FEATURE

PROMOTING THE JOY OF READING WITHOUT

Sonja Beckham
sbeckham@wcpss.net
Under North Carolina state law (as well as common law), a public library card may be considered a contract. Youth under the age of majority (a minor) cannot legally contract, so parents or guardians control access to public library services for their children. Even if the minor signs a contract it is not legally enforceable. The age of majority for contracts varies by state but in most states is considered to be either eighteen or no more than twenty-one, unless the youth is considered emancipated, which is a legal process that establishes independent status. If a public library provides a library card to a minor, someone has to be responsible for damaged or lost books. As a result, parents may be allowed to see what their children check out or their history of library usage. Not all parental requests for records are odious, but may stem from the simple need to locate the child’s borrowed books that need to be returned.

Even if a parent is controlling and wants to know what his or her child is reading, that request is well within the law. However, with the advent of the Patriot Act, many libraries have adopted the practice of wiping out circulation records as soon as materials (borrowed by users of any age) are returned.

This restrictiveness on the part of parents, guardians, or even librarians could be critical for adolescents who through books explore their feelings and the world around and beyond them; within books adolescents can see beyond their own current experiences. And if the parent does not have transportation or chooses not to use the public library, a child won’t be exposed to the wonderful resources there. Parental control and lack of access to public libraries can inhibit what or whether a child reads.

If a parent or guardian wishes to see the record of what his or her child has checked out, the child has no legal protection under privacy rights. A public library could adopt the stance of requiring a subpoena for all records requests, which is what many have done.
Best Interests
How do these frameworks apply to school libraries? Schools and teachers act to a limited degree in loco parentis, thus assuming the role of parents, especially in the health and safety of minors in attendance at public school, but also in setting educational standards. Public schools have been delegated this role and implement policies, programs, and procedures that sometimes, unintentionally, do not support the freedom to read or to make free choices regarding reading, and may contribute to students becoming non-readers. All of these actions are done in the name of building readers who will be able to recall, retell, and comprehend, and, in the end, pass the mandated tests. Nowhere in this process is the joy of reading the overarching theme, although this joy is always a hoped-for byproduct.

Though school librarians are part of the solution, they are sometimes part of the problem. How? By

Get as many books into their hands as they can be responsible for and carry.

with the advent of the Patriot Act. Requiring a subpoena to see a minor's circulation records would, at best, be a stall tactic since parental rights and not the rights of an underage child would control. In contrast, requiring a subpoena for the adult patron records protects the library as well as the patron under privacy laws.

All of this is a legal framework, whereas the ethical framework found in the ALA's Freedom to Read Statement <http://tinyurl.com/3q78hc>, though important, does not necessarily have the force of law. The ALA's Freedom to Read Statement is considered a code of best practices and could be viewed as a standard by which public libraries should operate. Children who go to a public library experience the best of this ethical framework at work with librarians who do not censor how much or what minors check out. Nor do librarians who demonstrate these best practices found in the Freedom to Read Statement restrict what is purchased and on the shelves, available for everyone to check out.

limiting the number of books a student may check out based upon the need to "teach responsibility," or by requiring that a student may get only a book he or she can read, or by stipulating that a student may not "abandon" a book once starting it, school librarians and other adults continue to thwart learners' natural desire for self-direction and personal choice. For proof, one only has to see how providing self-checkout and removing limits on numbers or types of books increases circulation and empowers students. Students begin to see the school library as a positive place for them.
This line of thinking leads to further discussion about whether students actually read the books. Who knows whether they read or do not read the books? However, it is clear they will not read what they do not have access to, either in their hands or in their book bags! If proof of reading is needed, school librarians and teachers can devise appropriate strategies, from follow-up discussions to computer-driven programs.

But is monitoring pleasure reading any way to excite a child about reading? An ideal way to encourage reading is to hold informal book-review sessions conducted by students with their peers, sharing their favorite books or most recently read favorite books. Such active sharing generates more excitement and enthusiasm for reading than any reading program or book report could do—especially when coupled with seeing the real book or a projected image from the school’s online catalog. This active sharing not only empowers, it appeals to multiple learning styles, and increases students’ ability to speak and articulate the reasons they like specific books. Another more individual way is for the teacher or school librarian to ask the student one-to-one whether or not he or she liked the book and why. In classrooms this may be called conferencing, while in the school library this is just the standard way of doing business as school librarians seek to put the “just-right” book in the hands of the student.

If rules requiring a student to complete a book and not abandon it, or to read a specific genre are needed, please let such requirements come from the teachers and be based upon specific assignments. Let the school librarian foster the freedom to choose as well as the freedom to abandon a book that proves boring or too hard. Also, in support of the freedom to read, the school librarian may foster an atmosphere where censorship is seen as inappropriate. Students can be taught that they may return (without finishing) books containing content they (or their parents) find offensive. However, in keeping with the freedom to read, other students and their parents may find the very same material appropriate.

Let students check out the number of books they believe they can be responsible for, and then see how they do. And let them borrow materials via self-checkout! This empowers a student, and frees the school librarian and other staff to teach or assist more students seeking guidance by asking, “Can you help me find a really good book?”

Being stewards of our school resources doesn’t mean books should remain on the shelf in pristine condition, but instead means resources should be placed in the hands of students to explore. Mine is not a recommendation to work at odds with the classroom teachers, but a plea for understanding of the different roles played by school librarians versus classroom teachers. While it is true school librarians teach and support the curriculum by collaborating and cooperating with teachers, school librarians also are on the front line, fostering students’ love of reading.

Sometimes the two goals appear to be in conflict. However, conflict can easily be avoided by being clear with students: When a teacher says something is required, it is. In contrast, when a school librarian works with students selecting pleasure reading, the standards are different. Because there are so many books and so little time, students should have “permission” to abandon a book picked up for pleasure reading. Sometimes a student should be encouraged to read at least ten pages (or maybe a chapter) to be sure the book is “not working” for him or her. But if the book doesn’t grab the reader’s attention during this “try out,” suggest trying another book.

If students, on their own, learn in elementary school to explore the richness of their school libraries, they will usually continue to read for pleasure in middle school where reading has continued to drop off. This abandonment of reading self-selected books is often in response to study of the novel in the classroom, but is just as often in response to what happened to students in elementary school—where what they could or could not read was prescribed in a lockstep manner. They might have been told they could check out only books with specific reading levels or could borrow just one or two books at a time.
As a result of this regimentation, students may never develop a joy of reading for pleasure or the fun of exploring many genres. But when students are allowed to explore, they will know what they like and how to find it, even when they move on to a new school. In other words, through self-direction and exploration young readers will become empowered. This empowerment is borne out anecdotally by an eighth-grade language arts teacher in the local school district. The teacher reported language arts teachers in this middle school no longer require a classroom novel study. They allow students to read what they wish. Parents are reporting to this teacher a sight they have not often seen before: Their children are reading—all the time, at home, and in the car!

Turning reading into a sport usually diminishes the innate, private joy of reading for pleasure.

Take the Competiveness Out of Reading Programs

Many reading programs that schools pay to implement, with the idea that the programs promote reading by rewarding students who pass tests and earn points, actually (in this author's opinion) don't promote much more than instant recall of facts. There usually is no clear measurement of comprehension, just memorization. Having such programs tends to drive collection development, as well. If students must take the tests, per their teachers' assignments or parents' requirements that students participate and "earn points," then young learners will read only books for which tests are available. Really excellent books without tests will languish on the shelf—or might not be purchased—because the test has become the only reason to read a specific book. Further, such programs impose a competitive spirit on students and their families, thus making a "sport" of reading, a tactic that can work well for some but just as often backfires for independently spirited students. In the end, students subjected to competitive reading programs often stop reading just as soon as they are no longer required to read. Turning reading into a sport usually diminishes the innate, private joy of reading for pleasure.

Summing It up for Schools

While it is true reading must be taught and reading leveled books helps students be more successful, the lockstep approach requiring that students have access only to books they can read results in their viewing reading as just another chore. To promote and/or preserve the innate, personal joy of reading, children should have the freedom of access all day to a wide variety of books. They ought to be able to self-select, self-check out, and then have in their possession the tangible expression of beautiful words and/or pictures they can read on their own or with adults. And, once in possession of library books, they should be allowed to decide on their own whether to look at the pictures and read. The temporary possession of a self-selected book is part of the pleasure found in the freedom to read.

Get into their hands as many books as students can be responsible for and carry. Get out of their way as students explore on their own and be a positive part of the experiences they wish to share!

Sonja Beckham is currently the school librarian at Sanford Creek Year-Round Elementary School in Rolesville, North Carolina. She returned to the field in 2000 after a career in law and in higher education. She earned National Board Certification in 2004 and has presented on copyright for educators at the North Carolina School Library Media Association conference.