

## Collection Development: Bordering on Dysfunction

Several years ago, Dr. Larry Amey was asked to serve on a committee for an "Information Center" being established for the community of Middle Musquodoboit, Nova Scotia. This center was to be set up in the school library and function as a community school-housed library. The public library system wanted little to do with this early 1990s innovation in rural Nova Scotia. A meeting was held involving the usual assembly – the teacher-librarian, members of the community, the parent group, subsystem supervisor and invited guest and authority, Dalhousie University professor Dr. Amey. The subsystem supervisor did not want to spend money on print or electronic materials; rather, he wanted comfy sofa chairs, pre-school furniture and a coffee machine – all worthwhile additions and enhance-

ments. When asked about the collection, he, in all sincerity, suggested that the school have a 'book drive' and use the donations. At this juncture Dr. Amey forcefully, and with only the hint of appropriate sarcasm he could inject, stated, "That is a very, very bad idea!" And indeed it was, and is.

In a recent case, several donations were made to schools and school libraries in the Halifax Regional School Board. These donations bypassed any library scrutiny, as they were a mass mailing to the schools, with a request that volumes be placed in the school library. A horror story followed, in that two of the books can be classified as hate literature – badly written and not in any way supportive of the established school curricula.

How can schools and districts deal with such materials? There should be a selection policy in place at the district level for all schools and school libraries. This policy may have many names – acquisitions policy, learning materials policy, selection policy or resource materials policy. Such a policy can deal with the following: donations, previewing packages of books, sales promotions, new purchases, provincial or state reading lists and automation "recon" of old materials. All materials, print and electronic, should meet the criteria of your school district's selection policy.

No policy at the provincial or state level? Grab your school library colleagues and form a committee – yes, another committee! Develop a policy and present it to the program and curriculum people. Any department or ministry of education will be hard pressed to ignore such a

vital piece of work. No policy at the district level? Well then, you can write one yourself for your school. This is something I have done. Talk to the teachers in your school. Talk to your school administrators. Chances are they will be happy to have you do this – provided that you assume the leadership. If you are unsure as to what should be in the policy, go to your formal and informal networks of colleagues. Find out what kind of selection policies other schools, other districts, other provinces and states and other libraries have. You are a teacher-librarian. You know how to do the research – get on the Net and get into the periodical databases.

But, what should be in this selection policy? One very important component is that a professional must do selection. Under no circumstances should individual parents or a parent group be choosing curricular support materials. Certainly the parents can be instrumental in lobbying for more materials for the school library and also in providing funds to purchase new materials. Your parents are often your strongest allies in developing a good, well-rounded collection. But the teacher-librarian is the staff person educated and trained in collection development. The teacher-librarian knows the publishers, the authors, the school curriculum, and the students' and the teachers' needs. The teacher-librarian knows how to order the books and how to make them available in the most effective way – through resource-based learning activities.

What about those schools all across Canada and the United States where there is no professional staff?

### TEACHER LIBRARIAN

The Journal for School Library Professionals

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It is a sad but true reality for many of our school districts. In this instance, teachers should be involved in selection. They know what they want their students to learn. They often see the gaps in the collection. The classroom and subject teacher is your next best line of offence in implementing sound acquisition in the absence of a teacher-librarian. I am currently on a committee for a large high school with no teacher-librarian. There are teachers on the committee representing each subject area and together we are assessing the curricular and library needs of the students. In another junior high school with a competent library technician, the principal sends requests for new purchases to me for consideration and review. Both of these methods help in maintaining a teacher-librarian's presence and participation in collection development.

But why is it necessary to have professional involvement at all? The old adage of "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" is so apt. Schools and school libraries are constantly under assault for the materials they use and lend to students. A selection policy can assist you in the justification you may have to offer. The most recent challenges have been to the *Harry Potter* series, not unlike the challenges to R.L. Stine's books of a few years ago. Under constant attack are vital materials on human growth and reproduction. With a selection policy, you build in a process for responding to and dealing with challenges to materials. Having materials chosen by a teacher-librarian in the first instance goes a long way to ensuring that selection is age- and curriculum-appropriate.

A recent trip to Indianapolis to attend the American Association of School Librarians conference allowed me some time to travel in the United States, from Georgia north to Illinois. Every day I visited public libraries, and found that books on "sex education" were sorrowfully missing from the shelves. A quick check in the

computerized catalogue often revealed that these resources do not exist for the school-aged patron. A solid selection policy in your school and in your school district can ensure that school libraries do not fall victim to such self-censorship or influence from outside sources, often special interest groups who have decided that what they think is good for all students. No selection policy? Your library needs one.

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