INTRODUCTION

Today media centers provide students the opportunity to learn and explore subjects of their interest in depth. The media center is the largest classroom in the school providing service to every student and every teacher in all curricular areas. The library should be a place to encourage students’ interests and a place to broaden their horizons by introducing them to new perspectives and concepts. To ensure a quality library collection, weeding is as critical as selection of new materials. A quality media collection should result in students actively engaged, working, reading, and learning in libraries.

A well-known Taoist proverb states, “Fertile fields cannot produce good crops as long as the weeds are not cleared away.” Students cannot efficiently find quality information if outdated, wrong, or poorly presented information is crowding your library shelves. Many media specialists feel the need to weed in the dead of night to avoid criticism from patrons who hate to see “good” books being thrown away. It is hard to explain to everyone that books eventually “expire” by going past their usefulness. Although books that are well taken care of will last many years, they are not meant to last forever. People want to think that every book will always have some value. Destruction of books brings up images of censorship and book burning, but it is better to have worthless books in the trash than have trash on your shelves. While weeding can be controversial, a carefully prepared and fully documented policy on weeding (or deselection) can lessen or alleviate misunderstandings. Media collections should be tailored to meet the needs of the students and the curriculum. Curriculum is constantly being revised and student populations are ever changing; thus school library media collections should also be in a continuous state of change.

New technology developments and advancements occurring on a daily basis have created an atmosphere of unrelenting change. Once stocked mainly with books and other print materials, today’s media centers include a wide range of multimedia resources. Technology and nonprint media should be weeded on a regular schedule just like print materials, although it can be harder to judge content and quality without spending a great deal of time watching or listening to each item. Other issues to consider when evaluating nonprint materials include format and condition. Discard obsolete technologies—transferring outdated materials to another format (e.g., VHS to DVD, cassette tape to CD) does not update the information.

WHY WEED?

Continual evaluation of media resources will result in a highly effective and quality library collection. Try to avoid a situation where weeding is a massive project that is done once in ten years requiring you to weed hundreds of items. It is much better to make weeding an ongoing process that is tackled with a strategic plan to weed small sections at a time throughout the year. Here are a few reasons to continually weed your collection:

1. Most libraries face space restraints; thus it is important to keep the best resources in the library. Unnecessary or outdated materials weaken a collection.
2. A library needs to be uncluttered to make it easier for patrons to find what they are looking for. Overflowing shelves give an overall impression of chaos and make it harder for people to find the resources they really need.
3. Library patrons want attractive, clean books that are in good condition. Shelves crowded with soiled, worn, torn, moldy, or unattractive books will send patrons running from the library.
4. Collections that are not weeded often contain unacceptable stereotypes and misinformation, not the reliable, accurate, unbiased, up-to-date materials your patrons need.

HOW TO GET STARTED WEEDING

Media specialists need to work with their media committees to develop a weeding policy as part of the overall collection development policy. Weeding should be based on a list of criteria such as copyright date, condition of the material, date last circulated, relevance to the curriculum, inclusion of biases and/or stereotypes, duplicates, and accuracy and appropriateness of material for patrons’ reading and interest level. The main question you should ask is, “Does this resource serve an appropriate purpose in this learning community?” For an overview of the criteria for weeding, the acronym MUSTY can be used:

M Misleading and/or factually inaccurate
U Ugly and worn beyond mending or rebinding
S Superseded by a newer edition or by a much better book
T Trivial with no discernible value
Y Your collection has no use for this material, irrelevant to the needs of your clientele

If weeding has not been done on a regular basis, identify areas which need immediate attention. Address these sections first due to currency issues: most career materials are outdated within five years; most computer/technology instruction books are outdated within three years; general encyclopedia and atlases are outdated after five years; and titles that imply currency (e.g., Today, Modern) that are older than seven years. As a general rule, the following materials should have a copyright date of less than ten years: Social Studies (300s) books, except for fair tales and holidays; Science (500s) books, except most dinosaurs, animals, and plants; Technology/Health (600s), except for many pet books; Social Studies (900s), except for war history books; and Reference books. If the paper is yellowed or torn or the cover or pages are missing, then weed that book.
Only resources that actually circulate have a value within the collection. Most automated cataloging systems can generate a list of all items that have not circulated for at least two or three years. Circulation reports can also be run on all the materials that are being discarded for poor physical condition since the condition may be due to the high usage of the material. Items that are discarded but have a high circulation rate will need to be replaced. Weigh the cost of repairing and rebinding against the cost of replacement. Finally, weed after hours, on planning days, and during the summer to avoid inconveniencing patrons.

WHAT TO DO WITH THE BOOKS

Now that you have resources that fit the criteria to be weeded from your collection, you need to decide what to do with those resources. First, all county and school procedures for discarding school properties should be followed. Media specialists can often avoid criticism about weeding simply by finding another use for books that no longer belong in a media collection. Many books have no proper place but in the trash due to their poor physical condition or outdated information. Often books that are being weeded have information in them that is no longer relevant or contain misinformation that you would not want to pass on to others, so those books should be recycled or placed in the trash. Do not make your weeded books a problem for someone else by just passing the buck. Many books may work as donations if they are no longer appropriate for your weeded books a problem for someone else by just passing the buck. Many books may work as donations if they are no longer appropriate for your weeded books a problem for someone else by just passing the buck. Many books may work as donations if they are no longer appropriate for...