



Don't blame the librarian, blame the system

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For several hours last Friday, Dr. Seuss sat near the top of the Twitter trending list. Alas, the renowned children's author was not there because an unpublished manuscript had been unearthed, or something pleasant like that. No, it was because a school librarian had pointedly rejected free Seuss books from first lady Melania Trump.

It set off a firestorm about the librarian, but the true problem is the public schooling system in which she works.

Cambridgeport Elementary School's Liz Phipps Soeiro declared her objections to the donation in an open letter. She had many complaints, including that there were worse-off districts that could use free books; Education Secretary Betsy DeVos had "marginalized and maligned" low-income communities by supporting school choice and decreased federal spending; and Seuss is "a tired and worn ambassador for children's literature" whose work is "steeped in racist propaganda, caricatures and harmful stereotypes."

Soeiro could have taken a less condescending tone. Right after "thanking" Trump for the shipment, she added, "Sent second-day air, no less! That must have been expensive."

Photos of Soeiro celebrating Dr. Seuss -- cat hat and all! -- just a couple of years ago didn't help. But agree with the substance of her points or not, they are matters on which reasonable people can differ. Ultimately, the problem is not her opinions or even her tone, but that in rejecting the books she made values-based decisions for every taxpaying citizen of Cambridge.

Was she allowed to do that? District officials said that Soeiro was counseled on "all relevant policies, including donations policies and the policy against public resources being used for political purposes." But it is hardly clear that she exceeded her authority. The "book donation procedures" page on the district's website states that a school's librarian may decline to stock donated books if, among other things, she decides that their "content is not appropriate."

That said, the process would not be any fairer if committees of parents, or school boards, made the decisions. Taxpayers who found accepted books inappropriate, maybe even immoral, would still be compelled to pay to promulgate those views. Likewise, groups seeing their views underrepresented or absent because books sharing them were rejected would be rendered unequal under the law. Think Seuss unacceptably stereotypes and mocks your race? Too bad if libraries in your public school stock his books. Opposed to gay marriage, but the public schools reject your offer of books making your case? Tough.

To be fair, the Cambridge situation is extreme in terms of the heat it has generated. Publicly rejecting books from the wife of a president, especially one as polarizing as Donald Trump, is bound to raise the temperature. But book battles are hardly uncommon. Indeed, the hullabaloo occurred in the midst of Banned Books Week, an observance created by the American Library Association, among other groups.

Tracking challenges to books primarily in public libraries, including in schools, the ALA from 2001 to 2016 confirmed between 275 and 547 challenges per year. And the association estimates that between 82 and 97 percent of challenges go unreported.

Especially likely is underreporting of decisions not to stock books to begin with. The "reading material" category on the Cato Institute's Public Schooling Battle Map draws incidents from media reports about conflicts dealing with public school libraries, reading lists and class assignments. Of the almost 240 such conflicts on the map, only a handful deal with initial decisions about books, which for all intents and purposes likely go on behind closed doors.

In the case of Cambridgeport Elementary, it seems that -- had she so chosen -- Soeiro could have rejected the Seuss award with nary a peep.

Of course, whether a rejection makes noise or not, or challenges are relatively rare, the end result is the same: Some have their views elevated by governments that are supposed to treat all people equally and others do not. It is patently unjust, but it is inescapable in a system for which all must pay, but only some -- or one -- make decisions.

Thankfully, there is a solution: school choice. Attach money to kids -- preferably through a tax credit for people who choose to donate to scholarship funds -- and let parents select schools with values they share. Choice is one of the policies to which Soeiro objected, but if there is one lesson to take from her run-in with Dr. Seuss, it's that neither she, nor anyone else, should get to decide whose speech everyone must support.

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