

Freedom on the Frontlines

Dealing With Challenges to Public Library Materials

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What was the worst interaction you have had with a patron?

What made it so terrible?

How did you feel after?

Agenda

- Storytime
- Laying the groundwork to prepare for challenges
 - Understanding your community
 - Understanding your library
 - Hospitality
- When challenges happen
- When it gets worse
- Resources

Eckhart Public Library Challenge, 2014

In January 2014, I challenged a book in the Eckhart Public Library (EPL) collection. I received a letter from Janelle Graber, EPL director, stating the library's decision to keep "Blue is the Warmest Color" by Julie Maroh. I filed an appeal to the library board of trustees in February 2014. Three months later, their decision is still pending.

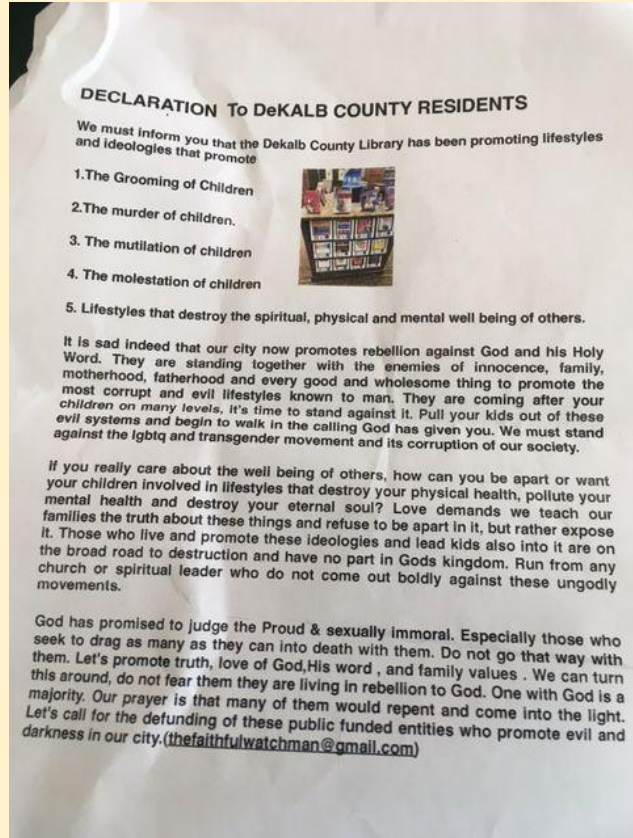
It is the library's responsibility to choose materials reflecting the values of the community as a whole, since materials are purchased with taxpayers' dollars. Language, violence or sexual content may be a concern to some. Any library material may potentially ruffle someone's feathers. EPL offers a variety of wonderful items and many fine services! However, my concern addressed the happenstance patron viewing of sexually explicit graphic novels, standards of the community and the liability of the library. There is a big difference between fine art books, anatomy books and the pictorial depictions of inappropriate images in some graphic novels.

I did my best to conscientiously research, review and express my concerns to the library board. Should books such as these be available for general access on open shelves without safeguards? Should they remain in the library at all? Now it is time for taxpayers to voice their concerns as to what the standards of this community are and how they want conscientious spending of taxpayers' money. Only the EPL Board of Trustees can decide — Carolyn Foley, Kari Ackerman, Lisa Conrad, Bill Schaab, Nancy Erwin, Barb Morrow and Steve Teders. Perhaps they would like to hear from the taxpayers. The next library board meeting is Tuesday, June 10, 6 p.m. at the Willennar Genealogy Center, 700 South Jackson Street, Auburn.

Shame on the director of the Eckhart Public Library. The library director has taken the position that this is an issue of freedom of speech. This appeal to the library board of trustees is not, nor never has been an issue of censorship, rather a concern over conflicting library policies that could place the library in financial jeopardy. A quick review of United States constitutional law and Indiana legal statutes reveal, while pornography intended for adults may be protected under the First Amendment, depictions of child pornography and obscenity are not protected. This is not an issue of intellectual freedom, rather a clarification of conflicting library policies that could result in a potential civil lawsuit.

Shame on the person responsible for selecting material that is obscene or borders on obscenity. As a practicing school librarian for 40-plus years with the Fort Wayne Community School System, building union representative for 80-plus employees, and a former employee of the Eckhart Public Library, I know not to trust information sources that are indebted to a national agenda. It is the responsibility of the library to provide unrestricted access to thought-provoking ideas while still supporting community standards of appropriateness. Acquisition librarians must be familiar with, and respectful of national, state and local codes. Why does the American Motion Picture Association advertise suggested age restrictions as part of their movie rating system? Why do book stores typically have an "Adults Only" section? It is to avoid litigation. While many things may be permissible, not all things are profitable, nor are they productive.

Eckhart Public Library Challenge, 2023



Know Your Community

What are the demographics? Are you serving everyone?

Who is using your library or not using your library?

What organizations and groups exist and have influence?

Who is on local boards?

What's going on? Newspaper? Community social media?

Know Your Library

Mission and vision?

[Collection Development Policy?](#) [Programming Policy?](#)

[Meeting Room Use Policy?](#) [Display Policy?](#) [Public Comment](#) or [Bulletin Board Policy?](#)

Process for reconsideration requests?

Patron Code of Conduct?

What's going on?

Daily Awareness

If your space is set up for this, greet or otherwise acknowledge your patrons as they come in. Know who is in the building.

Know what a “typical” day is like in terms of foot traffic.

If you can, get away from the service desk at least once an hour and walk the floor.

First Amendment Audits

- Loose group of social media activists testing alleged First Amendment violations of government agencies by filming public employees and/or in public buildings
 - Their goal is to cause conflict and post alleged violations to social media.
- Know and explain your policies, extend your hospitality, and follow through/up.
 - Is privacy an issue?
- If you remain calm and continue doing your job, they will likely keep it short.

Materials and Programming Challenges

- Concerns about collection
 - Is this a situation where a conversation with a manager or the director would help?
 - Conversation BEFORE the Request for Reconsideration form.
 - “Are YOU finding everything you/your child need?”
 - Know your policies and procedures.
- Pushing for removal of items or cancellation of programs
 - Purple for Parents/Mary in the Library/Moms for Liberty
 - There is no reasoning with these groups
 - Follow your policies and procedures while continuing to do the best job you can.

Behavior and Body Language

- Patrons

- Legitimate concern expressed in a productive way or there with a purpose?
 - Abusive behavior
 - Character assassination
 - Name-calling
 - Blindsiding
 - Disinformation
 - Outright harassment and intimidation

- Staff

- Stance
- Voice

It Just Got Worse: Protests and Audits

- Know your rights.
 - You do not have to take abuse.
- Know your patrons' rights.
 - The public library is a limited public forum.
 - The Library Board may regulate the time, manner, and place of speech as appropriate for the purpose of the space.
 - If they are following the Code of Conduct, they are within their rights.
- Do not engage with them as much as possible.
- Make sure staff are aware of what is happening.
- Make sure law enforcement is aware.
- Know what to say to other patrons who may be upset by what is happening.

It Just Got Worse

- Disorderly behavior
 - Are there other staff around who can be backup?
 - Does the behavior violate your [Code of Conduct?](#)
 - Disruptive, unsafe, interferes with library operations or use of the library.
 - “I know you’re upset, and I am trying to help you, but I can’t do that unless you lower your voice.”
 - “If you choose to keep doing X, we will need to ask you to leave.”
 - Call the police when you have said you are going to call the police.
- Consistently document every time you have to ask a patron to leave.
- If you can, document each behavior correction or tense interaction to establish a pattern of behavior and for staff awareness.

Take Care of Staff

- Management Support: Training and Staffing
 - Assertiveness training
 - Recognizing abusive behavior
 - Library training
 - Do you have at least two available staff on a floor/in a building?
- State and National Library Associations
 - Report ALL challenges.
- Policies
 - Fortify them.
 - Know them.
 - Know how to defend them.
- Self-care
 - Take a break after a tense or terrible interaction if at all possible.
 - Look for joy and celebrate wins, no matter how small.

What was the worst interaction you ever had with a patron?

What made it so terrible?

How did you feel after?

What could you have done differently?



Nico Pearl, portrait by Nancy

Violet the Void, portrait by Nancy



Resources and References

[Auditing the First Amendment at Your Public Library](#), Caldwell-Stone, Deborah, 2019.

The Black Belt Librarian: Real-World Safety & Security, Graham, Warren, 2011.

[The Librarian's Guide to Homelessness](#): An Empathy-Driven Approach to Solving Problems, Preventing Conflict, and Serving Everyone, Dowd, Ryan, 2018.

[The Merritt Fund](#)

[Under Scrutiny: Helping Staff Feel Empowered in the Face of Book Challenges](#)
[Lipp-Accord, Darcy, 2022.](#)

Questions?

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