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## **CSL Statement: Book Challenges and Censorship in Canada's School Libraries**

Canadian School Libraries (CSL) is a non-profit charitable organization dedicated to professional research and education in the field of the school library learning commons in Canada.

CSL is deeply concerned about the growing number of calls to remove or restrict access to books in school library collections that express LGBTQia2s+ perspectives, represent characters of differing sexual orientations or gender identities, or deal with sexual health, and books where the main characters are people of colour.

### **Why are we concerned?**

As Canadians, we value our democratic and Charter rights and hope that we can resolve book challenges to the satisfaction of all concerned. But the fact is people have sought to limit access to the public in general and children specifically to books in school libraries, public libraries, and even bookstores.

We understand that sometimes parents have issues or concerns with the books that their children bring home to read and that they may challenge books in their child's school library learning commons (LLC) for all kinds of reasons. While challenging reading content is a parent's prerogative for their own child, proposing to remove access to a book from the library learning commons for all students in the school is more problematic. As the Book and Periodical Council of Canada's statement on free expression says, "The freedom to choose what we read does not, however, include the freedom to choose for others."

Over the past two years, there has been an explosion of book challenges in the United States. Citing "parental rights", challengers have organized into groups like *Moms for Liberty*, sharing tactics and resources.

The vast majority of the books targeted by these groups feature LGBTQia2s+ characters or characters of colour, and/or tell the story of racism in American history. Groups share lists of books to challenge, and they employ similar and sometimes extreme tactics. Most typically, members flood school districts with extensive lists of books that they find objectionable, ignoring established procedures for the reconsideration of learning resources.

In the past year, this movement has found its way into Canada. School districts across the country have been subjected to demonstrations and disruptions to board meetings by representatives of, or people following the lead of the group, *Action4Canada*, with charges that school library collections contain pornographic materials. Canadian educators have been publicly accused of facilitating child abuse and pedophilia.



A ruling by the [Supreme Court of Canada in 2002](#) tempers the ability of school boards in attempting to ban books in Canadian schools. The court found that a school board's banning of a book in 1997 went against provincial legislation, saying that the ban on books about gay and lesbian parents had no place in a public school system that claims to promote diversity and tolerance. "Tolerance is always age-appropriate", commented the chief justice.

### **Purported grounds for book challenges**

Pornographic content or being age-inappropriate are familiar reasons given for challenges to library resources, and so it is with this latest wave of protest. These claims almost always mask other concerns. Recent research by PEN America ([Banned in the USA: The growing movement to censor books in schools](#)) concludes that the majority of challenges on the grounds of age appropriateness are to books with themes related to sexual orientation or gender identity and books where the main characters are people of colour. Challenges to books that tell the story of the Black experience in America are often disguised as concerns about other issues like being sexually explicit for example, based on sections or portions that may be taken out of context.

### **Defending students' freedom of expression and the right to read**

Canadian School Libraries refutes these spurious claims. School library resources are selected by trained professionals, following established guidelines. Pressure for material inclusion or exclusion from individuals or groups should not be factored into selection, but instead the professional judgement of trained library professionals should be applied, supported by guideline documents that defend universal principles of protecting intellectual freedom. Rich and diverse collections are developed within the context of the rights and freedoms guaranteed to all Canadians in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The Charter protects the rights of everyone, including children.

The right to freedom of expression is enshrined in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, to which Canada is a signatory. "The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice."

### **The entry point to reading in the library is interest, not level**

Library collections must be appropriate to meet the needs of all kinds of readers of all ages. The resource collection provides the foundation for student success in the library. Students engage with reading because they are able to make their own choices of reading material. All students deserve to see themselves reflected in what they read. The collection must, therefore, support a broad range of readers, at all levels, from emergent to proficient, regardless of age or grade level. The concept of age appropriateness is frequently co-opted by censors. Calls to ban books often have more to do with content and little to do with the reading level of the resource. Representation of diverse peoples or seeking understanding of potentially difficult topics is not restricted by the age of the reader.

### **Taking action against censorship**

Canadian School Libraries is very concerned that current, organized calls to ban or restrict access to resources in school libraries undermine students' right to freedom of expression, deny everyone's right to representation,



disrespect professional practices enshrined in the ethics of school librarianship, and disrupt the education of our children. It is the responsibility of school districts and educators to take action to resist the pressure to ban books.

## Recommended Actions

### Canadian School Libraries recommends that school districts:

- Establish selection guidelines that provide the foundation for developing diverse library collections, based on sound educational principles and the human rights of students.
- Establish and follow procedures for the reconsideration of library resources so that challenges are handled professionally and unemotionally, defending students' right to have access to diverse resources.
- Resist calls by groups to deny students' right to read based on values that do not align with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Canadian Human Rights Act.
- Report all attempts to censor educational resources to the Toronto Metropolitan University Centre for Free Expression's [Library Challenges Database](#).
- Do not undermine established procedures. In a situation where the removal of items is directed by the district, teacher-librarians and teachers must make sure that the district follows its own policies for reconsideration of materials. In recent cases, district personnel have directed schools to remove items from libraries without explaining why. In these cases the following questions must be answered:
  1. Who made the complaint?
  2. What is the specific nature of the complaint?
  3. Has the person directing the item removal read the book?
  4. Why is the district not following protocols in place for addressing complaints for an item in an LLC?

Directing teacher-librarians to justify their purchases is mirroring a tactic used in the US and diminishes the professional role of teacher-librarians in making appropriate choices for their students.

- Support teacher-librarians and other school library professionals as they develop collections using their professional judgement, based on their training and knowledge of the needs of the school community.
- Re-invest in professional library staffing and quality collections. Teacher-librarians have the knowledge and training to develop rich collections based on sound educational criteria, yet many school districts are reducing or eliminating this position. Learners have a right to expect excellent libraries in every school in Canada. Our school libraries should reflect our common values of equity, diversity, and cultural identity as well as best approaches in the educational and library professions.



## Additional Resources

Canadian Federation of Library Association: *Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries*: <https://cfla-fcab.ca/en/guidelines-and-position-papers/statement-on-intellectual-freedom-and-libraries/>

CFLA Intellectual Freedom Committee: *Memo re Notices of Personal Liability*: <http://cfla-fcab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/CFLA-Notice-of-Liability-Memo-7-05-1.pdf>

Book and Periodical Council: *Position Statement: Freedom of Expression and Freedom to Read*. <https://www.freedomtoread.ca/who-we-are/>

Canadian School Libraries: *Collection Diversity Toolkit*: <https://www.canadianschoollibraries.ca/collection-diversity-toolkit/>

Canadian School Libraries Journal: Articles on principles and practices related to protecting intellectual freedom: <https://journal.canadianschoollibraries.ca/category/intellectual-freedom/>

Toronto Metropolitan University Centre for Free Expression: *Library Challenges Database*: <https://cfe.torontomu.ca/databases/library-challenges-database>

