Proactive vs. Reactive: When you have materials challenged in your library collection

The beginning of every school year is exhilarating, exciting, and even exhausting. As librarians, we ensure that our physical space is organized and inviting, new materials are on display, and our catalog is current, to name a few. There is one more crucial item we must add to our beginning of the year TTD list. Each September a few weeks after school begins, I contact my challenge committee members to determine if they want to serve on the challenge committee again for the current school year. Since our committee includes two students, I often have to find new students to be part of the committee because the previous students have graduated.

In my eleven years as the school’s librarian, I have had 4 formal challenges, three for books and one for a movie. Ironically, none of these challenges was directed at the library’s collection, but our district’s reconsideration policy and challenge procedure mandates that the school librarian be in charge of the committee for any formal challenge, including classroom materials. I have also had 4 informal challenges that were quickly resolved with discussions. One discussion was a phone call from a parent whose teen told her we had *Fifty Shades of Grey* on prominent display in the library. The book, in fact, was *Between Shades of Gray* which was part of the NH Flume Award display in 2013 (and had been on the Teens’ Top Ten List for 2012). I offer this example to show how sometimes a challenge is raised based on misinformation or misconceptions.

Too often we librarians don’t think about challenges until we receive that email, phone call, or visit. This puts us in a reactive position, and when we are forced to respond to a situation rather than control it, we may falter or fumble. The best way to avoid being put in a defensive position is to be proactive. This means having your challenge committee in place at the beginning of the school year. Of course, you need a reconsideration policy and challenge procedure to follow. If your school does not have one, that is your first step. There are plenty of resources available to help you. ALA’s office of intellectual freedom is a great place to start. <http://www.ala.org/offices/oif> Another good option is Teen Services Underground. [http://www.teenservicesunderground.com/dealing-with-a-materials-challenge/](http://www.teenservicesunderground.com/dealing-with-a-materials-challenge/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

Links to both of these can be found on the NHSLMA website

You should review your reconsideration policy every few years to ensure that it is current and still applies to your school’s and district’s policies. Our district’s reconsideration policy is board approved, but until last year, the date of this policy was 1979! Even if you make no changes to your policy, it’s best to have a policy with an approval date in the last ten years.

When a challenge arises, it’s hard not to take it personally, but remember that this is a professional process, one that you need to follow explicitly. It’s imperative that your collection development/materials acquisition policy is clear. If your school or district does not have this policy, then work on this now.

If we have a clear policy and process to follow when material is challenged in our library or school, we are able to maintain professional discourse. A policy and process protects you as a librarian; it ensures the challenge is not a personal matter. NHSLMA is here to help you. Fill out the form on our website if you receive a formal challenge, and keep us updated so we can provide guidance. Complete ALA’s form as well. They, too, are here to help you.