IF Matters: Intellectual Freedom @ your library®

The “Overdue” Blues: A Dilemma for School Librarians

by Helen R. Adams

Have you heard this joke?
Q: Why was the T-Rex afraid to go to the library?
A: Because her books were 60 million years overdue.
(Multnomah County Library 2009)

Overdue and lost library materials are no joke. At this time of year, school library e-lists frequently have questions about handling missing library resources. School Library Journal reported the return of two books to a high school library after fifty-one years. With the book, the anonymous borrower included a $1,000 money order stating, “At 0.02 cents per day it works out at $745.00 for 51 years. I’ve sent along a few more dollars in case the rates changed” (Staino 2009). Although the news report is amusing, the problem of overdue materials is serious for school library professionals.

The “Overdue” Scenarios

Here’s the usual situation. A student checks out a book from the school library and fails to return it on time. The school librarian notifies the student, but the item is not brought back. The item may become weeks or even months overdue. In another scenario, the overdue item is returned, but the fines are not paid. In yet another variation, the student gives back a library resource in a damaged condition or loses the item and does not reimburse the school. In these circumstances, what are the consequences to students with overdue materials and unpaid library fines or replacement fees? Should students with fiscal obligations be allowed to check out more library materials?

School library professionals have a fiduciary responsibility to ensure that the users of the collection return or pay for the replacement of library resources damaged or lost. Before cutting off borrowing privileges, however, school librarians should consider these points. Students have a First Amendment right to receive information in school libraries. School librarians are ethically and legally responsible to provide access to library resources to all students. “Economic Barriers to Information: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights” cautions school librarians, “All library policies and procedures, particularly those involving fines, fees, or access, should be scrutinized for potential barriers to access” (http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/oif/statementspols/statementsif/interpretations/economicbarriers.cfm). Marcia, a school librarian in the Midwest says, “I consider WHY kids have overdue books. I am particularly sensitive to those kids who may have two or three ‘homes’ such as those who live in split households or those who are homeless and ‘stay’ with other family members” (WEMTA IFSIG list 2009).

Check the Library’s Policy

Most library policies are clear. Overdue books? Borrowing privileges for students are limited or cancelled until the materials are returned. Have a lost or damaged book? A replacement fee is charged with options such as payment of a uniform amount based on format (paperback or hardcover book, DVD) or restitution of the partial or full replacement cost. Some policies allow students to bring a suitable substitute for the lost or damaged item. Many libraries charge fines, although others do not because of potential economic inequities. To induce students to take care of library responsibilities, schools may deny attendance at special school events, like dances, or withhold report cards. In some districts, failure to clear a library record before the end of school or before transferring means the next school is notified of the student’s outstanding library obligation. Of all the policy implications, the most damaging is barring students from checking out library resources. This is especially true for economically disadvantaged students who are unable to reimburse the district, may have little or no access to a public library, and may
also lack suitable reading materials at home. For these students, stringent policies can mean years of not being able to borrow library resources.

**Strategies for Clearing Library Obligations**

Students should be held accountable in some way for lost, damaged, or overdue books, but there are many ways to teach the lesson of responsibility. Library policies should be sufficiently flexible to take into account individual student personal and economic circumstances and to ensure that students have full access to library resources. As a first step, discuss with the student the concept of responsibility and the desire to keep the door open to borrowing the library’s resources. Marcia uses this approach. “For chronic book losers, we have them check out books but keep them in school. If there is financial hardship and the books are truly gone for good, I’ll have students ‘work’ for me in the library. They actually enjoy it, and it gives me one-on-one time with a student who might really need it” (WEMTA IFSIG list).

**Other ideas to consider:**

- Generate incentive to return library materials by giving every student who “clears his/her record” a gum ball. A school with 700 students spent less than $30 on gum balls. Consider a “jelly bean amnesty.” Students and teachers earn a jelly bean for every overdue book returned (http://answers.unshelved.com/questions/356/getting-books-back-at-a-school-library).
- Set up an “installment” plan for students to pay for a lost or damaged item.
- Create an “honor collection” where students with no other borrowing privileges may take a book and return it with no official circulation record. Obtain the extra books through book fairs, or buy gently used books at rummage sales.
- Help families of ELL students understand library use. “Prepare a short translated note explaining when library books must be returned. Include a bar code, a spine sticker, and library stamp on the letter to help parents identify library materials, which must be returned in a timely manner, as opposed to… [classroom] materials. If [library] books are overdue, send home a printout from your catalogue that contains the book cover… Visuals can get better results than a translated note simply listing the name of the overdue book” (Jules 2009).

As school librarians struggle with retrieving missing library resources, they should consider the human side of the situation. Not every child or young adult has a stable home life or a good example of adult responsibility in their personal lives. Students may be homeless—forced to move due to home foreclosures or evicted because the family is behind on rent payments. Other families have seasonal employment and move several times in a single school year. Students are minors, not adults, and although there are students who are irresponsible or are trying to work the system, school librarians should not lose sight of the students who are struggling. Librarians can be proactive and look for creative alternatives ways to ensure access to library materials for all students.

**References:**


WEMTA IFSIG list. Marcia, November 17, 2009 8:57 AM, Subject: circulation, overdue policies and intellectual freedom.

* A former school librarian and technology coordinator in Wisconsin, Helen Adams is an online instructor for Mansfield University, serves on the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee, and is author of *Ensuring Intellectual Freedom and Access to Information in the School Library Media Program* (Libraries Unlimited, 2008). Email: hadams@mansfield.edu