

## WE ARE DIFFERENT: INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM IN SCHOOL MEDIA CENTERS

*by Linda E. Paul  
Media Specialist  
Carroll High School  
Fort Wayne, Indiana*



We are different! This is often the battle cry of school media specialists. Our patrons are a select group - kids. (My high school students would hang me for calling them children). We support the curriculum of our schools. We are working with just teachers and students. School media centers are learning institutions. Library personnel in some schools are non-certified. Certified school media specialists are teachers. As teachers, media specialists are charged with the protection of kids and supplying their intellectual needs.

No public or academic library operates in place of a parent, however, schools do. Kids must be protected while in the care of teachers, administrators and school media specialists. The rules for school librarians for intellectual freedom are simply different from public and academic librarians. The job of both the public librarian and the academic librarian is to provide all types of information for their patrons to use. The school librarian/media specialist's job is to provide the curriculum materials needed by students to learn but also to protect kids. Parents have a vital interest in the education of their children. Parents and school administrators have the right to know what their students are using and checking out from the school media center. Some parents may find some materials objectionable due to religious or moral grounds. If parents object to the use of materials in the high school media center, they may restrict the use of that material for their child. They may not restrict the use of those materials for other people's children. Parents have the right to know what their kids are reading and the school media specialist has an obligation to provide that information to them. School boards have an obligation to provide selection policies for school media specialists to use as guidance. A reconsideration policy should also be in place for those times when someone has a concern. Is something inappropriate? School media specialists select materials for their content and age appropriateness. If materials meet the selection policy criteria, a need for the materials exists, the materials are for an appropriate age level and funds are available, the materials should be purchased. However, if materials

are challenged, administrators may take the decision on whether to retain the material out of the hands of the media specialist. To avoid controversy, school administrators and school media personnel have removed materials from the shelves. This is well within the province of what educators do. Children are under age and are to be protected.

The Internet has provided an abundance of new information sources to high schools. Should high schools filter the Internet? Some sites on the Internet are not appropriate for kids. However, a filter does not guarantee that students cannot reach inappropriate material on the Internet. A filter can also prevent students from reaching information that is acceptable and valuable for their learning needs. We should teach kids to filter themselves, but immaturity is often a factor in this. Library personnel do not have the time or staff to stand behind every child who is using the Internet to make sure that they are not somewhere they should not be. So for some school media specialists and school boards, Internet filters are the answer. Some schools choose not to filter and teach kids to "filter" themselves. Kids "filtering" themselves does not always work. Either way, filtering or non-filtering presents problems for the school media specialist in his or her role as protector of children. Public and academic libraries are not the replacement for parents as protectors of children. Again, school media centers are different.

Media specialists struggle on a daily basis to find a balance between the rights of the child to information, the rights of parents to monitor what their kids are reading and borrowing, and the protection of the child from harm. Each child is different. Some materials may be appropriate for one student but inappropriate for another student of the same age. The media specialist does not have an easy task. He or she must balance all of these factors into a multi-cultural information/media center to serve a population of students at different skills levels and interests without censoring the materials to which students have access.