



Intellectual Freedom/Social Responsibilities Committee MLA Executive Board Report — April 2020

Past Activities:

- Met Monday, March 2, 2020 10:30-12:30 p.m. Springfield City Library - East Park Branch
- Formed subcommittee for planned 2020 symposium, chances are it will be postponed due to Covid-19
- Offering support for a school librarian, Jordan Funke, in Ludlow, MA about a challenge to the book, *Sex is a Funny Word* by Cory Silverberg. Committee members showed up for two school committee meetings. Our Intellectual Freedom Champions subcommittee Karen Tobin, Susan Caulfield and Matt Amory formulated a response. Matt wrote two powerful letters in support of the librarian, the merit of the book, and the need to follow their own school policy of keeping a challenged item in the collection until a committee can make a decision rather than pull it as soon as the challenge came in-which is what they did. There were personal attacks against Jordan Funke throughout this protracted challenge. Matt visited them in person to offer support. Michelle Spinney, our ALA OIF Liaison, attended school committee meetings in support and kept OIF informed of our response to the challenge. OIF requested that our letters of support be posted so that they could link to them as exemplary in material challenges. We posted them on the MLA website. The School Committee decided (with the help of their attorney) to follow their own policy and add the book back to school collections until a decision was made by the Request For Reconsideration Committee. The final decision was to move it in the elementary school library from the student collection to the professional development collection. Matt's timeline of the challenge is added to the end of this report.
- Helped circulate an ALA-IFC Facial Recognition Survey to MLA membership
- Matt Berube, of the Jones Library in Amherst, reached out to IFSRC to ask if we are interested in being involved with a new MLS Digital Privacy Task Force to explore possible trainings/resources for the Massachusetts library community and the wider

public on the topic of digital privacy. Michelle Spinney expressed interest in joining the task force on behalf of IFSRC.

- Supported a letter of support for the CASE Act bill, Small-Claims Enforcement Act of 2019.
- Matt Amory requested showing up in support of the Drag Queen Story Hour event at Boston Public Library March 8th and 15th.

Upcoming and Ongoing Work:

- Anna Gooding-Call, IF/SRC Conference Committee Member MLA Conference 2020 reached out to cancel our sessions after the decision was made to postpone or cancel the conference.
- Climate Resilience hubs: 10 official hubs; 20 inquiries to become a hub.
- Discussion of TERF groups, LGBT alliances, “coffee with a cop”, programs and groups that exclude patrons explicitly or implicitly are topics the committee will discuss at future meetings

Our next business meeting was scheduled during the May MLA conference, but will be rescheduled remotely.

Respectfully submitted,

Andrea Fiorillo and Carol Witt
Co-Chairs, IF/SRC

Intellectual Freedom Champions Subcommittee: Ludlow, MA Case Timeline

This is the approximate timeline of events in the town of Ludlow, MA leading up to material challenges to the physical and electronic copies of the book "Sex is a Funny Word" in the collection of the Library of the Baird Middle School and the timeline of the responses of the School Committee, the Request for Reconsideration Committee convened to determine whether the book and e-book should be retained in the collection, American Library Association Office of Intellectual Freedom ("ALA OIF") and the Massachusetts Library Association Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibilities Committee ("MLA IFSRC")

May 23rd, 2017: Ludlow School Committee adopts their Policy Statement IJLAA - RECONSIDERATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS, among other policies.

Note that it was reported approvingly in the School Committee meeting on January 28th, 2020 that the Principal(s) of the Baird Middle School had been in the practice of removing items from the library collection prior to review of a formal request for reconsideration. It's unclear whether this had been the practice a generation ago or if this practice continued into the recent past.

Early Fall 2019: A book (likely "Sacred Heart", by Liz Suburbia) that had been donated to a classroom book collection or the library was objected to by a parent over concerns about sexual content. The book was judged inappropriate and removed from the classroom collection immediately (either by the classroom teacher or the librarian in consultation with the principal).

Later in the Fall 2019: A second book (likely "A Court of Wings and Ruin", by Sarah Maas) that had been in the library collection was objected to by a second parent over concerns about sexual content. The book had been pre-ordered because it was part of a series of books which had been age appropriate up to that point in the series. The book was judged to contain inappropriate content and was removed from the library collection immediately (presumably by the school librarian in consultation with the principal).

The exact sequence of the following events is unclear:

Fall 2019: An incident occurred in the school library that was somehow related to the copy of "Sex is a Funny Word". The incident was reported to the school principal and some undisclosed disciplinary action was taken regarding the student.

In the School Committee meeting on February 11th, 2020, a parent reported the rumor that the student was masturbating with the book. However Librarian Jordan Funke, who was present at the time of the incident, flatly denies that that was the case, and insists that another parent began that rumor, deliberately mischaracterizing the incident to magnify its significance among members of the community. The superintendent pointedly did not confirm the parent's report of the nature of the incident, citing student privacy, so the exact nature and timing of the incident remains unknown to us.

Fall 2019: A group, reported to be associated with the open Facebook group “Massachusetts Informed Parents” and the Massachusetts Family Institute organizes and reportedly begins to communicate through a closed or secret Facebook group. Anti-vaccination and anti-sex education messages abound, as well as messages about persecution of people of faith.

Fall 2019: Baird parents protest against sexual content in the library collection and disparage the professional and personal conduct of librarian Jordan Funke. Accusations of “indoctrination” proliferate.

Fall 2019: Baird teachers protest against sexual content in the library collection and disparage the professional and personal conduct of the librarian Jordan Funke, creating a hostile work environment.

Fall 2019: Baird teachers circulate a “letter of concern” about library collection development practices among the staff, demonizing librarian Jordan Funke and continuing their pattern of creating a hostile work environment.

Fall 2019: Baird teachers and parents feign ignorance of the process for requesting reconsideration of materials, and intensify their disparagement of the professional and personal conduct of librarian Jordan Funke.

Winter 2019: Baird parents and teachers eventually file a proper request for reconsideration of “Sex is a Funny Word”. Librarian Jordan Funke judges the book and its content to be appropriate for the Middle School Library collection and refers the request for reconsideration to the Baird Middle School Principal and the School Committee.

Winter 2019: Librarian Jordan Funke contacts ALA OIF about the challenge.

Winter 2019: Librarian Jordan Funke contacts the Massachusetts School Librarians Association (“MSLA”) about the challenge.

Winter 2019: The School Committee and the Superintendent plan to convene a Request For Reconsideration Committee to judge the merit of the book and its appropriateness in the collection.

January 28th, 2020: At the School Committee meeting, parents and teachers express their desire to shield their children from sexual content in general and particularly the content of “Sex is a Funny Word”. The parents and teachers seem to conflate the different content of the two books that were removed and “Sex is a Funny Word”. While the Superintendent attempts to properly differentiate the separate issues with the content of the three different books and the appropriateness of the district’s response to each book, the parents and teachers are not satisfied.

Parents and teachers express separate objections to e-book version of “Sex is a Funny Word” available through SORA and the very catalog record for the book, as well as to another copy of the book which is in the Veterans Park Elementary School, although it is not clear that that book was ever intended for circulation or was even part of the school library collection.

Parents and teachers further disparage librarian Jordan Funke, questioning and disapproving of Funke's book recommendations to students, collection development practices and personal conduct. Several parents mention that they are no longer allowing their children to visit the library, most of whom also say that they are also not allowing their children to take part in health classes which are part of the regular state-mandated curriculum.

The Superintendent mentions the upcoming meeting of the Request For Reconsideration Committee, which is to be convened for the first time in the Superintendent's tenure. Parents and teachers are neither satisfied with the process nor the schedule, even though they are exactly in accordance with district policy.

The School Committee discusses the provision in their Policy Statement IJLAA - RECONSIDERATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS which requires challenged material to remain in circulation until a formal request for reconsideration has been reviewed.

The School Committee proposes to temporarily waive the provision in their Policy Statement IJLAA - RECONSIDERATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS which requires challenged materials to remain in circulation until their request for reconsideration has been reviewed for the express purpose of allowing "Sex is a Funny Word" to be removed from the collection before it has received a review by the Request For Reconsideration Committee.

The representative of School District Counsel offers an opinion that the change is not improper under MA Open Meeting Law, and the School Committee votes to waive the provision of the policy statement.

A school principal expresses confusion over the implications of the change in policy, but most parents and teachers leave the room satisfied and the School Committee turns to other business.

February 2020: ALA OIF contacts the MLA IFSRC.

MLA IFSRC writes a letter to the School Committee objecting to their waiver of the provision of Policy Statement IJLAA - RECONSIDERATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS which allows challenged materials to remain in circulation until a formal request for reconsideration has been reviewed.

MLA IFSRC writes a letter to the Request For Reconsideration Committee supporting the retention of "Sex is a Funny Word" in the Middle School Library collection.

February 11th, 2020: A smaller crowd gathers at the School Committee meeting, and a letter written by Ludlow Public Library Youth Services Librarian July Siebecker is read. The letter strongly objects to the suspension of the provision of Policy Statement IJLAA - RECONSIDERATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS which allows challenged materials to remain available until their reconsideration is complete.

Ludlow High School Librarian Jameson Hedin and an Elementary School Librarian enthusiastically agree.

The Superintendent also reads portions of a substantial letter from School District Counsel unequivocally supporting Policy Statement IJLAA - RECONSIDERATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS in its entirety.

The School Committee vote to rescind their waiver of the provision of Policy Statement IJLAA - RECONSIDERATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS which allows challenged materials to remain available until their reconsideration is complete.

Parents continue to make statements objecting to the book, but largely remain respectful of Librarian Jordan Funke, who is present. One parent insinuates that although the physical copy of the book has been marked "checked out" since the previous School Committee meeting, the e-book has remained available through SORA. Librarian Jordan Funke states that this is not the case, and further states that this has been confirmed not to be the case by logging in with credentials that have the same level of permission that a student would have. Parents seem neither to understand SORA's technology nor its non-concurrent use license model, and remain suspicious of the presence of the SORA app on their childrens' devices even after the Superintendent states that all e-book access through SORA has been suspended until "all issues" can be resolved. It is unknown whether SORA access has been restored.

The Superintendent mentions the upcoming meeting of the Request For Reconsideration Committee, and members of the School Committee seem to anticipate and dread a number of additional challenges (though none have actually been made).

February 13th, 2020: The seven members of the Request For Reconsideration Committee review "Sex is a Funny Word" and unanimously recommend that the district retain the book and e-book in the Middle School library collection. They recommend that the copy in the Elementary School not be placed in the library collection but be restricted to a professional collection for use by counselors and nurses.

February 19th, 2020: The Superintendent confirms the recommendation of the Request For Reconsideration Committee and releases the decision of the school district.

February 25th, 2020: Nothing relating to the Baird Middle School Library collection is on the School Committee meeting agenda, but that does not stop a crowd from gathering to rail against sexual content in the public comments section of the meeting. Comments denigrate the professionalism of librarians and teachers and insinuate that they are not doing their jobs. Excerpts of summaries of several books which are alleged to be in the middle school collection are read and objected to for subject matter and profanities.

Parents make comments demanding that the School Committee waive the provision of Policy Statement IJLAA - RECONSIDERATION OF INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS which allows challenged materials to remain available until their reconsideration is complete seemingly unaware that that policy has been affirmed at the previous meeting. They demand inclusion of parents on Request for Reconsideration Committees in the future and demand that the entire collection be reviewed by some "hard-working people" so that the collection excludes all references to topics like sex, drug use, violence, and eating disorders. They also advocate classification of books that contain references to such topics, and creation of a special section of books that can be checked out only with parents' permission. Distressingly, a member of the

school committee expresses dismay over the content of the middle school collection and support for the general idea of restriction of access by age and/or parental consent.

Parents continue to feign confusion over the process of challenging materials even after the process is explained once again by the school committee and the Superintendent.

No specific titles are mentioned, except for the two books removed from the library in the fall and Sex is a Funny Word.

March 2nd, 2020: Librarian Jordan Funke reports in a face to face meeting that assistance is coming from some colleagues and from the union. Some teachers and the union are helping to prepare a formal complaint against the teacher who was most instrumental in creating the hostile work environment in the school. Funke also sent thanks to the ALA OIF on behalf of Jameson Hedin, the chair of the Request for Reconsideration Committee for providing excellent guidance on how to conduct the Request for Reconsideration Committee and how to proceed. Finally, Funke sends thanks to her friends at the Massachusetts School Library Association for their steadfast support and to the MLA IFSRC for writing the letter defending the book. Funke also reports that the parent/teacher group have a list of several books to which they strenuously object, but for which they have yet to submit requests for reconsideration.

Respectfully Submitted,

Matt Amory, MLA IFSRC