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.

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 thTTa(l s) toe u6(s)1(to)2(6(e.)-3

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

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).

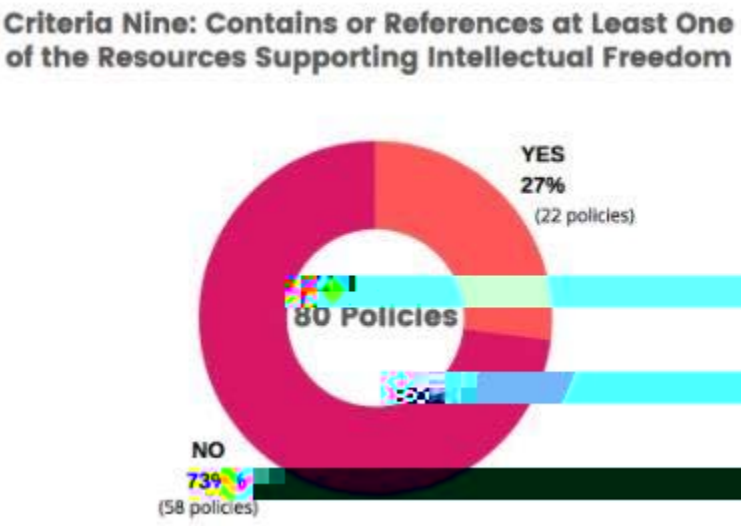

Figure 2**.** Does the policy contain or reference at least one of the resources supporting intellectual freedom?

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

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

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

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.

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.