

## Practical To Do List

*A note from Gina Millsap as a follow up to this webinar.*

It's important to acknowledge that there's no magic solution for dealing with a book challenge, especially now. No one has all the answers. These are my suggestions based on 45 years spent in public libraries, 25 of them as a chief executive officer. It's also important to note that while we talk about public school classrooms and libraries and public libraries, they aren't interchangeable. There is a difference in governance and how much say parents may have in what their child reads in those distinct environments.

I've thought about my previous experiences with challenges, two of which had organized opposition to either program or collection content, and what I would do now to prepare myself, the staff, the board, and the community for an organized and determined challenge that could get ugly and confrontational.

The standard responses we've used in the past – talking to people, explaining collection policies and selection guidelines, setting up a progressive complaint process that includes a review of a book -- won't necessarily work as effectively as they have in the past. By that I mean it won't end the complaint process. (If that is your policy, by all means follow it. It should allow the complainants to be heard and include an opportunity to review the book in question in its entirety, not just words or paragraphs taken out of context to prove how objectionable it is. Also, one way to lose if legal action ensues is to have a policy and not follow it.)

Book banning today is frequently an organized effort with groups like Moms for Liberty who have financial backing and playbooks for how to demand changes to school and public library collections. They are focused on intimidating librarians, teachers, and board members into complying with their demands.

It's critical in this environment to prepare yourself, colleagues, boards, and library advocates to respond to complainants and to hold them accountable for what they are really trying to do, not what they say they're doing. They say they are protecting children and preserving community values. What they are really doing is attempting to remove books and other content that is in conflict with their personal biases and values and to assume authority for making decisions for the whole community when there is no legal backing or mandate for them to do so. So, do your homework.

Study the opposition:

- Read what they're putting out on social media.
- Read articles by media and freedom to read organizations and advocates that analyze and break down what they're doing and the impact they're having
- View videos on YouTube – Search under “book banning school and public library board meetings” and “Moms for Liberty” to see their tactics at board meetings.
- Checkout [Book Riot's post](#) on Moms for Liberty, one of the largest and best funded groups. This post includes their playbook for how to talk about books they want schools to remove from classroom collections and libraries.
- Monitor what is happening in your state legislature. Several state legislatures have proposed or enacted book bans.

Policies and process:

[www.bibliotheca.com](http://www.bibliotheca.com)

- Review your selection and public comment policies – make sure they are up to date and that staff and board understand them. In this environment, it's important to have a public comment policy that allows the public to have their say and also allows the board chair to remain in control of the meeting.
- DO NOT hand someone a form as your first response to a book challenge or demand for removal. Talk to them, determine what their issue is and if they are part of an organized group. While it's not the library's intent, the message received may be, "Here's how you get something removed from library shelves."
- Make sure your library has access to legal counsel that is well versed in First Amendment law.
- Use the communication tools you have to educate your community about how librarians and libraries promote and champion the freedom to read and learn by providing access to all viewpoints and interests.

#### Training for staff and board:

- Training and discipline are essential in this environment. Boards should designate its official representative, whether that's the board chair or the library director or school superintendent.
- Be clear with staff who speaks and does not speak for the library.
- Train all staff in intellectual freedom principles, selection policy, the complaint process, and what to say if a member of the public approaches them with a complaint.
- Draft scripts for front line staff so they have a ready response when someone complains directly to them so that they can respond calmly and civilly and follow a process to refer the complainant to the official representative.

#### Whose job is it to respond to challenges and are they prepared?

- Ultimately, managing a challenge is the responsibility of administrative staff and boards. One of the goals of some groups demanding removal or restriction of books is to intimidate board members, teachers, and librarians into acquiescing to their demands.
- Boards are the policy makers. They partner with directors and superintendents to make and implement policy. They must be prepared to state policies, like collection policies, clearly and to exercise their authority to say no to groups who claim to represent all parents or the community. They must also be prepared to call out lies and misinformation as part of the response to demands for book bans.
- In addition to the traditional competencies they should have, they also need training and practice in:
  - Facilitating and managing meetings
  - Conflict resolution
  - Anticipating and responding to verbal and physical threats to themselves, staff, or the institution – talk to local law enforcement before you have a challenge.
  - Exercising their authority per law and policy, even when under duress

#### Collaboration:

- Build a coalition of library advocates – library users, parents, organizations from all sectors – that are willing to show up and speak out in support of the freedom to read and the importance of public libraries and public schools.
- Consider partnering with schools and libraries in your state. There is power in numbers and consistent messaging.

Last, but not least:

- Do an audit of how you're preparing for a challenge. Hoping it won't happen to you isn't a good strategy and leaves you unprepared for people who aren't going to go away or give up.
- Remain civil, respectful, transparent, truthful, and prepared to stand for the policies and values of your library or school.
- Remember that people who support book banning are part of the communities we serve. They may view and portray us as enemies, but responding in kind will escalate the situation and won't resolve anything. We can and should refute what they say and refuse to accede to their demands.
- All library staff and board members have the right to be safe. Make sure your audit includes a meeting with local law enforcement and security staff, if your school/library has them.

I hope you find this a practical to do list that makes you feel more prepared for a book challenge. If you have questions or comments, you can reach me at [gjmillsap](mailto:gjmillsap)