

KNOWLEDGE QUEST



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Journal of the American Association of School Librarians

VOLUME 51, NO. 2 | November/December 2022 | ISSN 1094-9046 | www.aasl.org

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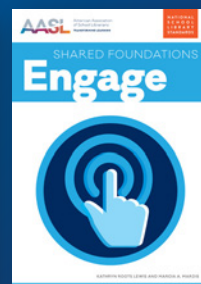
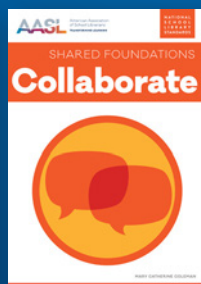
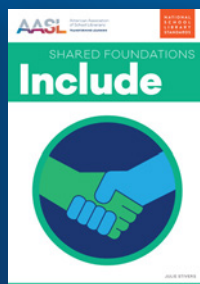
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Knowledge Quest (ISSN 1094-9046) is published bimonthly September through May by the American Library Association (ALA), 225 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1300, Chicago, IL 60601, <www.ala.org/aasl>. It is the official publication of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), a division of ALA. Subscription price to members of AASL, \$20 a year, included in membership dues; to nonmembers, \$65 in U.S., \$75 in foreign countries. Single copies \$15 from ALA. Periodicals postage paid at Chicago, Illinois, and at additional mailing offices.

Change of address notices and subscription inquiries should be sent to the Subscription Dept., ALA, 225 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1300, Chicago, IL 60601.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Knowledge Quest*, 225 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1300, Chicago, IL 60601.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

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In today's world with abundant spread of misinformation and efforts to limit the teaching of history, the need for school librarians to engage learners as active participants in civic learning is more important than ever.

Civic Engagement in the School Library

Kathy Lester, 2022–2023 AASL President | kathylester.lib@gmail.com

In the March/April 2006 issue of *Knowledge Quest*, Nancy Kranich wrote “The Civic Mission of School Libraries.” Kranich provided examples of civic engagement in libraries (see sidebar), including “enabler of civic literacy.”

Today's school librarians can support the civic engagement of their learners in all of the categories listed by Nancy Kranich, but “enabler of civic literacy” connects perfectly with the AASL National Standards Shared Foundation of Inquire. The Key Commitment of the Inquire Shared Foundation is: “Build new knowledge by inquiring, thinking critically, identifying problems, and developing strategies for solving problems” (AASL 2018, 34). As an “enabler of civic literacy” the school librarian guides learners through the inquiry process that is so critical in today's world of widespread misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation that is amplified by social media. For Inquire, the learners' competencies include seeking knowledge, enacting new understanding through real-world connections, and using reflection to guide informed decisions (Learner I.D.1,3,4). These skills are necessary for learners to be civically engaged and productively involved in our democracy. Teaching our learners to find, organize, evaluate, use, and critically think about information is extremely important.

School librarians can support civic engagement by teaching information literacy skills and by co-teaching lessons about social justice, accurate history, and contemporary issues; giving students opportunities to participate

School librarians can support civic engagement by teaching information literacy skills and by co-teaching lessons about social justice, accurate history, and contemporary issues; giving students opportunities to participate in service learning; and leading project-based learning about their communities.

in service learning; and leading project-based learning about their communities. Reflecting the current need to teach civic literacy, this year's AASL award winners offer examples of collaborative projects that civically engage learners.

“Bulls on Parade – Banned Books Week Poster Design” was the 2022 AASL Collaborative School Library Award-winning project co-taught by Michael Giller, Director of Library Services for South Carolina Governor's

School for the Arts and Humanities in Greenville, South Carolina, and David Gerhard, Visual Arts Department Chair and Graphic Design teacher. Learners researched information about intellectual freedom and banned books, and designed posters to support students' First Amendment rights and intellectual freedom. As Giller noted, "Students love learning about their rights and advocating for themselves" (ALA 2022b).

"Asian American History IS American History" was the 2022 AASL Roald Dahl's Miss Honey Social Justice Award-winning project from Dunwoody Elementary School in Dunwoody, Georgia, co-taught by school librarian Sarah Sansbury and fourth-grade social studies curriculum lead Emma O'Connor. Learners engaged in a lesson developed in response to the 2021 Atlanta spa shooting. Anti-Asian beliefs were spotlighted by using school library resources and historical fiction to learn about the Asian American experience during westward expansion. The project culminated in the creation of a StoryWalk by students. As Sansbury notes, "If it is not taught, it will remain foreign, reinforcing anti-Asian sentiment" (ALA 2022a).

"Empathizing with Teens in Trauma: Terezín/Theresienstadt Museum Project" at Saint Marys Area Middle School in St. Marys, Pennsylvania, was the 2022 Sara Jaffarian School Library Program Award winner. School librarian Ellen Stolarski worked with learners to research the history of Terezin/Theresienstadt, and the artwork, poetry, and music of teenagers at the camp. Stolarski collaborated with the school social worker to highlight how art and music can help people cope with trauma and stress. Students created presentations at the end of the project to share their personal responses to trauma that the teenagers in the camp faced (ALA 2022c).

As in the Dunwoody Elementary project, school librarians can co-teach projects to educate learners about our complex history. Asian American history was not part of the curriculum in Dunwoody. However, the new lesson helped fill in this gap. Similarly, school librarians can look at the curriculum in their schools to find concepts that are not included but would be valuable to their communities. One such gap may be civil rights history. In a 2022 *Washington Post* opinion piece, Nate Powell and Andrew Aydin, who along with Representative John Lewis created the March trilogy (Penguin Random House), make a case for teaching a full history of the civil rights movement. They reference a Southern Policy Law Center report that highlighted the "nine word problem," the problem that most U.S. high school graduates had heard only nine words about the civil rights movement: "Martin

THE LIBRARY AS:

- **Civic Space**

School libraries provide a safe space for civic activities.

- **Enabler of Civic Literacy**

School librarians teach information and media literacy skills while co-teaching projects about contemporary issues so that "students can gain critical thinking skills along with a better understanding of civic problems."

- **Public Forum**

School libraries can host programs that encourage civic engagement.

- **Civic Information Center**

School libraries can provide civic and government information to the school community.

- **Communitywide Reading Club**

School libraries can lead or take part in communitywide reading clubs that focus on a title of civic interest.

- **Partner in Public Service**

School libraries can partner with other community organizations to provide civic programming or participate in collaborative civic projects.

- **Service-Learning Center**

School librarians can co-teach project based learning or service learning projects to "strengthen academic skills, foster civic responsibility, and develop leadership abilities."

- **Champion and Advocate of Free Expression**

School librarians can engage students in advocacy efforts to promote intellectual freedom and free expression. (Kranich 2006)

Luther King,” “Rosa Parks,” and “I have a dream.” Powell and Aydin call for us to carry on John Lewis’s efforts to teach our young people a full history.

I attended the August 2022 webinar “Civic Online Reasoning: Sorting Fact from Fiction on the Internet” presented by the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) and sponsored by the AASL Information Literacy Community of Practice. In this webinar, Joel Breakstone, Director of SHEG, mentioned that when Stanford developed their curriculum to help students learn how to evaluate information, the team specifically used “civic” in the title of their curriculum Civic Online Reasoning (COR). The researchers at SHEG believe that learners need the skills taught through COR lessons to become “better informed citizens able to participate in our democracy in an educated and responsible way” (Wineburg n.d.). SHEG’s Civic Online Reasoning is a recipient of the AASL Best Digital Tools for Teaching and Learning (2022) designation. AASL’s Information Literacy Community of Practice, and other Communities of Practice, are free for AASL members to join. Check them out and join in the conversations today <<https://connect.ala.org/aasl/communities/all-aasl-groups/aasl-communities-of-practice>>.

As evidenced by Kranich’s 2006 article in *Knowledge Quest*, the school librarian’s role in teaching civic literacy and encouraging civic engagement is not new. Yet, in today’s world with abundant spread of misinformation and efforts to limit the teaching of history, the need for school librarians to engage learners as active participants in civic learning is more important than ever.

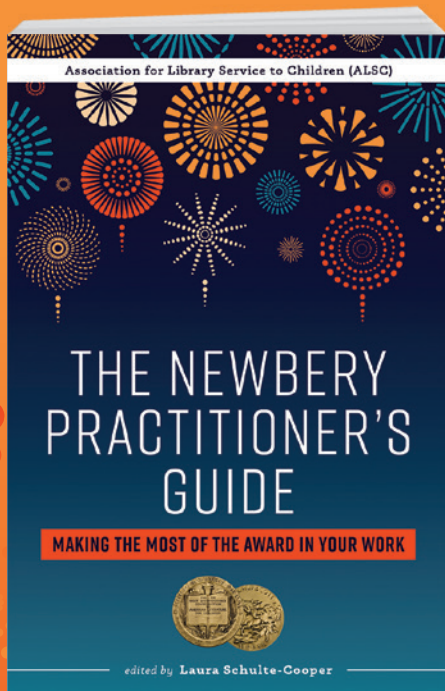
Do you have a great collaborative civic engagement project or lesson to share with your colleagues? Do you have a go-to digital tool that you use in teaching inquiry lessons on civic issues? If yes, consider applying for an AASL award or suggest your favorite digital tool for consideration by February 1, 2023, at <www.ala.org/aasl/awards>.

Kathy Lester, 2022–2023 President of AASL, is a school librarian at East Middle School in Plymouth–Canton Community Schools in Michigan. She is also an ALA Councilor-at-Large and serves on ALA’s Committee on Library Advocacy (COLA). She is active in her state association, the Michigan Association for Media in Education (MAME). She is a past-president of MAME and serves as a co-chair for its Advocacy Committee. Kathy also serves on the advisory council of two Institute of Museum and Library Services Grant Projects: *School Librarian Investigation—Decline or Evolution?* (SLIDE) led by Project Director Debra E. Kachel and Principal Investigator Keith Curry Lance, and *Restoring Urban School Libraries* (RUSL) with Project Director Kafi Kumasi.

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*When we are engaged civically, we create a stronger community,
and a stronger community benefits everyone.*

Civic Engagement: It's a MUST for School Librarians

Jennifer Sturge | sturgej@calvertnet.k12.md.us

"A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

— Margaret Mead

Welcome to the November/December 2022 issue of *Knowledge Quest*. This issue is dedicated to the ideas and actions that surround civic engagement. As members of society, it is our responsibility to be engaged in our communities, districts, states, and nationally to promote social discourse and the benefits of a strong school library program. When we are engaged civically, we create a stronger community, and a stronger community benefits everyone.

In this issue of *Knowledge Quest*, Carolyn Foote, a retired/rewired school librarian, consultant, and co-founder of the #FReadom Fighters serves as our content expert. In her article, she highlights her experiences with civic engagement through the school library lens and her work as a #FReadom Fighter. Carolyn outlines the ways in which school librarians can open lines of communication for productive dialogue in the school community. She shares the art of the elevator speech and why the elevator speech is so incredibly effective and important. Carolyn points out how our work as school librarians provides students with a model of civil discourse and engaging in a working democracy. Her article reinforces the importance of engaging beyond the "traditional" roles of the school librarian and why advocacy, being involved in the community, and providing a safe space for students to engage in democracy matters.

Carolyn did an outstanding job of recruiting authors for this issue who have longstanding records of being engaged civically and of working to create a more engaged community not only in their own school community but beyond.

Amanda Jones shares how she has learned to "roar" and is fighting back against unfounded allegations and a social media campaign against her after she spoke out against censorship at her local library board meeting. Amanda shares her journey and the support she has received from the school library community and beyond as she stands up to censorship and personal attacks. As you read her story, you will see how she has truly taken a stand to ensure the freedom to read.

In Sarah Sansbury's article, she recounts how the horrific events of March 16, 2021, in a nearby community and the rise in hate crimes in general toward those of Asian American descent led to a project that embraced social justice through collaboration with teachers, the community, and the local parks and recreation department. Sarah describes the project and the use of literature that informed students about Asian American history in the United States and fostered their development of empathy. She explains how her team wanted to go beyond the walls of the classroom and into the community to share the importance of listening to all voices—especially those of marginalized communities—by creating a StoryWalk in a local park. Through this collaboration Sarah empowered her students and the community with important knowledge and a way to

As school librarians, our civic engagement will allow us to look back ten, fifteen, or twenty years from now and realize that by being active in our communities and our democracy we made a difference for future generations.

share that knowledge. Her team was able to illuminate past injustices and to have the contributions of Asian Americans acknowledged and appreciated by both the school and the broader community.

How often are we told that if we are unhappy about how our local, state, and national governments work that we should vote? In Lucy Podmore's article she outlines how the school library can play an integral part in voter registration drives for a new generation of voters. Through supporting voter registration and pointing students toward nonpartisan information about elections and candidates, Lucy shows how the school library can be a center of civic engagement. She also points us toward American Library Association resources that can help librarians increase voter awareness and shares how she successfully supports voter registration in her building. Lucy also articulates how the school library prepares students for life beyond high school—and ways in which the school library contributes to students becoming informed and civically minded citizens.

Jennifer LaGarde and Darren Hudgins explain why barriers to civic engagement exist in news deserts, areas where many people don't have access to professionally vetted news. With the decline in traditional media and newspapers, more and more people are turning to social media to consume news. Jennifer and Darren recommend that we become familiar with platforms, such as TikTok, that are popular with students and teach students information literacy skills that can be used on platforms students favor, not just the vetted websites we recommend. Jennifer and Darren point out that most students use mobile devices to access information, and, therefore, we should use them too sometimes as we explicitly teach young people how social media algorithms work and about ways posts are often designed to manipulate emotions and engagement. These authors also recommend that we collaborate with classroom

teachers to design lessons focusing on dis-information campaigns, and mis- and mal-information related to specific subject areas.

Last, but certainly not least, Carolyn Foote posed questions about advocacy and civic participation to Jinnie Spiegler of the Anti-Defamation League, Ellen Kahn at the Human Rights Campaign, John Chrastka, founder of EveryLibrary, and Megan Cusick from the ALA Public Policy and Advocacy Office. In the thoughtful responses to Carolyn's questions, school librarians will learn about ways to be civically engaged themselves and be advocates for their school communities.

This issue on civic engagement could not come at a better time. The insights, ideas, and effective ways to participate in our democracy shared in this issue are relevant and reflect the time that we live in. As school librarians, our civic engagement will allow us to look back ten, fifteen, or twenty years from now and realize that by being active in our communities and our democracy we made a difference for future generations.

Jennifer Sturge is the specialist for school libraries and digital learning for Calvert County Public Schools. In 2021 Calvert County Public School libraries received AASL's National School Library of the Year Award. She has been an educator and librarian for twenty-nine years and is always looking forward. She is a member of ALA and AASL, and was president of the Maryland Association of School Librarians for 2020–2021 and 2021 AASL National Conference program co-chair. She was a 2017–2018 Lilead Fellow. Most recently she is the immediate past chair for the Supervisor's Section of AASL. She received her Ed.D. in Leadership and Administration at Point Park University in Pittsburgh.

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FEATURE



A FIGHT FOR DEMOCRATIC VALUES





Civic Engagement in the Library & Beyond

Carolyn Foote

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Political division, dueling news networks, heated social media debates—how do we as professional librarians demonstrate to our students how to practice civic engagement in these conflicted times? How do we model for them how to engage in civil ways in their communities? And how do we show them the ways professionals can speak up for the principles they believe in? Those questions are at the crux of sorting out how we can encourage civic engagement in libraries in this era of heated political rhetoric.

Libraries have always been civic institutions in their communities. Whether it's a public library supporting community members with election information or a school library offering 18-year-olds voter registration opportunities, participating in civic matters is a mission that comes naturally to librarians. My own work around civic engagement has involved planning activities for students when I was a school librarian, but also engaging in library advocacy out in the larger world. For students, I wanted to encourage them to get involved in our democracy, and help them be more informed about how to do that. And on a larger scale, I have been a longtime advocate of the importance of libraries for equity and access. Most recently, my advocacy has been

more directly focused on intellectual freedom as one of the co-founders of the grassroots group the FReadom Fighters. But there are many ways as librarians we can be civically engaged.

What Can We Do in Our Schools?

Librarians often step up and into moments where they see needs. Presidential elections in general are times when school librarians can provide information and help cut through the soundbites and political division by creating displays about historical elections, sharing facts about the voting process, and providing students with much-needed electoral information. During the 2016 election, I decided to attempt a program that would help students engage in the democratic process.

In the runup to the election, the political environment was quite polarized, and schools were definitely seeing the results of that spilling over into hallways and classrooms. In an effort to provide a balanced approach, I decided to launch a short term "Civil Discourse" lunch group in our school library, centered particularly around the national presidential debates. The plan was to host an open discussion after each of the presidential debates to help students process the debate and endeavor to

talk with others about it. My goal was to help students bridge the gap and figure out how to talk in civil ways about potentially volatile political topics so that they could learn ways to be civically engaged in their future endeavors.

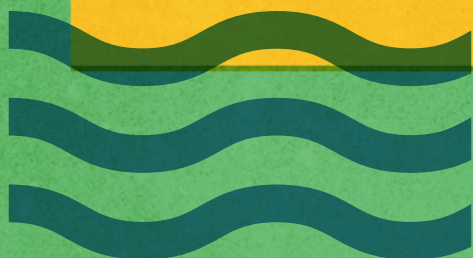
I worked closely with two teachers of government courses to formulate questions and ground rules for the first meeting. We wanted to be well prepared, not knowing which students would attend and what their perspectives would be. We created ground rules and then for our first meeting compiled a series of discussion questions particularly focused on debate logistics—the media anchors, the kinds of questions asked, the stage setup, etc.—to steer clear of more heated debates around the actual political topics. As we moved through meetings the week of each debate, we were able to be more and more informal and move on to discussing issues, but we wanted to first establish a positive experience where everyone could feel heard to start out with.

To our delight and surprise, we had the biggest turnout we'd ever had for a lunch activity. Some students clearly came to disrupt, but as we enforced our ground rules, they gradually engaged in more productive ways. This civic engagement activity was a great learning opportunity for me as well. As adults, we assume everyone has fairly fixed political viewpoints. But watching students move from candidate to candidate as various contenders dropped out of the race and listening to learners' rationales for changing their support reminded me of the openness that our students have towards learning more as they form their own ideas. This wasn't about persuading anyone to any particular point of view (and I did not share mine), but about giving students the opportunity to talk to one another





THIS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITY WAS A GREAT LEARNING OPPORTUNITY FOR ME AS WELL. AS ADULTS, WE ASSUME EVERYONE HAS FAIRLY FIXED POLITICAL VIEWPOINTS. BUT WATCHING STUDENTS MOVE FROM CANDIDATE TO CANDIDATE AS VARIOUS CONTENDERS DROPPED OUT OF THE RACE AND LISTENING TO LEARNERS' RATIONALES FOR CHANGING THEIR SUPPORT REMINDED ME OF THE OPENNESS THAT OUR STUDENTS HAVE TOWARDS LEARNING MORE AS THEY FORM THEIR OWN IDEAS.



and share their ideas with each other and with us. Our civil discourse meetings provided them a place to be heard as they discussed and analyzed each debate's format, issues, and responses. I counted it as a success that, despite making them "follow the rules" of civic engagement, they kept returning to this voluntary meeting week after week. And by the end, students of all different viewpoints had learned to say "I support my candidate because..." and could elaborate on the reasons.

Another smaller-scale way our school library supported students' civic engagement was by making voting a "popular" activity. In Texas, schools are actually required to have a voter registrar and to offer 18-year-olds a chance to register to vote (which is a manual process in Texas). Our principal had asked me to be the voter registrar. On the announcements we reminded students of voting deadlines, offered voter registration forms at the front desk, and set up a week each semester when we brought in community volunteers to staff a voter registration table. Students helped make the announcements and signage. We did this annually,

and it felt amazing to know we were helping young voters get off to a good start. Again, this was a nonpolitical, nonpartisan effort to get students interested in the democratic process. Along the way, we also helped many of our younger teachers gain more information and confidence about voting.

What Can We Do in the Wider World?

I believe in the importance of participating in democracy. Our communities are better when many voices get heard. Believing this, I've often engaged in advocacy for libraries throughout my career. When I've seen opportunities to speak up in a letter to the editor about a upcoming law in our state, or a chance to speak to a political figure in person about the important role libraries play in literacy and equity, I've taken it. Not knowing how many librarians this person will ever actually talk to, I figure I can't let the chance go by. Librarians are concerned about so many things that others care about—reading, literacy, achievement, career and college preparation, and equitable access to

information. But politicians don't always realize that school libraries play a key role in many of those issues, so it's always helpful when an actual librarian can give them examples.

We've all heard about having an elevator speech ready, and for library advocacy that is also great advice. When you speak passionately to any community member or political advocate about what a library can do for kids, your passion is contagious. For example, I went with a teacher colleague of mine to talk to a local state legislator about the importance of school libraries. Prior to the meeting, we did our research and discovered that what he *really* cared about was community colleges. In fact, he had supported funding for our local community college's library expansion. We used those two pieces of information to have a collegial conversation with someone who had not been an informed advocate for school libraries, letting him know how school libraries help prepare students for success in their community college (his pet project) with dual-credit programs and support through library materials. He wasn't at all aware of ways school librarians helped students with research projects or writing or information literacy. By the time we left the meeting, we had created a more positive impression of school libraries for him.

Most recently, of course, my civic engagement has reached much larger audiences as one of the co-founders of the grassroots movement FReadom Fighters.

How Can We Have Even More Impact?

Being able to speak collectively as part of a group such as FReadom Fighters sometimes gives more weight to our words—part of the power of networks and community. I rarely leave any public conversation in



When you speak passionately to any community member or political advocate about what a library can do for kids, your passion is contagious.

While not everyone may feel comfortable confronting censorship issues in a direct way, if nothing else, each of us can tell library stories about who we really are and why libraries matter to our students. Telling stories about your cause is a part of civic engagement. We need those stories as counternarratives right now, and keeping the focus on students is key.

this heated moment without raising awareness about the current fight for intellectual freedom and the impacts that the censorship climate has on school librarians and their ability to serve all students. Family members, friends, Facebook groups, and politicians at events I have attended have all been subjected to my “elevator speech.” (By the way, anyone can create an advocacy group with a few partners. We have tips on our website “how to” page at www.freadom.us.)

As part of #FReadom, we have been privy to the pain, challenges, and difficult decisions that have left many librarians feeling like they’ve committed malpractice.

Being able to share these stories in ways that can help those in power better understand the situation is a privilege and an honor. We know not everyone can publicly share these stories in their own circumstances, but each of us can take opportunities to privately share these impacts with community leaders who have the power to improve the situation. Unite Against Book Bans has an excellent toolkit of talking points that can be downloaded, as do state groups like Texans for the Right to

Read and Michigan Right to Read. ALA also offers national opportunities to engage with legislators, and your state library organizations often identify days to speak to legislators as well (see the list of recommended resources at the end of the article).

In our elevator speech for intellectual freedom, we try to keep the focus on students. We often focus on a few of these points (depending on the situation):

- Access for students means ALL students and families.
- Denying access sends a harmful message to marginalized students.
- Librarians care about literacy. Student literacy needs are crucial in a post-pandemic era; time spent on anything else takes valuable time away from our kids.
- Librarians are the people who celebrate when your child learns to read, who delivered books during the pandemic, who help your child with research. That’s who we *really* are.
- Librarians believe in the ability of students to have polite discourse about controversial ideas.
- Librarians celebrate the increasing diversity in publishing that has led so many students to see that their stories are now on the shelves.
- Politics have no place in libraries as libraries represent many viewpoints.

Our Communities Need Our Civic Engagement

While not everyone may feel comfortable confronting censorship issues in a direct way, if nothing else, each of us can tell library stories about who we really are and why school libraries matter to our students. Telling stories about

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your cause is a part of civic engagement. We need those stories as counter-narratives right now, and keeping the focus on students is key. We need to flood Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and traditional media with digestible stories of how librarians make a positive impact on kids so we continually remind the public of who we really are. Reclaiming that story is an important piece of advocacy, and one we've focused on as FReadom Fighters.

Practicing civic engagement in a heated climate does take passion, courage, and commitment, but there are many ways to engage, as I mentioned above. Each of us is in this profession because we feel passionately not just about school libraries but also about our student readers. They need our

voices because not all of them feel able to speak up. We know better than anyone what our school libraries mean to students. But we also need to remember, when we engage in conversations with others, we can find common ground. We have to think of what stakeholders also care about the issues we do. For example, who cares passionately about literacy? Who cares about college and career success? Businesses, grandparents, social workers, nonprofits, police officers?

Literacy is a starting place for these conversations, and we can explain the way censorship distractions impede us from spending time on that critical mission. Find out what others care about and figure out how to connect with those things. Join organizations in your community. You can make a difference there, whether it's a public library board, a local community equity group, a local Rotary Club, or other group. Even compiling a list of resources for someone else practicing advocacy can be an act of civic engagement, and it's a skill librarians are good at! Remember, people are much more interested and connected to libraries



Carolyn Foote is a thirty-nine-year retired/rewired librarian.

Named as a White House Champion of Change, she

focuses her work on libraries and technology, student voice, library design, and advocacy. Her collaboration with teachers was honored with the AASL Library Collaboration Award in 2019, and more recently, along with the other FReadom Fighters, she has received the AASL Intellectual Freedom Award and the Robert B. Downs Intellectual Freedom Award. She has served on a variety of library committees and is a frequent author and presenter. Her blog can be found at <www.futura.edublogs.org>.

than many of us realize. They can almost always remember a school librarian they encountered or a powerful book they loved as a child or a historic library in their town. Let's start with those common points of connection.

Whether we are connecting students with ways to engage, teaching students discerning information literacy practices, or whether we are engaging in civic matters ourselves or stepping up in tough censorship fights, we are providing students with models of adults who stand up for their professional values, and

who stand up for other people. We are giving them models of how to engage in civil civic discourse and of how to make whatever changes they want to make in their future, no matter what side of any political aisle they may land upon. We are showing them how to exercise the most fundamental democratic right: the freedom to express themselves and to be a

part of this great experiment we call democracy. As the executive director of the National Coalition Against Censorship Christopher Finan wrote, "The long history of book banning in America gives us reason to hope that the freedom to read will prevail—but only if we fight for it" (Finan 2022). Our democracy has always needed engaged citizens to protect it. That's why civic engagement matters.

Recommended Resources:

American Library Association <www.ala.org/advocacy>

#FREEDOM Resources <www.freedom.us/resources>

Garcia, Ariana. 2022. "Meet the Texas Librarian Fighting Book Bans in Schools." *Chron* [Houston Chronicle] (March 10). <www.chron.com/politics/article/Texas-banned-book-list-transgender-gay-school-law-16989382.php> (accessed September 17, 2022).

Michigan Right to Read Resources <www.mirighttoread.com/resources>

Texas for the Right to Read <<https://texansfortherighttoread.com>>

Unite Against Book Bans Toolkit <<https://uniteagainstabookbans.org/toolkit>>

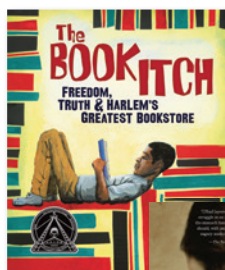
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Finan, Christopher M. 2022. "There's No Time to Despair over Book Bans—Just to Fight Them." *Publishers Weekly* (September 9). <www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/columns-and-blogs/soapbox/article/90288-there-s-no-time-to-despair-over-book-bans-just-to-fight-them.html> (accessed September 17, 2022).

THANK YOU, LIBRARIANS, FOR PROTECTING OUR RIGHT TO READ

Grades 2-4

- Starred Reviews, *Booklist*, *Kirkus Reviews*
- Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor
- ALA Notable Children's Books
- NCTE Notable Children's Book in the Language Arts
- *Kirkus* Best Children's Books



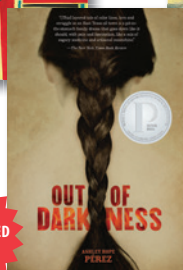
Grades 3-6

- Starred Reviews, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Publishers Weekly*
- ALA Notable Children's Books
- NCTE Notable Poetry Books
- *Kirkus* Best Middle-Grade Books of the Year

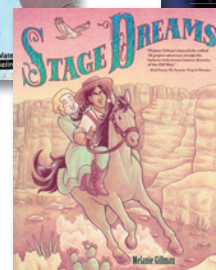


Grades 6-12

- Starred Review, *Booklist*
- ALA Rainbow List
- Booklist Top 10 Diverse Nonfiction for Youth



ALA TOP 10
MOST BANNED
BOOKS
OF 2021



Grades 8-12

- Starred Review, *School Library Journal*
- Michael L. Printz Honor Book
- YALSA Best Books for Young Adults
- Notable Award *Booklist's* 50 Best YA Books of All Time
- *Kirkus* Best Teen Books of the Year
- *School Library Journal* Best Book

Grades 8-12

- Starred Reviews, *Publishers Weekly*, *School Library Journal*
- YALSA Great Graphic Novels for Teens



Additional titles and resources at
lernerbooks.com/banned

Lerner

YOU'RE GONNA HEAR ME



SPEAKING OUT AGAINST
CENSORSHIP EFFORTS
IN MY COMMUNITY

Amanda Jones

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Making the Decision To Speak Out

"I used to bite my tongue and hold my breath." (Perry et al. 2013)

As a school librarian, I have paid close attention to legislation and book banning efforts across the United States over the past few years. I took the advice of librarians like Carolyn Foote and have been proactive so that I will not have to be reactive. I pushed for an updated librarians' handbook within my district, including revised collection development and reconsideration policies. I read articles, collected resources, and spoke out against censorship within the school library community. Because my focus had been on school libraries, I hadn't really thought about censorship and book banning efforts in public libraries until it hit home.

In July of 2022 a person from outside my community posted on social media a page from a book titled *Dating and Sex: A 21st-Century Guide for the Teenage Boy* (Magination 2016), and urged people to attend my community's public library board meeting. The "concerned citizen" from outside our district posted a two-page photo from the book and did not list the title of the book in her initial post. I researched her and found out she was a member of a political-activist group who had been wreaking havoc on a neighboring public library system for the past

two years. The group successfully urged citizens in that district to vote against the library tax, essentially costing the library millions of dollars. Members of the group have protested, run campaigns to successfully ban and relocate books, helped stack the board with staunch conservatives with no library experience, banned book displays, and have threatened to have local librarians fired who don't fall in line with their agenda. After seeing the post on social media, I looked at our public library board agenda that was posted online, and two items caught my attention: book content and book signage.

Fearing what was possibly coming to my district, I made the decision to speak at my public library's board meeting on July 19, 2022, as

a resident, parent, and concerned citizen. While I am used to speaking to school librarians, I had never attended a public meeting, much less spoken at one. The thought of speaking was daunting, and I was nervous. However, I thought about several things that helped me make my decision to speak: I am a librarian with knowledge on censorship and book banning; I am a resident who didn't want to see my public library destroyed; I wanted to share that our public library already had a policy in place for citizens to challenge books; and I wanted to explain to the public the slippery slope of censorship and its harmful effects on historically marginalized communities.



The Aftermath

“You held me down, but I got up (hey) / Already brushing off the dust.” (Perry et al. 2013)

I attended that public library meeting with a speech I had written the previous day. A board member passed around a list of books, many of which had LGBTQ themes. I gave my blanket speech about censorship, quoted the American Library Association, and quoted the Trevor Project. I didn’t speak about any particular books. Many other community members also spoke out against censorship. The director of the political-activist group also spoke. The library board made no decisions that night and postponed the discussion. I thought to myself that everything was

going to be okay. Imagine my horror when several days later, I woke up to find that the political-activist group had posted a picture of me on their Facebook page, complete with a red circle around my face that looked like a target. The accompanying text asked why I was fighting to keep pornography and erotica in kids’ sections, stated I was a school librarian (in all caps), said they were going to be visiting my school, and posted the quote widely attributed to Warren Buffet: “It takes twenty years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it.” In the comment section, people posted that I needed to be purged, slapped, fired, and I was called disgusting names. My heart immediately dropped to the pit of my stomach, but that wasn’t all.

Ten minutes after I saw that post, someone texted me a post on another Facebook page. This post was a meme

with a professional photograph taken from my website with the words, “After advocating teaching anal sex to 11-year-olds, I had to change my name on Facebook. Amanda McKee Jones now identifies as Amanda Beth.” It listed my school district and said, “Librarian of the year lol.” That post also contained comments identifying my school, comments calling me a pedophile and groomer, and comments pertaining to violence. I live in a small community, and those posts were being shared all over our town. I was completely devastated and spent that weekend in my room crying.

After two days of hosting my own personal pity party, I got angry. I’ve often heard the expression “seeing red,” but now I was experiencing it. The two groups continued posting about me on multiple platforms, pushing a false narrative about what I did and said at the public library meeting. From a man in Texas I received an e-mail with a credible death threat that contained language so vile and threatening I don’t want to repeat it here. I thought about what was happening to me, and what I’ve read has happened to librarians across the country, and I decided to take a stand.

Imagine my horror when several days later, I woke up to find that the political-activist group had posted a picture of me on their Facebook page, complete with a red circle around my face that looked like a target.



Taking a Stand

“I went from zero, to my own hero.” (Perry et al. 2013)

My mother likes to joke about how she purchased the book *The Strong-Willed Child* when I was younger because she didn't quite expect such a tenacious child. I am as stubborn as a mule. Once I make a decision, I stick to it come hell or high water. I was ready to fight back against the people defaming me and to tell my story. People who harass librarians expect us to sit back quietly, but I was prepared to do the exact opposite and take back the narrative. I filed criminal complaints against both of the men posting lies about me, filed a complaint against the man who sent me a death threat, and looked into hiring an attorney.

I want to acknowledge the privileges I have in this situation. I am blessed beyond measure with a supportive family; I have 100 percent support from my school system, and a professional learning network of allies who are unstoppable. I have worked in my school for twenty-one years and had a solid reputation in the community. Because of my past work in the school library world, I have connections afforded to me that make taking a stance possible. Speaking out and fighting back takes courage, but it also takes a support system. I know not everyone has the privileges and connections afforded to me, which is even more reason why I felt I needed to take a stand. Not only did I want to defend my reputation and put a stop to the harassment, but I also wanted to stand up for every librarian or educator who has ever had vitriol hurled at them on social media but was not in a place to fight back.

When making the decision to fight back, I had to conquer a lot of fear, and weigh the pros and cons of the situation. I thought about my family, the costs both mental and financial, and my personal safety. I sought advice from multiple school librarians, particularly members of FReadom Fighters and the Louisiana Association of School Librarians (LASL) Executive Board, and the 2022 *School Library Journal* Librarian of the Year, K.C. Boyd. I read everything I could about Martha Hickson, a school librarian in New Jersey who has been in a similar situation. After much contemplation, I decided I was ready to fight back and prepared to take the bad with the good. My mentor and good friend Tiffany Whitehead created a GoFundMe to help with legal expenses. I hired an attorney, and I filed a civil lawsuit for injunctive relief and to institute legal proceedings for redress against my harassers.

People who harass librarians expect us to sit back quietly, but I was prepared to do the exact opposite and take back the narrative.



I also had several friends reach out on my behalf to John Chrastka at EveryLibrary, who connected me with Kelly Jensen, a former librarian and current author at *Book Riot*. Kelly's article, "Louisiana School Librarian of the Year Seeking Legal Action after Smear Campaign" helped me share my story and caught the attention of journalists at *NBC News*, *USA Today*, *Time*, *Insider*, *NPR*, and *The New York Times*. I cannot begin to describe how empowering it was to share my story on a national level. What is happening to me is happening to librarians all across the country, and this coverage draws much-needed attention to these events.

If I have to take legal measures to stand up against those who propose censorship in our school and public libraries, and against those who attack librarians for speaking out, then that will be my mission.

LIVINGSTON PARISH LIBRARY ALLIANCE

Members live, learn and work in the parish and recognize the importance of preserving the freedom of the library to provide services to all patrons no matter their ethnicity, religion, gender identity, education status, political affiliation, socioeconomic status or any other diversity of life and thought.

www.LPLalliance.org

Because of this coverage, I have been contacted by hundreds of people across the country with messages of support, including librarians, strangers, former students now in their 20s and 30s, relatives of my harassers, and authors.

Taking a stand is worth it to me. On the first day of library visits this school year, a student approached me and whispered, "My mom said you're one of the good ones, and I can trust you. Can you help me find books with LGBTQ characters?" That is my *why*. Whether it is speaking out at school board meetings, public library meetings, or just speaking out in general on social media, our students and their families are watching. It is essential that our students and community know our libraries are safe spaces where people of all walks of life are represented.

If I have to take legal measures to stand up against those who propose censorship in our school and public libraries, and against those who attack librarians for speaking out, then that will be my mission.

Unleashing My Moxie

"Cause I am a champion, and you're gonna hear me roar."

(Perry et al. 2013)

After *NBC News* released the article, "In Rare Move, School Librarian Fights Back in Court against Conservative Activists," author Erin Entrada Kelly retweeted the story and wrote, "This is moxie." I've thought a lot about that word and the type of person I want to be. A person with moxie not only stands up for themselves, but stands up for others. I tattooed the word moxie on my wrist to remind me to be courageous and determined, and one day I hope to tell Erin in person what that tweet meant to me. I'm channeling my moxie not only into my fight against the people slandering me, but into a campaign to stop the outsiders from coming into our district and ruining our public library system. I am fearful that their ultimate goal is

to defund our public library system by encouraging voters to vote against an upcoming millage that funds our libraries. They've done it successfully before.

With the help of EveryLibrary, I have gathered a group of concerned citizens who also want to help save our public library system and speak out against these censorship attempts. We are a group of all ages who share a love of our library. Together we have formed the Livingston Parish Library Alliance, a group devoted to dispelling rumors running rampant in our community, showcasing the wonderful programs and resources available at our public library, and fighting hate with kindness. We have launched a website <LPLalliance.org> and a Facebook page, and are working with television and newspaper outlets to share information we have gained through public records requests that have revealed hidden agendas, while also highlighting stories from community members about what our library system means to them.

Amanda Jones and supporters. From left to right: Tiffany Whitehead (LASL parliamentarian), Tammy Chaffin (LASL vice president), Kristy Barker (LASL 2nd vice president, and Amanda Jones (LASL president). (photo credit: David Gray)



The Roberts Family at the Livingston Parish Public Library Board Meeting. (photo credit: Catlin Roberts)



What I have learned from this whole ordeal, a fight that I will most likely be waging for several years, is that when you stand up for what is right, you will have more supporters and blessings than you could have ever imagined. I will forever be grateful to my friends on the LASL Executive Board, as well as my professional learning network across the country for the comfort they provide me.

Speaking out is not for the faint of heart and can be dangerous. Do like I did and weigh the pros and cons. Think about your beliefs, your safety, and the cost of speaking out, and seek therapy to combat the roller coaster of emotions. Someone asked me if—knowing what I know now—would I go back in time and still speak at my public library board meeting? My answer is “yes” now and will always be “yes.” It’s time for school librarians to band together and start standing up if we are able. If not us, then who? If not now, then when?



Amanda Jones, an AASL member, 2023 National Conference Co-Chair, and Secretary for the AASL Chapters

Coordinating Team, is the 2021 School Library Journal Co-Librarian of the Year, a 2021 Library Journal Mover and Shaker, and the 2020 Louisiana School Librarian of the Year. Amanda is president of the Louisiana Association of School Librarians, an AASL Social Media Superstar, and was named a 2022 K–12 IT Influencer to Follow by EdTech magazine. Find out more about her at librarianjones.com.

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Supporting
ARTICLE

ASIAN AMERICAN HISTORY IS AMERICAN HISTORY

Sarah Sansbury

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I still remember my stomach clenching, losing my breath, horrified by such violence in the community I call home. On March 16, 2021, a mere twelve miles from my school's campus, several Asian American women were shot point-blank and killed (Shivaram 2022). Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian hate had been on the rise, but this tragedy literally hit home—and I found myself jolted into action. I knew our school and community had to do something, and I began searching for ideas.

Several months later, I read the article "Why a New Law Requiring Asian American History in Schools Is So Significant" by Li Zhou (2021). The article centered on how Illinois would be the first state to require Asian American history to be taught in schools. Why is this revolutionary? As librarians, we understand how knowledge is powerful. In the poignant words of the article's author:

Without such lessons, there's little awareness not only about how Asian Americans have been discriminated against in the past—and how that continues to inform current biases—but also about how Asian Americans have helped to build the country.

The omission, and limited portrayals, of Asian Americans in history lessons establishes and reinforces the message that they aren't part of this country's narrative. (Zhou 2021)

By making sure all voices are heard, especially those who are underrepresented, librarians can be agents of civic engagement. I knew then how my elementary students could bring about justice through awareness and, I hope, prevent further senseless violence spawned from prejudice and ignorance. Collaborating with Emma O'Connor, our school's social studies department head and fourth-grade social studies and English language arts teacher, we began brainstorming how we could include Asian American history in the curriculum.

About the same time I read Li Zhou's article, I finished reading Linda Sue Park's *Prairie Lotus* (Clarion 2020), a middle-grade novel set during the westward expansion in the United States and with a half-Asian girl as the protagonist. I lent my copy to Emma O'Connor, and she and I both agreed that our students needed to read this. In fourth grade, social studies standards include westward expansion. However, there is no requirement to teach the Asian American experience, despite the

By making sure all voices are heard, especially those who are underrepresented, librarians can be agents of civic engagement.

facts that one-fourth of people involved in the Gold Rush were Asian, and thousands of Asians contributed to the transcontinental railroad being built to successfully link the eastern and western U.S. This situation needed to be remedied, and *Prairie Lotus* became the cornerstone of our collaborative unit.

We gathered supplemental material to round out students' learning. Ultimately, our goal was for our learners to see and value the Asian American experience and how it contributes to the overall tapestry of American history. Because the students were studying westward expansion, I chose two historical-fiction picture books by Yin: *Coolies* (Philomel 2001) and its sequel *Brothers* (Philomel 2006). *Coolies* is about the hard work contributed by Chinese immigrants to create the transcontinental railroad—and



Students were thrilled to share their project with their family, friends, and neighbors.



Sarah Sansbury holds up her students' interactive StoryWalk pages.

how they received no credit or gratitude once it was completed. *Brothers* continues the story and gives further depth to the Chinese immigrant experience during westward expansion. After we read the books, I explained how they were historical fiction, but they were based on the experiences of real people. We then watched California Museum's "Gold Mountain: Chinese Californian Stories," a 2020 exhibit video (available on YouTube) about Lim Lip Hong, a Chinese immigrant who worked on the railroad and whose life was almost an exact parallel of that of the older brother protagonist in *Coolies*.

Beyond teaching Asian American history, we wanted to foster within our students empathy and an appreciation for diversity. Because of this, we included Joanna Ho's beautiful picture book *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners* (HarperCollins 2021) with illustrations by Dung Ho. It concludes with

In this simple exercise, our students recognized how powerful and necessary it is to have diverse books in our school library—how a book can be a lifeline for someone else.

these empowering lines, describing the protagonist's almond-shaped eyes:

My eyes crinkle into crescent moons
and sparkle like the stars.
Gold flecks dance and twirl
while stories whirl
in their oolong pools,
carrying tales of the past
and hope for the future.

My lashes curve like the
swords of warriors
and, through them, I see
kingdoms in the clouds.

My eyes that kiss in the corners
and glow like warm tea
are a revolution. (2021, 14–16)

We paired *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners* with chapters three and four in *Prairie Lotus*. In these chapters, the main character Hanna tries to hide her almond-shaped eyes behind her bonnet when she goes to school because she frequently experiences negative reactions from strangers (children and adults) when they find out that she is Chinese. Students were asked to explore the thought: If Hanna could read *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners*, how do you think this book would make her feel? Our fourth-graders told us that Hanna wouldn't feel alone anymore and she wouldn't want to hide her eyes anymore because she would be proud of them. In this simple exercise, our students recognized how powerful and



Librarian Sarah Sansbury and Social Studies Teacher Emma O'Connor collaborated on social-justice-focused StoryWalk®.



necessary it is to have diverse books in our school library—how a book can be a lifeline for someone else.

We also wanted our students to engage personally with the text, to have them “thinking from within the stories” and “thinking beyond the stories” (Read 2021). One of the corresponding activities was students responding to the prompt: “What would you do if you were Hanna’s classmate?” This activity was intended to grow their empathy and allow students a chance to practice the role of an upstander. My favorite response was these kind, sincere words: “I would try and make her feel welcomed. ‘Cause I don’t want anyone to feel left out at a new school. So I’ll try and help someone feel happy about where they are. Make them feel confident. And joyful. So if Hanna was here at this school right now, I [would] try and help her feel so happy and joyful...I’d make her feel welcome.” Our fourth-grader recognized that what Hanna was feeling is what many new students

feel, especially students who may feel like they are “different” or “don’t fit in.”

In addition, we wanted students to appreciate the diversity and uniqueness within themselves. In *Prairie Lotus*, Hanna vacillates back and forth from being ashamed of her appearance to being proud of her almond-shaped black eyes with matching black hair, which matches her recently deceased Chinese-Korean mother. For this reason, we included the book *The Best Part of Me* by Wendy Ewald (Little, Brown 2002) and compared it to *Prairie Lotus* and *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners*. At the end of *Prairie Lotus*, Hanna looks at a reflection of herself in a mirror and sees beauty in her unique features. Her shame has been replaced with pride. Furthermore, like the protagonist in the *Eyes that Kiss in the Corners*, she recognizes that her almond-shaped eyes are more than just beautiful. They connect her to her mother, to her heritage. The students then completed a *The*

The ultimate goal was for my students to see and value the Asian American experience that contributes to the overall tapestry of American history.



Best Part of Me activity in which the students explored what they believed was the best part of them and then shared that reflection with each other. A variety of parts were described with pride and appreciation. One student chose her hair describing it as a "crown on their head." Another selected her hands which "move so gracefully when I dance," while another picked his brain "because it holds all of the memories in my life."

For a culminating project, we wanted to go beyond our school walls, to empower our students and engage our community. We decided to have our students create a StoryWalk of Yin's picture book *Coolies* to be set up in our local community park.

Librarian Sarah Sansbury and Social Studies Teacher Emma O'Connor collaborated on social-justice-focused StoryWalk®.

After reading *Coolies*, the students discussed what they had learned. The book describes the hard and dangerous work contributed by Chinese immigrants to create the transcontinental railroad—and how they received no praise or acknowledgment once it was completed. In *Coolies* Chris Soentpiet has illustrated a moving scene, based on a real photograph, of the culminating celebration of the railroad's completion. The book and photo show a group of white men proudly smiling, one holding a champagne bottle. The Chinese workers are depicted on the sidelines, literally marginalized, watching the celebration as outsiders. My students were so moved by this. They all agreed that the treatment of the Chinese workers was completely unfair. This transcontinental railroad had an extremely great influence on the development of the United States we know today, and the hard work and contributions need to be recognized and celebrated—hence the book choice for the StoryWalk project.



Additionally, we wanted the students to contribute to the StoryWalk in a personal way and make it interactive for our community. Two QR codes were attached to every StoryWalk page. When the first QR code was scanned, a video would be pulled up of one of our students reading that page aloud. To give the students even more ownership of the project, the second QR code pulled up a video of the student sharing why they chose that page to read, why that particular page was important to them, or what they personally learned from that page.

However, it would be remiss not to mention our community partners. This project would not have been successful without our collaboration with the local public library and the city's Parks and Recreation Department. I reached out to the public library's head of youth services for help and received an enthusiastic "Yes!" They were thrilled to collaborate with us. Not only did they let us borrow their StoryWalk display stands, but the Friends of the Library also surprised us by generously supplying a hardcover copy of *Prairie Lotus* for every fourth-grader. Likewise, the Parks and Recreation Department were excited to host our StoryWalk. When we installed it, people from three different community organizations came to work together to bring our StoryWalk to life. At that point, it was more than just my school's StoryWalk, it was our community's StoryWalk.

In May 2022 our StoryWalk was recreated and featured at our city's Asian-American Heritage Festival. Then in June, in the same park where we had our original *Coolies* StoryWalk, our city installed not just one, but three StoryWalks scattered throughout that park and another community park. They expanded their reach to honor and celebrate Juneteenth (City of Dunwoody

2022). Each of these new StoryWalks featured the picture book *All Different Now*, written by Angela Johnson and illustrated by E. B. Lewis (Simon & Schuster 2014). I spoke to Lynn Deutsch, our city's mayor, to talk about the StoryWalk. She told me that my students' StoryWalk presented a whole new opportunity to showcase historical events as well as another way the City of Dunwoody could partner with the library to acknowledge and celebrate the diversity in our community. "Everyone needs to feel seen," she explained, "...and when you involve children, that gets parents involved, and then they bring their friends, the grandparents, aunts, uncles...and it just grows from there" (Deutsch 2022).

The ultimate goal was for my students to see and value the Asian American experience that contributes to the overall tapestry of American history. They empathized with the main character Hanna in *Prairie Lotus*, who felt alone and ostracized because of prejudiced interactions versus feeling accepted and proud of her Asian identity. Additionally, the students were outraged that Chinese workers

were not invited to or recognized during the celebration of the railroad being finished. Their study of the westward expansion went beyond learning the standards: It fostered an urge for social justice. Empowered with knowledge and given an avenue to share that knowledge, our students were able to expose injustices committed and to have the contributions of Asian Americans be acknowledged and appreciated.

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**ENGAGING
FIRST-TIME VOTERS**

**IN THE
LIBRARY**

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With its power to reach millions of young voters, social media has long been viewed as a time-waster and billboard for misinformation. In the past few years, however, that power has given teen activists a platform to shine a light on laws and proposed legislation that directly impact the lives of young people across the country. Because of this, our students are becoming more aware of the ways politics are directly impacting their daily lives, and these young people are eager to have their voices heard in our election process. They have become engaged in this social discussion in ways I had never seen before in my lifetime, and they are turning those discussions into a movement to motivate young voters to register and vote in elections at all levels.

As a school librarian, one of my jobs is to help students find relevant and authoritative information for their needs. I can think of no better way to carry out my duty than to provide my students with unbiased information on how they can be active participants in the process to vote for their representation in government. Some of the info I give learners is about registering to vote. Since Texas voters are unable to register online to vote, offering voter registration forms in the school library is one way I can help streamline the registration process for my students.

As a school librarian, one of my jobs is to help students find relevant and authoritative information for their needs. I can think of no better way to carry out my duty than to provide my students with unbiased information on how they can be active participants in the process to vote for their representation in government.

Facilitating Voter Registration

Throughout the school year I promote various deadlines for voter registration as well as encourage participation in local, state, and national elections. Frequent reminders are posted on the school library's social media accounts (see figure 1 for an example) for our students who have recently turned eighteen to pick up voter registration forms in the school library. Each year I contact our Texas Secretary of State's office and request

new voter registration forms so we always have a ready supply for our students who are eager to participate in our election process. (Students can mail completed forms to a local election office.)

Twice a year I host voter registration drives for our students. Tables are set up in our courtyard during lunches to make the registration services more visible to students who may not be frequent school library visitors. Our beautiful therapy dog, Mo, who visits our school library monthly, is a special guest during these voter drives (see figure 2). Mo is a crowd favorite and attracts large numbers to our space so we can offer our voting resources to more students. I asked a volunteer deputy registrar to attend my most-recent voter registration drive (see figure 3), and we were both thrilled when we had more than twenty students sign up to register to vote. Since that particular drive was in the spring semester, we also offered information on how to request absentee ballots for those students who would be attending college away from home in the fall.

This year, during our annual open house, I offered voter information, including voter registration cards, at our school library information table. This is an effort to encourage

Figure 1. Sample of reminders on library's social media.

Figure 2. Mo, a therapy dog, also helps with voter registration.



parents who may have just moved into our area to model participation in the election process for their children.

By offering these voter registration drives, our campus remains in compliance with a Texas state law that requires two opportunities per year for eligible students to register to vote. High school students are busy with their extra-curricular activities, afterschool jobs, and rigorous coursework. I am pleased this law allows an opportunity to encourage my busy students to become registered voters and engage in the election process.

Pointing Voters to Information about Voting and Candidates

Near the registration forms we provide handouts and a QR code that direct students to www.vote411.org, an informational website created by the nonpartisan League of Women Voters (LWV). This website offers a wealth of information on the voting process for all fifty states. When someone selects their home state from a menu, information is displayed about how to check voter registration status and what forms of ID are required to cast a ballot on election day. Information about use

of absentee ballots is also there. Links are provided to determine a person's voting precinct and to identify the open positions to be decided in their voting district. Voters can even look up polling locations and hours for their specific area.

Although our students may be hearing ads about state or national elections, the information on local elections provided by the LWV is a wonderful tool to inform them of local races and ballot initiatives. If candidates have responded to the LWV's candidate questionnaire, their answers are also provided so voters can make an informed selection. At Vote411.org a sample ballot is provided. Students can use it to research their choices, make notes, and then take the sample with them into the voting booth. As a voter myself, I really appreciate the information on the various district and county court positions and what kinds of cases each court hears. Long ballots can be intimidating, especially ones with so many judicial positions open that it is easy to become overwhelmed. The explanations and sample ballot offered by the LWV helps young and seasoned voters alike feel more comfortable with the process. Vote411.org is definitely a go-to

resource for me when helping my students navigate the voting process for our area, but it can be used in all fifty states, so I encourage you to see how it may help in your efforts to keep your students informed.

The American Library Association website also features some wonderful resources to increase voter awareness. In partnership with National Voter Registration Day, ALA encourages libraries to support voter participation in their communities. The ALA voter engagement website www.ala.org/advocacy/voter-engagement contains a *Voter Engagement Guide*, which includes resources and ideas; a *Tip Sheet for Community Leaders and Partners*, which highlights ways libraries can support voter engagement; and a *State Voting & Election Toolkit*. This toolkit is a simple-to-use site that directs people to voting and election information for each state, including registration and deadline information, and more. Although these toolkits and resources are geared toward public libraries, many of the strategies and materials can be adapted for use in a high school library in districts that allow educators to provide registration and voting information.

Figure 3. Author with a volunteer deputy registrar at the high school.



Helping Students Prepare for Their Futures

School libraries remain a hallmark of our societies. They are places where all students are welcome to use the abundant resources available to them to research topics for class study or explore ideas about which they are curious. At some school libraries it is also a place where students meet with military recruiters, sit for college interviews, complete job applica-

tions, and attend to other business as they prepare for their adult lives after high school. In our Texas public school library, preparing for life after high school also includes registering to vote and learning how to become an informed voter who sees the value in voting in every election.



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Supporting
ARTICLE

NEWS DESERTS

A Barrier to Civic Engagement

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As librarians, the term *book deserts* is a familiar one, referring to pockets within our communities where access to books is impeded by any number of obstacles. Familiar, too, are the devastating effects of book deserts on our readers, some of whom may come to us having never held, never mind *owned*, a book. These learners enter school at a disadvantage compared to those with abundant access to books (Zuri 2022). Less familiar, however, maybe the term *news deserts*, even though their effects on our communities are just as profound.

A 2020 study from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Hussman School of Journalism and Media found that since 2004 over one-quarter of U.S. newspapers have disappeared. This reduction has left many people, especially those in poor rural areas, living in news deserts, where access to professionally vetted information is limited, if not completely absent (Stites 2020). Additionally, those newsrooms that do still exist employ far fewer people. The Pew Research Center found that newsroom employment at U.S. newspapers has dropped by nearly half since 2008, resulting in a staggering 62 percent drop in ad revenue during the same time period (Walker 2021). Other traditional news platforms,

such as cable news, haven't fared much better in an environment in which subscription models are dead and clicks are the new currency (Rothschild and Fischer 2022). The voids left by traditional news sources don't remain empty, however. Instead of information vacuums, news deserts are flooded with mis-, dis-, and mal-information—all of which make true civic engagement impossible. Civic engagement depends on an informed citizenry whose decisions are based on facts. News deserts are more than just barriers to those facts; they stand between our communities and the information that makes healthy civic engagement possible.

The answer to where our communities are getting information in the absence of traditional news sources is no mystery. In an age where we've collectively decided that information should be free, social media has emerged as a primary source for content, including news (Hutchinson 2021). However, while social media platforms have become our go-to for everything from recipe ideas to current events, the platforms young people turn to for content are often very different from those their teachers and parents are most familiar with. Recently, the Pew Research Center shared new data about social media

use among Americans that revealed stark, if not shocking, gaps between the platforms used most by adults versus those our learners prefer. One of the most glaring examples of this divide exists among users of TikTok. While less than 20 percent of adults (ages 21+) said they used TikTok regularly, 67 percent of teens (ages 13–17) use it consistently, with a stunning 81 percent of Black teens saying they preferred the app (Vogels et al. 2022). These findings, coupled with a recent viral Twitter thread about the use of TikTok as a research tool (Sheares 2022), left many school librarians in our social media feeds concerned.

Those worries aren't without merit. In addition to concerns about the accuracy of information found on social media, there's also reason to be wary of radicalization in spaces where the algorithms have been proven to amplify hate. In 2021 an investigation by Media Matters found that if TikTok users interact with transphobic content, the app's algorithm will not only populate their For You Page (FYP) with more transphobic videos, but it will also curate a playlist of suggested videos that contains White-supremacist, antisemitic, and far-right content that includes calls for violence. In their investigation, researchers from Media Matters created a

dummy account, interacted with anti-trans content, and then evaluated the first 400 videos curated in the account's FYP. The study concluded that "while nearly 400 may sound like a large number of videos, if a user watches videos for an average of 20 seconds each, they could consume 400 videos in just over two hours. A user could download the app at breakfast and be fed overtly White supremacist and neo-Nazi content before lunch" (Keith 2021).

Unfortunately, TikTok isn't the only social media platform that has struggled to control the spread of mis-, dis-, and mal-information. Both Facebook and Twitter have had to reckon with revelations about how the spread of false content outpaces verifiable content on their platforms (Dvoskin 2021). That said, while it's tempting to advise learners (both young and old) to stay away from social media as a source of information, this approach can have negative consequences as well. When we dismiss the search tools young people prefer, we send the message that those tools aren't worthy of scrutiny. By teaching them only how to evaluate information from the sources we prefer, we leave them fundamentally unprepared to spot and avoid potentially harmful content outside of school librarian-vetted environments. Further, given that these platforms are (for better or worse) the places where we engage with our elected officials, and form opinions about our own governance, helping learners evaluate information in these spaces has become an essential way we prepare them to participate in our democracy.

Ironically, one consequence of news deserts is a flood of mis-, dis-, and mal-information that traditional information literacy

approaches are not equipped to address. As school librarians, information evaluation has always been in our wheelhouse, but today's information challenges require new approaches. Instead of throwing up our hands and imploring our students to use the databases we subscribe to, we must meet them where they are. Here are some ideas for getting started.

Get to Know TikTok for Yourself

While trending apps change frequently, having a passing understanding of the spaces where our kids spend much of their online time can help us better address the draw of these platforms and the information needs they create for kids. That said, you don't need to create an account and start busting out trending dance moves to familiarize yourself with TikTok. TikTok videos can be viewed in Web browsers without downloading the app. If you're not sure where to get started, try the hashtag #booktok where users share book recommendations. The #booktok community is large and active, and is using its collective voice to influence publishing. Take Adam Silvera's YA novel *They Both Die at the End* (Quill Tree 2018). It has spent over a year on the *New York Times* Young Adult Best Sellers list more than four years after its original publication, thanks to a surge of over 37 million #booktok videos recommending it (Murray 2021). But if #booktok isn't your thing, try #librarytok instead. High school librarian Kelsey Bogan has curated a Padlet full of librarians who use TikTok to share ideas and advocate for readers (2022). These videos can help you get to know both the platform and some of your colleagues.

Teach Students about How Algorithms and Engagement Work

We tend to think of "the socials" in the context of ways that we use them, but in reality the mission of social media platforms isn't to provide us with spaces to share pictures of our lunch, connect with old friends, get into political arguments, or influence book sales. Rather, social media platforms are designed to do one thing, and one thing only: get us to engage with content to make money for the companies who own the platforms. To do that, they collect massive amounts of data about us and constantly tweak their algorithms to get us to like, share, comment, and follow. For platforms like TikTok, user engagement is the primary data point used to curate future suggested content (TikTok 2020). While the example earlier about how searching for harmful content can result in a flood of potentially radicalizing videos is certainly a cautionary tale, it also represents an opportunity. Teaching kids how algorithms work and how to be intentional about feeding the algorithm data that will lead to good/healthy search results is now an essential information literacy skill.

Add Prebunking to Your Toolkit

Derived from debunking, *prebunking* refers to the practice of preemptively identifying and dismissing harmful content through the recognition of expected mis-, dis-, and mal- information techniques. Even the most motivated among us don't have time to fact-check every suspicious claim online, and certainly many of our students aren't motivated to do that work beyond the scope of an assignment or project. With that in mind,

prebunking is a way to inoculate learners against harmful content in advance by teaching them how to avoid information that contains specific red flags.

Here's how prebunking can work. In a recent study conducted by Cambridge University, millions of YouTube users watched 90-second clips that explained common disinformation techniques, like fear-mongering, scapegoating, and playing into emotions. Compared to a control group, users who were repeatedly exposed to information about techniques used to manipulate and fool the public were better able to recognize those techniques later. Upon recognition of those tactics, users chose to avoid potentially harmful content (Smalley 2022). For school librarians one way to incorporate prebunking into our information literacy work is to make sure all research projects contain a mini-lesson on commonly used dis- and mal- information techniques. The more we remind kids of the tools and tactics used by those who create harmful content, the more likely learners are to recognize—and avoid—it when we are not there to help them.

Teach Skills That Apply to Any Platform

Technology changes. But human behavior is remarkably predictable. By the time we all get a handle on TikTok, our kids will have moved onto the next big thing. Instead of focusing on learning everything about how a specific app works, focus on skills that transcend platforms. For example, helping kids understand how individuals who create and share mis-, dis-, and mal-information rely on emotional triggers as a way to increase engagement can prepare learners for navigating those reactions to content regardless of the platform they use to find information. A 2018 study from Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that “content that arouses strong emotions spreads further, faster, more deeply, and more broadly online” (Meyer 2018). Peppering headlines, bylines, sidebars, news chyrons, and even photo captions with words that elicit an extreme emotional response and/or confirm existing biases helps to increase the likelihood that a story, video, or post will be clicked, liked, and shared. When we connect with news that triggers an extreme

emotion like fear, anger, or outrage, our immediate urge is to express that emotion—often by passing on the information (along with our feelings about it) to others (LaGarde and Hudgins 2021). Helping kids recognize when content triggers them can help learners avoid mis-, dis-, and mal- information on whatever platform they prefer.

Go Mobile

While we tend to use desktop and laptop computers to teach information literacy at school, these are not the devices our young people use to access information everywhere else (Vogels et al. 2022). This reality matters for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that information looks vastly different on a mobile device than it does on a desktop or laptop, making the steps we often encourage kids to take when learning more about content or its source equally disparate. Including mobile environments in our information literacy work is an essential part of preparing young people to evaluate content outside the context of an assignment (LaGarde and Hudgins 2020). Whether creating mobile

The voids left by traditional news sources don't remain empty, however. Instead of information vacuums, news deserts are flooded with mis-, dis-, and mal-information—all of which make true civic engagement impossible.

simulations, displaying your phone under a document camera, or using a school-issued cart of iPads, including mobile devices when teaching kids to think like fact-checkers helps them recognize that these skills apply to the research they do outside of school, too.

Look for Helpers

In the age of apps like TikTok, information literacy instruction needs a radical overhaul. In an ideal world, these skills would be taught across curricula and grade spans and in meaningful ways throughout a young person's K–12 education. Until that becomes a reality, school librarians, who work with every learner in the school, remain best positioned to fill the gap. But we can't do it alone. The urgent need to help today's learners navigate a rapidly changing, commercially driven information landscape presents an opportunity for collaboration. Look for teachers in your building who are open to trying something new. While social studies and science are obvious choices, as propaganda and data analysis are already part of the content standards for those subjects, consider some less-conspicuous collaborators, too. Health teachers, for example, may be open to a unit on dis-information related to vitamins and supplements, while art teachers may be keen to collaborate on a unit that teaches kids how images can be manipulated to further an agenda. The more partners we have in this work, the more likely we'll be able to create sticky learning opportunities for kids.

Remember, Some of Your Colleagues May Need Support, Too

While, ultimately, our goal is to help strengthen our students'

information literacy skills, it may be necessary first to help teachers hone their skills. Sharing your learning is one way to support your colleagues as both information consumers and potential mentors for kids. Another idea might be to lead a staff-wide book study to increase collective understanding of information literacy. While we humbly suggest our book, *Developing Digital Detectives* (ISTE 2021) as a potential resource, numerous other titles out there may be of interest to your staff.

Challenges and Opportunities

While the body of research into the effects of book deserts on the academic and personal development of the young people we serve is well established (Langs 2022), we are just beginning to understand the effects of news deserts on our communities. And yet, we feel those effects with increasing frequency and ferocity. We would argue that the growing adversarial relationship between schools and some parents, leading to an exponential increase in both aggressive behavior at school board meetings (Harris 2022) and an uptick in challenges to instructional materials (Yorio 2022) is the result of mis-, dis-, and mal-information amplified by social media. As news outlets struggle to survive in a world that doesn't value or trust their products, we find ourselves in a situation in which information is plentiful, but facts are more difficult to find. As school librarians, this reality presents challenges and opportunities. In the end, we have a responsibility to prepare our students for the information landscape they actually live in, as opposed to the one we wish they did.



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Her educational passions

include leveraging technology to help students develop authentic reading lives, meeting the unique needs of students living in poverty, and helping learners (of all ages) discern fact from fiction in the information they consume. With Darren Hudgins, Jennifer is the coauthor of the books *Fact vs. Fiction: Teaching Critical Thinking in the Age of Fake News* (ISTE 2018) and *Developing Digital Detectives* (ISTE 2021). Subscribe to their free monthly information literacy newsletter at <https://drkenbortphd.substack.com>. A huge fan of YA literature, she currently lives, works, reads, and drinks lots of coffee in Olympia, Washington. Follow her adventures at www.librarygirl.net or on Twitter @jenniferlagarde.



Darren Hudgins

is a passionate advocate for creating learning experiences that drive educators of all kinds

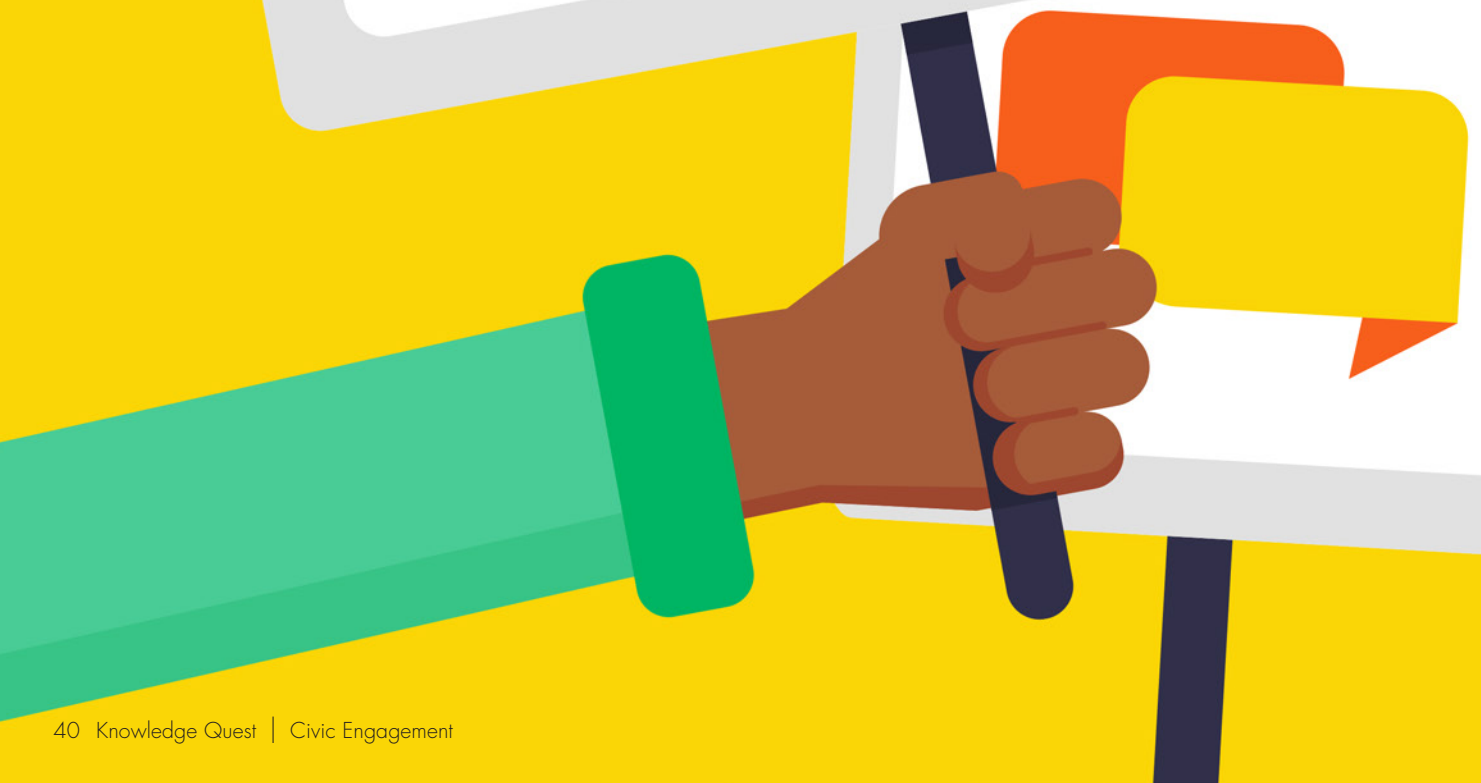
and their students to think, do, and thrive. He believes in this mission so much that he conceptualized and currently directs *Think / Do / Thrive*, LLC thinkdothrive.org. Here he uses his 20+ years in education, edtech, and coaching to inspire critical thinking, champion active learning, and create opportunities for educational communities to improve. With Jennifer LaGarde, he is coauthor of *Fact vs. Fiction: Teaching Critical Thinking in the Age of Fake News* (ISTE 2018) and *Developing Digital Detectives* (ISTE 2021). He challenges us: "Let's untangle this world together."

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THE FRONT LINE

OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



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AASL reached out to four organizations on the front lines of civic engagement with questions to assist school librarians as they plan their civic engagement path. We are sharing responses and resources from:

Background information about our respondents:

JS: Anti-Defamation League, Jinnie Spiegler, Director of Curriculum and Training

EK: Human Rights Campaign, Ellen Kahn, Senior Director, Programs and Partnerships

JC: EveryLibrary, John Chrastka, Executive Director

MC: American Library Association, Megan Murray Cusick, Deputy Director, State Advocacy, ALA Public Policy and Advocacy Office

What is the importance of civic engagement in terms of school libraries?

JS: Books create lasting impressions and have the power to make a difference in children's lives. Reading books with young people can foster empathy, transport them to new and unfamiliar places, affirm their sense of self and value, help them reflect on current events, and inspire civic action. School libraries and school librarians play a significant role in civic engagement. Every day, school libraries open doors for students to discover people and worlds beyond themselves, lifelong learning, critical thinking, and tools for taking action to improve our world. School libraries promote the freedom to read and the freedom to learn. In so doing, they actively help to inform the public (in this case, the youngest members of the public) which ultimately enables them to participate in our democracy.

EK: For decades, school libraries—and librarians, have been lightning rods during times of political dissension, and attempts to ban

books are a "go-to" tactic of extremist, conservative movements that aim to limit or ban access to topics or authors that do not align with their world view. Civic engagement is essential to ensure that school libraries are and continue to be a space for all students to learn about themselves, their peers, their community, their country, and the world around them. It is precisely through this unhindered access to thoughtfully curated books, magazines, and other resources in school libraries that students can become informed citizens of the world.

JC: It's vitally important that school librarians have a place in the

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IS ESSENTIAL TO ENSURE THAT SCHOOL LIBRARIES ARE AND CONTINUE TO BE A SPACE FOR ALL STUDENTS TO LEARN ABOUT THEMSELVES, THEIR PEERS, THEIR COMMUNITY, THEIR COUNTRY, AND THE WORLD AROUND THEM.

local education policy conversation. This is true for policies about collection development and materials challenges as well as about the funding for your school or District that is dedicated to your program or your position. A core issue that gets in the way for school librarians is that administrators, parents, and educational stakeholders are interested in student success but are unaware of how school library programs and certified school librarians support that goal. Effective civic engagement means that you start by assuming that decision-makers need you to inform, educate, and orient them to what you in your school library and how that work maps to the local plan of service prior to you making an ask. It is very important for effective civic engagement that you realize that different stakeholders care about different aspects of your work, and you need to tailor your orientation, education, and outreach to each audience and interest group. Otherwise, you'll be telling a story and not moving your advocacy agenda forward.

MC: Civic engagement advances librarianship's core values. We know communities are stronger when people are informed and connected, when they feel that their voices are heard, when their concerns are acknowledged and addressed, and when individuals making decisions are visible and accountable to those impacted by those decisions. As hubs of our communities, libraries have empowered people with the knowledge, skills, tools, access, and opportunities to learn, think critically, deliberate with others, participate in democratic processes, engage with decision-makers, and work individually and collaboratively for the greater good of the community.

Not only does this work situate libraries as vital civic infrastruc-

ture for our communities, but it also raises the library's profile with the individuals driving civic life in the community. It enables library professionals to build relationships with elected officials and community leaders built on trust and respective expertise. This increased visibility also shines a light on the other work that libraries do to strengthen communities—nurture a continuum of literacies, instill curiosity and a love of learning, connect people with education and career opportunities, advance digital equity, etc. These are all things that benefit civic health and, when community leaders better understand the link between the library and the wellbeing of their constituents, that can be leveraged to increase support for the library.

What are some impactful ways that school librarians can get engaged in their communities?

JS: Because of their central role in schools, school librarians can have a meaningful impact on their school and the local community. Librarians can foster an environment where everyone feels safe, welcome, and included and where all students have equitable access to resources and learning. School librarians can ensure that the books on the shelves, the images on the walls, and the resources available are intentional and representative of all members of the school community and society. School librarians can also reach out to parents and families to understand their needs, and how they want to be civically engaged and help them along that path. School

librarians can push back on calls for book bans. They can encourage civic participation by helping school and community members learn about and register to vote, participate in Banned Books Week by celebrating the freedom to read, and lead or participate in school efforts with service learning and social action projects. School librarians can work with students, teachers, families, and community members when they want to learn about relevant issues in their community and can host these conversations in their libraries.

EK: In state legislatures across the country we are seeing a record number of "censorship" bills, similar to Florida's "Don't Say Gay or Trans" bill that went into effect July 1st; that bill has struck fear and confusion amongst educators, school librarians, and other K-12 professionals, and it will directly harm LGBTQ+ students. If you live or work in a state in which anti-LGBTQ+ legislation is introduced, or if you are caught in a localized battle over LGBTQ+ inclusive books or curriculum, bring your voice into the public square. Write an opinion piece for your local paper, sign up to testify at a school board meeting or at the state capitol, and organize other AASL members in your state to speak collectively—there is power in a chorus of voices. Seize opportunities to educate your own school community—especially parents, about the actual content of the "most banned books" and how they help children learn to think critically, to deepen their knowledge of contemporary issues, and for LGBTQ+ students in particular, help them see that they are not alone in how they feel.

JC: First and foremost, school librarians have to be engaged across the entire school community. But in an effective advocacy effort, your engagement needs to be about more than how you serve students or

LIBRARIANS CAN FOSTER AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE EVERYONE FEELS SAFE, WELCOME, AND INCLUDED AND WHERE ALL STUDENTS HAVE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND LEARNING.

support faculty. Your engagements need to be about how you share a mission and a vision for realizing the educational and social-emotional goals of your students. It is only if you are alongside other school stakeholders in creating the plan of service that you can continue to be in the plan of service. But I would argue that the single most important advocacy engagement any school librarian can make is with their local union. The union contract needs to defend your position and not bargain it away. In some districts, you may have to educate union leaders on the unique role you have in the school and orient them to why a single position is a whole department. You may have to lobby the union leadership to defend your position in an unusual way because an effective school library program is vital to the goals of the school.

MC: Just as there has been a shift in the past decade beyond the walls of the library to engage more closely with the community, there has also been a trend towards deeper engagement with community leaders. The two go hand-in-hand.

In our professional realm, that engagement reflects the library professional's day-to-day work and the community's needs and priorities. It may include libraries serving as voter registration sites or polling places; hosting candidate forums, debates, or mock elections; facilitating discussions on key issues. It extends beyond the electoral process to integrating civic literacy; curating and sharing information; providing space for community organizations

to gather; hosting events with local leaders and partners; showcasing local history; etc. One excellent example in schools is Nashville school librarian Amanda Smith-field's Project Civ, which brings together high school students across the political spectrum for discussion and debate on current issues. Another example is Richland Public Library's Let's Talk About Race, a thoughtful invitation to discourse across diverse demographic groups and viewpoints. Both projects hinge on the expertise and training of the library staff, who have developed guides for others to use or adapt.

Many librarians partner with local organizations to tackle issues of joint concern. In schools, this takes place both in curricular and extra-curricular contexts. Organizations like Mikva Challenge and Generation Citizen provide training and resources that extend traditional civics instruction into applied learning. In addition, librarians themselves are often ambassadors to area civic, cultural, and educational organizations, both in formal and informal roles. Like those interactions with elected officials, these activities bring the library's work into view and the library professional's unique expertise and experience to the table for important community conversations. They also expand the library professional's civic network.

Outside of work, librarians are active in civic and cultural groups in their communities, in union organizing, in faith communities, and more. Some seek appointment or election to public office. Library

professionals bring unique skill sets and perspectives that enrich issues-focused conversations and, therefore, enhance the decision-making process on matters that impact communities, libraries, and the people who live and work in them.

In this heightened environment, since school libraries represent all, what advice do you have for school librarians in terms of civic engagement?

JS: Amidst the current school climate of book bans and attacks on teaching about LGBTQ+ people and systemic injustice, librarians may find themselves at the center of these controversies. There are many ways that school librarians can make a difference. Continue to provide books for all young people to read. These should include books that reflect our diverse society, help students think critically, and assist children to learn about people and places different than themselves. Stand strong that books should not be banned and support other members of the school community who espouse this position. Pay special attention to students whose stories and experiences go untold, or whose perspective is often not found on the library shelves. Share publicly the importance of the freedom to read all types of books. Remind colleagues and others that removing these books conveys the message that these students and communities are not valued or important. Amplify books by diverse authors, narratives about

people of color and other under-represented groups, and books about those who champion social justice. Finally, continue to support young people's thirst for learning and meaning by sharing resources and tools to find those answers and nurture their curiosity.

EK: More than 70 discriminatory education bills have been introduced in 2022 – including the “Stop WOKE Act” (HB 7) in Florida, which was signed by Gov. Ron DeSantis in 2022. Other curriculum censorship bills have previously been introduced in Kansas, Ohio, South Carolina and Tennessee, among other states. These bills, in effect, aim to prevent the discussion of LGBTQ+ issues or people in education settings. This also means that librarians and educators would be prevented from providing a safe, inclusive space for all students, and LGBTQ+ students would face retribution for talking about themselves or their lives. It is fair to say that the LGBTQ+ community is facing intense backlash, in particular LGBTQ+ youth. We need all adults to step off of the sidelines, even

OUR DEMOCRACY DEPENDS ON AN INFORMED ELECTORATE, AND SCHOOL LIBRARIANS ARE KEY TO INSTILLING CRITICAL LITERACY SKILLS THAT PROVIDE THAT FOUNDATION AND HELP STUDENTS IDENTIFY MIS- AND DIS-INFORMATION.

IT IS VERY IMPORTANT FOR SCHOOL LIBRARIANS WHO ARE FACING MATERIAL CHALLENGES AND OTHER THREATS TO THE INTEGRITY AND FUTURE OF THEIR PROGRAMS TO UNDERSTAND THAT THESE ISSUES, WHILE ROOTED IN THE FIRST AMENDMENT, GO WELL BEYOND THE RIGHT TO READ.

those who don't think of themselves as “political.” You can begin by finding like-minded people with whom to brainstorm and organize. There are LGBTQ+ organizations and coalitions in nearly every city and state, there are LGBTQ+ folks and allies in your community—PTA/PTO members, students, other youth-serving professionals, and organizations; find a way to get plugged in and remember that your specific professional expertise and ethics are essential to helping us keep school libraries safe and welcoming for all.

JC: It is very important for school librarians who are facing material challenges and other threats to the integrity and future of their programs to understand that these issues, while rooted in the First Amendment, go well beyond the right to read. Almost all of the book bans happening since September 2021 are focused on either GLBTQ stories and identity or on Black and Brown authors, stories, and populations. One of the key civic engagements you can be doing right now is to talk with stakeholders from those communities – on campus, among parents, and out in your town or neighborhood – about the real fight for students' rights, dignity, and future. You are in a good spot to talk about how these collections further the plan for education and your district's DEI goals. If you can educate, orient, and activate stakeholders from those communities about how your books then you out

any advocacy for the right to read in a very powerful spot.

MC: It's more important than ever. Our democracy depends on an informed electorate, and school librarians are key to instilling critical literacy skills that provide that foundation and help students identify mis- and dis-information. Democracy also depends on the opportunity for all voices to be heard. Library professionals are trained not to impose their own beliefs on their community, but to provide accurate information, nurture the skills and dispositions, and offer the opportunities for community members to think critically, formulate informed positions, and voice those opinions—through schoolwork, through community events, and through democratic processes.

In schools, connecting that work with the school's goals as well as with improved student outcomes is important. Increased engagement, agency, and ownership of learning can be powerful arguments for the value of civic engagement work with students. Collect anecdotes and data about participation, grades (if curricular), reach, and cumulative impact. Center student voice and let them demonstrate their learning to the school community. Start small and look at places where you can incorporate civic engagement into existing lessons or projects. Partner with a teacher or other staff member whose work intersects and connect with colleagues who are doing similar work. Outside of school, make sure

you are part of a strong network. Lean on your friends and on your professional networks through AASL, ALA, and your state organization. Having just been on an AASL call, I can say with certainty that you will be buoyed by support, inspiring stories, empathetic listeners, sage advice, and—always—the affirmation that your work makes an immense difference in the lives of young people.

What are ways your organization helps support civic engagement?

JS: ADL Education provides anti-bias education through professional learning, educational programs, and resources to build and sustain equitable and inclusive environments. We work with schools and communities to help people understand and challenge bias in themselves, others, and society. Anti-bias education is a core component of civic learning because it assists people in addressing the bias and injustice they see in their schools, communities, and society. We provide resources to help students learn about the current issues of the day by providing lesson plans and other teaching tools. Our comprehensive Civics Education curriculum encourages high school students to explore civic engagement and current events issues through an anti-bias and social justice lens. Books Matter, our online collection of books about identity, diversity, bias, and social justice helps engage students in discussions about these topics. ADL's "Changing the World One Word at a Time" read-aloud series features prominent children's book authors. During the virtual

read-aloud, authors engage our audience in insightful discussions about their work and its relevance to making a difference in the world.

EK: HRC has an annual event called Jazz and Friends National Day of School and Community Readings, which raises awareness about trans and non-binary students and offers a perfect opportunity for school librarians to plan a reading in their school or in their community. This year, the event will be held on Thursday, February 16th. Our Welcoming Schools Program curates elementary and secondary book lists for K-12 educators and school librarians that can help you bundle books during Pride Month, National Coming Out Day, or to center any one of these books for in-school activities or lessons. The books focus on LGBTQ+ related topics but are expansive and also include topics related to the experiences of BIPOC folks, and other historically excluded voices and stories. Further, AASL is a member of HRC's Project THRIVE initiative, a collective of over 30 national organizations that are committed to supporting LGBTQ+ youth; Project THRIVE offers monthly webinars, online resources, and other tools that can help school librarians build their knowledge about the needs and experience of LGBTQ+ youth and take action to be effective allies and change agents.

To get more involved in advocacy, HRC engages our members to work in local coalitions with other social justice and civil rights organizations to protect the rights we have, be it voting rights, access to gender-affirming care, or the rights of students to have GSAs and access to LGBTQ+ themed books and curriculum. You can learn more about HRC and how you can get involved locally at www.hrc.org. We need to work together in all ways

possible to protect the tenets of our Democracy—so much is at stake right now.

JC: EveryLibrary provides tactical support to school librarians facing different challenges. From fights over funding to the dignity of work to problems with materials, we're on the ground helping school librarians build relationships that help them succeed in their civic engagement projects. Our SaveSchoolLibrarians.org digital tools are there for you whether you can speak up for yourself directly or not. We are never shy to show up and help organize educational stakeholders – but it is always with your best interests in mind. We were working to restore school librarians to more libraries before COVID. It remains a critical part of our pro-library mission now in this new, disrupted normal.

MC: ALA supports civic engagement on two important fronts. First, we help libraries and library professionals deepen civic participation within the communities they serve; second, we help the library ecosystem engage with partners and decision makers on issues of importance to libraries. The work in these arenas overlaps and is mutually supportive.

Across divisions and offices, and in cooperation with members and partners, ALA creates resources, provides continuing education, convenes conversations, and highlights best practices. In addition, ALA partners directly with libraries, as in the Librarians Transforming Communities grant through ALA's Public Programs Office. For years, this program has enabled libraries across the country to engage communities on issues of local importance. The grant includes funding and professional development on facilitating deliberative conversations that center the voices of community members.

We work with a wide range of other groups to deepen shared knowledge, broaden reach, and amplify impact. A recent example from ongoing collaboration is an ALA Annual Conference program with partner NonprofitVOTE and the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University. Pairing their expertise with that of front-line library staff provided participants with a bird's eye view and deep contextualization on voter engagement, as well as practitioner expertise in translating that knowledge to practical application.

As the national voice for the library community, ALA nurtures strong relationships with federal officials and provides training, information, and opportunities for library advocates to apply at the federal,

state, and local levels. ALA offers in-person and virtual grassroots lobbying activities, as well as guidance on building strong relationships that undergird sustainable engagement with elected officials.

We also work with governmental agencies like the Institute for Museum and Library Services and Federal Communications Commission; with federally authorized groups like the Women's Suffrage Centennial Commission and the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission; and government associations like the National League of Cities and National Council of State Legislatures. It's no secret to these groups that ALA and libraries across the country help them engage

with communities. The significance of those relationships is so vividly illustrated when a policy, rule change, new funding, or initiative facilitates opportunity or transformation for a library patron, underscoring the value of engaging together for the betterment of our libraries and our communities.



John Chrastka, *EveryLibrary's* founder, is a long-time library trustee, supporter, and advocate. He is a former president and member of the Board of Trustees for the Berwyn (IL) Public Library (2006 – 2015) and is a former president of the Reaching Across Illinois Libraries System (RAILS) multi-type library system. Prior to his work at AssociaDirect, he was Director for Membership Development at the American Library Association (ALA). He was named a 2014 Mover & Shaker by Library Journal and tweets @mrchrastka.



Megan Cusick is the Deputy Director for State Advocacy in ALA's Public Policy and Advocacy office. She leads ALA's state and local advocacy efforts in partnership with ALA offices and divisions; state chapters and affiliates; and librarians, library staff, and advocates across the country. Prior to joining ALA, Megan was a librarian in Chicago Public Schools, where she led civic engagement projects for high school students. She is also a co-founder of the Chicago Teachers Union librarians committee. Megan has presented and published on topics such as partnerships, library trends, curriculum development, civic engagement, intellectual freedom, and advocacy.



Jinnie Spiegler is the Director of Curriculum and Training at ADL, where she has been since 2013. In this capacity,

Jinnie is responsible for the oversight, development and creation of curriculum and training efforts including anti-bias curriculum guides, online resources, anti-bias training and special projects. In addition, Jinnie writes other online education tools and resources, presents at national conferences, writes articles and blogs for ADL. Jinnie has worked for over 20 years in the field of K-12 education for both NYC-based and national educational organizations and institutions. Her professional interests include anti-bias and social justice education, project-based learning, current events and civics education and children's literature. Jinnie has an M.Ed in Education from Lesley University and a B.A. from Hampshire.



Ellen Kahn is the Senior Director, Programs and Partnerships at the Human Rights Campaign. In her role, Ellen provides

national leadership and expertise in public education and advocacy efforts on behalf of LGBTQ youth and families. Ellen oversees a portfolio of highly successful projects that promote fair and inclusive policies and practices; All Children—All Families; Welcoming Schools; the HBCU Project, and Youth Well-Being, which includes the annual Time to Thrive conference. Ellen was a founding Board member of Rainbow Families DC, the capital area's support and education organization for LGBTQ-headed families. She has facilitated "Maybe Baby" groups for over 15 years and consults with dozens of prospective LGBTQ parents each year. Ellen received her B.S. from Temple University and her M.S.S. from the Bryn Mawr College School of Social Work and Social Research. Ellen is the proud mom of two fabulous daughters.

Resources:

Anti-Defamation League

- Professional Learning for Educators, offers a variety of professional learning opportunities to equip educators with tools to engage young people in conversation around bias <https://www.adl.org/professional-learning-educators>
- Lesson Plans, filter by topic or search by keyword <https://www.adl.org/resources/lessons-plans/>
- Civics Education, helping young people challenge the biases that compromise equity and social justice <https://www.adl.org/civics-education>
- Books Matter, online bibliography of recommended children's and young adult books about bias, bullying, diversity and social justice <https://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families/childrens-literature>

- Changing the World One Word at a Time: Read Aloud & Conversation, author read aloud and conversation <https://www.adl.org/author-read-aloud-conversation-series>

CIRCLE (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement), non-partisan, independent research organization focused on youth civic engagement in the United States <https://circle.tufts.edu/>

Generation Citizen, working to transform civics education so that young people are equipped and inspired to exercise their civic power <https://generationcitizen.org/>

Human Rights Campaign

- Welcoming Schools, comprehensive bias-based bullying prevention program specifically designed for educators and youth-serving professionals <https://welcomingschools.org/>
- Elementary Booklist <https://welcomingschools.org/resources/elementary-booklists>
- Secondary Booklist <https://welcomingschools.org/resources/secondary-booklists>

- Project THRIVE, a national campaign to support LGBTQ youth <https://www.hrc.org/resources/project-thrive>

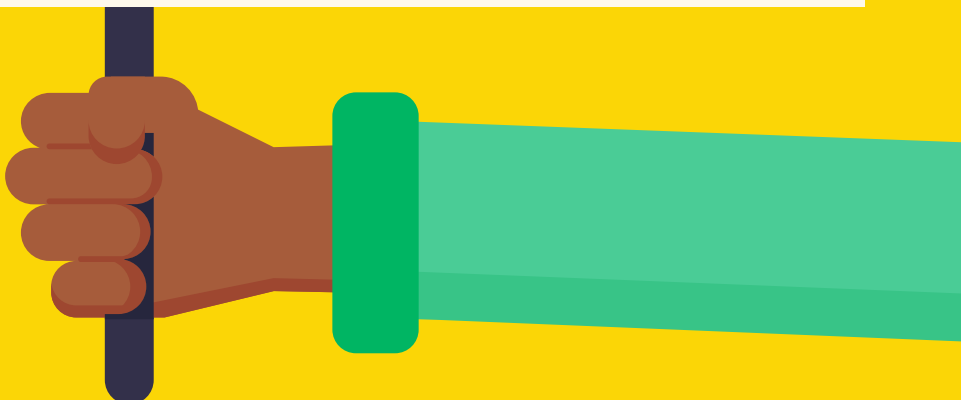
Let's Talk About Race, courageous conversations from Richland Library, <https://www.richlandlibrary.com/blog/2020-06-01/lets-talk-about-race>

Mikva Challenge, to develop youth to be empowered, informed, and active citizens who will promote a just and equitable society <https://mikvachallenge.org/>

Nonprofit VOTE, non-partisan resource to help nonprofits integrate voter engagement into their ongoing activities and services <https://www.nonprofitvote.org/>

PROJECTCIVAMERICA, promoting monthly discussions in libraries and classrooms throughout America <https://projectcivamerica.com/>

SaveSchoolLibrarians.org, <https://www.saveschoollibrarians.org/>



ARTICLE

How
INCLUSIVE
and
HUMAN-FIRST
*Circulation Policies &
Practices Can Impact
a Child's Relationship
with Elementary
Library Spaces*

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Introduction

In a time where social-emotional learning (SEL) and best-practice initiatives can be found plastered over any and all education-related resources, how can we ensure that school librarians are living up to those expectations? School librarians are tasked with helping students to build a positive relationship with their library spaces and see the value of consistent interactions with the central informational hub in their school. What does SEL have to do with that relationship? More than you might think. Students are drawn to spaces in their school that make them feel safe, accepted, and cared for. The school library should be a place in which SEL occurs naturally (Sansbury and Bongiorno 2020).

The words, phrases, and policies we use with students in elementary library spaces could have long-lasting impacts on their willingness to interact with the school library and see it as a space designed just for them. Words and tone of voice are incredibly powerful. How we use them with small children can be the difference between uplifting or ostracizing them. Inclusive, human-first language and circulation policies allow us to prioritize social and emotional development in children.

Library Circulation Policies and Practices Student Survey

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools students began virtual learning in March 2020 and remained in virtual learning until March 2021, when the hybrid model was implemented through the remainder of the school year: some students returned to in-person learning; some students remained at home and continued learning remotely. In fall 2021 all students returned to the building with no options available for virtual learning. For some students, it had been seventeen months since they had been in a classroom for in-person instruction. Even the students who had returned to in-person learning in spring 2021 had missed a year of in-person school interactions. Those students had experienced a unique and disjointed schedule during the few remaining months of the 2020–2021 school year. Because of this disruption in all students' education, as an elementary school librarian I knew it was important to be intentional and purposeful when creating and enforcing library circulation policies and to adopt best practices that would prioritize learners' social and emotional needs when they returned to in-person learning for the 2021–2022 school year.

When March 2022 approached, the students at our school, Mary Scroggs Elementary, had had a little over six months of in-person academic experiences so far that school year. I was in the last semester of working toward my MLS degree, and for my final artifact I needed to produce a paper focused on a passion project topic. I was most curious to see how the school library circulation policies and practices I had put into place earlier in the fall were faring with students and what type of emotional reaction the policies and practices might be invoking. Those policies and practices included: a careful use of words when reminding students in person about overdue materials, automated weekly "gentle reminder" e-mails to students and families about overdue materials, and checking out three books at a time.

After putting together a short survey, I decided to request feedback from the highest three grade levels in my K–5 school building. I chose this sample because I knew these students would be able to access the content of each question in the survey, independently use the digital platform on which the survey was presented, and provide self-aware, anonymous feedback. The third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students in my school were surveyed through a Google Form link and (in addition to a

couple of demographic questions) were asked four questions related to library services and circulation policies since the start of the school year.

The Library Circulation Policies and Practices Student Survey questions were:

- Where do you get *most* of your reading materials from?
 - Choices provided: Books from home, books from a public library, books from the school library, classroom library books, or other
- Do you find it helpful that overdue book e-mails are sent out to students and families each week?
 - Yes or No
- Which sentence do you prefer more when being reminded about your overdue library books?
 - "These books are overdue," or "These books are ready to come back"
- Do you feel that the circulation policies in your school library are fair?
 - Yes or No (with an additional short-answer box to provide specific feedback and suggestions)

Of the 186 third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders surveyed, 40% identified as male, 44% identified as female, and 16% preferred not to say. The grade-level breakdown of respondents was: 37% in third grade, 25% in fourth grade, and 38% in fifth grade.

Most students answered that the majority of their reading materials were either from the school library or books they have access to at home. The breakdown for most common source of reading materials was: 37% from home, 9% from a public library,

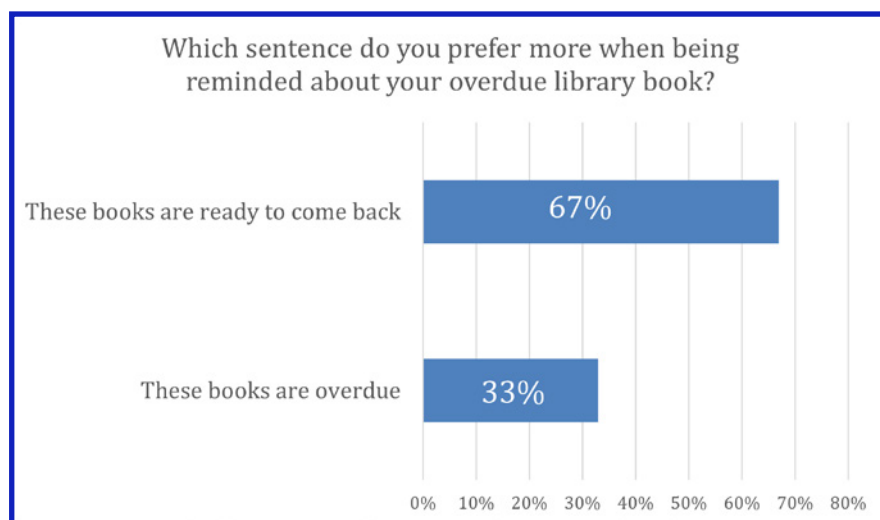


Figure 1. Preferences for wording of overdue reminders.

35% from their school library, 9% from their teachers' classroom libraries, and 10% responded "other."

Choose Your Words Carefully

After transitioning from a full-time elementary classroom teacher for nine years into the library media specialist role at my same school, I entered the position with several advantages: knowledge of the school community, years of experience collaborating with the school's staff, and, most importantly, I knew the ins and outs of the former and current student population. For nine years as a classroom teacher at Scroggs I saw how my second- and third-grade students interacted with this elementary library space. This experience gave me the knowledge that many children were quite fearful of the dreaded phrase: overdue books. I decided to make a small, but purposeful change. When it came to in-person reminders and interactions with students, rather than telling a child "These books are overdue" on their account, I instead chose to say, "These books are ready to come back." To reinforce the importance of being considerate of their schoolmates who likely wanted a chance at reading those overdue

books, sometimes I also threw in, "Someone else is ready to read these."

Data revealed that 67% of students surveyed preferred to hear "These books are ready to come back," as opposed to 33% of students who preferred "These books are overdue" (see figure 1). This information suggests that the majority of students polled in this survey may have negative connotations associated with the word "overdue" and be more likely to avoid checking out books with the potential for those books eventually becoming overdue.

Encourage Compliance / Discourage Punitive Actions

Access to books is crucial in developing strong, lifelong readers (Johnson and Donham 2012), and school library policies must match our belief systems. If we believe that students have a right to access information and knowledge, inclusive and human-first circulation policies and best practices are necessary to ensure those opportunities are provided. At the same time, school libraries typically aren't supplied with budgets big enough to replace continually lost or damaged books and materials. To prevent using a

significant part of the budget to replace materials while maintaining readers' access to materials, I recommend trying policies and procedures that encourage students to comply with the systems of the library rather than fall victim to punishment that decreases or altogether eliminates their access to school library materials.

For example, try specifying the number of books a student can check out at one time, so that the task of keeping track of multiple library materials at once is not placed on young children before they are ready for the responsibility. Perhaps start with three to five items for the youngest students and increase the number as the learners progress through the grades and develop further cognitive ability to become more independent and responsible for multiple items.

Gently reminding students in person about overdue library items is likely the best course of action. This establishes a physical/emotional connection between the school librarian and student, and helps to hold the student more accountable without any punitive influence. Tone and intonation are important

in these circumstances. The way we speak to children, the warmth we convey, and the emotional balance we impart can alter their brains (Sabater 2021). If a student feels the librarian is upset with them over missing or overdue items, it could potentially fracture the relationship that students are establishing with library spaces and possibly even deter them from accessing library materials as frequently as we would like. The difference between, "Hey, don't forget to bring your library books back as soon as you can!" and "Your library books are still overdue. Please return them as soon as possible" is noticeable and significant.

Beginning in October of the 2021–2022 school year, I set up an automated e-mail report to be sent out to students and their families every Monday morning at 6:00 a.m. with reminders about overdue library items. The generic automated message provided within the library's software system was: "*The following items are overdue. Please return them as soon as possible.*" In an effort to (again) be intentional with the social and emotional aspects of library services, I tweaked the message to read: "*The following items on your library account are past due. Please return them as soon as you*

can." It may seem like a minor, insignificant change, but the impact that phrasing and word choice can have on emotional reactions may be one of the aspects of circulation policy that matters most.

I also included my name and e-mail address for families to reach out regarding any lost or damaged items, or to report a possible mistake on their child's library account. After almost six months of this practice being in place, students polled in the survey were asked: *Do you find it helpful that overdue book e-mails are sent out to students and families each week?* As figure 2 shows, 92% of students in third through fifth grades responded "yes," and 8% responded "no." In my experience, gentle reminders and consistent connections with students and families can go a long way. The overall parent response to these e-mails was also positive. I received a few "thank you" messages at the end of the year from families telling me that these reports helped keep them organized and accountable each week.

At this point you may be thinking, *What IS your consequence for lost and/or overdue books?* There are some, though I try to keep them to a minimum. The consequences make sense and take into account my concern for social and emotional needs of learners. Once a student reaches the threshold of having nine books checked out on their account, they are permitted to check out only one book at a time until some or most of the others are returned. I had only one student last year who rarely ever returned any of their library books. After losing fifteen books, I gave this student a labeled tote bag to keep at school and continue to check out a few books at a time. As I write this in late summer 2022, I plan to give that same student a fresh start (as I will with all students) at the beginning of the new school year. Everyone will be permitted to check out books as usual

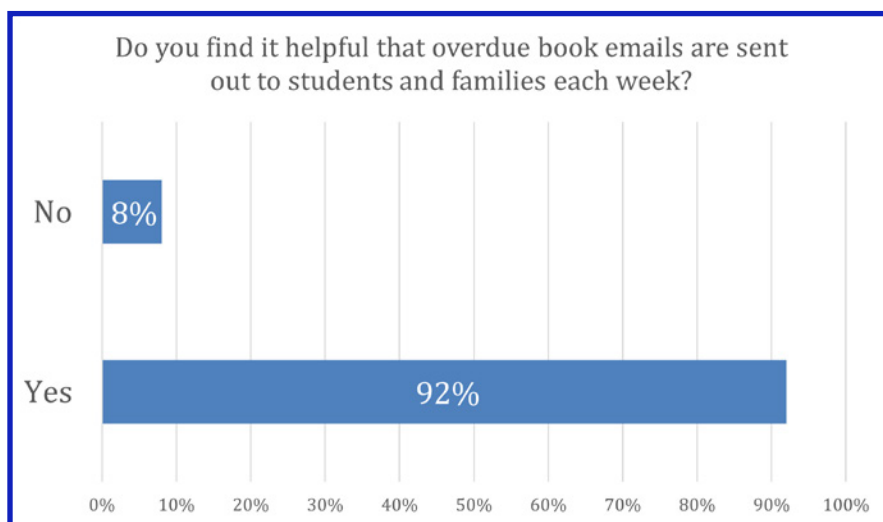


Figure 2. Views on e-mail reminders about overdue items.

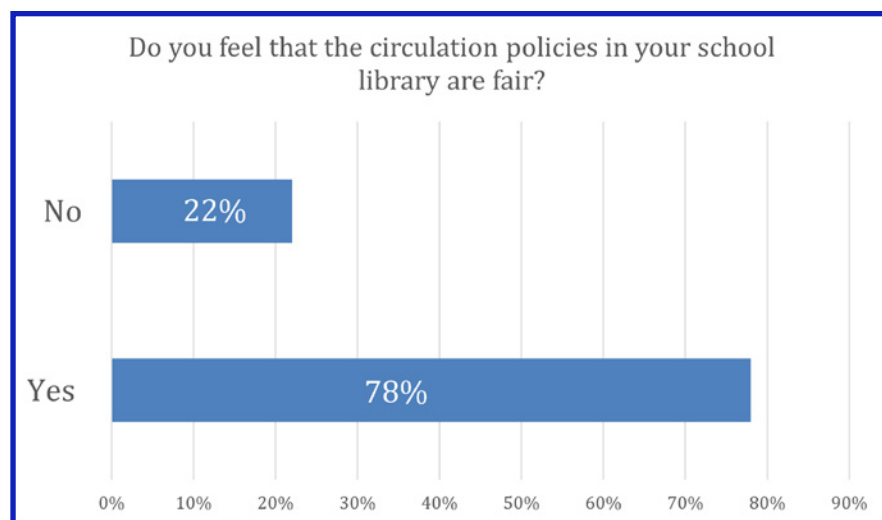


Figure 3. Opinions about fairness of circulation policies.

like their peers. If a parent reaches out to me about a lost book, I ask them to replace the copy if they are able. Most of the time they do, but I don't hinder their child's ability to access library books if they don't.

Most importantly, when students in my school have long-overdue or lost books, the most common consequence they receive from me is a discussion of how their actions will impact their own library services, as well as the other students in the school. Books checked out for weeks and months on end before they are returned mean that other students may lose the opportunity to read what interests them the most. Lost books mean other students may never have the chance to read that book, which can really impede their relationship with the school library. Lost books also may mean that funds allocated for new books the following school year have to be diverted to replacing popular or important titles that were never returned. As a result, fewer new books are available, a circumstance that can decrease interest in the collection school-wide. These are all consequences that adults may be able to easily perceive, but might require

a gentle and simplified conversation with elementary children. About forty books from the collection were lost during 2021–2022 school year, but the almost 20,000 checkouts during the school year are far more important to me than the lost books.

Allow for Flexible Circulation Policies

Towards the end of the third quarter of the school year is a good time to consider asking for feedback and suggestions from students regarding school library policies and procedures. This feedback provides librarians with an opportunity to be flexible and make changes to policies that have gotten negative feedback and implement suggestions for change, while also allowing time in the final quarter of the school year to make changes and resurvey students near the end of the school year.

The final question of the Library Circulation Policies and Practices Student Survey was a two-part inquiry that posed: *Do you feel that the circulation policies in your school library are fair?* and gave students room to provide suggestions and feedback. If students answered "no," they were encouraged to explain which

circulation policies they would make changes to. If the student responded "yes," they could skip the response box. Of the students surveyed, 78% agreed that their school library circulation policies were fair, with 22% responding "no" (see figure 3). Many of the students who answered "no" provided feedback that they wished they were allowed to check out more than one book from a series at a time (a new policy implemented at the start of the school year). In response, for the remainder of the school year I relaxed the limit on checking out only one book per series at a time. This decision did not have a major negative impact on collection availability, so I've kept the change in place. This type of flexibility in human-first circulation policy allowed for meeting the emotional needs of students who may have felt limited in their choices when selecting library materials for checkout.

Analyze Effects on Students' Behavior

When I began the role of school library media specialist in the fall of 2020, I had ample time to study the online library system that was used for circulation and library inventory. The checkout system has an option to include notes on a student's library account that will be displayed each time their circulation page is pulled up. On some students' accounts I came across several notes from a previous staff member related to lost, damaged, or overdue materials. Most of these notes advised that the particular student should be limited to checking out only one book at a time or keep their books only at school. When students returned to in-person learning in March 2021, I decided to forego adherence to the limits in those notes and give each student a fresh start, regardless of what the previous librarian's intent had been when making the notes. All

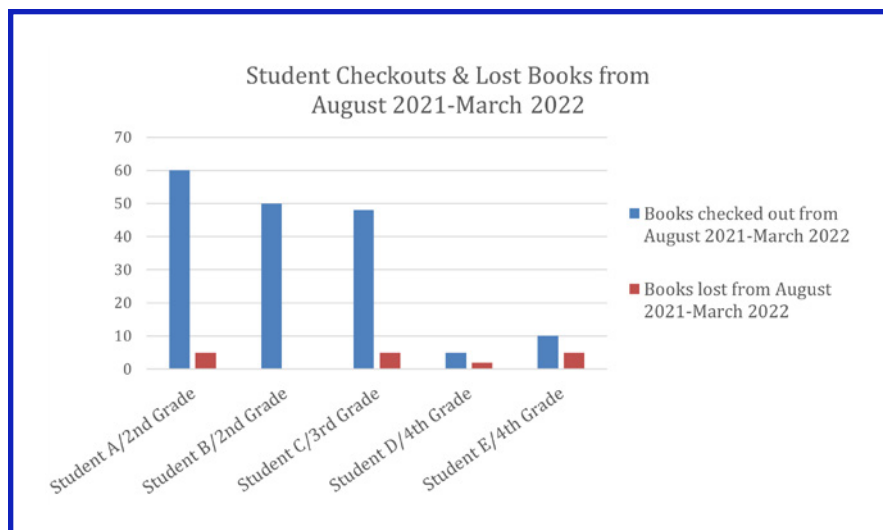


Figure 4. Student checkouts and lost books for selected students.

notes pertaining to circulation limits were eliminated from each student's account; I have no plans to reinstate that type of notetaking.

Five students currently in second, third, and fourth grades whose borrowing had been restricted pre-pandemic were chosen for "student notes" data analysis. These old notes on each student's account would have been made two years prior to my analysis. For example, students now in fourth grade would have had the initial notes added to their account when they were in second grade. In figure 4, which shows each student's current grade, you can see that once they were provided with the opportunity to freely check out books without limitation, the three youngest students demonstrated their interest in reading by borrowing many books. Unfortunately, the two students now in fourth grade who were restricted when they were second-graders have not demonstrated the same interest in resuming borrowing, perhaps because their negative experiences with the library were more entrenched or more clearly remembered. However, when provided with grace and opportunities to change previous

habits, students will often rise to the occasion as long as positive enforcements are in place and acknowledgement is given when improvement is shown. In my experience, validation is key.

Conclusion

In my experience, inclusive and human-first policies in elementary library spaces appear to increase circulation and win the approval of many students. When library account notes and ongoing limitations to borrowing were common practice in this elementary library from August 2019 through March 2020, 7,353 circulations were reported. After library circulation policies were updated and allowed for more flexibility from August 2021 through March 2022, circulations increased to 14,559.

Fear of loss of materials should not prevent librarians from focusing on their shared goal of getting books into the hands of children to encourage continuous reading (Downes, Krueger and Taylor 2017). It can be challenging to consider revising circulation policies in situations where significant loss and

damage to library materials have previously occurred. Even so, the consequences of decreased student engagement, lower circulation, and rapidly deteriorating relationships with library spaces are much more dire.



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City School District in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She recently earned her MLS Degree from East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, and is also a member of AASL.

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Hope coupled with determination make a formidable team.

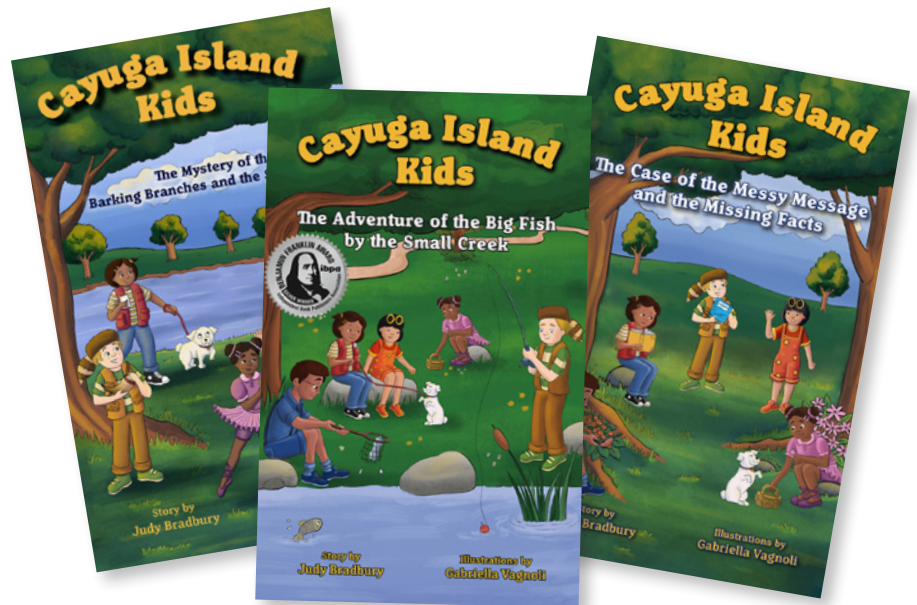
Chapter Books Can Make a World of Difference

Judy Bradbury

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As the author of books for children, I get to think and act like a kid in a world I create. In my chapter book series, I have the honor and pleasure of placing myself in the company of 7- to 10-year-olds, children who are learning and growing as they begin to navigate beyond the family unit. Their outlook is uncomplicated; they don't yet possess firm opinions or deep-seated viewpoints, nor have they become jaded. But I am intentional in not underestimating my readers. These kids are capable. They can make a difference as their engagement evolves and expands from neighborhood to community to wider world.

When I write for the chapter book audience, I strive to support and strengthen a love of books. I use my training and experience as a literacy specialist to address reading levels, comprehension skills, sentence complexity, vocabulary acquisition, needs and abilities, and common interests while also respecting the scope of individuality. As an author,



I am energized by possibility as I endeavor to craft a compelling story that challenges my reader to reflect, consider, and grow.

In many respects, kids in this age range are inexperienced—or you might say, unencumbered. And so it is the ideal age to come to the realization that they can make a difference. When we connect with

children at this juncture, we have the opportunity to nurture the emboldening concepts of empowerment and being agents of positive change. We can foster insight into what they are capable of accomplishing.

They can be game changers.

And yet, we know that's not easy. We must guide children to understand-

ing socially and emotionally as well as conceptually what civic engagement entails. Hope coupled with determination make a formidable team. Optimism partners best with a plan. Patience and persistence require endurance and equal space. These are abstract concepts and developmental skills; yet through story young readers can intuit how to nurture these attributes and choose how to proceed when facing their own challenges.

Story makes learning dynamic by way of entertainment. When we present a world into which the reader can step, we offer a safe space and a bit of distance that affords objectivity. Alongside characters, the reader vicariously faces prospects, considers actions, samples perspectives, and experiences the power of choice in conflict resolution.

In the opening chapters of *The Adventure of the Big Fish by the Small Creek*, Book 2 in the Cayuga Island Kids chapter book series, the characters witness two events that catapult them into action. They come upon a mallard caught in the plastic loops from a six-pack of cans. Then they see someone tossing a plastic water bottle into the creek. The friends summon their resourcefulness and work together to free the duck and to fish the bottle out of the water. But these acts seem simple compared to the bigger goal they set for themselves. How can they mobilize their community to stop littering in the park and embrace recycling? As Mac points out, "We're just kids."

Nevertheless, they brainstorm; they consider one idea, then another, and another. They are stumped, but they are determined. They team up and show up. They look in a new direction, and in the end they triumph. They go from fishing a plastic bottle out of the creek to bringing the community together to build a recycling bin big enough to

hold plenty of plastic. They come to realize that although we are each just one person, together we can make a big difference.

Understanding how we come to form the opinions and convictions that motivate actions is at the root of civic engagement. Cultivating the tools necessary to skillfully navigate the maze of information that bombards us is not beyond the scope of young independent readers. Through story,

they can access, appreciate—and acquire—these skills.

In the third Cayuga Island Kids adventure, *The Case of the Messy Message and the Missing Facts*, civic engagement is an underlying theme reflected in how the kids approach and process information. I wrote this story at the height of the pandemic, at a time when our country—indeed, the planet—was grappling with loads of information coming at us daily about



critical, unprecedented current events. Some of the information was factual, some of it was thought to be accurate but later deemed erroneous, and some of it was simply untrue or misrepresented.

Misinformation. Disinformation. Big words, big notions. But I was convinced that young readers could grasp these concepts. And I believe that raising awareness concerning truth-versus-half truths-versus-falsehoods is critical and ought to begin when kids are broadening their engagement with the world.

As I conceived the plot, I considered how to weave the importance of evaluating information we are presented with into an appealing story for 7- to 10-year-olds. From flour bugs in chocolate chip cookies to wonky websites and missing glitter pens, the Cayuga Island Kids encounter situations and information that lead to faulty assumptions. When they think critically and dig deeper, they land on the truth. The characters—and, I hope, readers—come to realize the importance of gathering all the facts instead of settling for a fraction of the truth before drawing conclusions or settling on a belief.

Books have always been my passion and my home. Readers have been the focus of my career as a literacy specialist and as an author. Children are my audience and at the heart of my work. On my website, visitors are greeted with my mission to “open minds and hearts, initiate conversations, and expand possibilities.” The stories I create reflect my core beliefs and my true center: each of us *can* make a difference. We have the power to impact immediate and broader communities. Our children are watching and learning, able and ready to be inspired, to be engaged, and to thrive as they make their way in the wider world.

Judy Bradbury <www.judybradbury.com> is an award-winning children’s author and literacy specialist whose books open minds and hearts, initiate conversations, and expand possibilities. Her current Cayuga Island Kids chapter book series for ages 7–10 includes the Ben Franklin Silver Award recipient *The Adventure of the Big Fish by the Small Creek*. Judy blogs about children’s books with social-emotional learning themes at Children’s Book Corner <www.judybradbury.com/blog>. An advocate for promoting reading through community initiatives, she has received awards from the New York State Reading Association and Niagara Frontier Reading Council. Instagram: [judy_bradbury](https://www.instagram.com/judy_bradbury); Twitter: @JudyBwrites; LinkedIn: [judy-bradbury-295a17b](https://www.linkedin.com/in/judy-bradbury-295a17b)



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(“Average” figures denote the average number of copies printed each issue during the preceding twelve months; “actual” figures denote actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: September/October 2019 issue). Total number of copies printed average 7,640; actual 7,303. Sales through dealers, carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: none. Mail subscription: actual 6,961. Free distribution actual 110. Total distribution average 7,256; actual 7,213. Office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled after printing average 384; actual 90. Total: average/actual 7,640/7,303. Percentage paid: average 96.4; actual 96.5.

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