Methodology

- *SLJ* updated its landmark 2008 “self-censorship” survey with input from the National Coalition Against Censorship.
- An invite to take a survey about selecting books with potentially controversial subject matter was emailed to a random sample of school librarians on March 4, 2016. Respondents were assured that their responses would remain anonymous. The survey closed on March 28 with 574 U.S. school librarians responding.

Overall Summary

- More than 9 in 10 school librarians serving elementary and middle school students have passed on purchasing a book because of potentially controversial topics. The number drops to 73% among high school librarians.
- Sexual content and profanity/vulgar language were the most frequently cited offensive topics.
- A third of elementary and middle school librarians and a quarter of high school librarians feel they need to make decisions about controversial subject matter more often now than they did even one or two years ago. Many think this is because books have become more graphic, while others blame the close-mindedness of society.
- “Non-age appropriate content” is the number one reason given for passing on a book at all school levels, trailed by possible reaction from parents and their institution’s guidelines.
- How do librarians determine if a book is age-appropriate? Reading reviews, reading and assessing the books themselves, and asking for input from others in the community emerged as the top answers.
- Content labels (e.g., YA, mature content) are used by 33% of middle schools, 27% of elementary schools, and 11% of high schools, considerably more often than they were when we conducted the 2008 survey (when it was 18%, 10% & 6% respectively).
- Restricted book sections exist in 12% of school libraries servicing middle school students, 10% serving primary grades, and 6% serving grades 9 through 12. Many school libraries don’t “restrict” books but do shelve them by age of reader and sometimes require a parent’s OK.
- Overall, 77% of schools have a formal book challenge procedure, relatively consistent across all grade levels. Eighty-one percent of public schools have a policy, compared to 59% of private schools. Schools in the South Atlantic, Mountain, and South Central regions are most likely to have a book challenge procedure in place.
Overall Summary (continued)

- More than half of schools (59%), especially high schools, have drafted some form of book selection policy to support purchase decisions. These policies involve reviews and/or some other district mandated or personally adopted selection criteria.
- More than 4 in 10 school librarians has personally experienced a book challenge. The Midwest and Pacific regions saw the most challenges. Exactly half of urban schools experienced a book challenge, compared to a third (32%) of small town schools.
- The majority of challenges originate from parents, especially in elementary schools. School administrators and teachers are the second most likely source of book challenges, followed by the students themselves.
- One quarter of librarians say that a previous book challenge affected their book-buying decisions going forward. This rises to 46% if a previous challenge was brought forth by an administrator.
Which of the following topics have led you to pass on purchasing a book?

- Sexual content
- Profanity or vulgar language
- LGBTQ content
- Violence
- Drug use
- Self-harm or suicide
- Religious references
- Racial content
- Other
- None of the above

![Chart showing percentage of respondents who avoided books based on various topics.](chart.png)
Do you find yourself weighing the effect of controversial subject matter more often now than you did one or two years ago?

(All respondents: 29% Yes)

- **Elementary**: 33%
- **Middle/Jr. high**: 33%
- **High school**: 23%

**Comments:**
- “More books with controversial content are being published.”
- “I think teen books are much more graphic than they were a few years ago. Before it was considered horrible if it had the ‘F word’ in it once, and now some books have it multiple times on every page.”
- “Everyone is offended by everything these days...so I weigh how I will defend the book even before it is challenged.”
- “Our curriculum director has begun censoring my purchases.”
- “Society and our local community members are more broad-minded than in previous decades. I am also bolder in making selection choices. We are a very large school with a diverse population. We can't ignore providing reading materials which reflect the realities of all our student's lives.”
- “It just seems like we need to justify everything. Usually complaints lead to the removal of the book, which means I just wasted those funds.”
- “More and more, the laws are leaning toward groups most vocal about their agendas. Are school librarians covered under the free speech amendment? Who will support us if we are questioned or disciplined about our content choices and what we deem suitable for our patrons? The pay and support fails to outweigh the possible outcome of such decisions.”

Read more comments.
Which of the following has influenced your decision to NOT purchase a book?

- Non-age appropriate content: 92% (Elementary), 93% (Middle/Jr. High), 75% (High school)
- Possible reaction from parents: 43% (Elementary), 44% (Middle/Jr. High), 30% (High school)
- Your institution's guidelines: 30% (Elementary), 36% (Middle/Jr. High), 23% (High school)
- Possible reaction from administration: 30% (Elementary), 21% (Middle/Jr. High), 23% (High school)
- Possible reaction from the community: 16% (Elementary), 19% (Middle/Jr. High), 15% (High school)
- Possible reaction from students: 12% (Elementary), 14% (Middle/Jr. High), 12% (High school)
- Your personal views: 12% (Elementary), 12% (Middle/Jr. High), 7% (High school)
- Previous book challenge: 8% (Elementary), 6% (Middle/Jr. High), 6% (High school)
- To avoid professional setback: 6% (Elementary), 7% (Middle/Jr. High), 2% (High school)
- To avoid embarrassment: 4% (Elementary), 5% (Middle/Jr. High), 2% (High school)
- Your institution's guidelines: Public school: 28%, Private school: 50%
- Your Personal Views: 18% in South Central region
- None of the above: 9% (Elementary), 2% (Middle/Jr. High), 2% (High school)
- Other: 13% (Elementary), 8% (Middle/Jr. High), 6% (High school)
How do you determine if a book is age-appropriate?

“I read lots of reviews, ask for teacher and student input, AND READ, READ, READ.” —7th–8th grade librarian

“I read reviews, check Common Sense Media, and go with my gut.” —High school librarian

“Age recommendations from SLJ and Booklist primarily, but I also consider Kirkus. Middle school is a tricky age group to serve, so I try to make sure that the books will speak to my students' concerns in a way they can comprehend. My worry is that books with content that is too mature won't help them make sense of complex issues but instead feed negative social or other dynamics.” —K–8 librarian

“Read more comments.”

- “We begin with peer reviews, then go to authors’ notes and comments and young adults’ reviews. When we’re not sure, we try to read the book ahead of purchase, but we may purchase then read the book and make a final determination based on our own knowledge of our student population and community.”
- “I try to read as many of the books as I can, especially if I am at all concerned about the appropriateness of the book.”
- “I read reviews and look for middle school ratings (5–8). I shy away from most YA books and anything meant for high school. Most of the students who use this school library are in grades 6 and 7, even though we are a 6–8 school.”
- “By considering the whole book. In my professional judgement, and considering our selection policies, explicit sex, violence, or drug use are not appropriate topics for a middle school audience.”
- “Our system requires two positive professional reviews. I will follow those, and if I am still uncertain, I will read the book myself or ask another teacher or two to read [it].”
- “I take into account student interest and that we have many different levels of maturity in a 9–12 school. I read reviews, peer recommendations, and [lists of] award winners.”
- “I read reviews from other librarians to see what they think the age range is for the book. For books that I am not sure about, I read the book and decide if the objectionable material is age-appropriate and how it fits in with the story. As a middle school librarian, I don't choose books that have gratuitous sex, language, or violence just for the sake of it. If these are used to make the story more realistic, then I take that into account.”
Do you place content labels on books in your library?

% Yes

Sample titles that are labeled:
- *The Absolutely True Story of a Part-Time Indian*
- *The Hunger Games*
- *The Fault in Our Stars*
- *Twilight*
- *Dear Life, You Suck*
- *If I Stay*

Comments:
- “We have a Young Adult section that is by permission only for 6–8.”
- “Inside the cover I will write, for example, ‘profanity,’ and I ask for a note from the parent, although it is not required.”
- “Our science books all carry this label inside the front cover: ‘This book may contain statements that contain evolutionary theory. We encourage parents to discuss this with their children.’”
Do you restrict students from accessing certain books based on mature or potentially controversial content?

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Middle/Jr. high</th>
<th>High school</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have a restricted section</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t restrict students from books,</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but shelve them by age of reader (for instance, a teen interest section)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All books are shelved together</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>10%</td>
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Comments:
- “Students can check out any books that they want to read; however, I have a sign at the checkout that reminds students that if they are checking out books with a YA sticker, they should have checked with their parents. A verbal ‘yes’ is all I require from them.”
- “We have separate YA and Easy sections. I don’t necessarily restrict students from books, but use color coding for Gr. 3, and books that are designated Grades 5–8 so students know these are of a more challenging level.”
- “We require all students to check out a book in their reading level.”
- “We have a ‘serious topic’ section.”
- “We counsel student or send an email to parent asking if it is okay to check out.”
Does your school/district have a formal book challenge procedure?

Formal Book Challenge Procedure in Place
Public vs. Private Schools

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total respondents</th>
<th>Public School</th>
<th>Private School</th>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>59%</td>
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Does your library require professionally sourced reviews or have a book selection policy in place that supports purchase decisions in the event of a challenge?

- 59% of all schools have some form of book selection policy

**Other Book Selection Policies:**
- “District Mandated Selection Policy”
- “Reviews are not required, but suggested.”
- “When in doubt, don’t buy the book.”
- “Check reviews, read it yourself, gauge age appropriateness, use best judgement.”
- “Selection of Materials Policy:
  1) Educational significance: Supports curriculum
  2) Reputation and standing of author or producer: Recommendations and reviews
  3) Accuracy and scope of text: Timely and clear
  4) Organization and presentation of contents: Easy to use with appropriate indices, bibliography, and glossary
  5) Readability and comprehensibility: Language should be age and reading-level appropriate
  6) Potential user appeal: Supports reading programs and development
  7) Artistic quality and or literary style: Encourages appreciation for quality materials
  8) Format/binding: Library quality whenever possible
  9) Value commensurate with cost and or need: Best quality possible
  10) Variety of materials inclusive of all views”
Have you ever directly experienced a book challenge?

- 42% of total sample has experienced a book challenge
- 41% of public schools and 43% of private schools

Experienced a Book Challenge By Locality

- Urban: 50%
- Rural: 46%
- Suburban: 42%
- Small town: 32%
If yes, from whom did the challenge originate?

- 17% of challenges in the South Central region and 16% of those in urban areas originated with an administrator

If yes, did that book challenge affect your book-buying decisions going forward?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge originated from:</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Administrator</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>67%</td>
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</table>
Please tell us about a book challenge you personally experienced or communicate any other information related to this topic.

- “I have received two formal book challenges: one for language (swearing) and one because the book referred to a past crime involving a mass shooting in a mall (but no violent details were given). Neither challenge went far. This is my seventeenth year as a K–5 librarian, and it has become increasingly difficult to avoid swearing, violence, and sexual references in children's literature. I have become somewhat more lenient in what I purchase. My biggest frustration is when a terrific book for kids is very age-appropriate in every way EXCEPT for one sentence or paragraph that seems to be stuck in there for NO good reason! I see no reason for that, and it honestly makes my job much more difficult. I have had to pass up purchasing some wonderful books because of very unnecessary content that seems to be thrown in simply for shock value. It’s frustrating, and I'd honestly like to know WHY authors do that.”

- “I have found that you cannot predict challenges. The books that have been challenged during the 18 years I’ve worked in our school district came out of left field.”

- “Our school board and superintendent tried to remove school librarians several times, and our community rallied against it. So now they are trying to ‘deprofessionalize’ the positions by slowly removing our professional job responsibilities. One of those responsibilities was the area of book challenges and censorship. Challenges have been [moved] from the librarian's duties to the building principal’s.”

- “I don’t worry about content (and typically not even reviews). I buy what I can afford, based on my practically nonexistent budget from places such as bargain tables at book stores [and] yard sales; I also accept donations. I actually look forward to having a parent challenge a book because it would mean they are monitoring what their teen is reading and taking an interest in the student’s learning.”

- “Controversy? Bring it on. I'm a big girl.”

- “I have had several verbal challenges, but after we discuss board policy, purpose of the school library, and needs of the students, [and] the formal challenge procedures, the student, staff, or parent has chosen not to move forward. The only guardian who chose to move forward to a formal challenge did NOT challenge having the book, Suckerpunch by David Hernandez, in the library. She challenged [its inclusion] as a choice for a literature circle read. We followed board policy, convened a reading committee, and said it should only be a literature circle choice for 11th and 12th graders. It took a couple of months for the process to reach a conclusion. The principal agreed with our conclusion and presented it in to the guardian, and the guardian was satisfied. The board policy has changed to where the superintendent will handle book challenges. I am not sure it would play out the same way [now].”

- “If a book is challenged anywhere in the school district, I make it a point to purchase it for the library.”

[Read more comments.]
Demographics of the Sample

Grades Served by School Library

- PreK - grade 5 Elementary: 45%
- Grades 6 - 8 Middle/Jr. High: 55%
- Grades 9 - 12 High school: 39%

Public or Private School?

- Public school: 83%
- Private school: 15%
- Other: 2%

U.S. Region

- Northeast: 24%
- Midwest: 25%
- South Central: 17%
- South Atlantic: 14%
- Pacific: 14%
- Mountain: 6%

Locality

- Suburban: 46%
- Small Town: 21%
- Urban: 19%
- Rural: 14%