

A Content Analysis of District School Library Selection Policies in the United States

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Abstract

Selection policies are practical tools used by school librarians to guide them in their collection development plans. This investigation into district-level selection policies examined policies from 80 school districts across the United States. The policies were examined to determine the status of selection policies in school libraries and if the policies reflect the recommendations of professional literature. Through content analysis, we determined that most of the school library selection policies included at least half of the expected key components. However, there is a need for school librarians to advocate for revision of policies to keep them current and provide effective guidance for school librarians as they make selections for their collections.

Introduction

Selection policies are used by libraries to explain how a librarian makes decisions about what materials should be added to its collection. These policies are a standard practice in all types of libraries, including public, academic, special, and school libraries. Having a selection policy is important because no library can collect everything. In a school library the selection policy should serve as the foundation of a collection that supports an equitable, inclusive, and learner-centered environment. The policy should guide the school librarian in determining what, where, and how a wide range of resources are available to learners. Additionally, an effective policy helps protect the collection from individual biases and allows for accountability in decision-making. The established selection policy should also be continually updated to ensure that it addresses resources in all relevant formats, its content is accessible to all readers, and it adequately defends a library's collection. Making the policy accessible, publicly available, and well-written and organized allows all stakeholders to understand the process of both selection and reconsideration. Most previous research has focused on the selection policies of public and academic libraries (Adkins, Esser, Corrigan 2005; Boulé 2005; Lanier 2014; Ritchie 2010; Straw 2013). In contrast, this study focused on the selection policies of school districts across the United States to evaluate their current status.

Selection and reconsideration policies remain an area of concern in school libraries. In its 2016 nationwide Controversial Books Survey, *School Library Journal* found that of its 574 respondents, only 59 percent of schools had some form of book selection policy (SLJ Research 2016a, 11). Interestingly, 81 percent of responding public schools had a formal book challenge procedure, a percentage that former director of the American Library Association (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom explained was too low. Jamie LaRue explained, “This is the piece that can be fixed. One hundred percent of schools should have a reconsideration policy” (Jacobson 2016).

The purpose of this study was to examine the selection policies of school districts across the United States to determine if they do or do not contain components recommended by the “Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries” (2018). Published by the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, this toolkit offers a comprehensive overview of why libraries need firmly established selection policies as well as which components are necessary for selection policies to be effective.

By comparing a sample of school district selection policies across the United States with the components found in the “Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries,” this study seeks to determine the overall effectiveness of a sample of school district selection policies by discussing the discrepancies between the toolkit and the sample selection policies. Thus, we could emphasize the specific areas of concern within the sample policies and encourage current school libraries to evaluate the effectiveness of their own district’s selection policies.

The following research questions were the focus of this study:

1. What is the state of district school library selection policies in school systems in the United States?
2. Do these policies have components that are recommended by the “Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries”?

TERMINOLOGY

Selection policies may appear under a variety of names, including Collection Development Policy, Acquisitions Policy, or Materials Selection Policy. In most states, school libraries in public schools are governed by the policies developed by their local school systems or districts. Each state varies in the number of school districts and their size and makeup. Some school districts include many schools, and some districts are quite small. However, each school library is subject to the policies of its school district. Hawaii is an exception, because all public schools in the state of Hawaii are part of a single school district.

Literature Review

RESEARCH STUDIES

When reviewing the literature, we found that most of the studies examining selection policies were conducted in public libraries, and they primarily focused on a specific area of the collection or a specific type of material (Niethamer 2016; Ritchie 2001). Other studies were focused on

academic libraries and their collection policies (Corrigan 2005; Horava and Levine-Clark 2016; Levenson 2019). Very little research is available about the development or content of selection policies as a whole. Instead, the available research focused on specific aspects of policies that impact collection development.

We located three studies that relate to collection development policies and practices in public libraries. These studies focused on how policies affect the collection of materials that represent diverse populations, but did not provide a deep exploration of the full content of policies. Catherine J. Ritchie's study conducted by surveying librarians in Illinois public libraries explored collection development of gay/lesbian/bisexual-related adult nonfiction. Ritchie's research also explored some aspects of respondents' collection development policies. Ritchie found that 72 percent of the libraries surveyed do not include a specific mention of "sexual orientation" as a specific group to be included or considered in collection development. She pointed out that most of the librarians believed that special inclusion of subgroups was not necessary because of the provisions of the American Library Association's blanket statements on access or because inclusion of special subgroups in the policy could potentially be exclusionary to other groups who were not specifically mentioned (2001).

Janet L. Niethamer's qualitative case study explored the availability of ethnic-specific, award-winning multicultural children's literature in public libraries in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania. She analyzed eleven collection development policies to see whether the policies specifically mentioned the need for diverse multicultural resources in the library. Then, she conducted group interviews with the public librarians to see if the library's collection practices aligned with its policies. Niethamer found that, while the policies were consistent in asking for cultural and ethnic diversity in the collection, the libraries' collection practices did not always match their policies. One of the principal issues was that the librarians were unaware of many of the awards for multicultural literature. Out of the four interview groups in the study, all four groups were aware of only two out of the eight relevant awards for multicultural literature. Similarly, only two of the librarians within the four focus groups mentioned their library's collection development policy. Also, many of the librarians claimed that the multicultural titles were often weeded due to lack of circulation (2016). However, as Niethamer points out, "When library policy and practice are misaligned, the default to whiteness is often the outcome" (2016, 90).

For her Master's thesis project, Meaghan R. Lanier conducted a content analysis of the collection development policies of public libraries in North Carolina. She found that the information included within the policies varied widely because no standard checklist for components in this type of policy existed. Although she focused only on public libraries in one state, her use of a checklist of expected components provided us with a blueprint for conducting a similar content analysis of school library policies (2014).

We also located several empirical studies about collection/selection policies in academic libraries, two of which were thesis or dissertation studies. Andy Corrigan's 2005 case study explored academic libraries' collection policies available on the Web and also documented specifically how one library developed its own policy. Although Corrigan's work cites specific examples of academic libraries' policies published online and outlines how his own library developed new policy documents, it provides little guidance on what a typical collection development policy should include.

To examine current trends in collection development policies, in 2016 Tony Horava and Michael Levine-Clark sent twenty academic librarians in North America a link to an online survey.

Horava and Levine-Clark found that five out of the twenty librarians did not have any collection development policies established at their libraries, while three of the libraries had transitioned in the last five years from a detailed policy to a simplified version. All but one of the fifteen libraries that had policies had updated them in the past five years. Based on their findings, Horava and Levine-Clark concluded that collection policies should evolve with libraries, and that a simplified collection policy allows for a less-restrictive collection management process (2016).

Helen N. Levenson's case study assessed written collection development policies and resources to determine the necessary components of a collection development policy for a medium-sized academic library. To find the components, Levenson used earlier publications such as David L. Perkins's *Guidelines for Collection Development*, published in 1979 by ALA; Bonita Bryant's *Guide for Written Collection Development Policy Statements*, published in 1989 by ALA; and the revised *Guide for Written Collection Development Policy Statements* by Bryant et al., published in 1996 by the ALA. Because Levenson's study was concluded before the 2018 publication of the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom's "Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries," the toolkit was not used for Levenson's study. She found that collection development policies for academic libraries should contain elements such as a statement of purpose, the library's mission statement, selection criteria, weeding considerations, a gift policy, ALA and Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) statements, a diversity statement, and a mention of intellectual freedom. Levenson also mentioned the importance of continually updating the library's collection development policy. According to Levenson, "Any library that expends the effort to produce a [collection development policy] should understand that the document is a 'living, breathing entity that is always thought of, always lived with, always tinkered with, and never quite finished' " (Levenson 2019, 215).

We found only three empirical studies of selection policies in school libraries (Galindo 2013; Shupala 2006; Turner 2006). Andrew Michael Shupala conducted a mixed-methods study of the perceptions of selection policies held by certified school librarians and principals in Texas. However, this study did not explore the actual content of the selection policies themselves. Shupala determined that both principals and librarians had positive perceptions of selection policies and reconsideration procedures. Interestingly, a higher number of the certified librarians than principals could not identify the source of their districts' policy. On the other hand, principals were less likely than librarians to report complaints about materials, especially as the size of their district enrollment grew larger (2006).

Aurea L. Galindo examined the acquisitions policy in a single school district in Texas to determine whether the policy could serve as the foundation of a collection that meets the needs of a diverse student population. Galindo's study primarily used interviews with school librarians and Spanish-speaking English Language Learners to understand their perception of the school library's acquisitions policies and services provided. This study highlighted the significance of interpretation of the acquisitions policy and how that interpretation affects decision-making. Both Galindo's and Shupala's studies provide little information about the actual content of the policies themselves and instead focus on perceptions of policies and procedures.

Even fewer research studies on school library selection policies have been conducted outside of the United States. Richard Turner's research on school library policies was conducted in England and Wales. His work emphasized the need for school library policies to provide guidance in multiple areas of the school library program, including collection development. His research

included a list of components that school library policies should have to guide the mission and overall program of the school library. Turner concluded that “The relatively low number of schools in England and Wales that have a school library policy needs to be disseminated further” (2006, 68). Although his study reflects the status of policies in the United Kingdom in 2006, the same can be said of policies in the United States as revealed by the high percentage of schools and districts without policies in the 2016 SLJ Controversial Books Survey.

GUIDELINES FOR CREATING POLICIES

Guidelines for creating school library policies can be found through several sources. One of the oldest published guidelines for collection development in school libraries is Esther Stallmann’s article in the 1935 *Peabody Journal of Education*. In her article Stallmann outlined key principles for selection, including the use of selection aids and providing books for all kinds of readers. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) collaborated with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to develop *School Library Guidelines*, which were adopted in 2002. IFLA approved revised guidelines in 2015. The 2015 guidelines include a short section on collection management policies and procedures. These guidelines recommend the following elements to be included in a policy statement:

- The mission of a school library, consistent with the *IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto*.
- Statements of intellectual freedom and of freedom of information.
- The purpose of the collection management policy and its relation to the curriculum and to the national, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and indigenous identities of its users.
- Long- and short-term objectives of the provision of resources.
- Responsibilities for collection management decisions. (2015, 34)

The guidelines also explain the need for policies establishing guidelines for reconsideration of materials and policies and procedures for collection management.

Several notable publications on school library policy creation have been published in the United Kingdom, including Anthony Tilke’s textbook, *Managing Your School Library and Information Service: A Practical Handbook* (published by Facet in 2002) and Lynn Winkworth and Geoff Dubber’s *Policy Making and Development Planning for the Second School LRC* (published by School Library Association in 2003). Although these are notable for international use, in the United States most school libraries are guided by the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom’s “Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries” (2018). This toolkit was developed to update and replace “Workbook for Selection Policy Writing,” which was published in 1998 by the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom. The original 1998 workbook was intended for use by school libraries. The 2018 toolkit was developed over a two-year period (2016–2018) with input from school, public, and academic librarians, and provides guidelines for all three types of libraries. The 2018 toolkit includes suggested components and sample text for each of the types of libraries (Dawkins 2018).

Two widely used collection development texts have been developed specifically for school libraries: Mona Kerby’s *An Introduction to Collection Development for School Librarians*

(published by ALA in 2019) and Marcia Mardis's *The Collection Program in Schools: Concepts and Practices*, now in its seventh edition (published by Libraries Unlimited in 2021). Both texts were updated to reflect the AASL's *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* (2018) and the *ALA/AASL/CAEP School Librarian Preparation Standards* (2019). Kerby's work provides an example of a district-level selection policy criteria list from a school district in Maryland and encourages school librarians to use the "Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries" as guidance for selection policy development (2019, 24–26). Mardis's text includes an entire chapter on policies and procedures, including the suggested contents for a policies and procedures manual. Mardis suggests the following elements for a school-level policy:

- Statement of philosophy that includes the district value, school mission, and documents related to intellectual freedom and students' right to access;
- Selection objectives that explain how the collection aligns with the school's goals and assists in meeting those goals;
- Responsibility for selection;
- Selection criteria that provide guidance for content as well as format;
- Guidelines for acceptance of gifts;
- Policies on controversial materials and support for intellectual freedom;
- Procedures for handling complaints and reconsideration of materials. (2021, 60–64)

An additional resource for writing school library policies in the United States is Elizabeth Downs's *The School Library Media Specialist's Policy & Procedure Writer* (published by Neal-Schuman in 2010). When providing guidance for writing school-level selection policies, Downs provides a checklist of policy considerations that are very similar to those in other texts and include goals and objectives, responsibility for selection, selection criteria, intellectual freedom, and right to read statements. Interestingly, the considerations do not include reconsideration guidelines (2010, 74–75). Downs's work serves as a guide for writing a variety of policies in school libraries. It also contains sample policies to illustrate good policy-writing.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Overall, the previous research on selection policies suggests that such policies can be helpful in guiding librarians through the selection process when the policies are well written and kept up to date. As detailed above, most of the previous research has focused on the public library setting, and, within a school library context, the research has focused on attitudes or perceptions about policies instead of analysis of the policy itself. Of the studies about school library selection policies (Galindo 2013; Shupala 2006; Turner 2006), only Turner's examines the content of those policies, and it was conducted outside of the United States. Thus, the purpose of this study is to fill a gap in the knowledge base by examining the content of district-level selection policies in school libraries across the United States and comparing the content to professional selection standards. Additionally, the study can encourage school librarians to review their own district- and school-level policies.

Research Design and Methods

INTRODUCTION

For this study, basic content analysis of primary sources was conducted. The primary sources were material selection policies of randomly selected school districts in the United States. The content of each policy was examined in the context of a set of criteria: twenty desirable components of effective policies.

OBTAINING PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Criteria for Inclusion of School Districts

Currently, no federal agency, professional organization, or other publisher produces a listing of all of the school districts across the United States. To obtain a representative sample of the school districts across the United States, purposive sampling was used to select school districts across the country. The following criteria needed to be met to be included within the sample:

- public school district with at least four member schools,
- population determining placement as large or small school district (large districts being located in a county with a population greater than 50,000), and
- located in one of the fifty states.

Sampling

For the purpose of this content analysis, ninety-nine school districts in the United States were selected and examined. In each state except Hawaii, one large school district (location in a county with a population of more than 50,000) and one small school district (a county population of less than 50,000) were randomly selected from the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website (<<https://nces.ed.gov>>). To randomly pick a large and small district from each state other than Hawaii, we first compiled a list of counties with populations above and below 50,000 from the U.S. Census Bureau website (using data from the 2010 census) (<www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-counties-total.html>). A large and small county was then randomly selected from these lists. As these counties might have more than one school district, we then used data from the NCES website to search for public school districts from the selected counties. If more than one district was located in the identified county, we once again used a randomization process to select the district to be studied. To identify districts that met the study criteria, we first clicked “Search for Public School Districts” within the “Data and Tools” section of the NCES website. Using the search tool, we found school districts within the United States that fell within the size and location constraints for this study. For example, “charter,” “component,” “supervisory union,” and “other” school districts were not included in the search, and therefore were left unselected when picking search criteria..

This method of sampling is based on the method used in a previous national study of school library websites completed by Chow et al. (2016). The initial reason for picking a large and a small school district in each state that has individual districts was to determine if there was a

statistical difference in our findings between the two groups. However, analysis of our data revealed no significant statistical difference between the two groups.

Finding Policies

Once the school districts had been chosen, we searched for each school district's selection policy on the school district's website. Library selection policies were usually located within the school district's policy manual. In some instances, the selection policy was instead found within a general search of the website. We decided that only publicly accessible policies would be used for this research. Therefore, if the selection policy was not on a school district's website, the district was not included in the content analysis. The decision was made not to search for additional school districts with policies present on their websites to replace those without selection policies. This decision was based on the desire to illustrate the reality that some school librarians are faced with no guidance in making decisions about selection and reconsideration. Out of the ninety-nine school districts included in this study, nineteen school districts did not have selection policies on the school district website (see table 1), while 80 school districts did and were included in the content analysis described below. Both school districts sampled for Delaware and Rhode Island had no policies on their websites. The state of Hawaii also had no policy on its website. Therefore, those three states are not represented in the policies analyzed for this study.

The lack of a publicly accessible district-level policy in the nineteen districts eliminated from this study may indicate that those districts do not actually have a district-level policy and instead have only school-level selection and reconsideration policies. However, none of the nineteen districts for which a selection policy could be found indicated in their board policy manuals that the districts had delegated that responsibility to school-level decision-makers. Therefore, the lack of a policy on the district's website could potentially reflect the absence of any policy guiding selection and reconsideration.

Table 1. Quantity of large and small school district policies examined.

	Large Districts	Small Districts	Total
Located & Examined	41	39	80
Not Located	8	10	18 (+Hawaii)
Total Searched For	49	49	98 (+Hawaii)

ANALYSIS METHOD

This study employed basic content analysis to determine the current state of district school library selection policies. Basic content analysis is largely deductive and employs analysis of

existing data (Drisko and Maschi 2015). We chose to examine district policies because most public school library policies are determined at the district level (Mardis 2021, 63). Some states, such as North Carolina, even have general statutes that stipulate that school library selection policies must be created by each district (“Elementary and Secondary Education” 1996). Each school district’s policy was analyzed using deductive coding based on twenty criteria—desirable components of effective policies—derived from “Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries” (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom 2018). The list of components is in the appendix.

This criterion-based method of content analysis of selection policies was previously used in Lanier’s examination of public library selection policies. However, Lanier’s sampling was not random but convenience-based (2014). Using the twenty criteria, each of us first independently coded ten sample policies looking for the keywords of the policies’ components. We decided that a policy could be said to include a component if the policy contained a statement or statements that were closely aligned to the definition of the component (see appendix). If the policy only vaguely mentioned a component and the statement was either incomplete or weak, the policy would be said to lack that component. After the first ten sample policies were coded independently, the intercoder reliability rate was found to be 94.6 percent.

Analysis of the remaining policies was conducted independently with one out of every ten remaining policies also being cross-checked between the coders. The intercoder reliability rate remained consistently high throughout the coding process.

ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF METHODOLOGY

One of the advantages to this type of study is the ability of researchers and the general public to find selection policies on school district websites, as we did. The school board or administrator of each school system posted their policies online because they are created by publicly funded institutions. The documents themselves are easy to analyze as they can be compared to similar documents.

Although the results obtained from this study can benefit school librarians, the study’s methodology has limitations. A larger sample might provide more insights into the state of selection policies across the country. An additional limitation is that the policies may not accurately reflect the reality of the selection procedures that take place in these school libraries due to a number of factors. This issue will be discussed further in the “Discussion and Conclusions” section of this paper.

Findings

To concisely share the findings from each of the twenty criteria examined in the 80 policies analyzed, the information was compiled into a single table (see table 2). The table provides numerical information on the number of policies, both large district and small districts, that contained each of the twenty criteria. (The appendix provides the complete list with brief explanations of each component used as a criterion during analysis.) The table also includes an asterisk beside criteria that need further explanation. Those explanations follow the table.

Table 2. Summary of quantities of checklist items found in policies analyzed.
 Note: Asterisk* indicates further commentary provided following the table.

Checklist Items	Included by Small Districts (n=39)	Included by Large Districts (n=41)	Total Inclusion Rate (n=80)
1. List of criteria	30 (77%)	34 (83%)	64 (80%)
2. Mission statement	8 (21%)	12 (29%)	20 (25%)
3. *Policies & procedures	12 (30%)	23 (56%)	35 (44%)
4. Publication & revision dates	27 (69%)	35 (85%)	62 (78%)
5. Who the library serves	18 (46%)	25 (61%)	43 (54%)
6a. *Responsibility for selection	26 (67%)	32 (78%)	58 (73%)
6b. *Selection responsibility = school librarian	16 (41%)	16 (39%)	32 (40%)
7. Selection aids	15 (38%)	23 (56%)	38 (48%)
8. Policy objectives	32 (82%)	36 (88%)	68 (85%)
9. *Intellection freedom documents	10 (26%)	12 (29%)	22 (27%)
10. *Controversial materials	13 (33%)	18 (44%)	31 (39%)
11. Intellectual freedom statement	4 (10%)	6 (15%)	10 (14%)
12. Intellectual freedom definition	0	0	0
13. Diversity	30 (73%)	28 (72%)	58 (73%)
14. Weeding the collection	17 (44%)	22 (54%)	39 (49%)
15. Gifts & donations	17 (44%)	27 (66%)	44 (55%)
16. *Reconsideration of materials	26 (67%)	38 (93%)	64 (80%)

Checklist Items	Included by Small Districts (n=39)	Included by Large Districts (n=41)	Total Inclusion Rate (n=80)
17. *Reconsideration form	13 (33%)	20 (49%)	33 (41%)
18. *Reconsideration committee guidelines	22 (56%)	35 (85%)	57 (71%)
19. *Classroom collections	0	1 (1%)	1 (1%)
20. *Standing for reconsideration	10 (26%)	31 (76%)	41 (51%)

Criterion 3: The district selection policy contains both the appropriate selection policies as well as the selection procedures detailing the steps within the acquisitions process.

We analyzed each of the school district selection policies to determine if it contained **both** the policies for the selection of materials **as well as** the procedures for the selection of materials. Out of the 80 selection policies that were examined, 44 percent (35 policies) contained **both** the materials selection policies **and** the materials selection procedures, which were labeled within the policy document as either “Policy” or “Procedure.” Out of the 80 selection policies examined, 57 percent (45 policies) contained only the policies for the selection of materials, which were labeled within the document as “Policy.” Out of the 41 large district selection policies examined, 56 percent (23 policies) contained **both** the selection policies **and** the selection procedures, while only 30 percent (12 policies) of the 39 small district selection policies examined contained both.

Criterion 6. The district selection policy clearly states that the responsibility for selecting library materials rests with the library professional staff.

Out of the 80 selection policies that were examined, 73 percent (58 policies) stated who was responsible for selecting library materials. However, out of the 80 selection policies that were examined, only 40 percent (32 policies) explicitly stated or referenced the school library professional as the one who is responsible for selecting library materials (see figure 1).

Criteria Six: States School Library Professional is Responsible for Selecting Library Materials

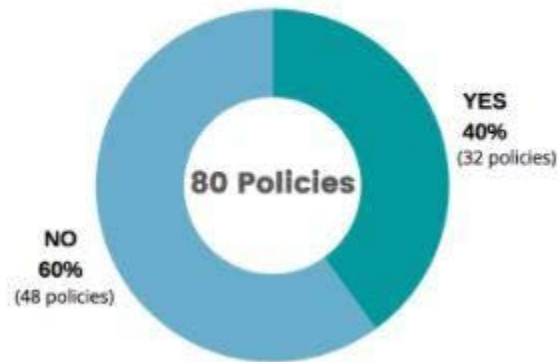


Figure 1. Criterion 6: Does the policy say that the school librarian is responsible for selecting library materials?

Varying language was used to describe the school library professional, including: “librarian,” “library tech educator,” “school media specialist,” “professional library personnel,” “building librarian,” “school media librarian,” “school library media specialist,” “information technology specialist,” “library media center staff,” and “teacher-librarian.” Interestingly, out of the 80 selection policies that were analyzed, 28 percent (22 policies) stated that the superintendent of schools, the board of education, the principal, or the “professional personnel” in general of the school district were primarily responsible for selecting library materials.

Criterion 9: The district selection policies contain the First Amendment, and/or the American Library Association (ALA) Library Bill of Rights and/or its interpretative statements, including “Access to Resources and Services in the School Library Program,” and/or The Students’ Right to Read statement of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Out of the 80 district selection policies that were examined, 73 percent (58 policies) did not contain or reference the First Amendment, the ALA Library Bill of Rights, or any of its interpretative statements. However, 27 percent (22 policies) did either contain or reference at least one of these documents (see figure 2).

Criteria Nine: Contains or References at Least One of the Resources Supporting Intellectual Freedom

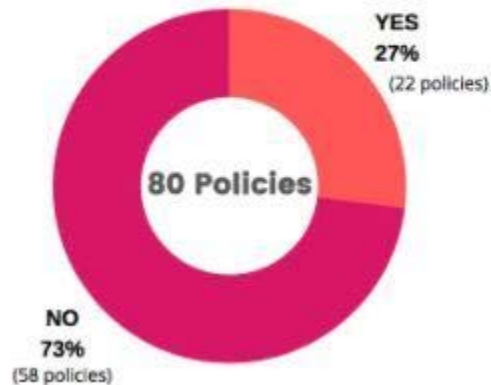


Figure 2. Does the policy contain or reference at least one of the resources supporting intellectual freedom?

Out of the 80 district selection policies that were examined, 21 percent (17 policies) either referenced or included ALA’s “Library Bill of Rights,” while 7.5 percent (6 policies) either referenced or included the National Council of Teachers of English’s “The Students’ Right to Read” statement, and 10 percent (8 policies) either referenced or included the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Less than 2 percent (1 policy) of the 80 district selection policies contained ALA’s “Access to Resources and Services in the School Library: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights,” while about 13 percent (10 policies) contained a mixture of the First Amendment, ALA’s Library Bill of Rights and/or its interpretative statements. Out of the 80 school district selection policies that were examined, only one policy contained the First Amendment, the ALA Library Bill of Rights, *and* its interpretative statements. Finally, out of the 41 large district selection policies that were examined, only 29 percent (12 policies) contained a reference to at least one of the previously mentioned documents. Out of the 39 small district selection policies that were examined, only 28 percent (11 policies) contained a reference to at least one of the previously mentioned documents.

Criterion 10: The district selection policies contain a statement about the inclusion of materials that might be controversial.

Out of the 80 district selection policies that were examined, 61 percent (49 policies) did not include a statement about controversial content. However, 39 percent (31 policies) did include such statements. Several of the policies had separate documents (outside of the selection policy) about dealing with controversial “issues,” but these documents were not specifically related to selection of library materials. Often, we found vague statements alluding to—but not directly addressing—controversial content. One policy mentioned “diversity of appeal” in its guidelines for selection but did not include a phrase that could be interpreted as relating to potentially controversial materials. Another district policy specifically forbade the inclusion of controversial content stating, “Teachers may not use materials that are clearly controversial.” The list of

examples in that policy included materials that contained profanities or drug use, and materials that “are likely to unnecessarily and negatively divide the community.”

Criterion 16: The district selection policies include policies and procedures for reconsideration of library materials including handling complaints or concerns.

Upon examination of the 80 policies, 80 percent (64 policies) were found to contain some guidance about reconsideration of library materials. However, this guidance was not always specific. Some reconsideration procedures were very short. One mentioned only that the school board and superintendent would handle all complaints, and another referred to “instructional materials” without separating out library materials. Of those policies that were placed in the “did not include” category, several mentioned policies and procedures for reconsideration, but the policies and procedures were not outlined.

Criterion 17: The district selection policies include forms for requests for formal reconsideration of library materials.

After examination of the 80 district selection policies, we found that only 41 percent (33 policies) had reconsideration forms readily available to the public through district websites. This number seems quite low when 80 percent of districts had reconsideration policies. In 17 instances, policies mentioned reconsideration forms, but those forms were either not included within the policy itself, not found on the district’s website, or the link to the form was not valid.

Criterion 18: The district selection policies include guidelines for the makeup and procedures of the reconsideration committee.

Examining the 80 district selection policies, revealed that 71 percent (57 policies) included some guidance for membership of the reconsideration committee and for procedures. The difference between large and small districts was more distinct in this category. While 85 percent of large districts provided these guidelines, only 56 percent of small districts provided them. One of the small districts specified that the reconsideration would go straight to the district’s superintendent, bypassing any local school review of the request.

Criterion 19: The district selection policies include information differentiating a classroom collection of leisure reading materials from the school library collection.

The “Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries” defines classroom collections as “an informally arranged group of fiction and nonfiction books collected and housed in a classroom and used by the students assigned to that classroom” (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom 2018). Only one district (out of 80) was found to have used the terminology that indicated acknowledgment of a classroom collection, which the policy referred to as a “classroom library” and distinguished it from instructional materials. The toolkit suggests that classroom collections should be guided by instructional materials policies. The study revealed that many districts used the terms “materials,” “classroom materials,” “supplementary materials,” and “instructional materials” interchangeably. As a result, it is difficult to determine

exactly how many districts had policies related to reading materials collected for and housed in classrooms.

Criterion 20: The district selection policies identifies who can challenge and ask for reconsideration of materials.

When the 80 policies were examined, 49 percent (39 policies) were found to either contain no indication of who could challenge and ask for reconsideration of materials or to simply refer to someone who initiated a challenge as the “complainant” or the “public.” Some district policies had multiple categories of people who could challenge. The following groups were explicitly listed as those who had standing to challenge or request reconsideration: residents or citizens (22 policies), parents/guardians (20 policies), employees (15 policies), and students (6 policies); see figure 3.

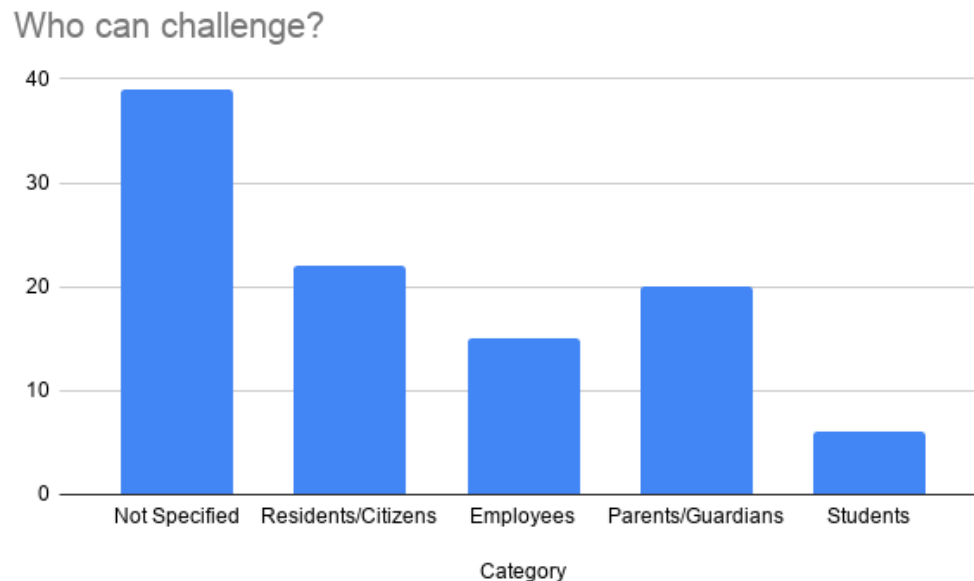


Figure 3. Criterion 20: Who has standing to request reconsideration of materials?

Discussion

INTRODUCTION

In examining the district selection policies of 80 school districts across the United States, we were able to draw some conclusions about the state of those policies. One area of concern is that not every school district has a selection policy. Our random sampling of large and small school districts found 81 percent of the districts had some form of selection policy available on the

district’s website. This contradicts the findings of the SLJ Controversial Books Survey conducted in 2016, in which only 59 percent of their survey respondents responded that their schools had selection policies. Interestingly, the SLJ survey indicated that 81 percent of respondents from public schools reported having a formal book challenge procedure—as distinguished from policies. The SLJ Survey indicated that 59 percent of their respondents indicated some form of selection policy but that those policies varied widely in outlining specific procedures such as reading book reviews to determine what to purchase (SLJ Research 2016a). Upon closer examination of the district selection policies located during the study, we found that 81 percent had specific selection policies, but only 44 percent of those selection policies had specific procedures outlined in the publicly available documents. This discrepancy between our district-level selection policy research and the SLJ survey can perhaps be explained by the presence of school-specific procedures for selection of materials that do not rise to the level of district policy.

Another area of concern is the differences in the policies across the United States. Only one policy examined included 19 of the 20 components of a selection policy that the researchers identified from the “Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries” (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom 2018). Looking at the district policies as a whole group, we found that a total of 51 percent of the twenty policy components were present within the 80 policies that were examined. This percentage was calculated by totaling the components that were included from each of the policies (820) and then dividing by the total possible components that we hoped to find (1,600). The lowest rates of inclusion were for the following components: mission statement (25 percent), Intellectual Freedom documents (27 percent); Intellectual Freedom statement (14 percent), Intellectual Freedom definition (0), and classroom collections (1 percent). It is particularly alarming that of these five lowest categories, three relate to intellectual freedom, which is a guiding principle of the school librarian profession. It is also interesting to note that while these policies seem to lack actual references to intellectual freedom or inclusion of intellectual freedom documents, we found that 80 percent of the policies have guidelines for reconsideration.

ADDITIONAL AREAS OF CONCERN ABOUT POLICIES

Language

One of the most consistent areas of concern within each of the 80 selection policies examined in the study is the use of varying vocabulary to describe key terms within the documents. For instance, documents including statements on who the library serves used different language to describe those who are specifically assisted by the library. The vocabulary ranged from “students” to “pupils” to “students and school personnel” to “district residents” to “all persons involved in the educational community.” The use of disparate terminology has the potential to lead to confusion about who specifically can use the library’s resources, especially for those outside of the school.

Another issue relates to the ways selection policies stated who is responsible for selecting library materials. According to the “Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries,” “Teachers, students, administrators, and others participate [in the selection

process] by making recommendations. However, strong policies state that the final responsibility for the selection decision rests with the school library professional” (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom 2018). However, out of the 80 selection policies examined in this study, those that stated who specifically held responsibility for “the selection decision” used varying language to describe the school library professional. This language included “school media specialist,” “library tech educator,” “information technology specialist,” and “professional library personnel.” Therefore, while 40 percent of policies referenced a version of the “school library professional,” the vocabulary did *not* specifically align with the terminology used in the “Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries.” Thus, the policies established an inconsistent representation of who is responsible for selecting school library materials.

Varying terminology was also used in relation to diversity. Selection policies that encouraged the use of diverse perspectives (58 policies) used varying language to describe diverse representation, while some policies did not use the word “diversity” at all. Phrases used included “varying points of view,” “represents all points of view,” “respecting all people,” and “does not discriminate on the basis of race, age, color, religion, national origin, sex, gender identity, physical disabilities, or sexual orientation.” Therefore, selection policies that simply *implied* diversity were included in the policies that “encouraged the use of diverse perspectives.” Once again, the use of inconsistent language allows more room for subjective interpretation by the reader. Documents that do not explicitly state “diversity” provide less protection for diverse materials and allow for a more-limited interpretation of what constitutes diversity. The effectiveness of documents could be improved if they stated the word “diversity” and defined it appropriately.

The language used to describe the types of materials included in the selection policy documents also varied from policy to policy. For example, some policies mentioned only “instructional materials,” while other policies mentioned “resource materials,” “supplementary materials,” “complementary materials,” or simply “library materials.” Very few policies contained definitions for these phrases, which did not support a clear understanding of whether the materials mentioned in each of the policies represented those found in the library, those found in the classroom, or those found elsewhere. Selection policies that contained explicit definitions of each of the material types supported a better understanding of which materials were covered by each of the policies in the document.

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

Finally, one of the most blatant concerns found when examining the 80 district selection policies for this study was the scarcity of any mention of “intellectual freedom” as well as the lack of any definition for “intellectual freedom.” According to the “Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries,” “Intellectual freedom is the right of library users to read, seek information, and speak freely as guaranteed by the First Amendment. Intellectual freedom is one of the core values of the library profession; it promotes access to information and guides the defense against censorship” (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom 2018). While the American Library Association adamantly defends intellectual freedom, out of the 80 selection policies that were examined, only 14 percent of policies contained an intellectual

freedom statement, while 0 percent of policies contained a definition for intellectual freedom. As “one of the core values of the library profession,” intellectual freedom as well as a definition of the term should be included in *all* selection policy documents.

Accessibility

Considering the audience for school district-level selection policy documents, the policies themselves should be of an appropriate length, should be formatted for efficiency, and should be readily available on school district websites. We found issues with the length of many of the documents, as some were either much too short at two pages or less, while others were much too lengthy at over twenty pages. Those that were less than two pages did not have enough information to effectively meet each of the study’s criteria, and the information provided was vague and not thorough. On the other hand, those that were over twenty pages often did contain many of the study’s criteria, but the information was hard to find. In these long documents, users who are unfamiliar with policy documents may be unable to swiftly seek out specific information within the many pages. Out of the selection policies that were examined, those that effectively met most of the researchers’ criteria in a concise, yet practical manner were around eight to ten pages in length.

Additionally, the formatting of the district selection policies contributed to the overall effectiveness of the documents themselves. For instance, those that did not contain headings, labels, individual sections, and/or bulleted criteria were more difficult to navigate than those that did.

Meanwhile, the location of the district selection policy documents was vital. Of the 99 selection policies sought for this study, 19 either didn’t exist or existed but were not available on the school district’s website and, thus, not available to the general public. Selection policy documents included within designated policy manuals on the school district’s website were the easiest to locate. Likewise, policies that were contained within the same document in the policy manual were more accessible than policies that were spread out across multiple documents in the manual. For example, individual components of the selection policy documents, such as the “Request for Reconsideration” form and the “controversial materials” statements were the easiest to locate when they were included within the selection policies and procedures for library materials. However, these components could sometimes be found in a separate section of the policy manual, and, therefore, were more difficult to locate. District selection policy documents containing the policies, procedures, *and* supplementary forms in one document were the most effective in providing accessible information to the public.

Date

Due to the changing nature of a school library’s collection as new formats, genres, reading interests, and school curricula alter over time, the school district’s selection policy should be continually revised and updated. In this study, however, we found that, out of the 80 policies that were examined, only 62 (78 percent) had an adoption and revision date. If the policy had been adopted in the last five years, we did not require that it have a revision date and included it in the category as having fulfilled the category requirement. Of those 62 policies, 22 of them had not been revised or updated in the last decade.

The oldest district selection policy that was examined was that of a large district that contained a revision date of 1989 with no adoption date and no further dates of revision. Out of the 80 district selection policies that were examined, 6 percent (5 policies) included no date of adoption. An additional thirteen policies had adoption or publication dates prior to 2017 but had no information about revisions or updates to the policies since adoption. However, it should be noted that more-recent versions of these policies might have been adopted in these school districts but at the time of the study had not yet been made publicly available via the district's website. These results demonstrate the need for many of the policies to be revised as they are out of date and, therefore, less likely to meet the requirements established in the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom's "Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries" (2018).

To ensure that a school district's selection policy properly meets the continually changing needs of each of its communities, the policy should be revised frequently (at least once every five years). An example of the need to update policies can be seen in one comment provided by a school librarian in the SLJ Controversial Books Survey. When faced with a challenge to a graphic novel in their library, which then turned into a challenge to all graphic novels in the district's middle school libraries, the district had to update their policies to reflect evolving formats. The librarian said, "This caused us to have to create a selection policy specifically for graphic novels (manga in particular). The difficulty in purchasing manga is the lack of traditional reviews, so we created a system to protect us and our students in the event of another challenge" (SLJ Research 2016b). Similarly, to ensure that the document's audience is aware of the age of the information contained within the policy, *both* the adoption date and subsequent revision dates should be clearly listed at the beginning of each document.

Conclusions and Future Research

This analysis of current district selection policies for school libraries across the United States provides an overview of the main components that are currently in place. While the results of this study are not generalizable, they can provide a process and checklist of essential components for practicing librarians to conduct a review of their own district or school selection and reconsideration policies. The American Library Association has provided excellent guidance with a standardized group of components that should be included in all school library selection policies through its Office for Intellectual Freedom's "Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries" (2018). A written selection policy can be a useful tool for school librarians when making decisions about what to add to the collection.

However, without the inclusion of key components, selection policies cannot be an effective tool for practicing school librarians. This study found that 81 percent of schools have selection policies but there was wide variation in the components that were included in the policies. Particularly concerning is the lack of a statement in 27 percent of the policies that identifies the school librarian's role in the selection process. Policies for selection that do not recognize the role of the school librarian in selecting materials for the library collection may be indicative of the decline in professional staffing of school libraries (Kachel and Lance 2018).

Our findings reveal that many policies lack basic protections for intellectual freedom, and 20 percent of policies lack guidelines for reconsideration. Michelle Marder Kamhi's study found that "schools that do have written selection policies and reconsideration procedures appear to

resolve conflicts with few restrictions on the instruction and library materials available to students” (1981, 22). Kamhi concluded that lack of a policy could lead to arbitrary removal of books without any full consideration. As a result, school librarians may make decisions from a position of avoidance of controversy and potential challenges. In her interviews of school librarians about selection policies, April Dawkins found that even when school librarians were aware of the policy, they often weeded, restricted access, or passed along potentially controversial items from their schools (2017, 106).

Additionally, this study indicated several areas of concern outside of the key components that should be addressed by school librarians when undertaking a review of their policies. Specifically, the use of varying terminology such as “materials,” “library materials,” “instructional materials,” and “supplementary materials” suggests the need for a common vocabulary within policies or even the use of a glossary to provide clarity.

The difficulty in accessing a cohesive policy is another area that could be addressed through review and revision of policies. Currently, components of selection and reconsideration are often spread across several different areas of school board policy handbooks. As a result, accessing the policies is difficult for not only school librarians but also for parents and administrators.

The review and revision of policies should be undertaken on a regular schedule so that new material formats, areas of concern, and procedures can be addressed and updated to reflect evolution in best practices.

In their current form, school library selection policies indicate that several key stakeholders are influencing decision-making about collections in school libraries. Primarily, these decisions are being made by school librarians. However, other stakeholders are involved in the selection process. In some states, the state legislative body has designated local school boards and their designees to make decisions about school library materials. In turn, the local school boards have adopted policies for collection development. Many of these district-level policies specifically mention principals, school librarians, and committees. The reconsideration procedures section of the policies also bring other persons into the process, including parents. The policies are also impacted by budgetary concerns. As most public schools in the United States are funded by a combination of state and local monies, the selection policies will also be impacted by political decisions about taxation and school funding.

To determine the effectiveness of the policies in place and the reality of their implementation, qualitative studies are needed that ask key stakeholders about the policies and reality of implementation. When studying policies, “ensuring that they are carried out is the hardest part and the loneliest” (Gerhardt 1993, 4). Who, in reality, are the stakeholders who are making the decisions? Does a district’s policy reflect the reality of collection development in school libraries?

Future research should explore the actual practice of implementing these policies at the school and district level through case studies and interviews with stakeholders who are making selection decisions. While case studies are not generalizable, conducting multiple case studies of the challenge process from start to finish during an active reconsideration case would provide a better understanding of how policies are actually being implemented.

How are selection policies different in non-public school settings? An additional area of future research would be to conduct analysis of policies outside of the traditional public school settings, such as charter, parochial, or independent schools. Future studies might also look at what

additional components beyond the twenty examined for this policy can be found outside of the traditional public school setting.

Without an examination of the actual implementation of the policies, it is difficult to determine their effectiveness. In summarizing the results from SLJ's 2016 Controversial Books Survey, Jamie LaRue stated, "Too many school libraries still lack fundamental policies; there are growing restrictions to access; and by their own admission, people responsible for material selection are more concerned about avoiding controversy than supporting the curriculum or student needs" (2016). Every school library needs a selection policy that provides guidance in choosing materials that meet the needs of the students in their schools.

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Appendix: Components of Policies

1. **List of Criteria:** The district selection policy contains a list of general criteria and/or specific criteria, dependent on the goals and objectives of the educational institution the library belongs to, for the selection of materials in the library.
2. **Mission Statement:** The district selection policy contains a central, guiding mission statement and/or library philosophy statement that defines the library's purpose.
3. **Policies and Procedures:** The district selection policy contains both the appropriate selection policies as well as the selection procedures detailing the steps within the acquisitions process.
4. **Publication and Revision Dates:** The district selection policy contains the publication or adoption date for the policy as well as a list of each of the dates of revision.
5. **Who the Library Serves:** The district selection policy states who the library serves.
6. **Responsibility for Selection:** The district selection policy clearly states that the responsibility for selecting library materials rests with the library professional staff.
7. **Selection Aids:** The district selection policy states that the professional personnel in charge of selecting library materials must evaluate reputable, professionally prepared aids to selection and other appropriate sources before selecting materials for the library.
8. **Policy Objectives:** The district selection policy contains the objectives of the policy, such as ensuring that the school library materials implement, enrich, and support the educational program as well as the personal interests of each student.
9. **Intellectual Freedom Documents:** The district selection policies contain the First Amendment, and/or the American Library Association (ALA) Library Bill of Rights and/or its interpretative statements, including "Access to Resources and Services in the School Library Program," and/or "The Students' Right to Read" position statement of the National Council of Teachers of English.
10. **Controversial Materials:** The district selection policies contain a statement about the inclusion of materials that might be controversial.
11. **Intellectual Freedom Statement:** The district selection policies contain a statement supporting intellectual freedom as a basic principle for library access.
12. **Intellectual Freedom Definition:** The district selection policies include a definition of what intellectual freedom is and what it means when applied in a school library.
13. **Diversity:** The district selection policies include selection criteria that ensure the materials in the collection include a diversity of topics, authors, and viewpoints, and provide a diverse perspective.
14. **Weeding the Collection:** The district selection policies include guidelines and/or standards for maintaining the collection, including the periodic removal of items from the collection (weeding).
15. **Gifts and Donations:** The district selection policies include policies about the acceptance of gifts and donations and their inclusion within the collection.

16. **Reconsideration of Materials:** The district selection policies include policies and procedures for reconsideration of library materials, including handling complaints or concerns.
17. **Request for Reconsideration Form:** The district selection policies include forms for requests for formal reconsideration of library materials.
18. **Reconsideration Committee Guidelines:** The policies include guidelines for the makeup and procedures of the reconsideration committee.
19. **Classroom Collections:** The policies include information differentiating a classroom collection of leisure reading materials from the school library's collection.
20. **Who has standing?:** The district policy identifies who has the standing to challenge materials and ask for reconsideration.

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