



## Battle of the Books Pros and Cons. Is This Competition Really Worth the Time?

By Educator Barnes – February 22, 2019

Although this is my 13th year as an educator, this is my first year as a school librarian. Most people say this is a perfect job for me since I'm an avid reader. When I was an English teacher, I did a good job of promoting literacy and a love of reading. One school year, my students read an average of 35 books independently.

Unfortunately, the library I inherited is a mess. At the beginning of the school year, I discovered every single section had problems: books were incorrectly labeled, books were put into the circulation system wrong, barcodes didn't match the books they were placed on, there were carts of new books that weren't processed, and my office was filled with useless items. Don't get me started on the lack of diversity in book selection.

I'm a super organized person. To prove this point, my husband normally mentions how my closet is organized by function, and each section is organized by color moving from light to dark. To have to enter a place every day that is so unorganized is frustrating and makes finding books difficult for students. I have spent every day this school year trying to fix the library. Therefore, I'm not doing Battle of the Books (BoB) this school year, but I won't be excused from doing it next school year.

I heard about Battle of the Books before I became a librarian and was told that students form teams and are coached by an adult. Then, students read preselected books and participate in a reading competition where they have to know facts from books they read. Reading is more than recalling facts, so I was immediately turned off by this competition. Since I must do this next school year, I decided to read through documents other librarians created and placed in our school district's Google drive folder. Then, I went a step further and asked librarians what they thought about this competition in a librarian Facebook group. My post elicited 31 comments. Below, I have summarized what they had to say:

### **Pros**

- students can foster camaraderie, sense of belonging, and teamwork with other students
- students are exposed to books they would not have read on their own
- students are provided an opportunity to participate in competition if they don't qualify for athletic teams
- the librarian can connect to students that participate
- the books students must read are typically available in audio format

### **Cons**

- struggling readers might not be able to participate
- competition is based on rapid recall of matching book titles and authors to facts in the books
- competition is English only, which can exclude English language learners
- competition questions lack depth of knowledge or critical thinking skills

- time commitment can be hard for students and staff
- difficult to find staff to commit to a BoB team
- book content knowledge many times falls to a few students on each team
- some librarians struggle with understanding the goal or purpose of the competition
- students do not understand how much they agreed to read
- staff who are coaching teams feel pressure to read the books with the students
- students have expressed they rather read other books, but do not have time because of the battle books they have to read.
- some librarians do not have any input in the books selected for the battle
- librarians, if there is not a sponsor to provide the books, must use their budget to purchase books on the battle list that may not be used after the competition

Besides pros and cons, my fellow librarians across the United States also shared other thoughts. A few librarians pointed out that the librarian should not be the one expected to run Battle of the Books. A few mentioned that other teachers volunteer to run it and another librarian mentioned that parents organize BoB at her school. Some shared they have no input to select the books used for competition because the book list is selected by the state or school district. Others shared they had the right to decide if they wanted to do BoB or not. One librarian stated, "I hated it and killed it off as fast as possible." What was clear is that some librarians like BoB and others don't. I am a librarian that does not like BoB.

After reading these responses, I'm at a crossroads. I'm being mandated to implement an activity that I do not like. I was hoping that speaking to other librarians would change my mind or provide a perspective I had not yet considered, but it did not. When I was an English teacher, I had an African American Literature club and a Mythology club, and I think a reading club would be a better use of my time than this competition. Moreover, as a student, I was not good at athletics. I won't even tell you how many times it took me to dribble a basketball around cones in gym class. I know it had to be painful for my classmates to watch. In life, everyone is not going to win a medal or a trophy. I don't like that schools are trying to implement alternatives to make everyone win. I even worked in a school that insisted that by the end of the school year we had to find a way for every student to go home with a certificate. We are not preparing students for real life. Real life means you might not get a trophy; that's okay, but you are still a valuable person.

If you been in education long enough, you learn you will be forced to implement assignments or activities you do not like or conflict with your education beliefs. Last year, I wrote, "[3 Reasons to Burn Reading Logs](#)" to express why they do not help children gain a love of literacy and improve

their literacy skills. I was told by administration that I had to use a reading log, and I was also told how much it should be counted as part of the overall English grade. Students knew I did not like it. I didn't make a big deal about it. What I found interesting was my colleagues who made it a big deal and were stressed about it did not have students reading as much as I did. Some weren't even close to my student average of books read.

Yes, I have to implement yet another program I don't like, but that is just how it is in education. My purpose is to build a love of literacy in children, not to train children to rapidly recall facts from books. I don't think any school librarian should be mandated to implement a program he or she doesn't believe in because the librarian would do a better job implementing a program that aligns with his or her educational beliefs.