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When Libraries Are a Battlefield: Standing Up for Kids' Right to Read

By Patricia J. Murphy | Jun 13, 2022

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Pop singer Pat Benatar once sang that “love is a battlefield.” Sadly, today with all of the banning and challenging of books, we can say the same thing about libraries. Fortunately, there are librarians and teachers across the country who are standing up for books and the readers who want, and need, to read them. *PW* spoke with four such librarians about how they are arming themselves and their readers for the battle.



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Growing up, **Becky Calzada** would have given anything to see herself and her Mexican-Bolivian cultures celebrated in books. Today, as the district library services coordinator in Leander Independent School District a fast-growing pre-K-12 district northwest of Austin, she does everything she can to stand up for readers of all backgrounds to see themselves and others in books—and to read books of their choosing from their schools' libraries.

In her work, Calzada is all too familiar with book challenges. But this doesn't diminish her fight on behalf of her district's librarians, teachers, and students—it emboldens it. As part of the district's teaching/learning department, she's on the frontlines offering essential training and invaluable support for 42 campus librarians. “I've created training for principals, assistant principals, teachers, and language arts coordinators regarding challenge processes and building understanding in terms of how to interact with parents,” Calzada said. “We do a lot of scenario-based training. It's important to listen to a parent who comes in with concerns, remind them what rights they have, how those rights only extend to their child in terms of removing of a book, and inform them about the processes that we have in place and our policies, including that no child is ever forced to read a book,” Calzada said.

So far this year, Calzada's district has seen 15 challenges to books with topics ranging from racial issues to LGBTQ+ themes in their secondary schools. While Calzada believes it's only natural for librarians to become impassioned over challenges, she's tried to be less emotional and more practical. “I've learned to really lean in and trust the process,” Calzada said. “I'll tell parents I understand their concern. I also explain that the book is going to have its due process based on the board policies put into place.”

For fellow librarians whose districts don't offer training and/or have clear collection policies in place, she advises they take things into their own hands. “Go to your district leaders, and ask, ‘What are our policies? What are we to do; what are we to say?’” Calzada said. “And, then, see if there's a role in planning or pulling together resources.”

One such resource Calzada suggests is one she's helped create: #Freadom, aka the FReadom Fighters, an award-winning online advocacy community offering an arsenal of support, encouragement, and assets for school librarians to continue their fight. “Here librarians can find instructions on how to contact their school board or legislators, to make

connections, and to order a #FReadom t-shirt. I think we're the first grassroots organization to do something like this. Now, there are others," Calzada said.

Faith Huff is also a #FReadomFighter and a school librarian teacher at Albemarle Road Middle School in Charlotte, N.C. Next year, she'll be at Northern Guilford Middle School in Greensboro.

While Huff's current school is not in the middle of a book banning battle, and her principal and superintendent are supportive of the books their students choose to read, she's made it her mission to stand up for other districts and school librarians who are facing challenges. "A lot of librarians are scared or unwilling to speak out for fear of losing their jobs, so we help by being there for them and encouraging them," Huff said.

The "we" Huff is referring to is the North Carolina School Library Media Association, a hands-on grassroots organization for school librarians. They offer support on everything from being a friendly face in a Zoom meeting and giving encouragement at in-person meetings, to stepping in as experts and helping navigate difficult situations. "We're there to stand up, to support, and to be loud," Huff said. "We are all in this together, and it could be us next. Things can change in a heartbeat."

Huff and others believe that something even greater than book banning is at stake. "It's not enough that you win your book challenge," Huff said. "We're having to remind people what public school and public education is about. That it is for all!"

Katie Kendall is a secondary school teacher at Vandegrift High School in the Leander ISD in Austin (the same district as Calzada), where she puts her AP students through the paces of rigorous coursework, and sponsors the student-led Banned Book Club. Kendall had her reasons for saying "yes" when asked to sponsor this group of high school girls determined to read all of the books set to be removed from their school's classroom libraries. "My daughter is actually one of the club's co-founders," Kendall said, "and I'm a proponent of choice and free reading. So I absolutely stand by their mission."

What started out like any other academic club has turned into more of an advocacy group with twice-monthly meetings, a website, social media accounts, press coverage (e.g. NPR and the *Washington Post*), and a mission statement: "to allow students to share and debate their views on the controversial subject matter in the books, and to provide an opportunity to expose students to different viewpoints or opinions."

Kendall said the group is also determined "to have a place in the conversation" about the future of the books in question. "Once they read each title, the members write a 'reconsideration statement' from the students' perspective, and they post it to the club's Instagram, and send it to their librarian," Kendall said. "Then, when these reconsideration statements are received, the reconsideration committee reads the club's statements, it discusses whether or not the book is appropriate for students."

Kendall said that without the club's input, the committee could only speculate on what students' feedback might be. To date, the titles for which the club has provided reconsideration statements, and which have been reviewed by the reconsideration committee, remain on the school library's bookshelves for now. But regardless of the outcomes, the club will keep reading, discussing, and writing statements.

Kendall's advice to teachers who may want to sponsor a banned book club? "Make sure that you know what you're being asked to do, that you are supportive of their mission." As for the club's advice for students? "1) Get together with other people and read the texts that are being challenged. 2) Get to know your librarian at your school and public library because they're a huge resource and advocate for reading and choice. 3) Have hard conversations with people who may either be unaware of these topics or initially not open to discussing these topics."

Kendall sees firsthand that kids can handle difficult discussions, and are better for having them. "What I've discovered is that our students can absolutely handle these hard topics. They can grapple with things going on in the world, and we don't give them enough credit for that," she said. "These discussions can help them become more critical thinkers, and more compassionate and empathetic people, while allowing them to see things in new ways."

Nick Higgins remembers moving around a lot as a kid, and being dropped off at the library for hours at a time. It was where he found community and a place he fit in. Today, as the chief librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library, he's in charge of delivering public services throughout Brooklyn, and helping develop transformative library services and spaces for its residents.

Higgins and BPL's recent efforts to stand up for readers' rights are helping create a community far beyond the library's walls. They began with a desire to combat the unprecedented parade of book challenges. "The ALA has documented over 1,597 challenges on individual titles—and not everything gets reported," Higgins said. "But this was the highest number reported in the 20-year history of keeping track of things." So Higgins and his library interns (ages 13-21) brainstormed and workshopped a number of ideas.

In the past, they had done book displays and discussion groups on titles that are frequently challenged or banned. But, this time around, Higgins and the interns wanted to offer direct support to those who were most impacted. They came up with the Books Unbanned initiative.

“We wanted to do something that was meaningful, particularly for teens in the areas of the country who are in the middle of these challenges, and who aren't finding the books that they need to read on the shelves in their local libraries,” Higgins said. “So, we decided to offer a free out-of-state e-library card that gives readers access to more than half a million audio books and e-books in our collection—totally unrestricted, so they can check out whatever they like, just like a regular card holder here in Brooklyn!” (To apply for a card, email BooksUnbanned@bklynlibrary.org.)

The library also started an Intellectual Freedom Council to address issues with the new e-library card readers and others interested in joining. Over Zoom, the BPL council meets monthly to discuss intellectual freedom and what it means to them, why it's important to have a robust collection library, and how they can support others across the U.S. to stand up for the right to read. “We'd like to see it become a national advocacy group of young people who are interested in supporting libraries in protecting and promoting the freedom to read!” Higgins said.

Higgins and what he calls “a small motivated team of the most compassionate, smart, hardworking colleagues” will supply whatever the council needs to get the job done. “Whether it's future meeting spaces, additional Zoom accounts, or even money for pizza,” Higgins said, “we just want to make sure they know that we support their efforts.”

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