

Montana Library Association Presentation: Montana Challenged Books**Kellian Clink's part of a panel with Jasmine James, Matt Beckstrom & Sean Anderson****Montana Library Association Conference April 2023**

READING/MIRRORS AND WINDOWS

Reading is fundamental and a love of reading is stymied when kiddos don't see themselves in children's books (Bronson, 2016). No Child Left Behind means that there were years when teachers taught to the test, necessarily so. Research on the effects of high-stakes testing shows that curriculum is reduced to high-stakes determined content, format, and teacher-centered as opposed to student-centered practices. Worksheets similar to the upcoming tests replace writing that engages critical thinking skills (Zoch, 2017). In general, being a reader results in greater knowledge, cultural appreciation, civic engagement, appreciation of others, and increased social skills. (Clark & Rumbold, 2006).

A complex study of Native American children found that regardless of demographics such as education and poverty, parents who read to their kids have kids who have higher academic achievement. (Riser et al., 2020) There's at least anecdotal indicators that children learn more from characters who are like them. Some of the theories for this are social preference hypothesis, identification hypothesis, and the self-relevance hypothesis which all posit the notion that the reason that even infants distinguish between like them and unlike them and pay more attention to those like them. (Dore, 2022) An article I most highly recommend, *Mirrors and Windows: Teaching and Research Reflections on Canadian Aboriginal Children's Literature*, discusses some of the complexities of children's literature for Native American students—curricular requirements, teaching difficult uncomfortable topics, worrying about the age appropriateness of books that depict painful realities, and more. One researcher, Lynne Wiltse, surveyed a library's collection. Students were majority was students of color, the books depicted were of white middle class families. (Wiltse, 2015). In another study she noted, though, that it's not necessarily that students are looking to see themselves in the ethnicity of the characters but

in the familiarity of the activities—students in her study, also published in 2015, chose books about jingle dancing (because the student was a jingle dancer) or hunting (because that was the kid’s favorite activity) or their grandparents’ boarding school experiences. Black children’s books have been studied extensively and in 1982 Rudine Sims reported on the (few) books about Black children written by (fewer) Black writers and commented that progress was being made since “gentle doses of racism are still being offered through children’s books” (Bishop-Sims, 1982, p. 108). A more recent article found similar patterns, “According to the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC), for example, there were 340 books featuring Black characters in 2018, and only 100 of these were by Black authors and/or illustrators” (Gardner, 2021). A recent article argued for children having shared story time with books that both promote pride and prepare them for their encounters with racism. “ Positive Racial Identity Development in Education at the University of Pittsburgh and the Center on the Ecology of Early Development at Boston University created a race-positive booklist for kiddos of different age groups. (Curenton,2022).

And of course, books with LGBTQ+ themes are the most targeted for challenges, according to a recent article in the *Publishers Weekly*. The author of George M. Johnson's 2020 essay collection, *All Boys Aren't Blue* (FSG, ages 14-up), is billed as a "memoir-manifesto." He wrote, "When you say my story has no merit, you're really saying the lives of queer youth have no merit. When you say my book shouldn't be accessible to teens, you're saying that teens who are non-heterosexual should keep their truth quiet and removed from societal structures” (Makhijani, 2022, p. 35).

The classic, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, included this telling quotation:

Gay people, who seldom grow up in gay families, who are exposed to their culture’s if not their parents’ high ambient homophobia long before either they or those who care for them know that they are among those who most urgently need to define themselves against it, who have with difficulty and always belatedly to patch together from fragments a community, a usable heritage, a politics of survival or resistance. ~ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (81)

The realities of homophobia are, despite recent legislation, very real for young people. The most recent *Trevor Report* revealed the latest numbers associated with a long existing phenomenon: “14% of LGBTQ youth reported that they had slept away from parents or caregivers because they were kicked out or abandoned, with 40% reporting that they were kicked out or abandoned due to their LGBTQ identity: (Trevor Project, February 2022). These throwaway kids can end up doing survival sex, having mental health issues, and physical issues, as being without a safe place to lay your head at night is bad for a person. While the 2020 data for Montana show more hate crimes based on race (15) than sexual orientation (3), many hate crimes aren’t reported and many homophobic behaviors aren’t even challenged by the victims. State LGBTQ+ Business Climate Index *Out Leadership*, however, judged Florida and Montana among worst for the Lgbtq community, based on work environment, legal protections, youth and family support, health access and safety, and political and religious attitudes. (Jones, 2022).

MONTANA

More than a million souls live in Montana, the country’s fourth largest and one of the least populated states. Ranching and farming are the biggest industries. Craft beer is big industry. Population density is low. The *Moving to Montana* website says “Living in Montana requires you to be self-reliant. You must know how to manage and deal with the issues like power outages and freezing of the car battery. It is greatly influenced by politics and many of the political divides are evident in the state. Be ready to get pushback if you hold different opinions. (Movingest, n.d.) The latest election means that “Republicans hold power not seen in the state Capitol in nearly a century” (Montana Free Press, November 21, 2022). There are eight federally recognized tribes (Assiniboine, Blackfeet, Chippewa, Cree, Crow, Gros Ventre, Kootenai, Little Shell Chippewa, Northern Cheyenne, Pend d’Oreille, Salish and Sioux.) and seven reservations. School children are mostly (78 percent) white, then Indian (11 percent), and less than 1 percent any other race. There are wide disparities between whites and natives in reading and math scores, graduation rates, and dropout rates. (Montana Office of Public

Instruction, 2020). There are efforts afoot to educate kids in Montana about natives, including Shane Doyle and Megan Doyle's *Living Within the Four Base Tipi Poles of the Apsaalokke Homeland*, a grade school curriculum which states:

I reflect on the endless web of relationships that make up the fabric of the Plains Indian tribal worldview and I try to focus my thoughts on the oral traditions of the people that connected everything and propelled us into the future. My curriculum design philosophy is based on my desire to understand my homeland as much as I can, and to share this knowledge with others. The indigenous cultures of the Medicine Wheel Country have much to contribute to the rest of the world's understanding about how to live a balanced and sustainable life. The tribes who lived light on the land also lived by a philosophy which emphasizes well-being over wealth, renewal over despair, and relationship over dominion. These cultural values were reinforced within extensive and inclusive kinship systems and strengthened through participatory ceremonies and economic cooperation. I believe that contemporary communities, both tribal and non-Indian, could utilize these values and pathways to success that were cultivated and cherished by the indigenous people of the Northern Plains. "Walking in beauty on a red road" is a metaphor that tribal people throughout the west use to refer to living a good life. (Doyle and Doyle, 2016)

Ray Suarez (January 2021) wrote a series of articles about deaths of despair in the *Daily Montanan*, and reported: In the U.S., people are more likely to die by their own hand in sparsely populated areas, and Montana has one of the lowest population densities of the fifty states. In a country where veterans, older men and gun-owning households are at higher risk, Montana has more of all three than the average American state. It treasures rugged individualism in a time when loneliness is commonly reported as a mental health problem. In a world where more suicides and attempted suicides occur at higher altitude, it sits on America's Rocky Mountain spine. While it is well-known that effective treatment and follow-up for depression requires access to mental health professionals, Montana struggles to recruit and attract psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers. Montana has had one of the highest rates of suicide in the country for a century and bounces, depending on the years, between the top and slightly trailing positions in America's rankings. Older men self-medicating after the loss of a love, a parent, all have access to firearms. Native kids despairing.

"If you can't describe how Native people were once proud, strong, healthy, and resilient, if you can't conjure that up in your mind, it's going to lead you to believe either Native people deserve this, or are stupid, or lazy" said educator, activist, and Crow tribal member

Shane Doyle. Compound that with distances... “People have to go into Billings if they want to see a specialist. It’s a hundred miles round trip, and transportation can be a significant barrier to people seeking healthcare,” the head of Messengers for Health, a tribal health care agency, said. Plus, there’s a big stigma about reaching out. “In Montana, there’s a mentality around not needing help, being able to get through things on your own.” (Suarez, 2021).

Montana’s political history is mixed. While right now the map looks very red, one of the most renowned names is Mike Mansfield, who was an avid user and advocate of public libraries, having used them on his journey from mucker to assistant mining engineer in Butte, and a democrat. (Oberdorfer, 2003). Jeannette Rankin, while Republican by party affiliation, was certainly an advocate for many issues dear to Democrats, including labor rights. The *Montana Council for Progressive Political Action* certainly were liberal/left in their concerns for the working people of Montana. But there is no denying that Montana is currently Republican, largely, by political affiliation. There is no clear line between being republican, to being conservative, to being homophobic, but there are indicators. Only a little more than half of Republicans support same-sex marriage, compared to almost three quarters of democrats. (McGraw, 2022). Montana’s Republican State Senator Theresa Manzella was quoted as saying this past year that “members of the LGBTQ community like to “play the protected class card,” because queer couples in general have expressed that they’re scared to walk down the street holding hands in fear of possible violence against them for their sexuality, the Missoulian newspaper’s education reporter Skylar Rispens reported. “I’ve got to tell you, I think those are normal consequences associated with the choices they made,” (Levesque, November 21, 2021). So, queers should accept the violence that comes their way? And while many celebrate the recent law President Biden signed affirming same sex marriage, both Republicans in Montana’s Congressional delegation, Sen. Steve Daines and Rep. Matt Rosendale, voted against the legislation as it passed through respective chambers. (Schutt and Girtin, 2022)

CHALLENGED BOOKS

Some talking points written about responding to the challenges, whether it be sexual, lgbt, trans, religiosity, or whatever, libraries in Montana have responded (and this was echoed in the survey), with parental

responsibility to help their children choose books to read. In the library controversy in Kalispell this past year these talking points were provided:

All libraries have books on diverse topics. Books should not be removed or banned because a resident doesn't like or agree with a book topic. That's definitely censorship, and we know that censorship is a dangerous violation of freedom of speech.

If parents are concerned about certain titles or topics, they are responsible for helping their children select books. Library staff members are always ready to help patrons find suitable books. As the library policies state, "ImagineIF Libraries does not act In Loco Parentis, and as such, responsibility for materials selected and read by children and adolescents rests with their parent or legal guardians."

Parents have different ideas about how to discuss difficult topics like death, divorce, and racism. It's no surprise that a library would have a diverse collection of books on all topics. One parent should not have the right to prevent other families from accessing information. (Love Lives Here)

Libraries have to stay on point, speak to library collections, freedom of speech, and the dangers of censorship. For the Collection Developers in the library, it can be difficult to find the right books, especially around issues of sexuality, lgbt matters, books about trans kids, along with the subjects of religiosity, death and dying, divorce, there are no shortage of topics that can be hard to find to right book with the appropriate age-level language, vantage point, and level of emotional honesty. One 2021 article about teacher candidates and diverse books, gave some guidance about books being authentic, reflective of complex lives that push back against stereotypes, relevant, and raise questions and answer the requisite literacy skills in the building.(Jiménez, 2021). Some essays direct the teacher bring the mirror/window concept to the forefront: "Is this a mirror book or window book?" (Quinones, 2021). It's important to use the reviews of books, as the MLA survey revealed. The controversies around diverse children's' books abound and seem unanswerable—who's a legitimate author, if they are not written by someone from the community they're depicting, can they have merit at all? Why are so few books written by diverse authors? Why so few people of color working in the publishing industry? (Pen America, 2016) Does it follow that the lack of opportunities in higher education and the financial resources for people of color will make it always so? Because only those with more financial resources can afford to work in a poorly paying job, which publishing is? Do the books find their way to act as mirrors and windows and sliding glass doors? (Martin, 2022). Should some of the "classics" be taken from the shelf,

which was argued about *Little House on the Prairie* at a workshop on Native American Children's books I attended? The controversies are complex and unanswerable, but librarians need to have the conversations to just know what they think themselves before a challenge occurs. Some of the ways that librarians can look for responsive books is to look for award winners whose judges are from that community, such as The American Indian Library Association's American Indian Youth Literature Award. Most librarians probably use We Need Diverse Books, <https://diversebooks.org/>.

EveryLibrary, a national political action committee for libraries that tracks such challenges, said it has seen "dozens of new attacks" on libraries, their governing bodies, and policies since the first of the year — in Texas as well as ongoing cases in Montana and Louisiana. In some cases, the challengers are being assisted by growing national networks, facilitated by social media, such as the parental rights group *Moms for Liberty* or *Heritage Action for America*, according to ALA. (Gowen, 2022). A September 2022 poll of over one thousand people found that 95% of Democrats, 80% of independents, and 53% of Republicans are against book bans (EveryLibrary, 2022). Whether it's supported by the many, it's a growing phenomenon. According to a recent report from the free speech organization PEN America, there are at least fifty groups across the country working to remove books from libraries. Some have seen explosive growth recently: Of the three hundred chapters that PEN tracked, 73 percent were formed after 2020. (Harris & Alter, 2022) Montana is often included in news articles about the growing number of book challenges.

Martha Cornog (2016) traced the history of librarians and attitudes towards "difficult books:"Our story began about 1900, when many books with sexual content and certainly homosexual content were termed "vicious," "poisonous," "immoral," and conducive to "the breaking up of family life." We see similar reactions up through the 1990s: homosexuality—and books about it—are still "WRONG" and lawless as against God, and "destroy the family and our cultural fiber" (p.50). Cornog writes that increased public acceptance of the lgbt community, more folks being out, more acceptance in religious entities, and legal changes, have all given librarians more liberty to choose books that reflect and support their gay

community. In a side note, that's professional librarians. There's an interesting article about how one community, Elmhurst in Illinois, was actively anti-professional and some Freedom of Information requests resulted in learning about a board determined to keep "ideologies at the door" and to hire an unqualified director who would take direction from a board determined to keep the library's collection and services for the mainstream white, straight, and anti-woke community members (Jenson, 2023). But recently the challenges are multiplying. PEN (originally stood for Poets, Essayists, Novelists) keeps track. Recent developments include Republican state representative Matt Krause sending a letter and list with 850 books to school districts, asking them to investigate and report on which of the titles they held in libraries or classrooms. (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). Librarians understand that removing the lgbt, trans, and other diverse books mean targeting these kids. Brooklyn Public Librarian Nick Higgins said, "particularly if they're in a community [where] the only safe space might be the school's library or a public library." "All of a sudden, they go into these spaces, and they find adults taking the stories that matter to them the most off the shelves. In a sense [the adults are] telling them that they don't matter at all, and they have no right to belong in that community, and that's devastating" (News+, 2022). It's not just the books, it's the boards. "Conservative activists in several states, including Texas, Montana and Louisiana have joined forces with like-minded officials to dissolve libraries' governing bodies, rewrite or delete censorship protections, and remove books outside of official challenge procedures." (Gowen, April 2022).

Looking for articles and letters to the editor from Montana there were many that surfaced, using challenged, banned, etc. and "public libraries" and Montana as keywords. We did a survey this fall and the respondents, not enough to be statistically significant, revealed, the subjects of the book was challenged: - Anti Christian⁵ Critical Race Theory² LGBTQ¹⁰ Occult² Policing² Profanity³ Racial issues⁵ Sexually explicit¹² Trans⁶. Flathead County's ImagineIF library experience is worthy of its own book, if not mini-series, and I don't feel knowledgeable enough to go into the details, but it's clear that politics are successfully at work to limit the books that kids can read. Jonny Diamond's piece, "They're shooting books now: Censorship-loving, book-banning vigilantes stoop to a new low" They've come for librarians,

for storytimes, for school boards, held bonfires... and now they're shooting books. Librarians in Kalispell, Montana have resigned after several bullet-riddled books were dropped off over a two-day period in early August. As library director Ashley Cummins told *The Flathead Beacon*, of the two resignations: They said they did not feel safe coming to work anymore. They signed up to be library workers, they didn't sign up for that. (Diamond, 2022). Billings kept two gay themed books on the shelf, trustee Mike Leo saying, "I would like to go back to the selection criteria and remind folks that selection of a work does not constitute agreement with its content and that material selected should be considered for the impact of each work as a whole and not in part. So, I think by following those guidelines that are already accepted standard policy, it guides us to the decision we're about to make tonight" (Two books, 2022).

Jim Elliott, talking about the trends in Montana about book banning wrote, "I don't know if they've been banned yet, but it seems that books on manners haven't been read much of late. "Dear Miss Manners, I am going to a library board meeting, should I carry a semi-automatic or will a Colt Peacemaker do?"(Elliott, 2022) In Montana, even logos are suspect. The rejected logo is blue and features four triangles — reddish orange, yellow, green and light blue — that symbolize information being trumpeted outward. Commissioner Tammy Hall was worried. "I think there are two things you can say today to set off a firestorm in the area of information," Hall said. "One is rainbow and one is misinformation. Those are very political, explosive weapons." While in the end, it stayed, the State Library Commissioners were worried that this logo, part of a promotional package costing more than \$300,000 and inspired by a prism, was too like the LGBT!Q Pride flag.

The challenged books can come from either side, though. In October of last year the ImagineIf Board kept *Why Children*, characterized by "pro-slavery sympathies, anti-LGBTQ views and allegations that he allowed alleged sex offenders to hold positions of authority in his church" (Drew, 2022) But it was retained, one of the arguments being that people should be informed about this book, which is getting a lot of press, without having to enrich the author's coffers.

Many articles document the pushback. ImagineIf's director said that despite all the threats, the "staff stand firm in their professional dedication to their mission and ensuring a safe space for staff and library users". September 18 to 24, Banned Books Week, was still being marked and "we're hoping this year to use it as an educational opportunity for people that aren't familiar with the history of books that have been banned or challenged and might be surprised by what they find out." Bozeman's Banned Books week included a conversation with a First Amendment Lawyer, a Banned Books Jeopardy Night, Picture book conversation for grownups and a giveaway. *Gender Queer* and *Lawn Boy* were retained in Billings, those in favor arguing for LGBTQ support and freedom to read, those against claiming the books were child pornography.(Ehrlick, January 25, 2022).

Library and School Boards are being organized by people who would censor. One article in *BookRiot* shared this story, "Recently, I voted in my local school board election. A whole slate (usually school board members here run individually) was running that aligned themselves with book banners and other regressive school board policies. After annoying everyone I know about the election for weeks and dragging my roommate to the voting station, I was surprised to find a long line awaiting me. Of the six board members who ran with that slate, exactly zero got elected, which I hope means that part of the reason so many people voted in this local election was to vote them out" (Ellis, 2022). Even the resignation of Bruce Newell from the Montana State Library (MSL) Commission was preceded by his praise for what had been accomplished there previously. ImagineIf library's success he wrote "was built on a foundation of trust between staff, the board's trustees and its community. Trust on all those levels allowed ImagineIf to operate with excellence for decades. Through successive improvement it became (literally) a world-class public library. It hired and retained fantastic directors. It was blessed with an extraordinary staff. It had a vibrant Friends group and an enviable Foundation. And as you'd expect, ImagineIf always had a great library board, one that played its role with fidelity, imagination, and courage" (Drew, February 11, 2022).

But by fall of 2022, David Ingram, in an essay in *LoveLivesHere*, was quoted, while the writer first noted that “it is important to recognize that none of the current trustees were placed on the library board for their experience with libraries, because they have none. Knowing that, it is still a surprise that their comments do not support best practices for libraries, the First Amendment freedom to access information, or the ImagineIF Library policies that they approved” (*Love Lives Here*, 2022) Ingram said that *Not My Idea* was “totally inappropriate for the intended audience,” “indoctrinational material,” “a potential threat to the safety and tranquility of our patrons and staff,” and “borders on hate speech.” Based on this opinion of the book material, he suggested hiding the book and making it available only upon request. He even went so far as recommending that the book should be placed under video surveillance, dubiously claiming that this would be a “deterrent from damage or theft.” (*Love Lives Here*, October 3, 2022). And one of his fellow trustees, also inexperienced in libraries, wrote that they could sequester the books they disapprove of, keep them, “as long as we make a big deal that ‘intellectual freedom’ has made us slaves to ALA [American Library Association] philosophy and that we’ve been neutered,” (Drew, February 2022) . Director Ashley Cummins’ immediate response was, “If we are going to sequester materials that someone finds inappropriate, we do not have a desk or shelf large enough... I think this opens up a can of worms that you are not prepared to deal with” (*LoveLivesHere*, October 3, 2022).

Some of this is down to Trump and racism. “ George Johnson said in an *On-Point* radio program, “We literally just go back to our origins, when we start to deny the ability of reading and writing. And that's what it really is, right? We're trying to literally deny an ability for people to read and people to write. And that is something that my ancestors know about very well, because we were denied that ability to read and write. It was illegal for people like me to be able to read and write in the 1800's and in the 1700's in this country. And so when we are specifically targeting books by Black people, books by queer people, we are going back to this country's origins, which is interesting. "Because that's the whole tagline, right? Make America Great Again. And it's like, but at what point are you speaking of? Are you speaking before Black people had civil rights? Are you speaking of during slavery? Are you speaking of when the indigenous people? Like what point was it great for the people who you're literally targeting right now? And so even like when we hear those type of statements,

we know exactly what the dog whistle is, too. And so when you start to say, Well, we're going to remove these specific books and we're going to start to remove these specific talking points” (Sutherland and Chakrabarti, 2022).

SURVEY RESULTS

We launched a survey of Montana Library Association membership this past fall. Only 60 librarians responded at all and most of the responses came from 25 or so people . Montana has a strong library community that was as ready as they could be, in policies, anyway, for this last couple of years, according to the respondents to the MLA survey--24 out of 25 respondents had a challenge process in place, and listed the MLA, the State Library, the ACLU, and supportive local communities and individuals who advocated for them. One, however, wrote that, in retrospect, it “made us realize the Library should amend its materials challenge form to include a requirement that the challenger read/view the item in its entirety, otherwise the challenge would not be considered. Another wrote, we had three books that were challenged by a patron from our library. He found the three titles on a list that his daughter was to choose from for AP English. After searching our online catalog, he realized that those same titles could be borrowed from some of our partner libraries, not us directly. We followed through with the challenge discussion just to make sure we had a policy that was able to withstand outside influences.”

One response spoke to the professionalism, “Having a well-defined reconsideration policy, a well-trained Youth Services Librarian, who could articulate the value of retaining the material and a Library Trustees that understand the importance of ImagineIF really made the difference.” Another wrote, since we are a unique library that is both a school library and a public library, whatever happens with our school library affects the public library and vis versa. In this case it was helpful to have the public librarian accessible to provide a buffer as well as perspective for the parent.”

Montana State Library is doing many things to serve the state’s population. It supported the state with a Covid dashboard through the pandemic and had a library of circulating hot spots, so critical in Covid -times. It was

one of 14 states to be part of NASA program to grow STEM and Solar System Ambassadors and Night Sky Network members. (Mena Report, 2019). It's helping the state update its 911 system. (Montana State Library 2022). It supports libraries and the state through many means, one of them being help with the challenge process through the Intellectual Freedom committee, which is charged with creating "awareness among librarians of their responsibility to promote freedom of access to information in all types of libraries and to assist any library, library worker, library trustee, or friend of the library besieged by individuals or groups attempting to interfere with the right-to-read firestorm" (Silvers, June 20,2022).

I want to thank the Montana Library Association for posting the survey, developed with Matt Beckstrom. While we only had about sixty responses and often only twenty-five respondents to the open-ended questions, the results are encouraging, especially seeing that the majority had challenge processes in place. I asked the Montana Library Association membership about their perceptions of the motivation of the challengers, which included simple reader offense, concerns about unchristian ideas, misrepresentation by students about the contents of books, personal moral convictions and political viewpoints. Two respondents said the challenger was part of coordinated efforts. Some reported library users feeling unsafe in the library due to the displays and books available. I also asked who had their back. The State Library was named four times, the most named, though, were other public libraries, five times and same number for the Montana Library Association. Some of the criteria used to question the challenger included an average of eight times--the ALA Code, collection statistics, reviews, prizes won, and number of other libraries with the same title. Strategies, besides calling on outside validation, included using informed community members, or associations. Active listening and discussion with the concerned patron were noted. One wrote, "Making clear that we understood that they were offended and that we respected their right to choose what they wanted to read and watch. Being clear about our process and why we wanted to keep the item in the collection." One respondent wrote, "It was very helpful, I think, that one of the Library Trustees--who is pretty devout--read it and said she saw no reason to change anything about it." When someone makes a comment about the content of a book, we just talk to

them and let them know we appreciate their input and if they would like to make a formal complaint, they have the right to do that.

“The ALA policy was quoted about censorship, our policy was presented, explanation that if we banned the books they wanted, then we would also be required to ban their Bible if someone objected. Explaining that if they did not want their children to not read the books, then don't allow them to check them out.” Montana’s reputation as ruggedly individualist would have come into play. It sounds as though the most important part of dealing with these issues included patience, good listening skills, and the ability to keep a neutral face. Some of the responses included bullets like: *Several conversations with both the school and public librarian. *Speaking to them in terms they understand. *My experiences were conversations with people. Being honest when they ask about work/ the library. People reading the newspaper stories and then asking me questions because they know I work at the library meant I had a connection already. “As Director I explained our policy, offered a copy of our policy and stated if the person/group did not want their families to check out the books they did not have to check them out. Other people in the community liked the books wanting banned. If I banned the books they wanted banned I would then have to remove in a likely scenario their Christian book they followed I think the notion of democracy played a role”—“Making sure everyone understood why we weren't removing the book based on the request of one patron. We made sure we had out pro/con arguments ready for personal confrontations.” The importance of keeping the public in the loop and the ability to have open conversations where concerns were heard but community opinions, in an individualistic state, had to be weighed as well. When asked about support from the townspeople, MLA members replied, “I feel like community members were incredibly supportive in the initial stages. Eventually, library "advocates" began to care more about winning than the effect their actions were having on the library.” So, pluses/minuses situation. One response was “Individual members of the community speaking up through conversations, opinion pieces in the newspaper, etc. Flathead Library Alliance has done things like "read-ins" that help people ask questions and learn about what is going on.” “There are so many people who don't know what is going on or stop listening once they hear it's a book that is controversial.” One recommendation coming from the survey “Libraries need to advertise

themselves and, on their websites, have good statements about the importance of information access and how different programs available at the library help maintain information access.”

“If we received a serious challenge I think I could ask for help from Montana Library Association and their representative to American Library Association who assists with book challenges. Some used the understate approach, “The Library was able to keep the whole situation de-escalated, so the challenge never hit the newspapers or made waves in the community. It was resolved under-the-radar.” Others felt that “community support was vital in retaining books. Many wrote in on behalf of keeping books. We have had people come in to show us support personally. I feel that when we review our collection development and acquisition policies folks will come in to urge support of a diverse collection.” One wrote, “We haven't had any recent challenges. No one had seemed upset that we didn't remove the challenged books from the shelf. It did not impact the use, but the reputation is now that students have access to "pornography". There is a magnifying glass on collection development. The whole situation this summer bled into Banned Books week when another furor over our displays occurred. It seems patronage is down a bit after all of this has happened.

LESSONS LEARNED

The survey respondents had considered lessons:

- It's good to visit with a patron, listening to their thoughts, sharing your notions because others might appreciate book:
- The experience helped clarify our policy.
- Allow the community to understand that we do not censor and why we do not censor.
- More conversations about why books matter, why a variety of books & topics & viewpoints matter.
- Made us more aware of the difference of opinions and beliefs of some community members. We reviewed our policy to make it stronger and discussed the situation.
- It gave the Board of Trustees a renewed sense of unity against censorship.

- It let us decide who should handle these types of requests and how they would best be handled.

When asked if the library was self-censoring: Most said yes or yes, but:

- We are being cautious. We are going to be asking the community to support a Library Mill Levy in the next year and we cannot help but hope that we can avoid controversies that will impact our funding.
- We try not to self-censor, and we do pay attention to books being banned in other libraries. I feel like each community is different in that respect and if a book is banned in a library and we also have that book, we do not remove it from the shelves or move it. For us basically "if the wheel ain't broke don't fix it"
- We aren't self-censoring, but if a book that is highly controversial that doesn't seem to fit the demographics of our population is available via our sharing group, we choose to place holds rather than purchase the title.
- I am the primary book purchaser for our library, and I am cognizant of the challenges, but try to not let it impact the book choices I make. I don't know if I am doing a good job or not though. We did purchase all of the top banned books for the past few years to make sure patrons had access without worrying about book challenges.
- I don't believe the library is self-censoring in any way. I do feel like the library is being more considerate of alternative viewpoints in library messaging and displays.
- A little bit. The books put on display in high-traffic areas are usually more "generic" topics like cooking, camping, technology, etc. I don't necessarily think this is a bad thing. We are here to help people know what information is available to them, not to start fights. We stick up for information accessibility when a fight comes to us. If more "broad-appeal" displays keep other more sensitive topics on shelves & accessible, then I think it's okay. It's sad to me that not all information is seen as equally important.
- We are not self-censoring or being more cautious.
- The library is not self-censoring, but very vigilant about the possibility of challenges.

- To a certain extent they are. We now spend more time looking at the placement of each item before we add it to our shelves. We also look at where other libraries place certain materials that we think may be challenged in the future.

And when asked about being asked to disaffiliate:

- Yes, our library board, especially one member, has pushed the library to disaffiliate from the ALA.
- Yes. The library board voted to publicly dissociate the library system from the American Library Association due to the perception of ALA being a radical leftist organization. They have not discouraged library staff from being individual members.

Impact

“In June a community ally group formed to support LGBTQ+ youth in our community. They put together a Pride float to have during the annual summer celebration. The assistant director and her husband chose to participate as private citizens. A few people in the community thought that the library had sponsored the float and "enticed children under false pretenses" to ride on the float. The only children on the float were two of my own children as well as a community youth who was going to walk the parade route solo wearing a Pride flag as a cape. Instead of directing all comments and concerns directly to me, two of the board members fielded "dozens" of phone calls with complaints. The complaints also included comments about our (minimal) Pride displays, the fact that we had teen volunteer that "appears to be trans or transitioning" (also one of my own children), and that we served rainbow cookies at our circulation desk. When asked for clarification, comments received electronically, or people to contact to explain, the trustees refused, stating that they were "private communications", and state law says that they don't have to divulge who or what was said. Like previously mentioned, this had not fully died down when Banned Books Week was upon us, and we received more complaints.”

Impact:

- It didn't impact the library's reputation or use. We were able to resolve the issues without going all the way to a board hearing.
- Not at all. Library has a reputation for pushing boundaries.
- It had no impact essentially. However, the one group never came back to the library and the church they were a part of, started their own Christian library.
- I don't think it impacted at all as it was resolved quickly and without dispute.
- In some ways it hurt and, in some ways, it helped. Flathead County is very divided in ideology though tends to lean more conservative. The library was much more liberal in years prior to the original book challenges. The handling of the initial book challenges resulted in County government appointing library board members that aligned with their personal values.
- It highlighted divides in the community. I think some people see the library as a threat (often these are people who don't use the library frequently) and some people see the library as a sanctuary (usually more frequent users or people who understand the importance of access to information that you may not be able to get elsewhere).
- For the most part it had little or no effect on our reputation as dedicated patrons realized a library was obligated to maintain a variety of books.
- Because the Library had succinct policies in place and staff was well-trained in Intellectual Freedom issues, there was really no blow-back in the community.
- The patron who initiated the challenge accepted the decision of the Library Board of Trustees.

INTO THE FUTURE

“The effort to pass HB 234 in Montana is the latest salvo by extremist politicians who want to prevent equitable access to library services by banning so-called “obscene” books and materials” (HRC Staff, 2023). Passed in February of this year, it's still in Senate. An editorial in the *Missoulian* argued, “Romeo and Juliet.” “The Canterbury Tales.” “Beowulf.” These and many other titles in libraries or in age-appropriate

curriculums could now be designated as obscene if HB 234 becomes law. Teachers and librarians could be held criminally liable. Let's be clear: teachers and librarians do not provide obscene material. And HB 234 does nothing but scare education professionals into questioning whether literature taught for years could now meet an arbitrary definition of what is obscene" (Missoulain, 2023). Initially, the bill sponsored by Rep. Bob Phalen, R-Lindsay meant that librarians could face criminal charges and \$500 fines as well as and six months of jail. Now, the bill going forward makes exceptions for them and for employees of colleges and universities but not for employees of public schools. The threat is ongoing, getting more virulent all the time, and only the concerted efforts of library people will keep books in the hands of those who need them most as well as keeping children's reading materials in the decision-making province of the parents and guardians.

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