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## Bravely Supporting AASL Core Values

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I believe that the AASL core values of learning; innovation; equity, diversity, inclusion; intellectual freedom; and collaboration (AASL 2019) have always required a certain amount of bravery from school librarians. Of course, over the past several years, as school librarians have translated their services to respond to the pandemic and have faced an unprecedented number of book challenges, the need for bravery and courage has been heightened. Most recently, stories of courageous school librarians and community members defending the right to read have been highlighted. School librarians across the nation are bravely working to uphold our core professional values and to provide students with equity of access, experience, and opportunity within their libraries.

As school librarians, our work to support the core values of equity, diversity, inclusion, and intellectual freedom are currently intertwined. The American Library Association reported in September 2022 that the total number of book challenges were on track to exceed the number of book challenges in 2021, which was a record number (ALA 2022). PEN America reported that the vast majority of these book challenges featured “LGBTQ+ characters or characters of color, and/or cover race and racism in American history, LGBTQ+ identities, or sex education” (Friedman and Johnson 2022). Thus, the efforts by local, state, and national groups to ban books are having a harmful impact on groups of students from historically marginalized backgrounds.

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The Unite Against Book Bans 2022 white paper “Empowered by Reading” (2022) provides reasons and support for why it is important to provide a wide range of reading material to *all* learners. Reasons to provide diverse materials included in the white paper are promoting student achievement and wellbeing, encouraging critical thinking, and fostering community cohesion. Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop’s essay from 1990 about our students’ need for “Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors” in children’s literature is included as a reference in the white paper and continues to be a foundational work to advocate for our learners’ access.

The efforts of school librarians to diversify their collections, I believe, has increased since the organization We Need Diverse Books was founded in 2014 and began highlighting the inequities in

children's publishing and our students' need for diverse books (*We Need Diverse Books* 2023). Since then, many articles, webinars, and resources have supported school librarians in their efforts to diversify their collections.

Of course, school librarians' work toward equity goes beyond just providing diverse books. In the AASL *National School Library Standards for Learners, Librarians, and Libraries* the core values of equity, diversity, and inclusion are intertwined in all of the Shared Foundations. The 2018 *Knowledge Quest* article "Speaking Up for Equity Takes Courage—But the Standards Have Your Back" by Kate Lechtenberg and Jeanie Phillips provides examples and action steps for equity efforts across all six Shared Foundations.

The strides that have been made toward equity through our library services and resources are now facing pushback by a variety of groups that are leading the censorship attempts. Many recent censorship attempts have included personal attacks on school librarians, other educators, and even students. In addition, adverse legislation has passed in several states and is proposed in many others. For many, it is a very scary environment with threats of fines, job loss, or jail time. While some school librarians in these situations have the environment and/or backing to fight back and be publicly "brave," others do not. I would advocate that we all prioritize safety and self-care as we work to support our students' freedom to read.

So, what can we do? I think the answer to the question will be a personal decision, but we can look to our core value of collaboration for some answers. If you are faced with challenges or attacks, remember that you are not alone. Reach out to others to speak for you when you cannot speak for yourself or to just support you by talking things through. Think about possible allies. A few ideas include:

- your local school, public, and academic library colleagues,
- teacher colleagues,
- local supportive parents or groups of parents already supporting other education issues,
- student groups,
- local LGBTQ+ organizations such as chapters of PFLAG or GLSEN,
- local independent book stores,
- your state school library association, and
- AASL and ALA.

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If you are in an area not facing censorship, please support your colleagues who are by speaking up for them or providing them emotional support. Reach out to them and ask them what they may need.

There are many levels of showing courage in support of our students' access to a wide range of materials, and demonstrating this courage may look different for each school librarian, depending on their local situation. For some, an act of bravery may be to speak out publicly against censorship. For others, it may mean speaking to the school board about the positive things going on in your library. For some it may mean speaking with your administrator to elicit support. For others, it may mean asking district leaders to follow the current reconsideration policy or serving on a reconsideration committee. For yet others, it may mean reaching out to a potential ally. And for others, it may mean making a purchase for the school library that will support students in spite of the possibility of facing pushback.

We must all (within legal limits) resist soft censorship. Examples of soft censorship include allowing our personal biases to affect the titles we purchase or to *not* purchase titles that would serve our learners because we are nervous about pushback. Soft censoring can also include silently weeding titles or limiting access to titles by putting them in a special section (behind the desk) or requiring special permission for check out. Another form of soft censorship is not including books in displays or lists made available to students. Soft censorship is difficult to track—but can have a long-lasting negative effect on our collections and our learners. *School Library Journal* published the results of a survey that showed that when asked the question "How often do you find yourself weighing the effect of

controversial subject matter when making book purchase decisions?” 7 percent of respondents said always, 25 percent said often, and 50 percent said sometimes (Yorio 2022). This total of 82 percent may indicate that the current environment is effecting school library purchasing decisions even in areas without adverse laws. While making purchasing decisions, it is crucial to think about *all* of your students and how best to support them with the needed “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors.”

When I joined the school library profession more than twenty years ago, I would have never imagined the situation that we find ourselves in today with a record-breaking number of challenges, and school librarians facing personal attacks and threats for doing their jobs. I do have hope, however, that we will get through this. I am proud to be a member of the school library profession, and I am always impressed and inspired by the work of my school library colleagues nationwide. We must continue to bravely work together and stand together to support each other and our learners’ right to read.

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