Curating Collections our Learners Need and Deserve

Courtney Pentland, 2023–2024 AASL President | aaslpentland@gmail.com

Once upon a time school librarians would wait in giddy anticipation for boxes of the new books they had painstakingly curated to arrive in their libraries so they could share new stories and information with their school communities. The payoff of that box of fresh, never-been-read titles was all that much sweeter because of the work that went into making the “to-buy” list. No matter what the size of the budget, school librarians thoughtfully examine the options for age relevance, appeal, and curricular connections so that they are spending their budget in a way that best serves the needs of their learners.

In these pages you will read about the growing concern—not only about the blatant censorship we are seeing when community members call for books to be removed from a collection—but also about what I feel is the even bigger concern of the trend toward soft censorship and how that will affect an entire generation of young people. It is the choices that quietly get made of whether to include a book in a to-buy list that may matter even more than what actually comes under review.

The day the boxes of brand-new books arrive is still a joyful one, but the process of picking what will arrive in those boxes has become much more difficult. In addition to the general concerns that usually go into selecting materials for the school library, there is now an added layer of tension after recent legislative and school board actions.

I remember when I was able to submit my first order for books in my first year as a school librarian. I felt extremely lucky to be in a profession where I was able to spend some of my time at work, and, let’s be honest, quite a bit of time at home, looking through all the possibilities available to add to our collection. I also felt a great responsibility to use our budget so that I would not only be able to support the learning needs in my building but also grow lifelong readers by finding books that would hold their attention and encourage them to come back to check out more.

The day the boxes of brand-new books arrive is still a joyful one, but the process of picking what will arrive in those boxes has become much more difficult. In addition to the general concerns that usually go into selecting materials for the school library, there is now an added layer of tension after recent legislative and school board actions. It doesn’t matter whether your state or your school district is one that has put in place restrictions, the effects are being felt all over.
The well-funded, vocal minority that is spreading false information about school library collections and school librarians has, I believe, also intentionally caused a chilling effect on what certified school librarians select for new purchases. What has always been a time-consuming process is now also potentially filled with second-guessing and self-doubt.

While I am not advocating for anyone to go against state law or district policy, I am hopeful that we can be aware of and acknowledge what could be motivating us to second-guess selecting a title for purchase. When that moment does happen, we can rely on our professional expertise. Certified school librarians are specifically trained to make thoughtful purchasing choices, and we need to trust what we have learned about best practices in the art and science of collection development. And, I would be remiss in not acknowledging that the threat of soft censorship is even greater in schools and districts that do not employ a certified school librarian because those making the purchasing decisions lack this critical knowledge.

The threat of consequences for making what used to be easy choices for books that not only connect to students’ lived experiences but expand their worldviews is very real. I have heard from school librarians in several states where laws have been proposed, and in some cases passed, that could criminalize librarians for what they select. I have also heard from those where there is now an added layer of approval in place that could easily throw hours of work out the window if someone feels certain books don’t fit new, and somewhat subjective, standards.

As your AASL president, I want to assure you that your national association is here to support you. We need to hear from you about what you are experiencing, including your concerns and celebrations related to curating collections. I know that the more AASL is aware of what is happening nationwide, the stronger we can be together and for each other as we continue to work in support of our learners. Please reach out to AASL and to the Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF). We are here for you, and your voices and expertise help us do so in the best way possible.

I have hope that the unabashed joy once felt in our school libraries and in our profession will be omnipresent once again. I may pause and reflect more from time to time as I read through summaries and reviews when making selections to add to my virtual cart, but I will also remember that our learners deserve access to robust, age-relevant school library collections. Our school libraries provide an essential service for our learners, and they deserve to have direct, free access to materials that include accurate information and represent not only their own lived experiences and histories but also those of others they will encounter in their lifetimes.

While some may attempt to erase histories and identities from our school libraries, we know in our hearts, and from our specific training and education, what our learners need and deserve.

---

**Additional Reading:**


---

Courtney Pentland is the high school librarian at North Star High School in Lincoln, Nebraska. She is adjunct faculty for the University of Nebraska-Omaha School Library program and has served on the Nebraska School Librarians Association (NSLA) board as member at large, president, and chapter delegate to AASL. She is the 2023-2024 AASL President. Follow her adventures on Twitter @livluvlibrary.