

Wayne A. Wiegand. *American Public School Librarianship: A History*

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“How to get the kids to read books they ought to read instead of the ones they want to read?” In a moment when book and curriculum bans are proliferating nationwide, this question, posed by a Minnesota newspaper in 1913, remains resonant (p. 36). Such prohibitions turn our attention to two institutions where kids read: schools and libraries. These two institutions are uniquely combined in the form of a school library, and as long as there have been school librarians, they have been familiar with controversy. In *American Public School Librarianship: A History*, Wayne A. Wiegand traces the trajectory of an often-overlooked profession from its first stirrings in the nineteenth century, through its growth, professional codification, and organizational battles in the twentieth century, to its ongoing struggle for recognition and resources today. Many of debates in which public school librarians have been enmeshed will strike the contemporary reader of *American Public School Librarianship* as familiar. Historically, school librarians have been, like teachers, more often than not middle-class white women struggling for recognition in patriarchal institutions, while often simultaneously complicit in rendering Black history, queer life, Indigenous people, and others invisible on library shelves (p. 51). Despite all of this, and libraries’ pervasive underfunding (and, in many schools, absence), Wiegand offers compelling historical evidence that public school libraries offer students a unique and important space for different kinds of reading, and for alternative ways of being at school.

School librarianship has been, from its origin, caught between two institutional cultures, that of librarianship and of teaching (p. 149). The work of the school librarian is different from that of the public librarian and different from that of the schoolteacher. Consequently, to operate a library inside a school is, in many instances, to live in a perpetual struggle over the definition of the role and suffer a “continual identity crisis” (p. 149). At the same time, school librarians and their champions have, over decades, referred to the promise of the school library as the “heart of the school”—an often-cited aspiration, the kind that Wiegand argues, unfortunately in too many cases, amounts to “wishful thinking” (pp. 78, 206).

In Wiegand’s well-rounded account, school librarians have been both defenders of intellectual freedom and complicit in excluding people and ideas. Sometimes the censorship comes from above, such as when the superintendent of New York City Schools banned *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* from school libraries, because “it tells of times that have passed, of evils that have perished, of slavery and brutality that the present day knows nothing about” (p. 57). When an Arizona high school principal complained that a

young adult history text, *Story of the Negro*, was dedicated to a communist (Langston Hughes) and that it inferred that Black people had been “stolen” by White people, the *School Library Journal* defended the book as “essential” (p. 161). At other times, the librarians themselves were the culprits. They joined forces with what Wiegand calls the “children’s literature clerisy” in librarianship to oppose the presence of serial fiction and comic books in school libraries (pp. 81, 87). In a particularly damning episode, reviewing decades of records of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), Wiegand notes the complete absence of any official discussion of important social questions such as inequality and segregation of schools or libraries, and no attempt to confront them as forms of censorship (pp. 176-77).

Despite these and other blunt assessments, Wiegand ultimately writes in the hope that his research will influence policymakers who can help to realize the transformative potential of school libraries. Toward that end, he weaves anecdotes of inspiring school librarianship nationwide throughout the text. We glimpse the experiences of teachers, students, parents, and particularly, of course, school librarians over many decades. These stories help to illustrate why, despite all the institutional and professional racism and prejudice, school libraries are also spaces of possibility. In rural Arkansas, a Black schoolteacher-librarian, Mildred Grady, drove seventy miles to procure novels with her own money to keep a young Black student (who later became a judge) supplied with his favorite reading material (pp. 130-31). Wiegand cites evidence that, for the first generation of Black students who desegregated all-white schools, school libraries operated as a “safe place when the classroom got too rowdy” (p. 171). In another story, Wiegand relates how a school librarian placated censorial homophobic parents with the claim that the offending LGBTQ books were “lost” while actually mis-shelving them where queer students could reliably find them (p. 228). Childhood testimony from a cast of notables, including Bill Gates and Anita Hill, reveal the ways that encounters with school librarians transformed the courses of their lives (p. 155).

Wiegand spends significant portions of the book carefully recounting the professional organizations (primarily AASL) that hoped to organize, represent, and champion the cause of school librarians and their struggle for status and recognition within the American Library Association and the National Education Association. These multigenerational organizational battles over budgets, bylaws, standards, and accreditation, while less engaging to the lay reader, are essential ingredients in the overall story of public school librarianship, and will make this volume an enduring reference for historians of education.

American Public School Librarianship is also a social history, exploring the ways schools and libraries responded to dramatic social and technological transformations over the past one hundred years. With these transformations came shifting paradigms of childhood, and of reading. The concept of reading either for pleasure or for “information literacy,” Wiegand argues, is an unfortunate binary throughout this history that flattens a more expansive understanding of the ways young people engage in reading and interact with school libraries (p. 11). While school librarians benefited from the overall twentieth-century expansion of schools and libraries, they lacked much institutional power to carry out their own independent agenda. Late twentieth and early twenty-first-century trends, such as the emphasis on high stakes standardized testing,

further eroded their status. “Because subjects like civics and history—the kinds of subjects school libraries were especially well positioned to serve—were not easily tested,” Wiegand writes, “school libraries automatically lost stature in a narrowed curriculum driven by math and science” (p. 208).

Wiegand argues that a school library is not just a collection of resources (in the form of books, and, as the decades progress, we note the presence of audio-visual materials, computers, internet-enabled devices, etc.), but that its place-based function is of tremendous value. The school library is, unlike other places in the school, a space for a freer mode of learning. It is a place for rest and relaxation, a place to get away from whatever else might be going in the school, and a place to be different. School libraries are significant, Wiegand argues, “because students enjoy autonomies there that other parts of the school do not allow” (p. 276). The much-needed historical perspectives in *American Public School Librarianship* remind us that among those autonomies is the opportunity for young people to choose for themselves what they want to read.

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