

COLUMN: COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Book Selection Challenges: A Growing Concern

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In recent years, the issue of book challenges has escalated into one of the most pressing issues facing educators and librarians. In the United States, challenges to books have grown significantly; the American Library Association's (ALA) Office of Intellectual Freedom reported that it received 1,269 reports of book challenges in 2022, representing the highest number of attempted book bans in ALA history (American Library Association, 2023). Further, this number represented a nearly 50 percent increase over the number of book challenges in 2021. School libraries and classrooms must offer diverse, well-balanced collections that represent a wide spectrum of perspectives—including those related to contemporary and sometimes controversial topics. To ensure materials are both age-appropriate and educationally sound, it is essential that those responsible for curation are well-versed in established procedures of selection and collection development, as well as in the study of children's and young adult literature. It is equally important that school districts have clear instructional materials selection policies in place, media advisory committees, and procedures for handling book challenges.

Two categories of books have been disproportionately targeted in recent years: works addressing social justice and those featuring LGBTQ+ themes or characters. The number of individual books challenged by schools has soared to record levels according to *Banned in the USA: Narrating the Crisis* (PEN America, 2023). PEN America, a nonprofit organization that works to defend free expression, also finds that books discussing race, racism, LGBTQ+, and transgender identities continue to be targeted at consistently

high rates. These topics are the subject of book challenges due to several reasons, including opposing viewpoints on Critical Race Theory, gender identity, sexuality, our political climate, and influences from social media.

Unfortunately, individuals on both ends of the political spectrum, combined with inadequate understanding of proper selection processes and sensationalized media coverage, have fueled conflict and mistrust. The result has left many schools and public libraries at the center of controversy and scrutiny, further intensifying confusion and frustration surrounding this highly charged issue. As debates around critical race theory have continued into 2022 and beyond, certain books, such as those discussing systemic racism, became targeted by critical race theory opponents (PEN America, 2023).

The groups or individuals who present book challenges may often be misinformed, fueled by emotion, or extract passages out of context. Increasingly, efforts to categorically exclude—or, conversely, to universally include—all titles in these areas distort the purpose of school library collections. Such sweeping approaches undermine the educational mission of public schools by preventing students from engaging with literature that reflects both historical and contemporary realities.

This is precisely why securing certified media specialists and executing a clear district-wide instructional materials selection plan are crucial. Certified media specialists are professionally trained in collection development and materials evaluation; these specialists ensure that selections are grounded in sound methodology—balancing age appropriateness, developmental readiness, and student interest. In my own practice as a school library media

coordinator, I adhere to rigorous standards: consulting authoritative journals, studying current trends in adolescent literature, and carefully balancing diverse representation with developmental suitability. While our library includes titles addressing social justice issues and featuring LGBTQ+ characters, I am equally mindful of developmental suitability for middle school students. Some works in these categories are simply too mature for this age group, underscoring the importance of professional expertise in selection.

As a certified media specialist, I rely on Titlewave, one of the most comprehensive online tools for collection development and curriculum support for PreK–12 educators (Follett Content Solutions, 2025). Within the platform, I use the collection analysis tool to evaluate existing holdings, identify gaps, and make informed selection decisions. Titlewave integrates full-text reviews from authoritative sources such as *Booklist* and *School Library Journal*, ensuring that every addition to the collection is backed by professional evaluation.

The platform provides detailed information for each title, including synopses, interest level, reading level, and Lexile measure. Its robust filtering options allow users to refine searches by these criteria as well as by topic, making it easier to match books to the developmental and curricular needs of middle school students.

In addition to supporting individual title selection, Titlewave's analysis features allow me to examine the collection by copyright date, genre, and subject representation. This deeper analysis ensures that our library remains balanced, diverse, and reflective of a wide range of perspectives.

To further strengthen the collection, I draw from curated lists within Titlewave, including award-winning titles across multiple genres, works by popular authors, state award nominees, and newly released middle school selections. These tools not only streamline the selection process but also ensure that our

students have access to literature that is both relevant and engaging.

In selecting materials, I also utilize our media advisory committee, consisting of teachers from various grade levels and subject areas. According to our Board policy, the Media Advisory Committee assists the library media specialist in the selection process. Under the leadership of the professional library personnel, this group sets priorities for media to be acquired based on instructional objectives as well as strengths and weaknesses in the existing media center collection.

When challenges do arise, they often stem not from deliberate negligence but from a lack of training, information, understanding, or policy infrastructure. Every district should maintain a clear selection policy and prioritize the hiring of certified media specialists. Their role extends beyond managing the library collection—they collaborate with classroom teachers, provide instructional support, and help ensure that all instructional materials are aligned with both developmental needs and curricular goals.

At its core, the debate over book banning is not merely about individual titles but about the integrity of education itself. By entrusting school library programs to certified professionals, we uphold the values of intellectual freedom, developmental appropriateness, and educational excellence that our students both need and deserve.

References

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My name is Michele Bost. I am currently in my eighth year serving as the Media Specialist at Cuthbertson Middle School in Waxhaw, North Carolina. Before joining Cuthbertson in 2018, I spent twenty years as the Media Specialist at Monroe Middle School. I am dedicated to ensuring that students and teachers have access to high-quality digital and print resources, and I work to cultivate a genuine love of reading among all students by providing a diverse, balanced, and current book collection.

I earned my Bachelor of Arts in English Literature with a minor in Secondary Education from Winthrop University in 1995, and in 1999 I completed my Master of Education in Educational Media. I am also a National Board Certified Teacher in Library Media. Beyond the school setting, I remain active in supporting literacy, currently serving as Acting Chair of the Union County Library Foundation.

I strive to build meaningful connections with students by valuing their thoughts, interests, and perspectives, and I am committed to creating an environment where they feel respected and inspired. Even after nearly three decades in the profession, I am just as passionate about my work and my students as I was when I first began. In my spare time, I enjoy reading, spending time with family and friends, and caring for my two dogs, Bilbo and Hugo.
