

SB0738

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The following article was written as a blog post for Maryland Association of School Librarians. The statistics and information gathered clearly explains why HB785 is important legislation that is necessary to ensure libraries are able to provide services to citizens across the state.

Impact of Book Challenges in Maryland

By Brittany Tignor and Jennifer Sturge

Introduction

Books are being removed from school library shelves across the nation, and Maryland has not been exempt from this movement. Books about race, racism, LGBTQ+ identities, and violence remain a top target of the book banning movement in 2023 according to PEN America. ALA reports that in 2022, 2,571 titles were challenged across the US as opposed to 223 in 2020. PEN America reported a 33% increase in book bans in 2022-2023 compared to 2021 data. A large share of the 3,362 individual bans of books took place in states where legislation has passed or there has been a coordinated effort by local and national groups to restrict access to books. During this time, MASL has been receiving advocacy requests; while the numbers are not as large as national data, the 18 requests represent 8 districts and increased from 0 in 2020 to 8 in 2023. MASL Board Members have talked with school boards, media outlets, and ALA to advocate for students to have access to the titles that reflect all students.

While MASL can speak clearly and confidently about policy, procedure, position statements, and school library values, our organization could not tell with certainty the full picture of book challenges and bans in our state. MASL didn't have a comprehensive picture of how the increase in book challenges was impacting school librarians across the state. In September 2023, our organization surveyed our membership about their experiences with challenges and changes to policy. This initial article is being released to summarize the results of the Maryland Book Challenge Impact Survey. Please note, further analysis is forthcoming.

Summary of findings

Between September 19 and September 25, 2023, MASL collected 175 responses from 23* public school districts and 5 independent schools. Of the public districts, all but 3 districts had at least one respondent report that there had been a book challenge between the 21-22 SY and present day; none of the independent schools reported a book challenge. During that same time, 18% of School Librarians reported having book challenges at their school library, and 60% of school librarians reported knowing someone else who dealt with a challenge. Over 20% of respondents reported knowing more than 5 school librarians dealing with a challenge.

If a book from your collection is challenged, do you feel confident in defending it?

175 responses

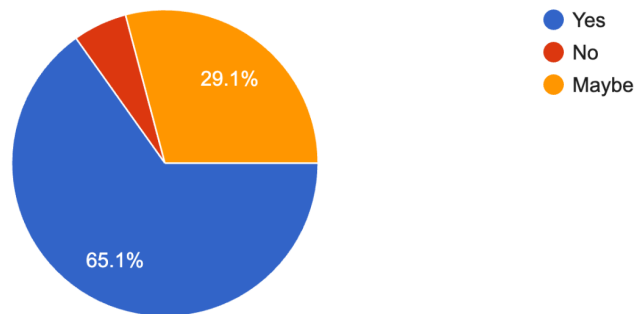


Figure 1: Percentage of school librarians who feel confident in handling a book challenge in their library.

The results of the survey indicate that school librarians feel confident in how to deal with book challenges. Over 65% reported feeling confident that they could handle a book challenge (Fig. 1) and the same percentage said they felt confident or very confident in their ability to handle the challenge.

At the same time, school librarians reported a high level of trust in decision making and confidence in getting support at the school and district level during book challenge situations and the majority (over 75%) report receiving professional development from their school library supervisor on the policy and procedures in place in their district (Fig. 2) Of those who responded to the survey, the data indicates that school librarians feel confident that they would have support from their administration in their individual school and in their district. More school librarians feel confident their central office would support their collection decisions than their administration. The same held true for a challenge. (Fig. 3) This prompt did not distinguish between library supervisors and other leaders at the district level, but at least one respondent mentioned having, “confidence in my supervisor’s support,” but not board of education members.

Have you been provided professional development on your district's policies and procedures for book reconsideration by your school library supervisor or the central office of your district?

175 responses

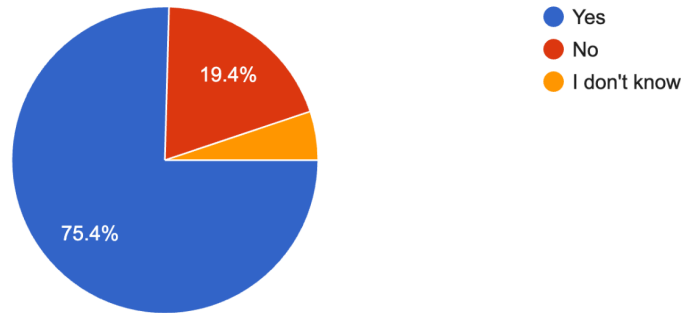


Figure 2: School librarians in Maryland who have received professional development from their district supervisor.

Support. Please rate the amount of support you feel for each item. 0 is no support, 5 being very supported.

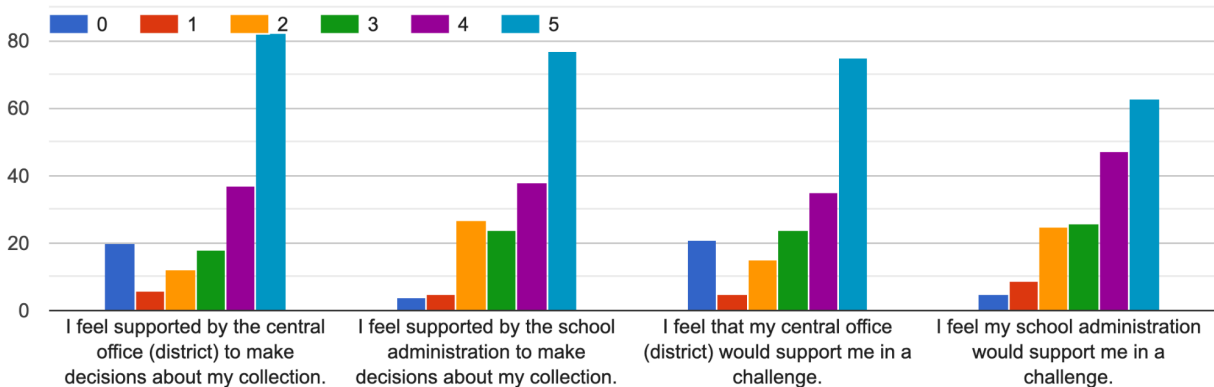


Figure 3: Support at the central office and administration of building

As part of the survey, MASL asked members to report on the implications of book challenges in relation to their feelings about their job. More than half (57.1%) of the respondents said that book challenges in general have made their job more difficult and a little less than half (42.3%) said book challenges are having a negative impact on their personal life. Some librarians reported being yelled at in public or voiced fear because of angry community members and

parents. School librarians reported that they have been called “groomers,” that they are “politically indoctrinating students,” and providing “porn” to students.

Have you avoided purchasing a book for your library collection because you were afraid that it may be "controversial" even though it meets selection criteria and policy?

172 responses

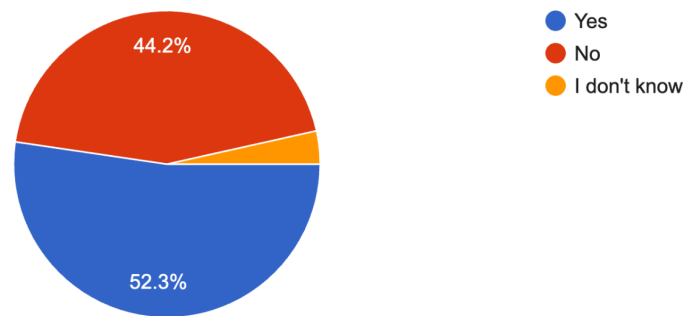


Figure 4: School Librarians have begun to avoid purchasing “controversial” books.

More than half of the school respondents reported a type of soft censorship by avoiding purchasing a book for fear of negative consequences. (Fig. 4) Some reported being “fearful” of purchasing a book even though they knew that there were students who could benefit from it because they would receive pushback from parents. Others stated that they “second-guessed” their decisions when it came to purchasing books because of a sense of fear of repercussions and losing their jobs. School librarians also reported that some of the policies and procedures put into place by their district increased the time required for purchasing and made placing orders “next to impossible” by creating copious amounts of paperwork and requiring every book to be read before it was placed on the shelf. School librarians reported school and/or district administrators suggesting removal of books in order to avoid controversy.

Only 11 respondents didn’t know their policies and procedures and fewer than 25% of respondents reported lacking professional development on those procedures. Respondents mentioned strong adherence to selection policies as well as frustration when selection policies and reconsideration policies are not followed.

School librarians reported being frustrated with how small groups of parents could change the entire culture of a school community. They reported that they felt that their expertise was not valued and that some parents and community members did not recognize that they have master’s degrees in their field and have been trained in selection and collection development.

Discussion

While these community groups may be getting the reactions they want in some places, school librarians are standing strong in the belief that all students deserve to have books that reflect their lives. When it comes to purchasing books that are controversial, librarians reported spending more time ensuring that their orders followed policy and second-guessing themselves; however, just as many librarians reported continuing to purchase books that might lead to controversy in order to ensure access and representation.

The resilience demonstrated by respondents was admirable. There is a significant amount of fear and frustration in school librarians, but there is just as much confidence that they are doing the right thing even if it isn't the easy thing. Despite the fact that almost all districts have had at least one challenge since the 21-22 SY and most school librarians know someone who has dealt with a challenge in their school, very few school librarians are giving up. Very few librarians mentioned questioning whether they would continue in the profession.

At first, it was difficult to reconcile the fear with the sense that school and district administrators trust decision making and would support librarians in challenges. It seems like the two would go hand in hand; people would be fearful because they didn't feel supported. After looking through the open-ended responses again, the school librarians feared more for their students. School librarians want to do the best job that they can. Their biggest fear is not being able to provide the things that their students need, but they also want to do so in a responsible manner and work to follow any and all policies and procedures set out for them. When community and parent groups "vilify" them as many respondents reported, there is a fear that they are not doing a good job.

Immediate Actions

MASL recognizes that the battles of book challenges are fought in individual conversations and large protests, at kitchen tables and school board meetings, by students and corporations. MASL's Advocacy Committee meets regularly to discuss issues, strategy, and next steps. They have developed campaigns, letters, and alerts. While MASL can and will continue to speak out on behalf of school librarians across the state, we also recognize that our members need access to tools that allow them to be able to advocate for themselves at a moment's notice. MASL is actively working to update our advocacy toolkit and to provide more resources to members.

MASL will be curating and crowd sourcing resources and materials that will allow everyone in the Maryland School Library community to have resources related to book challenges at their fingertips. If you have a resource for advocacy or want to contribute to our toolkit, please add your resource to this [document](#).

MASL has also created a members only forum which can be accessed [here](#). You will need to be signed into the MASL website to access this resource and add to the different discussions. This is a place to stay up to date with what is happening across the state.

To directly report a book challenge to MASL, please email challenges@maslmd.org This will help us to keep a database of challenged books and prepare responses.

Further Exploration

As MASL moves forward in our investigation of book challenges across the state, we plan on investigating the following questions:

- Does the data differ significantly when there has been a “difficult” challenge situation?
- How many people mention an increased workload?
- How many people mention health problems (physical and mental)?

Final Thoughts

MASL would like to remind members that they are not alone. There is power in the collective voice, so continue to speak out and speak up when something is happening in your district, community, or another district. Feel free to utilize the [advocacy now form](#) on the MASL website or email: advocacy@maslmd.org

*One additional district responded via email saying that they have not had any challenges, but are reviewing their selection policies and procedures due to the book challenges in other areas of the state.