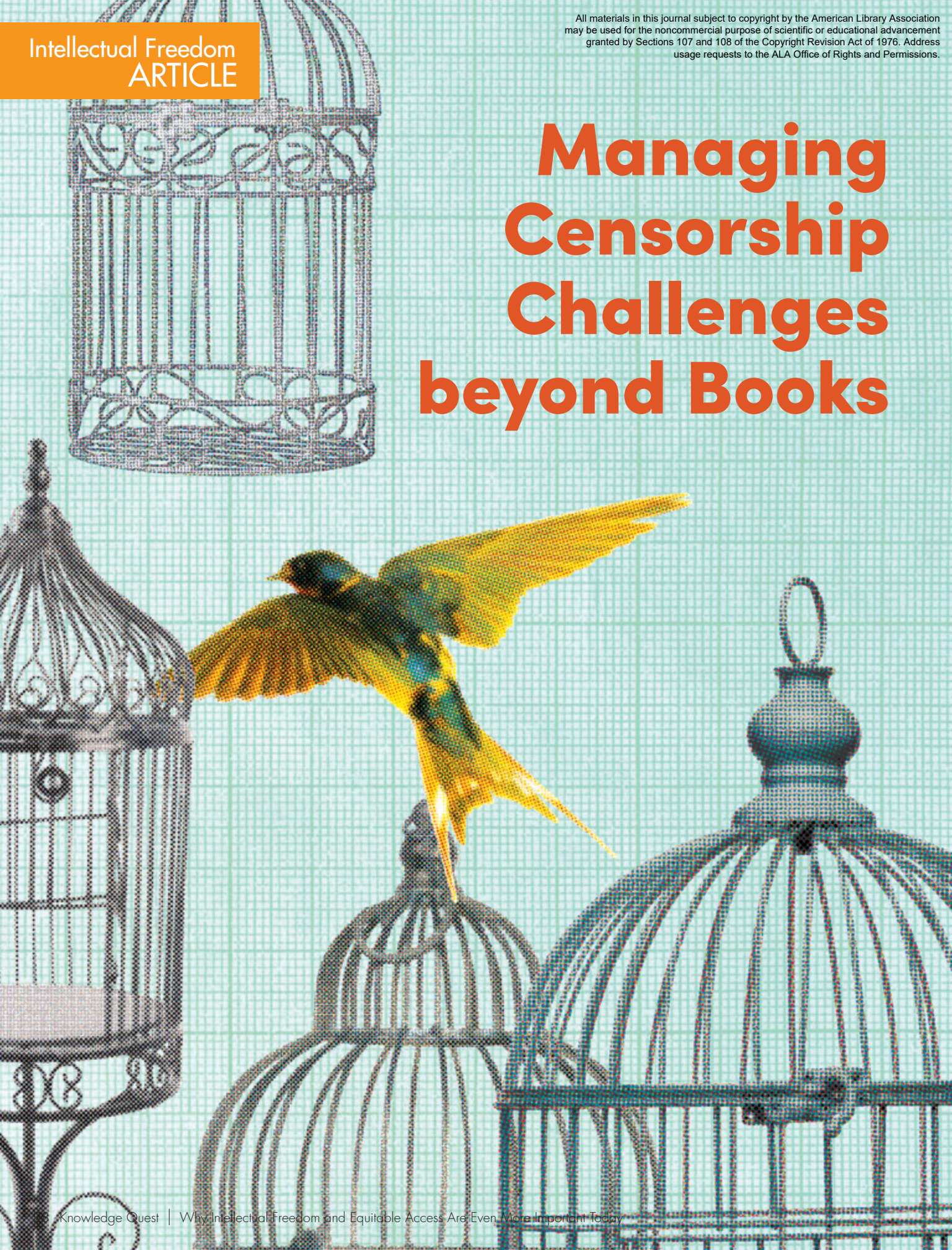# Managing Censorship Challenges beyond Books

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School libraries are no longer solely repositories for the information that has traditionally been published in books. School libraries still collect and circulate books in fulfillment of their educational mission, but that mission is much broader now. And the resources used to achieve that mission have expanded as well. School library professionals are providing education and access to information in many different formats and technologies. The role of the school librarian is much more than just literacy; it is about visibility, culture, and access to the world.

Professional school library values embrace equitable access to information for all, including underserved populations. To provide truly equitable access, school librarians need to provide equitable representation of all users and all backgrounds in all types of content.

According to AASL Common Belief 5, "Intellectual freedom is every learner's right. Learners should have the freedom to speak and hear what others have to say, rather than allowing others to control their access to ideas and information" (AASL 2018). The school library provides a point of equitable access to resources that allows learners to think critically and form their own opinions.

School library professionals profess that value with more than just books; they profess it by providing access to technology and resources that represent and serve everyone in their community. They provide access to LGBTQIA+ families in their displays, gender identity in their storytimes, and cultural perspectives in their posters and artwork. They provide games for all learning styles and abilities. They provide digital access to all students regardless of location or status. When that access is denied or censored, learners aren't the only ones harmed; the greater society is damaged.

Censorship and Inequitable Access

When providing services and resources to all, school librarians and educators often encounter obstacles that target learners who need them the most. These obstacles can include censorship and inequitable access. ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) receives reports of challenges and bans from the frontline and in the media. It may be commonly known that OIF tracks book challenges that happen in libraries and schools, but what may not be known is that it also tracks challenges and bans of non-book resources and services. In 2019 OIF recorded 607 total materials affected by challenges and bans. Materials can include displays, artwork, social media, programs, speakers, films, games, music, newspapers, magazines, reading lists, handouts, databases, and electronic resources. Taking down a poster or canceling a database subscription because of a complaint is as much censorship as banning *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou.

Challenges are not just complaints. They are attempts to remove or restrict access to library resources. People may cast judgment on library materials or services, but disapproval is not a challenge. A challenge is defined by the intent of the request to deny or restrict access to others. Challenges can be a written complaint or reconsideration form, which is traditionally how many librarians have determined if a resource or service is being challenged. But challenges can also be a call to action on social media, a letter to the editor of the newspaper, or an online blog. Challenges can be protests and pickets. Challenges can be a public comment at a board meeting. On the other hand, a ban is the removal of materials. Sometimes the ban is a decision made by a committee, and other times it's when an administrator or staff member removes books without following a library's policy.

According to the "2020 State of America's Libraries Report," the majority of challenges still target books and the majority of challenges happen in public libraries (ALA 2020). But when OIF analyzed the types of challenges and locations, it found that the majority of book challenges occur in school libraries, while the majority of challenges to programs and displays happen in public libraries.

So why is this information important? The more information that is collected about censorship incidents—what's being challenged, where it's being challenged, who is challenging it—the more accurate and timely resources and support can be provided to the profession that's committed to defending intellectual freedom.

The number one resource OIF uses is ALA's *Library Bill of Rights* and its interpretations. There are currently 28 interpretations ranging from privacy, equity, and diversity, to programs, displays, and Internet filtering (available at <www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations>). Each resource has been carefully and thoughtfully deliberated by the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee, reviewed widely by the library profession, and adopted by the ALA Council. It can take twelve to twenty-four months for each interpretation to be updated or crafted from scratch. These resources aren't just to be used during a challenge to defend a specific book or resource, they are also to be used to protect libraries and strengthen policies before a challenge happens.

Programs

Most library workers are familiar with drag queen story hours and have probably heard of a public library where the program has been met with protests and social media outrage. In 2019 OIF recorded 53 challenges to drag queen story hours; that doesn't include the broad range of LGBTQIA+ inclusive programs like trans 101 and queer book clubs.

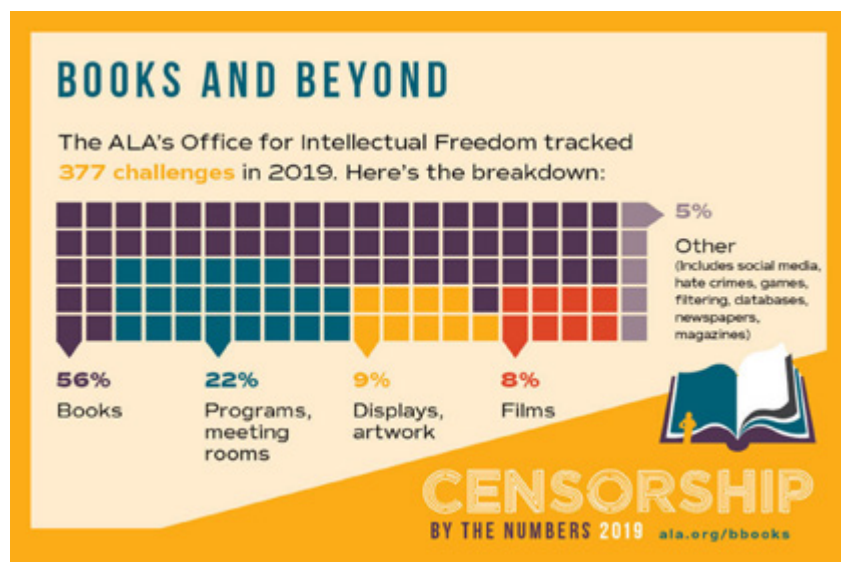Author K.A. Holt was invited to a school in Flint, Michigan, after the student body read her book *Rhyme Schemer* as a "One Book, One School" summer read. Days before her visit, the school drastically limited participation to allow only high school seniors to attend the presentation. *School Library Journal* recommends the book for 4th- to 7th-graders (Tidman 2014). Students who contacted the author, wishing they could meet her, claimed that the decision was made because the author is gay.

A school in Wheaton, Illinois, invited author Robin Stevenson to talk about writing her book, *Kid Activists*. She was disinvited when parents complained that Harvey Milk was included with fifteen other stories of important activists.

"Mindfulness Moments" was a yoga program used in a Maryland elementary school. It had been funded by a grant and featured a local children's yoga instructor and a licensed clinical therapist to teach breathing exercises and calming techniques to promote social and emotional growth. It was challenged by a local pastor who claimed that yoga seeks to recruit people and indoctrinate them with false truths. The school canceled the program (ALA OIF 2019c).

Programs are a significant source of information and social-emotional development, particularly to neurodiverse and underrepresented students. The demand for guidance in how to defend programs is rising.

ALA can provide a variety of comprehensive resources to support school libraries in how to write policies for their programs and events. Decisions to cancel or deny access may not be in a school librarian's hands, but school librarians may have some influence in designing a policy that includes programming as a resource and can advocate for an objective review process before decisions are made.

BOOKS AND BEYOND

The ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom tracked **377 challenges** in 2019. Here's the breakdown:

5% Other (Includes social media, hate crimes, games, filtering, databases, newspapers, magazines)

56% Books
22% Programs, meeting rooms
9% Displays, artwork
8% Films

CENSORSHIP BY THE NUMBERS 2019 ala.org/bbooks

American Library Association, Office for Intellectual Freedom. "Censorship by the Numbers 2019. Books and Beyond." Artwork used courtesy of ALA. <www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/bannedbooksweek/ideasandresources/freedownloads>.

The *Library Bill of Rights* has been updated with a 2019 interpretation that emphasizes the role that programs play in supporting the mission of the library by providing students with additional opportunities for accessing information, education, and recreation. The interpretation, "Library-Initiated Programs and Displays as a Resource," states:

> Concerns, questions, or complaints about library-initiated programs and displays are handled according to the same written policy and procedures that govern reconsiderations of other library resources. These policies should apply equally to all people, including, but not limited to, library users, staff, and members of the governing body. The policies should set forth the library's commitment to free and open access to information and ideas for all users. (ALA OIF 2019b)

While many school districts designate the task of organizing programming and events to library workers, the ultimate responsibility and authority for programs usually rests with the administration and the board. Just as school librarians consider a selection policy when purchasing books that will circulate well, be informative and authoritative, meet the educational needs of a wide variety of learners, and provide diverse viewpoints, they must also utilize these same professional skills in organizing programs.

Online Resources

Online resources are vital now, considering the necessity of distance learning in schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Databases are a popular research tool for students because they offer keyword search, full text, and access from home. A database has a wide variety of resources distributed from one starting point.

Challenges to databases and online resources are relatively new to OIF reports. Many of the challenges that have surfaced in Utah, Colorado, Indiana, Virginia, Idaho, and Montana were organized by pressure groups broadly accusing database vendors of distributing pornography.

In Colorado, a group called "Pornography Is Not Education" sued EBSCO and the Colorado Library Consortium claiming that they were knowingly distributing materials that were harmful to minors. And in Utah, after a parent complained, the Utah Education Network eliminated database access for 700,000 K–12 students in the state. It was reinstated after weeks of testimony and advocacy by Utah teachers and school librarians.

Because of the ongoing shortage of school librarians there are fewer people who understand the value of these shared databases and how essential these tools are for research and inquiry. Databases are library resources just like books, and the consideration of removing access to them or canceling subscriptions should go through the appropriate reconsideration policy. It can be a gut reaction to cancel, delete, or unsubscribe anything that is tainted with pornography, but it's important to consider the resource in its entirety and how it aligns with school district policy. It's not uncommon for school libraries and districts to overlook their well-established policies when complaints are submitted about databases because of the misconceived notion that censorship only affects books.

In 2018 ALA's "Selection and Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, and Academic Libraries" was updated to facilitate libraries in protecting resources and the intellectual freedom of their users. The toolkit covers not just books, but also digital resources like databases:

> Digital resources and services allow libraries to significantly expand the scope of information available to users. Like all resources and services provided by the library, provision of access to digital resources and services should follow the principles outlined in the *Library Bill of Rights* to ensure equitable access regardless of content or platform. (ALA OIF 2018)

While the digital divide is not considered censorship based on content, it does limit access to the

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intellectual freedoms the library profession holds dear. According to recent studies and reports, the digital divide is still very much a reality today. A 2019 Pew Research Survey showed that only 56 percent of lower-income American households have broadband services (Anderson and Kumar 2019). Closing the digital divide would improve literacy, democracy, social mobility, economic equality, and economic growth.

ALA is dedicated to closing the digital divide and ensuring that all libraries have access to affordable high-capacity unfiltered broadband services. Whether it's advocating for #ebooksforall with publishers, recommending active WiFi networks at libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic, or sending bookmobiles equipped with WiFi hotspots out into their communities, the message is clear: libraries are essential to providing online resources and fighting for digital equity.

Displays

Displays serve multiple purposes. They are attractive, enticing, and often welcome users into the school library space. Displays showcase materials that might otherwise get overlooked. They offer opportunities to cross-promote additional services and events in the school library. Displays themselves are a resource. They offer information in a different format, engage users to rethink traditional ideas, and offer opportunities to consider marginal viewpoints. But their ephemeral nature and creative design leave them vulnerable to exclusion as a "library resource" that can be challenged.

School libraries will often use displays to recognize significant or historical events like Black History Month or Rainbow Book Month.

School librarians create displays that bring light to stories and viewpoints that are neglected or to highlight their school library's core values of inclusivity and intellectual freedom.

LGBTQIA+ displays, Banned Books Week displays, and displays with racial or political issues receive the majority of complaints. Sometimes a specific book title in the display may be deemed offensive, and sometimes the subject matter of the display is found objectionable. When there are no policies to guide the school librarian in responding to concerns about displays, the display often will be dismantled.

The aforementioned *Library Bill of Rights* interpretation "Library-Initiated Programs and Displays as a Resource" is also used to support displays. The keyword is "library-initiated." School libraries not only provide access to information in their collections, they also foster the ability to use those resources through educational programs and instructions. School librarians create a visual environment that nurtures creativity and exploration with displays, instruction, libguides, reading lists, and bulletin boards—all ways that communities use and explore the school library. Those resources are

protected too. School libraries do not need to adopt a policy for each individual resource, but they do need to make sure all resources and services are covered.

Support

Challenges can happen at any time, at any type of institution, and to any type of material or service. Whether a school library is fully prepared with sound policies and a strong foundation of professional values or it is vulnerable and isolated, support is available. During a challenge, OIF can write a letter of support to the school board or provide talking points and reviews to defend materials and services that are under
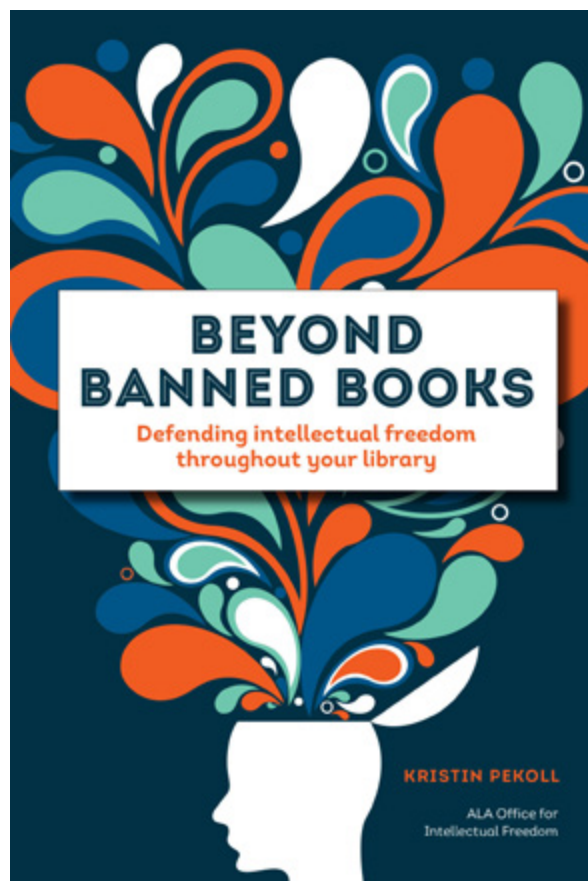
American Library Association ALA Editions. "Beyond Banned Books: Defending Intellectual Freedom throughout Your Library." Available for use by educational institutions and individuals for educational purposes. <https://www.alastore.ala.org/content/beyond-banned-books-defending-intellectual-freedom-throughout-your-library>.

reconsideration. OIF can provide information about state statutes and legal cases or help with press relations and social media.

But OIF can't offer support if they don't know about it. Reports of challenges and censorship help everyone. OIF uses the information to track trends and strategically develop resources that can help the profession in protecting intellectual freedom. Only 3–11 percent of challenges are reported. In 2019 377 challenges were recorded. That means that as many as 12,000 challenges are happening in libraries that no one knows about (ALA 2020).

Challenges can be reported confidentially by anyone at anytime. Support from the Office for Intellectual Freedom is tailored to the specific school, community, and situation. Even in situations where support isn't needed or where action can't be taken because of potential consequences, OIF is always available for emotional support and listening. When school library workers are going through a censorship incident, it can feel lonely and hostile. It is stressful and emotional and overwhelming. Having support can make the situation better.

Beyond Banned Books

When OIF analyzes the larger trends and issues that surface each year, there is a continual increase in challenges to library displays, programs, and online resources. *Beyond Banned Books: Defending Intellectual Freedom throughout Your Library* is a helpful resource for librarians when challenges arise that don't fit the traditional book challenges.

The book, categorized by library resource type, offers questions to consider when evaluating policies and procedures and guidance when updating or creating new policies and procedures. It specifically addresses resources created by library workers and educators and focuses on the need to include and protect diverse voices and ideas when defending intellectual freedom.

Intellectual freedom isn't just celebrated during Banned Books Week or valued only when challenges arise to materials and services. Intellectual freedom is every day. Intellectual freedom isn't about books, it's about the learner. It's the ability to explore and be seen. It's thinking for one's self and the privacy to question ideas outside one's experience. It's the confidence to grow as a global, informed citizen.

Banned Books Week is an event that highlights the harms of censorship for students and the community. It relays the truth that banning books— or any resource—is a contradiction of the First Amendment. As school libraries prepare for Banned Books Week, consider expanding the concept of censorship beyond books. Consider other ways in which students' choice of reading, access to information, and opportunity for educational experiences are curtailed. Use Banned Books Week to champion and protect students' intellectual freedom, September 27– October 3, 2020.

Kristin Pekoll *is the assistant director of the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom. She wrote the 2019 book* Beyond Banned Books: Defending Intellectual Freedom throughout Your Library.

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