



# Censorship: Are You Part of the Problem?

By Mona Kerby

**Y**ou've seen the troubling news. Politicians and far-right groups are demanding that certain titles be removed from school library collections. You might think that angry groups of parents are your only worry when it comes to censorship. But you'd be wrong. There's another threat that is much closer to home. It's you.

In a 2016 survey, *School Library Journal* discovered that nine out of ten school librarians are guilty of self-censorship ("Self-Censorship"). It begins with book selection. For example, if the book has some aspect of LGBTQ+, many librarians admit to choosing something less "controversial." Recognize yourself?

In this article, I'll highlight the detrimental and self-censoring behaviors that must stop. When we talk about censorship, we often focus on defending against materials challenges, but our own day-to-day actions can have just as significant an impact on limiting students' intellectual freedom. (Think of Don Quixote fighting those windmills; you're fighting the wrong battles.) I'll give the successful strategies to beat our most pervasive enemy—ourselves. While I'll use some humor to cope, this topic isn't funny. It's serious. Librarian, know thyself. It's time for an intervention.

"School libraries provide the widest possible range of viewpoints, opinions, and ideas so that every learner has the opportunity [to] read freely and pursue success in college, career, and beyond..."

"It is a school librarian's responsibility to use their professional expertise to provide information relevant to all learners, educators, and members of the learning community." —AASL (November 29, 2021, <https://twitter.com/aasl/status/1465511770303434753>)

## Detrimental Behaviors of Self-Censoring Librarians

We school librarians are kind, thoughtful, and often shy. We avoid confrontation. We don't like to fight about anything, and just thinking about fighting censorship gives us the shivers. We worry about confrontation, about what *might* happen, and these fears shape our actions. Unwittingly, and with the best of intentions, we sabotage our learners.

Interventions require honesty. How do I know what our destructive behaviors

are? Because I'm guilty of some of them myself. Ask yourself. Are you guilty of these self-censorship behaviors?

1. You pull a book off the shelf and stick it in your desk drawer.
2. You don't purchase "controversial" titles, because after all, there are so many other good books out there.
3. You put restrictions on what books can be checked out.
  - Kindergarten through second graders must only choose from the "Everybody" section.
  - You insist that the Five Finger Rule is a rule instead of a strategy. (If the child finds more than five words they don't know on a page, they are not allowed to check out the book.)
  - You insist that students can only check out books that are on their Lexile levels.
  - You have a reserved section for the eighth graders, and you made the determination of those titles arbitrarily.
4. Before a class comes in, you display the "good" books on the tables, and restrict the children to these choic-

es. (Sharing good books is great! Restricting choices is not.)

5. You use a black marker and line through "bad" words or pictures.
6. You put labels on the spines identifying what the book is about so that everyone can see what kind of book the student checked out.
7. You print out overdue lists and read aloud the student names and book titles, violating student privacy.
8. You send out a permission form that parents/guardians must sign before allowing students to access library materials.
9. In your MARC records, you insert warnings such as "language," "some violence," or "for mature readers."
10. At the circulation desk, you question a student on their book selection and tell them to choose something else.

## Successful Strategies to Fight Censorship without Fighting

How do you stop being afraid of what might happen? How do you fight without being confrontational? It's not as hard as you think.

1. **Make a Students' Right to Read Poster.** Review ALA's Library Bill of Rights and the Freedom to Read Statement. Then make a poster that is age-appropriate for your students and post it everywhere. The poster is important to make because you'll spend time thinking about this vital issue. It is important to share because without saying a word, you've guided students, teachers, administrators, and parents/guardians.
2. **Provide daily check out opportunities.** All students must have the option to check out books daily. Sure, this can be tricky to organize with teachers' schedules. And yes, a kid will get in trouble for not following the rules. But, you must do this. Students need practice finding books. Mistakes help students learn what books are right for them. It's tougher for a parent to be angry about a library book if their child can immediately exchange it. Get in the habit of saying to students, "If you don't like the book that you checked out, return

it. Return it in thirty seconds, this afternoon, or tomorrow. No worries. That's how you learn what is right for you."

3. **Use the selection criteria.** Find and review your district's selection policy for school library materials. Realize that school library book selection criteria differ from criteria for instructional materials or textbooks because library materials ensure choice and voluntary reading.
  - You'll mostly likely discover that your district's school library selection criteria mirrors ALA's selection criteria. School librarians select materials that reflect diversity, support curriculum and students' personal interests, are highly reviewed, and age appropriate. Because this is an official school board policy and because you're an employee, you must adhere to the procedures.
  - While most board policies state that school librarians should get two positive reviews for new books, I recommend you find three. I have been burned too many times on purchasing a book based on one good review, and when the book arrived, my students wouldn't touch it. Money wasted. My top three favorite professional selection sources are *Kirkus*, *School Library Journal*, and *Booklist* because you'll get three distinct opinions. Diverse opinions help you make a wise decision.
  - You don't have to purchase subscriptions to professional selection tools. You probably already have access to them. Where? In your vendor settings when purchasing materials. Adjust to select by publishing year, material type, and the number and name of the professional selection sources.
  - Beware this trouble spot, however. The publishers and selection sources will differ widely on the appropriate age level they give for the same item. Synthesize these opinions and decide if the book is appropriate for your school level.
  - You're selecting highly reviewed books for two reasons. One, if someone does complain about a book, you've got the reviews to verify it is a quality title. Two, in all the years I've evaluated school library

collections, I have NEVER found a collection that has more than 30% highly recommended titles. I'm not kidding. Shame on us.

4. **Review the district reconsideration policy.** Board policy does not allow you to remove a book from the library unless you follow the mandated steps.
5. **Remind your principal** of the approved selection criteria, the reconsideration policy, and that you and your library supervisor are eager to help. (Okay, so maybe you're not eager but you don't have to tell the principal that)
6. **Evaluate your collection** by your selection criteria, including age, quality, and amount. (You can read more in my AASL book, *Collection Development for School Librarians*, where I explain the procedures.)
7. **Know the controversial titles** that are in the news. Read them. Discuss them with colleagues.
8. **Craft an elevator speech** or at least learn some key phrases to say when confronted with a complaint. Memorize the powerful explanation of Texas school librarian Jill Bellomy. She explains she needs a diverse collection because she is teaching students the "life skills of self-selection."
9. **Trust the process.** Remember, we follow board approved steps to select, weed, and remove. Repeat—trust the process. It works.
10. **Seek comfort in the fact that most Americans oppose censorship.** In a March 2022 poll conducted by the American Library Association, 74% of survey respondents opposed banning books from school libraries and supported their local school librarians ("New ALA Poll"). The person who comes into your library may be loud and angry but remember this: their viewpoint is in the minority.

"We need diverse collections so that we can teach the life skills of self-selection." — Jill Bellomy, Lead Librarian, Highland Park (Texas) ISD

Tips from Mary Woodard, Mesquite (Texas) ISD, School Library Supervisor

When caught off guard or you don't know the answer, say, "I'll get back to you on that."

Remember that you're not defending the book, you're defending the process.

Literature must be examined in its entirety rather than obsessing on individual parts.

### Counseling Strategies

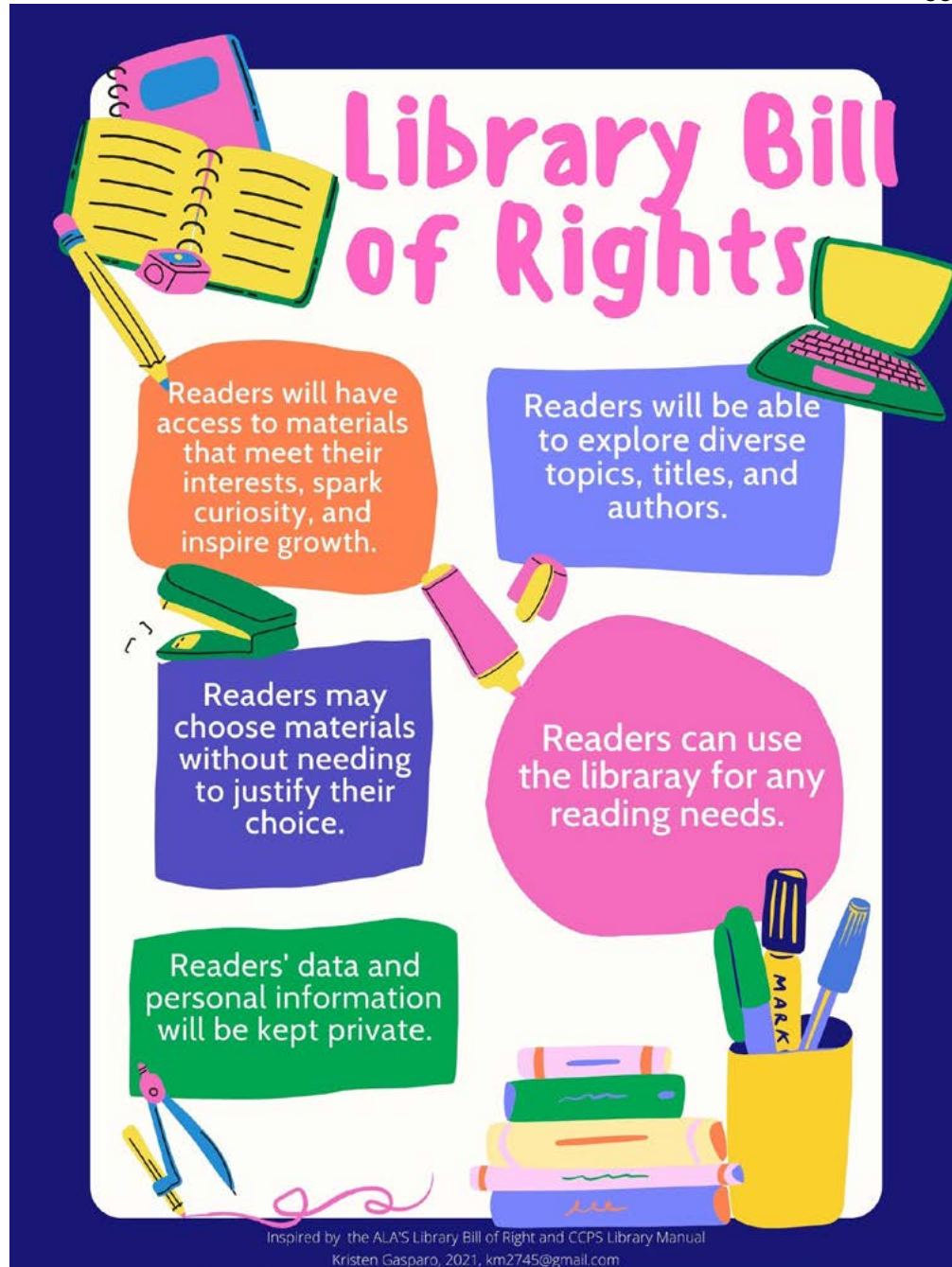
We are living through a pandemic and a toxic hyper partisan environment. On top of all your other responsibilities, you must now learn counseling strategies. The book, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, explains that skills are needed when "opinions vary, stakes are high, and emotions run strong" (Grenny, Patterson, McMillan, Switzler, and Gregory 2021). When we feel threatened, our adrenaline kicks in. Our blood rushes to our legs so that we can escape, which means that our diminished brains are operating at the mental capacity of rats....Oops. I don't know the strategies. I'm just pointing out the problem.

As we work to face our fears and be prepared for, instead of trying to avoid, a challenge, let's seek the help of our school counselor colleagues.

### The Dreaded Conversation: What to Do When It Happens

It's entirely possible that the conversation over a book's suitability will be illuminating and wonderful, and I'm not being silly. During my years as a librarian, I had several conversations like that. Still, it helps to prepare ahead of time.

1. Thank the parent for expressing interest in their child's learning. Say something nice about the child. (You must know every student in your building by name.) Smile, use a soft voice, and stay pleasant.
2. Keep your mouth shut. Let the parent talk. If you're feeling nervous, this gives you time to calm down.



An example of a Library Bill of Rights poster, created by Kristen Gasparo, McDaniel College.

3. Ask clarifying questions if needed. Is the issue the entire story or just certain parts? Model respectful listening; repeat what the parent says.
4. Remind the parent that students can return books daily. Offer to help the child find another book.
5. Offer to make the parent a library card so that the parent can check out books for the child. This offer, said in your kindest voice, flabbergasts some parents. But, be sure to explain that you still want their child to choose their own books because you're "teaching the life skill of self-selection."
6. If the parent asks you to remove the book from the library, mention that your collection supports children from all kinds of families, not just theirs, and that other parents have different viewpoints.
7. Again, show gratefulness that the conversation is occurring and emphasize that discussion helps us learn.
8. Avoid defending the title or promising to remove it. It's rare that you need

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

to share your selection criteria or the reconsideration policy. If you do defend anything, defend the process.

9. If there are any lingering questions or if you are stumped for answers, say "I'll get back to you on that."
10. After the parent leaves, look up the reviews for the book. Grab the age levels for the book provided by the professional selection sources. Is the book age appropriate? Then ASAP, call your library supervisor, before telling your principal. The supervisor has more experience with these issues; they have a network of colleagues and professional resources. They will work with you. By the time you share the news with your principal, you'll be a calm, kind, rational human again.

### Collaborative Steps Going Forward

We must stop our self-censorship behaviors. If not, we sabotage our very mission. We lose the opportunity to have thoughtful discussions about important issues with our learners, and we leave them defenseless to make decisions in our troubling times. When planning professional development at the district, state, and national level, consider the following:

One, get professional counselors to teach us the skills of listening.

Two, provide opportunities to have plenty of discussions among ourselves. Begin with AASL's 2018 publication "Defending Intellectual Freedom: LGBTQ+ Materials in School Libraries." Tackle three of their important questions:

1. What are our biases and how can we develop collections that transcend them?
2. What are the advantages of creating an inclusive collection?
3. How can school librarians examine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the current collections, with a focus on LGBTQ+ collections?

Three, focus on improving the quality of our collections. My research shows that the quality is awful.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

Four, create lessons on the "life skills of self-selection" and the strategies to navigate tough discussions. An excellent resource is the Learning for Justice pamphlet, "Teaching Tolerance: Let's Talk: Discussing Race, Racism, and Other Difficult Topics."

### In Closing

When my niece was three years old and she wanted something, she started patting her mother and repeating, "Let's talk about this." She was probably just using the psychology that her mother had used on her. But, maybe my niece instinctively realized the power of discussions.

This article won't stop your worrying—we live in stressful times. But, when you run into a censorship problem, you know what to do. We'll talk about it.

### Works Cited and Further Reading

AASL. "Defending Intellectual Freedom: LGBTQ+ Materials in School Libraries." 2018. <https://www.ala.org/aasl/advocacy/tools/toolkits>.

ALA. "Access to Resources and Services in the School Library: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights." <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/accessresources>.

ALA. Freedom to Read Statement. <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/freedomreadstatement>.

ALA. How to Respond to Challenges and Concerns about Library Resources. <https://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/respond>.

ALA. Library Bill of Rights. <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>.

ALA. "Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries." <https://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/selectionpolicytoolkit>.

ALSC. Know Your Kids' Rights. <https://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/alscpubs/KidsKnowYourRights.pdf>

Fox, Sharon. "Pause and Prepare: A School District Guide to Navigating Book Challenges." <https://sharonfoxlibrarian.com/about/updates/>.

Grenny, Joseph, Kerry Patterson, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler, and Emily Gregory. *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes Are High*. McGraw Hill, 2021. <https://cruciallearning.com/crucial-conversations-book/>.

Kerby, Mona. *An Introduction to Collection Development for School Librarians*, 2nd ed. Chicago: ALA Editions, 2019.

Kerby, Mona. "Finding Collection Funding in Tight Times." *School Library Connection* (October 2021). <https://schoollibraryconnection.com/content/>

article/2268336.

Kerby, Mona. "Up to the Challenge: Dealing with School Library Book Challenges Before They Happen." *American Libraries* (September 3, 2019). <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2019/09/03/school-library-book-challenges>.

Learning for Justice. "A Teaching Tolerance Guide: Let's Talk! Discussion Race, Racism, and Other Difficult Topics with Students." <https://www.learningforjustice.org>.

"New ALA Poll Shows Voters Oppose Book Bans: Majority of Survey Respondents Support Librarians and Oppose Banning Books from Public and School Libraries." *American Libraries* blog (March 24, 2022). <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/new-ala-poll-shows-voters-oppose-book-bans>.

"Self-Censorship: Survey and Analysis." *School Library Journal*, 2016. <https://www.slj.com/page/features-self-censorship>.

University of North Texas. "Living Multiliteracies: The First Amendment is Under Attack...Again!" webinar (December 2021). <https://multipleliteracieslab.unt.edu/events-and-presentations>.



**Mona Kerby, PhD**, is a professor at McDaniel College in Westminster, MD where she coordinates the School Librarianship program. She earned her bachelor's degree in

Elementary Education and Spanish at Texas Wesleyan University in Fort Worth, two masters' degrees, and her PhD in Library Science from Texas Woman's University (TWU) in Denton, Texas. She served as the librarian at Little Elementary School in Arlington, Texas. Her most recently published book, *An Introduction to Collection Development for School Librarians, 2nd ed.*, is published by ALA Editions. She holds McDaniel's Bowlsbey Endowed Chair and has received awards such as the Texas Library Association's Siddie Joe Johnson Award for Outstanding Library Service to Children in the State of Texas, McDaniel's Outstanding Teacher Award, AASL's Distinguished Service Award, and the 2022 TWU Pioneer Alumni Association's Distinguished Alumni Award. In addition to writing for *School Librarians*, she also writes for children. See [monakerby.com](http://monakerby.com).

Kerby, her husband, and their two energetic rescue mutts live in northern rural Maryland. The two-legged family members like reading and walking. The four-legged members dig holes.