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Cassandra Barnett

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An active member of the American Association of School Librarians, Cassandra has served in several capacities including the 2009–2010 president of AASL, past member of the AASL Board of Directors, and currently serves on the AASL *Knowledge Quest* Editorial Board.

Thoughts on School Librarians and Civic Engagement

Civic Engagement means something different for everyone due in part to where a person's passion lies. For some civic engagement means public service or merely voting; for others it means being an activist, a volunteer, a conservationist or a donor.

For my sister, a retired nurse, it is volunteering to provide healthcare to people in need. For me, being a school librarian has afforded me the opportunity to be civically engaged in a variety of activities.

As a teenager in the 1960's and a young adult in the 1970's, activism was evident everywhere: the anti-war movement, civil rights, gay rights, women's rights, and environmentalism. All of these big ideals have had a huge impact on my life, including as a school librarian. In my elementary school library, we worked with students to implement a school-wide recycling program, bought rainforest acreage to protect wildlife habitat, planted trees, and became a voting site for local, state and national elections. In my high school library, we worked with our students to collect food donations for our district's food bank, establish a clean up the grounds campaign, and promoted debates around the constitution.

However, the ideal that has most informed my practice as a school librarian has been the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution which

protects the freedom of speech and the press, among other rights. While working toward my initial certification as a school librarian, I was fortunate to have professors who stressed the importance of providing students with a wide variety of reading material and free access to whatever information a student might want or need. That foundation in intellectual freedom served us well when my high school library was the subject of a well-organized effort to remove (without formal challenge) more than 70 titles from the collection and put a parent committee in charge of selection.

That experience, as ugly as it was, was preparation for the situation in which we now have state law that criminalizes school employees and has made school and public librarians nervous enough to self-censor. In my current position as a state level school library supervisor, I have been able to use my experience to offer advice and resources to help school librarians as they navigate the current culture wars.

In this issue of *Knowledge Quest*, the authors represent a variety of perspectives on the connections between libraries and civic and community engagement. Michael A. Spikes, *Repositioning School Libraries as Professional Information Navigators*, discusses the need for school librarians to get back to our core purpose: to help students navigate our increasingly chaotic world of information.

Jami Rhue's article provides an overview of civic engagement and offers many examples of how a school librarian connects the activities of the school library to civic engagement.

Tanya J. Haynes, in her article, *Libraries: the Community Learning Hub*, focuses on the library as a cornerstone of our democracy. The library, through its many resources and programming, provides equal opportunities for learning. Authors Pamela R. Moore, Christina S. Norman and Katherine Baxter, *Community Engagement Makes Libraries Stronger*, offer us additional examples of

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how community organizations collaborated with school librarians to bring resources and learning experiences to students.

Jami Rhue and Pamela R. Moore give us food for thought about civic/community engagement, pre-service school librarians and school libraries in their Q&A. The article, *Understanding and Using Open-Access, Global Digital Picturebook Platforms to Scaffold Cultural Connections*, by Gwendolyn Nixon, Jamie Campbell Naidoo, and Steven Yates offers research suggesting that global digital picture book platforms can promote the United Nation Sustainable Development Goals.

James LaRue's article, *Ban Bombs: Managing Public Comments in 2024*, offers advice on managing and responding to the disruptive tactics employed by citizens who show up at school and library board meetings demanding certain books be removed from collections in order to protect children.

With the increasing pressure on teachers to limit what and how they teach and school librarians to restrict access to information, it is more important than ever for school libraries to demonstrate our relevance. The authors in this issue suggest that civic engagement offer school librarians many opportunities to be relevant. We can do that by sticking with our core purpose of helping students navigating information, engaging community partnerships, and advocating for intellectual freedom.

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