Selection Policies Across the United States

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In today's climate of challenges to classroom and library content, it's important to have robust policies to both guide selection of materials and the procedures to follow when materials are challenged. Selection and reconsideration policies may appear under a variety of names including Collection Development, Acquisitions, or Materials Selection Policy. I collaborated with Emily Eidson, my former graduate student assistant and current School Library Media Coordinator in Davidson County, North Carolina, in conducting a research study "A Content Analysis of District School Library Selection Policies in the United States" (Dawkins and Eidson 2021). The published paper was selected to receive the AASL Research Grant, which "recognizes excellence in manuscripts addressing a persistent and recurring challenge in the field of school librarianship" (AASL 2022).

Background

Guidelines for creating school library policies can be found through several sources. One of the oldest published discussions about collection development in school libraries is Esther Stallmann's article in the 1935 *Peabody Journal of Education*. In her article, Stallmann outlined key principles for selection, including the use of selection aids and providing books for all kinds of readers. In the United States many school library selection policies are guided by the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom's "Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries" (2018). This toolkit was developed to update and replace "Workbook for Selection Policy Writing," which was published in 1998 by the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom. The original 1998 workbook was intended for use by school libraries. The 2018 toolkit was developed over a two-year period (2016–2018) with input from school, public, and academic librarians, and provides guidelines for all three types of libraries. The 2018 toolkit includes suggested components and sample text for each of the types of libraries (Dawkins 2018).

Research Study

For this study, Emily and I wanted to explore samples of policies from across the United States to see what components were included or excluded from district-level policies and also determine their currency. An important thing to note: the policies we studied were retrieved and analyzed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many districts have undertaken revisions to their policies in the last two years because of the flood of challenges that have occurred.

During the study we focused on two main questions:

1. What is the state of district school library selection policies in school systems in the United States?

2. Do these policies have components that are recommended by the "Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries"?

For our research, we chose to look for specific components that are considered best practice for inclusion in selection and reconsideration policies using the guidelines from the American Library Association. This is criterion-based content analysis.

We intended to randomly select two sample districts from each state for a total of 100 districts' policies to analyze. As we began to select districts, we discovered that Hawaii has a statewide school district. Therefore, we identified 99 school districts to include in the sample. We would search these districts' websites to locate selection policies. In each state except Hawaii, one large and one small district were randomly selected for analysis. Out of the 99 school districts' sites that were examined, we were able to locate selection policies on 80 districts' websites. This task wasn't always easy as some district board policy manuals are difficult to navigate and sometimes components of the policy are located in multiple locations within the manual.

We chose to examine district-level policies because in most states the public school library policies are determined at the district level. Some states, such as North Carolina, even have general statutes that stipulate that school library selection policies must be created by each district. After locating each policy, we then examined it to determine if it contained the twenty components that we identified as best practices based on the ALA selection and reconsideration toolkit. (See sidebar for list of components and our research paper for descriptions.)

Findings

This study found that 81 percent of the school districts in the sample have selection policies, but there was wide variation in the components that were included in the policies. Looking at the district policies as a whole group, we found that a total of 51 percent of the twenty policy components were present within the 80 policies that were examined. Only one of the policies we examined included almost all (19) of the 20 components that we had identified.

The highest rates of inclusion were for the following components: list of selection criteria (80 percent), publication and revision dates (78 percent), objectives of the policy (85 percent), and reconsideration of materials (80 percent).

The lowest rates of inclusion were for the following components: mission statement (25 percent), Intellectual Freedom documents (27 percent), Intellectual Freedom statement (14 percent), Intellectual Freedom definition (0), and classroom collections (1 percent).

Some Areas of Concern

Vocabulary variation was one problem we encountered as we studied each policy. The policies themselves had different names and sometimes referred only to library materials, and in other cases referred to both classroom instructional materials and supplementary materials. Varying terminology was also used in relation to diversity. Selection policies that encouraged the use of diverse perspectives (73 percent) used varying language to describe diverse representation, while some policies did not use the word "diversity" at all. The use of inconsistent language allows more room for subjective interpretation by those who are working to implement the policy and those who are enforcing it. If a policy does not explicitly state "diversity," then it provides less protection for diverse materials and allows for a more-limited interpretation of what constitutes diversity. The effectiveness of policy documents could be improved if they included the word "diversity" and defined it appropriately.

One of our greatest concerns was the lack of mention of "intellectual freedom" in these policies. Only 14 percent of the policies we studied had an intellectual freedom statement and even those did not define what intellectual freedom actually is.

As challenges to library collections increase, so have challenges to classroom collections and curriculum materials. Therefore, it is concerning

that only one of the policies explicitly included a reference to classroom collections. This was also a policy area that was difficult to determine because sometimes selection policies were for supplementary instructional materials or specifically for libraries. The question remains whether or not the reconsideration policy that would be used for the school library would apply for instructional materials or teacher-created classroom collections.

And finally, although 62 (78 percent) of the policies had publication and/or revision dates, 22 of those policies with dates had not been revised or updated in the previous decade. This may no longer be the case as many school districts have been revising their policies as a result of the challenges to content districts have been facing.

Implications for Practice

While the results of this study are not generalizable, they can provide a process and checklist of essential components for practicing librarians to conduct a review of their own district's or school's selection and reconsideration policies.

Here are a few suggestions we have based on our research:

- Your selection policy should be reviewed and revised (if needed) at least once every five years. This review and revision process should include the voices of experts: school librarians!

- Consider including a glossary in your policy that explains terms that are specific to our field but that may be unfamiliar to non-librarians. For example, define what weeding is.

- Use examples of policies from other districts to inform your own policy development. Also consult the ALA selection toolkit for more information and sample language about each of the recommended components.

- Really discuss and consider who has standing to request reconsideration

of materials. Is it only parents, staff, and students? Do requesters have to live in your school district or could an outside individual or organized group present a challenge? Consider the implications.

- Policies are good only when they are implemented consistently. It's very important that your school board, district administration, and school-level administration understand the procedures, and the legal and ethical ramifications of a failure to follow policy.

Conclusion

Selection is an extremely important professional responsibility that school librarians exercise to meet the needs of their learning communities. While some have claimed that the practice of selecting (or not selecting) books for inclusion in a collection is in itself an act of censorship, making decisions about whether to acquire specific resources is necessary as no library has unlimited funding to provide access to everything that is available. Therefore, we must have policies to guide us in our decision-making. As Lester Asheim explained:

> Selection…begins with a presumption in favor of liberty of thought; censorship, with a presumption in favor of thought control. Selection's approach to the book is positive, seeking its value in the book as a book and in the book as a whole. Censorship's approach is negative, seeking for vulnerable characteristics wherever they can be found—anywhere within the book, or even outside it. Selection seeks to protect the right of the reader to read; censorship seeks to protect—not the right—but the reader himself from the fancied effects of his reading. The selector has faith in the intelligence of the reader; the censor has faith only in his own. (Asheim 1953, 67)

As school librarians we are charged with using our professional skills to create collections to support both the curricular and recreational

information needs of all students. Policies serve as both guidelines for our decisions and public explanation for how those decisions are made. Therefore, it is essential that all school districts have current and comprehensive policies for selection and reconsideration. Then, we must insist that they be followed.

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Checklist of Components:

- list of criteria for selection
- mission statement of the library
- policies and procedures for selection and acquisition
- publication and revision dates of the policy
- who the library serves
- who has responsibility for selection
- selection aids
- policy objectives
- intellectual freedom documents
- controversial materials
- intellectual freedom statement
- intellectual freedom definition
- diversity of collection
- weeding the collection
- gifts and donations
- reconsideration of materials
- request for reconsideration form
- reconsideration committee guidelines
- classroom collections
- who has standing to request reconsideration

Additional Resources:

Kerby, Mona. 2019. *An Introduction to Collection Development for School Librarians*, 2nd ed. Chicago: ALA.

Mardis, Marcia A. 2021. *The Collection Program in Schools: Concepts and Practices*, 7th ed. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.

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Dawkins, April M., and Emily C. Eidson. 2021. "A Content Analysis of District School Library Selection Policies in the United States." *School Library Research* 24. <www.ala.org/aasl/slr/volume24/dawkins-eidson> (accessed November 13, 2022).

Stallmann, Esther. 1935. "Picking Out Books for the School Library—Some Principles." *Peabody Journal of Education* 13 (3): 132–36.