

The Freedom to Read in Michigan

A Joint Statement Prepared by
Michigan Association for Media in Education (MAME)
Michigan Council of Teachers of English (MCTE)
Michigan Reading Association (MRA)

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“The freedom to read is essential to our democracy.” (ALA, “The Freedom to Read Statement,” 2004).

While there are always a number of overlapping concerns related to books in our schools — including adequate school funding to purchase materials, as well as to provide certified library staff that support inclusive collections — as three professional organizations committed to literacy and learning, we focus our shared attention at this moment on this matter of concern: the Freedom to Read in Michigan.

We are inspired by and indebted to the American Library Association’s 2004 statement, “The Freedom to Read,” which was first written in 1953 and revised over decades to represent the social, political, and cultural contexts in which book challenges — that sometimes lead to book bans and, through the bans, censorship — is as relevant now as ever. As the ALA affirms, “Now as always in our history, reading is among our greatest freedoms,” and we must continue to assert our rights and protect that freedom.

Book challenges and bans are not new, though the reasons for various stakeholders to push for challenges and bans take on new forms over time. In the past, for instance, “obscenity” was a common cause for challenging a book; today we see how those who wish to ban books still fear “obscenity,” and also fear that their own children may feel “guilt” or “shame” about themselves. No matter the reason, these challenges persist, and need to be addressed in a direct, clear, and swift manner.

To that end, as we consider the diverse nature of our state’s citizens and needs of various K-12 school communities, we outline interrelated elements including the principles and the stakeholders that are connected to The Freedom to Read in Michigan, noting the crucial role of each.

Principles

As literacy educators, we commit to the following principles in our own statement on the freedom to read.

Diversity

We support diverse library collections that affirm the identities and lives of children and youth. The United States is a patch-work quilt of colors, ethnicities, traditions, and beliefs. So, too, are the children who enter our schools. As argued by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, we want children to see themselves, and the greater world, in our library collections through metaphorical “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” (1990). The mirrors reflect their own experiences, windows offer a view of the world beyond their own experiences, and sliding glass doors invite them to step into new worlds to build empathy and understanding of multiple perspectives. To that end, we encourage all stakeholders to explore and embrace diverse and inclusive books.

Literacy

We believe that literacy is essential to success in life, both inside and outside the classroom. Literacy success is strongly correlated with not just academic success, but also college and career access and success, health outcomes, life expectancy, and even incarceration rates. In addition to high-quality instruction, robust library collections that include up-to-date, curated print and digital materials support this success. Children who find books that they like and which resonate with their identities and experiences will, indeed, read; the ideal place to find books to support curricular and personal interests is in a school library. Reading is the best way to improve literacy, foster empathy, create critical thinkers and, according to the ALA (2019), “promote intellectual freedom.” To that end, we encourage literacy in all its forms, and especially through school libraries.

Censorship and Intellectual Freedom

We are committed to supporting intellectual freedom and our students’ right to read. While we recognize that various constituencies will have different opinions about the content and quality of the books in our libraries, we are committed to challenging censorship, as protected by the First Amendment. To maintain vibrant library collections while responding to community concerns, we support the processes for challenging and — only if absolutely necessary — removing books from our schools.

If policies and procedures for selection and reconsideration are not yet in place in every district, they should be. Moreover, the ways in which various stakeholders are identified and invited to the development of such policies is crucial. To the extent that it is feasible, we believe that students from the school — elementary, middle, or high school — who would be affected by the ban should also be part of the procedure.

Stakeholders

Students’ Rights

Children, with the guidance of their parents and caregivers, have the right to make choices about what they read as individuals. The First Amendment guarantees this right to choose and parents should be involved in those choices. However, no individual, group of individuals, legislator, community member, or even school board member, based on their own personal beliefs or political viewpoint, can dictate what *all* students are — or are not — allowed to read. As NCTE argues, “we respect the right of individuals to be selective in their own reading” (2018). In all cases, we believe that students themselves must have a voice in this decision.

Parents’ and Caregivers’ Rights

We believe that parents and caregivers have always had and should retain the right and responsibility to guide, select, and monitor their own children’s reading material; however, parents and caregivers do not have the right to limit or prevent other childrens’ reading, even when those materials may contrast with their own personal beliefs. Parents and caregivers do have the legal right to review and/or petition texts — through their local school’s board-approved processes and established library collection development procedures — or to ask for alternative selections for their own children.

School Librarians’ Rights

School librarians have the right to curate a current, diverse, and inclusive school library collection based on established collection development policies that “support the developmental, cultural, social, and linguistic needs of all learners” (AASL, 2020). As professionals, they are entitled to due diligence and adequate protections from their school administration and, as local contracts allow, their union. Moreover, the school library is a classroom; school librarians, as educators, have the same rights as teachers to select, display, and encourage students to read a variety of books.

Teachers’ Rights

We believe that teachers have the right to select whole-group, small-group, and individual texts for their classrooms based upon “the contribution each work may make to the education of the reader, its aesthetic value, its honesty, its readability for a particular group of students, and its appeal to young children and adolescents” (NCTE, 2018). Knowing their students' particular passions, questions, and goals, teachers can select and suggest books that meet them where they are, both to build their skills and motivate them to read a variety of authors and genres in support of their continued literacy learning.

Administrators’ and School Board Members’ Rights

We believe that administrators and school board members have the right to develop and follow school-related policies, including those related to book selection. We also realize that they are balancing the needs of many (and oftentimes competing) constituencies. As they facilitate conversations and enact policies, they must listen deeply to hear questions and concerns from these stakeholders. Yet, they must also stand firm for the rights of all students, providing insights to the community about culturally responsive instruction regarding the topics and themes that are relevant to the wider audience of readers in their school.

Conclusion

At a time when book challenges and bans are on the increase around our country, we affirm students’ rights to read and parents’ and caregivers’ rights to guide their students’ choices. We also affirm the rights and responsibilities of school librarians, teachers, administrators, and School Board members to offer books inclusive of the diversity found nationwide. In partnership with parents and caregivers, administrators, and colleagues, we stand firm in our belief that choice reading leads to stronger readers, critical thinkers, lifelong learners, and empathetic citizens essential to our democracy.

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The Board of Directors of the following organizations have affirmed and support the above statements:

- [Michigan Association for Media in Education](#) (MAME)
- [Michigan Council of Teachers of English](#) (MCTE)
- [Michigan Reading Association](#) (MRA)

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Additional Resources

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