Kirsten Stewart:

Books hold a special place in our history and our imaginations. Reading is fundamental. It's how we access knowledge and understand our world, and libraries perform an important function in making sure the public has access to the world's knowledge. Library collections, however, are not static. They evolve and shift. After all, libraries have limited space, staffing, and budgets, which may be why the so-called fifth law of library science is, "The library is a growing organism." But the very notion of removing or of discarding books makes us all a little uncomfortable. We have a sentimental attachment to books. I have a few hundred titles gathering dust on the bookshelves of my home, so it's no surprise that announcements about libraries reviewing or weeding books from their collections can cause angst for some.

Kirsten Stewart:

Canyons School District is reviewing and considering updating its library management policy to more clearly define the criteria against which books should be evaluated for acquisition and the regular weeding of titles, and for in those exceedingly rare instances when titles are challenged by someone. Here to explain the reason and goals for the policy review are Canyons Superintendent, Dr. Rick Robins, General Counsel, Dan Harper, and the District Library Specialist, Gretchen Zaitzeff. Welcome to Connect Canyons.

Gretchen Zaitzeff:

Hi.

Dr. Rick Robbins:

Hi Kirsten.

Kirsten Stewart:

Why don't we start with you, Rick? If you could, briefly explain what prompted the review of our library policy. I understand it started with some concerns from parents, and naturally when we receive questions from parents, we defer to policy. And what we found is that while our library management policy had some strengths, it had some areas that needed a little shoring up.

Dr. Rick Robins:

Thank you, Kirsten. Well, it's really great to be here with all of you today. And first off, I just want offer my sincere gratitude and support for our amazing libraries in Canyons School District and our librarians that manage and operate those libraries. I think all of us have near and dear connections to our local libraries. I think about my own time as a child and the excitement and just the opportunity that comes with checking out a library book. For me, this is a very important topic and one that I think as a society and as a community that we really want to pay attention to. The issue surrounding our library books really started, we had multiple parents and patrons send us emails and notices about concerns that they had with content in some of our books that they perceived as potentially not being appropriate.

Dr. Rick Robins:

As these concerns were raised with me, it gave me pause as superintendent in looking at our own policy. And I think it's important to mention that I really believe our policy comes from a place of strength. It has been looked to and utilized in years past, but I also think it was incomplete in some ways and it was necessary for us to take a look at it. As the policy is finalized by the board that the titles in question that were brought to me with concerns would be deferred back to the policy for that protocol.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay. To be clear, no book has been banned in Canyons District. No final action has been taken on any title until we can provide more clarity through policy on how to respond to official book challenges or review requests, which leads me to my next question about the nature of the concerns parents have voiced regarding these books. Now, if you're a regular consumer of news, then you know, there's been a spate of school library challenges throughout the country. In some states, parents have targeted books that address issues of importance to LGBTQ students. School libraries have also received challenges from parents opposed to books they say perpetuate racism. My understanding of the input we've received is that parent concerns have mostly hinged on language in the books that they perceive to be obscene, vulgar, or inappropriate for students.

Dr. Rick Robins:

So for me, the nature of concerns that I'm most interested in and concerned about relates to being age appropriate. We have many, many titles in our libraries that support of vast array of diversity and different topics and students. And so, for me, really applying obscenity state statute and rule as well as Supreme Court, Miller's three prong test trying to define obscenity, which is very difficult in that I think for me, that's the greater concern is when content is called out specifically that may not be age appropriate is to me is the central focus of this concern.

Kirsten Stewart:

To your point, Rick, I understand the Utah chapter of the NAACP issued a statement to stress their concern about some of obscene language in the books in question while supporting reading materials that are "appropriate for all students."

Dr. Rick Robins:

That really is the heart of the question is the balance of First Amendment rights and access versus the content and whether or not it's age appropriate.

Kirsten Stewart:

these really are tough policy questions. My understanding of the American Library Association's Code of Ethics is that public librarians are regarded as public servants. In other words, they have the responsibility to serve their designated communities and not promote one point of view over another. School libraries, which serve children ranging in age from five to 18 have also a distinct duty to ensure their collections are age appropriate. Now, Dan, could you speak to that from a legal perspective?

Dan Harper:

The Supreme Court holding in Island Trees Union Free School District V. PECO where the Supreme Court held that the First Amendment imposes limitations, but not an outright ban upon a local school board's exercise of its discretion to remove books from high school and junior high school libraries. The court pointed out that local school boards have broad discretion in the management of school affairs, but such discretion must be exercised in a manner that comports with the First Amendment as the Supreme Court pointed out in the Tinker case that students do not shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate. And they also pointed out that these rights may be directly and sharply implicated by the removal of books from the shelves of a school library.

Dan Harper:

The court went on to say that the petitioners, the school district, possesses significant discretion to determine the content of their school libraries, but that discretion may not be exercised in a narrowly partisan or political manner. In other words, the court was pointing out that we can't remove books because of their ideas. We may disagree with ideas that are expressed in a book, but that's not the reason why those can be removed. However, the court went on to point out that there are reasons why a school district or board could remove books, including such things as vulgarity and offensive language.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay. Gretchen, let's talk about the practical challenges faced by school librarians. We have 42 school libraries and about a half million books on the shelves district wide.

Gretchen Zaitzeff:

We're roughly at 470,000 books in our collection. So that's not titles, but copies since every library has at least one set of Harry Potter. But we do have a large number of titles within our library system.

Kirsten Stewart:

That's an awful lot of reading, not to mention the non-analog or digital resources we make available. Practically speaking, how do librarians go about adding new titles and updating their collections?

Gretchen Zaitzeff:

So a library has a finite amount of shelf space and regularly teacher librarians purchase titles. So you might become aware of a title in a variety of different ways. I mean, I personally follow several popular authors through social media and I'm always getting information about what they're writing and what other people are reading. We also read professional reviews. There are a lot of standardized review materials from sources like the bulletin for the children's book, from the University of Illinois and the School Library Journal. So commonsense.org also provides rated materials locally. We have a woman, Cindy Mitchell, who's a librarian in the Jordan District who has a blog called Kiss The Book that's been essential I think within this state and across the country as far as like providing review materials that address some of the concerns like we are seeing with these titles. But once a librarian becomes aware of a book, they start to consider how that would fit into the collection overall. If it addresses curricular need, student interest, might be a popular title, and then those are acquired. So we acquire somewhere between 200 and 1700 books a year within our secondary schools with the average being about 700 titles.

Kirsten Stewart:

That sounds like a heavy lift, but our librarians are trained for this. I mean, it's what they love and know how to do, right?

Gretchen Zaitzeff:

Our secondary teacher librarians are all licensed educators. Many of them have either an endorsement in library science or a master's degree. We have one secondary librarian who has a doctorate degree. On average, they have about 11 years in the classroom and six years of experience in school libraries.

Kirsten Stewart:

I understand that the policy changes that have been proposed aim to provide more guidance on the purchase or acquisition and then the weeding and review of books. Maybe the three of you could break it down for listeners. Rick, why don't you start by describing how books would be acquired under the new rules?

Dr. Rick Robins:

So, a couple of things, and I'll defer to Gretchen, I think this is more in her wheelhouse, but just for me, a couple of things in the policy that change is that in the previous policy for acquisition, there were 12 criteria that librarians would select from that three of those needed to be met and one of the categories in that criteria was being age appropriate and we've made a requirement right at the top of the list across the board as well as meeting five more criteria for adoption. So I look forward to that and I think that does give a little more clarity to our librarians and support in how they go about looking for selections, but I'll defer to Gretchen to speak to more of the process.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay. So, as I understand it, all of our library books will be selected with a goal of meeting diverse reading interests while also being age appropriate and meeting at least five additional criteria which range, I think from favorable reviews to teacher, parent, and guardian requests.

Gretchen Zaitzeff:

Right. So, we take a lot of requests, both from educators within the learning community, certain student requests are always considered, parent requests. As curriculum changes, we add books that support curriculum or academic research needs of our students, also new topics…so just coding and being a YouTuber. I mean that didn't even exist as a job, and now, you can read about that as a career option. So those titles are now being considered against the list as Superintendent Robins mentioned, that has actually expanded. So there's 15 criteria instead of 12. So that just gives us a lot more options to kind of gauge how the book meets our needs.

Kirsten Stewart:

As we've entertained these changes to the policy, I'm assuming we involved our librarians as well as other experts.

Gretchen Zaitzeff:

We've received feedback both from our district librarians, both at the secondary level and our paraprofessionals who support elementary students doing their Brain Booster Program. We've also received feedback from state organizations and our state librarians at the Utah State Board of Ed about feedback, which has helped us shape the policy to make it stronger and more reflective of what was already happening in practice. But it just strengthens our position.

Kirsten Stewart:

As a side note, any parents wishing to browse the shelves of their child's school library can easily do so online using our searchable library catalogs, which we make available on our school websites. Parents wishing to be more involved in their children's reading selections can also log into their school's digital catalog using their student login and put a title of interest on hold so their student can more easily check it out.

Gretchen Zaitzeff:

Correct. So this is a new option that we've made more available and accessible to parents. Students had access to this option, but I'm not sure every student was aware. Now, with the addition of these links on the school website, as parent and student can sit down together and browse the entire collection at their school through the Destiny Discover Platform. A student can log in using their school credentials and select a title that's available and have it placed on hold.

Kirsten Stewart:

Gretchen, you touched on the number of new book purchases made in any given year. What does the draft policy say about a parent who wants their school to review a book in the collection?

Gretchen Zaitzeff:

So if there's a title that a parent has a concern about, we've made additions to our policy so that a parent can ask for a school level review. So as soon as the policy is adopted, there will be a form that will be available through the school either on the website or in hard copy that a parent could fill out and submit to the school principal that will trigger a review of that title so that title will be read by a licensed librarian in the district. And then, a defense of acquisition will be made explaining why that book was added to the collection. That includes the reading of the book. So, as I mentioned, we bring thousands of books into our system every year and not every book can be read prior to purchase. Some of the review material that we have access to is incomplete. So reading the title is essential to understanding the content.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay. So from there, the book could be either retained or deselected and weeded. Gretchen, what does weeding mean in the world of libraries?

Gretchen Zaitzeff:

So it would either be retained or it would be weeded. If it's weeded, it would automatically trigger a districtwide review in case that title was in a library at a different location.

Kirsten Stewart:

Okay. What then about an official challenge to a book? What process is spelled out in the proposed policy for that?

Gretchen Zaitzeff:

So a review, like I mentioned, is kind of a defense of acquisition. It's like, please read this book. Let's discuss what's in the content. A formal review would be a parent who's interested in removing that title from our collection permanently and would require us to put into play the school level library materials challenge. So a parent would have to fill out request for reconsideration of library materials form, which includes certification that the parent has read the material in its entirety and then documents the areas of concern within the content. When that's received at the school where their child attends, that would trigger the creation of a school review committee that would be led by the principal as defined in the policy. And then, each member of the committee reads the material, they're given access to the professional reviews, the defense of acquisition. At some point, the challenger has an opportunity to make their case before the committee. And then, the committee decides by majority vote whether to keep that title at that school or whether that will be deselected.

Kirsten Stewart:

And after the policy is adopted, what happens next? I mean, I know there are folks out there who are eager to see all of this resolved, but we have systems in place for updating policies. And as we have said in the introduction today, decisions about library books should be taken carefully or undertaken carefully and deliberately.

Dan Harper:

Traditionally, when it comes to policies, the board has always had three readings of a policy before approving. Sometimes, when it's just a small change that may have been brought about by recent legislation that we just had to make a minor change to the policy, it might go to two readings and then they request approval. I would imagine this, given the substantial changes that the policy is gone through and the revisions that have been put in place between the first reading and the upcoming second reading at, I believe the December 14th board meeting, that we would more likely than not also have a third reading after that. And there's a good chance that there may be additional revisions to this policy in between the second and third reading. So there will be plenty of opportunity for patrons to review and give input on this policy, as well as our employees. As Gretchen indicated, she's been working with the other librarians in the district to review the policy and receive their feedback. And so, I think it will be a very thorough process with a lot of feedback from multiple constituents, both our patrons and our employees. And I think we're going to end up with a really good policy.

Gretchen Zaitzeff:

So I think previously we had a good policy. I think this strengthens our policy. It certainly adds clarification and more definition. It helps strengthen the district's support, public support, I guess, of school librarians and the work that they do. And it will just help us do our job better.

Dr. Rick Robins:

I think it's important too, some clarity on this that is a check and balance that kind of, to me, it also differentiates this policy is that in previous policy, as I mentioned, it was silent on whether or not school administration or a board member could call for a review of a certain title. In this new policy, district administration or a board member can call for a district level review, which would be three of our school librarians would then conduct the review of that book, but it also clarifies that it does not allow for school administration or a board member to direct a book to be permanently removed from our collection. That would only come through, as Gretchen mentioned, through the challenge process. So I think that's a great combination that strengthens our policy in a couple of different ways without giving a school board or a school level administrator unfettered access to just simply ban a book. So I think it's very helpful both ways.

Kirsten Stewart:

I know we've had patrons already giving input at our board meetings and there will be more time for that at subsequent meetings where the policy is discussed. Anyone interested can find our board meeting agendas and patron comment instructions under the leadership tab on the canyonsdistrict.org website. They're also free to give input in person at the meetings or they can submit questions and comments by emailing communications@canyonsdistrict.org.

Dr. Rick Robins:

I think we're in a time that is changing, right? And so, adjusting policy to be responsive to the day and age that we live in, I think that's important that we all support that and really allow the process to occur to really meet the needs of our students and our district in this day and age.

Kirsten Stewart:

I want to thank our guests for their time and willingness to explain these nuances. And I want to let our listeners know that here at Connect Canyons, we're going to be talking a whole lot more about library books. I'll be inviting Gretchen and some of her librarians back to spotlight some of the new books they've added to their collections. And of course, we'll be asking them for book recommendations and short recaps of some of their favorite reads. So be sure to tune in again soon. With that, I'll sign off and thank you all as your host, Kirsten Stewart, for tuning in to Connect Canyons.