

How a school librarian *actually* chooses books

Every school district wants a space where students can explore their personal and academic interests, develop literacy and research skills, collaborate with peers, and gain access to quality resources.

Fortunately, most school districts have several of these. According to the American Association of School Libraries (AASL), this is what a school library can do at its best, specifically with a certified librarian at the helm to develop a rich collection.

Amid nationwide book challenges in schools– including local school districts like Central York, Hempfield, and South Western– school library collections are increasingly the subject of uncertainty, suspicion and scrutiny, rather than support and celebration. Parents continue to voice concerns about mature and controversial content in the books that line their shelves.

School librarians are responsible for these collections. “I don’t think the public really knows what all a librarian does,” said Amy Boyer, who has experience in two school districts, both elementary and middle school libraries, and high school English and English as a Second Language. “It’s not just sitting behind a desk and checking out books to students.” School librarians regularly balance public concerns with their own training and experience to determine which books suit their students and which ones do not.

What is collection development?

“Collection development is a specialized skill completed by learning about your community and the resources that the community needs and desires,” said Linda Kean, who worked locally as an elementary school librarian for about 20 years before becoming the executive director of the Manheim Community Library last year.

It is typical for schools to have a collection development policy; all four of Kean’s school districts had one while she was employed, and the first of Boyer’s two school districts had one. Collection development policies have existed for decades, and they cover the purchase, challenge, and disposal of library books.

The American Library Association (ALA) offers guidance for resource selection in all types of libraries, including a section dedicated to school libraries. This list highlights age-appropriateness, accuracy, reader appeal, strong literary and aesthetic merit, and diversity (of opinions, authors, subjects, and format). Collection development policies often include these considerations.

Librarians tend to consult trusted sources to determine which books fit their populations. The ALA highly recommends five reviewing sources, including the School Library Journal, which both Boyer and Kean utilize. These reviewing sources include listed reading levels, age range recommendations, and descriptive reviews by certified librarians.

Age, reading levels, and labels

Much of the public outcry over library books is due to concern that some books are too mature for the age group in question. Age-appropriateness can be tricky for middle school, Boyer explained. “Sixth graders, especially early in the year, are still little kids. My eighth graders are about to go to ninth grade. They’re really looking more for Young Adult materials and they don’t like the stuff I’m purchasing for sixth graders because it’s babyish.” She knows of some middle school libraries that have Young Adult sections that are open only to eighth graders.

Though Kean and Boyer skim each book on their own before placing it on a shelf, the professional reviews are their first step to determine if a book suits the age of their readership. For example, said Boyer, “If a kid asks for a book and I jump on the website and a professional review recommends it for grades nine through 12, I will tend to shy away from that.”

The reading levels of library books can also pose challenges to collection development. Kean ensured she had preschool-level books through chapter books in her elementary libraries. In one of her school districts, books were not labeled by reading level; in another, reading levels were marked by solid-colored dots on book spines, and students were expected to check out books at their reading level. Kean did not agree with that– “One purpose of a school library is to *increase* their reading level”- but that was part of the school’s policy. Boyer currently has a “quick reads” section that houses lower-level books. She also recently secured a grant for Spanish-language materials.

Some school district collection development policies are somewhat at odds with the AASL, which advocates against labels that indicate mature content, minority characters (“LGBTQIA+”), and reading level. These labels are reductive or subjective; what counts as “mature content”? Labeling can lead students to self-restrict what they read. Additionally, the AASL says that labels revealing the reading level or sensitive interests of the student restrict First Amendment rights to privacy

The other factors

School librarians consider more than what is intellectually and emotionally appropriate for their readers. Kean noted that her purchases were guided by the science and social studies curricula for each grade level, teacher requests, and award winners like the Caldecott Medal. Boyer accounts for the academic and recreational needs of her students when she makes choices. “Students are looking for things to help them with class, but also for their own enjoyment.”

Librarians regularly remove books, often for reasons that have nothing to do with parent input. Kean described two books that she found in elementary school libraries in the 2010s. One ended by predicting that “man will one day walk on the moon.” The other was a biography of Jacqueline Kennedy that was written immediately after John F. Kennedy’s assassination, which didn’t account for the last 30 years of her life. Nonfiction books often become incomplete or downright inaccurate after enough time passes. Similarly, Boyer removed 1950s books about Native Americans that caricatured and misrepresented them. Kean and Boyer both remove books that are damaged, and sometimes even books that look old and dull. “Students gravitate towards

books that have bright colors; they gravitate towards books that have characters on the front that look like them,” Kean said.

Though librarians consult their professional organizations, reputable review websites, and their own district’s collection development policy, *they* make the final determination about the fate of any book based on their own professional evaluation. They know their school communities and existing collection best, and they have the training necessary to assess the benefits and drawbacks of any selection.

Boyer and Kean both named time and money as their greatest challenges in collection development. Because of this, they both said that collection development amounted to less than 25% of their time at school, and Kean added that her library aide always helped by setting aside damaged books. Kean also noted that she was less likely to discard books when she worked at schools with small budgets, knowing that she could not easily replace them with better resources.

Parents have not affected collection development for Kean or Boyer. Kean, a strong believer in parent discretion, gladly makes exceptions for individuals. “We buy according to the guidelines, and if parents do not want their children to take out a certain book or certain subject, that’s their right.” When adults requested restrictions for their students, she and the library aide added notes to their accounts, which were visible at checkout. This follows the AASL’s position; parents are welcome to restrict what their children read, but *only* their children.

Boyer rarely hears from parents and guardians. But, she said, “I wouldn’t shy away from parents having some feedback or influence about what their kids are reading. It would be just another piece for me to use when I’m thinking about what to purchase for the library.”

As school librarians navigate the realities of time, budgets and public perception, they continue developing their collections the same way they always have: with professionalism and thoughtfulness, one book at a time.

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