest education in the world can provide. We must remind ourselves and our learners that school libraries transform learning and allow our learners to create their futures.

Recommended Resource:

"Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, and Academic Libraries"
<www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/selectionpolicytoolkit>

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