

15 What Do I Do Now? Where to Turn When You Face a Censor

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Censorship: An Everyday Problem

As the many cases cited in the preceding chapters indicate, teachers, librarians, authors, publishers, booksellers, and others who make books available to students face a regular barrage of censorious comments and criticisms. In some cases, the censors have merely felt a need to express a complaint and, having done so, are satisfied. In many cases, however, would-be censors make concrete and continuing efforts to remove books and magazines from school and public libraries, from classroom libraries and materials collections, from school curricula, and from required and suggested reading lists. And all too often those efforts are successful.

These would-be censors have many places they can turn for assistance. Phyllis Schlafley, the Gablers, and Beverly LeHaye represent only three of the better known of these promoters of censorship. Censors know where to turn for help, but where can a teacher, librarian, school board member, or school administrator turn when he or she is trapped in the midst of a censorship attack?

The purpose of this article is to describe some of the resources available to us when we are on the defensive. What follows is information about national organizations that you can turn to for help. We've matched each one with a letter shared with us by friends who have been on the receiving end of censorship. We thought you'd be interested in them.

A Letter to a Teacher

Dear English Teachers:

I have noticed a disturbing trend in the assignments that you give to my child and others in your school. These recently published books seem to have teenagers as their target, and they show children and adults in conflict, usually with most of the blame for everything that goes wrong falling on the adults. They also show teenagers drinking, using drugs, and having sex. Others show teenagers dying of AIDS and other diseases or committing suicide. These books promote wicked behavior and are depressing.

Now, I know that many of these books have received awards, but I also know that those awards have been given by people like you, not concerned parents like me. So, I don't think those awards justify the books in the school. I wouldn't let my child read them, and I certainly don't want them assigned to him.

Therefore, please remove these novels from your reading lists and from the school library and go back to studying the tried and true classics, books like those I studied when I was in high school.

Although I don't want to threaten you, I plan to contact the members of the School Board to alert them to what is being read in school and to call on them to help me rid the school of these novels. Sincerely yours,

A Concerned Parent

Where You Might Turn:

The National Council of Teachers of English
1111 W. Kenyon Road
Urbana, Illinois 61801
800-369-6283

NCTE works through its staff, a standing committee, at least two of its constituent groups, and a publications program to combat censorship and to help its members resist censorship efforts. At its headquarters in Urbana, the Director of Affiliate and Membership Services is assigned the task of coordinating requests for information and for assistance from affiliates and individual members. Currently, that director is Millie Davis. Through publications such as *Dealing with Censorship*, *The Students' Right To Know*, *The Students' Right To Read*, and *Celebrating Censored Books*, NCTE also provides information about and assistance to those of us who find ourselves fighting a battle against censorship. NCTE has taken several official positions on different aspects of censorship, including a "Statement on Censorship and Professional Guidelines."

Recently NCTE and IRA (see below) formed a joint Task Force on Intellectual Freedom. Under then-chair James E. Davis, the task force prepared a statement on

intellectual freedom principles that was approved by the executive committees of both groups. The task force then prepared a brochure containing that statement plus helpful information for combating censorship efforts. That brochure, *Common Ground*, is available at no charge from NCTE or IRA.

In addition to publications and staff support for the anti-censorship effort, NCTE has a committee, the Standing Committee Against Censorship, devoted to work in this area. Its charge is

To solicit and receive reports of censorship incidents from NCTE members, constituent groups, and sources outside the Council; to maintain an annotated list of agencies and organizations concerned with censorship and to maintain informal liaisons with groups that are opposed to censorship; to coordinate its activities with other Council groups that deal with censorship; to serve as a resource on current patterns of censorship; to advise the Executive Committee, affiliate leaders, and others on strategies for dealing with censorship; to propose convention sessions and publications on the subject of censorship.

At this writing, its chairs are Geneva Van Horne of the University of Montana and Joyce Armstrong Carroll from Abilene, Texas.

The Conference on English Education of NCTE has established an ongoing Commission on Intellectual Freedom, designed to sponsor publications and programs and to recommend to the CEE Executive Committee actions that it should take to protect the integrity of the English language arts curriculum, instruction, and teacher education. At this writing, the chair of this commission is Jean Brown of the Saginaw Valley State University.

Also, the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE (ALAN) has appointed an Intellectual Freedom Officer who serves as the liaison between the ALAN Board of Directors and the NCTE Standing Committee Against Censorship. The Intellectual Freedom Officer advises the ALAN Board about the state of censorship efforts in this and other countries related to the availability of literature to teenage readers and recommends actions that ALAN should take or support to defend the First Amendment rights of teachers and students. The current Intellectual Freedom Officer is Margaret Sacco of Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

ALAN has also established a policy that, at its annual workshop in November, at least one session should deal with intellectual freedom issues, and that its journal, *The ALAN Review*, should regularly publish articles dealing with censorship. The co-editors of the journal are Patricia Kelly of Virginia Tech and Robert Small of Radford University.

NCTE is a member of the National Coalition Against Censorship.

For Local Support: Many NTE affiliates have intellectual freedom committees or officers. Faced by a censorship challenge, we'd suggest that you contact, first, your affiliate president in order to see what help the affiliate can offer. If you can't contact your affiliate president, call NCTE.

A Letter to an Author

Dear Author:

We are pleased to inform you that we would like to include an excerpt from your novel in our new basal reading series. The chapters that we would like to include are those that deal with Washington crossing the Delaware. We feel that it is an excellently written depiction of an important event in our nation's proud history.

In order to make the excerpt suitable for our textbook series, it will be necessary to request that you agree to a few changes in the chapters. Specifically, it will be necessary to eliminate all references to Christmas Eve because of the religious nature of that date. Also, there are several references to the British soldiers drinking and smoking and celebrating Christmas Eve. Those references will have to be eliminated because of their negative moral implications.

We look forward to including your work in our text, which we are confident will place your fine writing in the hands of an even larger circle of readers than did the original publication.

Sincerely yours,

A Publisher

Where You Might Turn:

The International Reading Association
800 Barksdale Road
P.O. Box 8139
Newark, Delaware 19714-8139
302-731-1600

IRA has established the President's Advisory Committee on Intellectual Freedom. As its title suggests, it reports directly to the IRA president. Its charges are to

1. Monitor attacks on intellectual freedom and incidents of school or community censorship ... and
2. Prepare position statements for Board action ... and resolution(s) for the Delegates Assembly . . . for review by the Resolutions Committee on issues involving intellectual freedom.

In addition, each IRA affiliate is expected to appoint an intellectual freedom officer. The IRA IFC is in regular contact with these individuals, and at the annual conference of IRA in May, the IRA IFC sponsors a breakfast meeting for the members of the committee and these affiliate officers. At this meeting, an author, a scholar, or a teacher who has been involved in a censorship controversy discusses intellectual freedom issues. Following the breakfast meeting, the IRA IFC sponsors an open session dealing with censorship problems.

As a part of its charge, this committee advises the president of IRA on actions that the organization should take in defense of intellectual freedom. The current chair of the committee is John Ridley of Houghton-Mifflin.

IRA has a number of statements on different aspects of censorship, including "On Textbook and Reading Program Censorship," "On Opposing Abridgment or Adaptation as a Form of Censorship," and "Selection of Instructional Materials." The organization also has an official statement of censorship in general and guidelines for individuals faced with censorship efforts.

IRA is a member of the National Coalition Against Censorship.

For Local Support: Most IRA affiliates have intellectual freedom committees or officers. Faced by a censorship challenge, we'd suggest that you contact, first, your affiliate president in order to see what help the affiliate can offer. If you can't contact your affiliate president, then call IRA headquarters or the chair of the IRA IFC.

A Letter to a School Librarian

Dear Librarian:

It has come to my attention that school system funds have been used to purchase contemporary books written for adolescents for the school library. In these times of restricted budgets for education, we cannot afford to spend school monies on such ephemeral works. All available funds must be spent to purchase the best of our literary heritage in order to reverse the cultural literacy crisis in the country.

Therefore, please let me instruct you (a) to purchase no more of these titles and (b) weed those already purchased from your materials collections and the school library and plan a book sale to raise money to replace them with copies of the traditional classics.

Sincerely,
Chair, School Board

Where You Might Turn:

The American Library Association
50 East Huron Street
Chicago, Illinois
60611
800-545-2433

Perhaps the most active of the professional organizations in the United States in defense of intellectual freedom, ALA has established the Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) at its Chicago Headquarters. The director of this office is Judith Krug. The ALA OIF gathers information concerning censorship attacks on libraries, including school libraries; defends librarians who are under attack; and is responsible for a number of publications, including the *Intellectual Freedom Newsletter*. The OIF also provides support for much of ALA's other work in combating censorship.

The principal focus of ALA's member activities in support of intellectual freedom is the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee. The committee reviews individual cases and decides what actions ALA should take, regularly proposes updates of the ALA Library Bill of Rights, considers publications, and generally acts as ALA's watchdog on these issues. The current chair of the ALA IFC is Arthur Curley of the Boston Public Library.

ALA is divided into eleven divisions, most of which have their own intellectual freedom committees. The divisions most closely related to the work of English language arts teachers are the American Association of School Librarians, the Association for Library Service to Children, the Young Adult Library Service Association, and the Public Library Association. The intellectual freedom committees of these divisions advise the boards of directors of their divisions on censorship issues, prepare support materials for division members, and sponsor programs at the annual ALA conference in late June. The charge to the YALSA IFC, for example, reads as follows:

To serve as a liaison between the division and the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee and all other groups within the Association concerned with intellectual freedom; to advise the division on matters pertaining to the First Amendment of the U. S. Constitution and the ALA Library Bill of Rights and their implication to library service to young adults and to make recommendations to the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee for changes in policy on issues involving library service to young adults; to prepare and gather materials which will advise the young adult librarian of available services and support for resisting local pressure and community action designed to impair the rights of the young adult user.

The current chair of the YALSA IFC is Patricia Mueller of the Arlington, Virginia, Central Library. This IFC has published a packet of materials to help librarians faced with censorship efforts, *You Are Not Alone*, and a collection of rationales entitled *Hit List*, and has sponsored programs at most recent ALA conferences.

In addition, ALA sponsors the Intellectual Freedom Roundtable. Its charge is

To provide a forum for the discussion of activities, programs and problems in intellectual freedom of libraries and librarians; to serve as a channel of communications on intellectual freedom matters; to promote a greater opportunity for involvement among the members of the ALA in defense of intellectual freedom; to promote a greater freedom of responsibility in the implementation of ALA policies on intellectual freedom.

ALA also works closely with the Freedom To Read Foundation, which provides funds to resist censorship, especially in court cases, and sponsors several awards for service to intellectual freedom, most notably the Immroth Award.

ALA is a member of the National Coalition Against Censorship.

For Local Support: Many ALA affiliates have Intellectual Freedom Committees or Officers. Faced by a censorship challenge, we'd suggest that you contact, first, your ALA affiliate president in order to see what help the affiliate can offer. If you can't contact your affiliate president, then call the ALA OIF.

A Letter to a Teacher

Dear English Teacher:

It has been brought to our attention that you have been spending a great deal of time teaching literary works by writers whose personal lives are, at best, questionable. I am referring to such writers as Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe, O. Henry, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Lillian Hellman, to mention only a few. Do you really believe that the values as represented by the lifestyles of these individuals should be presented to our students? They are drunkards, homosexuals, and communists. The best literature is surely that which has been created by moral individuals, not people like these.

Perhaps there is a place for the study of such authors in college English courses like those you took, but our children already are confronted daily with television programs and newspaper and

magazine articles that reflect a rapid decline in American values and culture. We feel that we should not praise those whose personal lives are a disgrace. We call upon you, therefore, to eliminate works by the authors listed above and in the enclosed publication.

Sincerely,

A Minister

Where You Might Turn:

National Coalition Against Censorship

2 West 64 Street
New York, New York 10023
212-724-1500

NCTE, IRA, ALA, and many other national organizations are members of the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), both an organization of organizations and one that individuals can join. This organization advises and gives direct assistance to schools and citizens in local communities when censorship controversies erupt. It also works through the network of participating organizations to stimulate and assist them in anti-censorship activities and informs and educates the wider public about censorship activities and how to oppose them. In addition, it publishes *Books on Trial*, a report on school book-banning court cases, through its National Clearinghouse on Book-Banning Litigation. The executive director of NCAC is Leanne Katz.

To support the work of NCAC, an individual can become a "friend" by sending a tax-deductible contribution of \$25.00 or more to its headquarters. Friends receive NCAC's quarterly newsletter, *Censorship News*, and special reports. They are also invited to attend special seminars and luncheons on topics related to censorship.

A Letter to an Author

Dear Author:

I thought that you ought to know that we have used many of your books in our academic program. However, we have noticed that your publisher's address includes the number 666. These are Satanic numerals. After discussing this problem with a number of people in my community, I have been asked to suggest that you find another publisher or risk losing our patronage. We cant afford to support evil in our reading program.

We are praying for you.

Sincerely yours,

A Parent

Where You Might Turn:

PEN
PEN American Center
568 Broadway
New York, New York 10012
212-334-1660

The Freedom-to-Write Committee of PEN American Center works on behalf of writers caught in censorship cases and deals with issues of censorship in about thirty countries each year. Since 1980, the committee has become increasingly concerned with violations of the First Amendment and other forms of censorship in the United States: book bannings in school libraries, restrictions imposed on foreign travelers under the ideological provisions of the 1952 Immigration Act, misuse of libel laws, and government jamming of the Freedom of Information Act. The following statement appears in the Charter of International PEN:

The PEN stands for the principle of unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations, and members pledge themselves to oppose any form of suppression of freedom of expression in the country or community to which they belong.

Liberty Denied: The Current Rise of Censorship in America, written by Donna A. Demac and published by PEN, is a valuable resource. It is available from PEN American Center at the address listed above at a cost of \$6.95. PEN is a member of the National Coalition Against Censorship.

A Letter to an Author

Dear Author:

Although we previously signed a contract with you for you to speak to our students three weeks from now, we have, since signing that contract, read several of your books. Unfortunately, because we discovered that you use such words as "ass" in those novels, we are forced reluctantly to cancel our agreement. We do not feel that such language is appropriate for our students, and we are confident that the appearance that we are promoting such language through your appearance in our school would cause a commotion in our community.

Given your popularity, we feel confident that you will be able to make arrangements for another appearance, despite this short notice.

Sincerely yours,

A Superintendent of Schools

Where You Might Turn:

National School Boards Association
1680 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-3493
703-838-6722

A Letter to a School Superintendent

Dear Superintendent of Schools:

We are parents of students in our local high school. It has come to our attention that the English teachers there are asking our children to give their opinions about characters and incidents in the books they study and to relate those books to their own personal lives. Doing so is a violation of the rights of our children as well as an intrusion into the moral education of those students, which belongs in the home.

We feel that the teachers should use more objective tests to deal with the facts presented in the literature studied. Open-ended questions such as the ones being used promote situation ethics as well as holding up to ridicule the beliefs we have taught our children.

We look forward to hearing from you that the testing program has been corrected so that it evaluates the facts of literature, not the opinions of immature students.

Sincerely yours,
Citizens for Moral Evaluation

Where You Might Turn:

People for the American Way
2000 M Street, NW
Suite 400
Washington, D.C. 20036
202-467-2381

In a statement of its purposes, People for the American Way has stated that it "is the leading national organization in the fight against censorship in our children's schools. . . ." In that same statement, the organization concludes: "In our battles against the forces of intolerance, no contest is more important than our efforts to protect the freedom to learn."

People for the American Way publishes several important monographs on censorship, including *Attacks on the Freedom to Learn: People for the American Way 1989-1990 Report* (\$7.95 for members; \$8.95 for non-members), and *Protecting the Freedom to Learn: A Citizen's Guide* (member \$4.95; nonmember \$5.95). Membership in People for the American Way is twenty dollars.

In recent years, a number of books, pamphlets, and newsletters have been published that are useful to teachers, librarians, schools, and school systems caught in censorship controversies. We have included, toward the end of this essay, a short list of materials that have proven helpful in such situations.

People for the American Way is a member of the National Coalition Against Censorship.

Other Organizations That Will Help

American Association of School Administrators
 1901 North Moore Street
 Arlington, VA 22209
 703-528-0700

American Association of University Professors
 1012 Fourteenth Street, NW
 Suite 500
 Washington, D.C. 20005
 202-737-5900

Association of American Publishers, Inc.
 2005 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
 Washington, D.C. 20036
 202-232-3335

National Association of Elementary School Principals
 1615 Duke Street
 Alexandria, VA 22091
 703-684-3345

American Civil Liberties Union
 ACLU Washington Office
 122 Maryland Avenue, NE
 Washington, D.C. 20002
 202-737-5900

National Association of Secondary School Principals
 1904 Association Drive
 Reston, VA 22091
 703-860-0200

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
 1250 North Pitt Street
 Alexandria, VA 22314-1403
 703-549-9110

National Education Association
 1201 16th Street
 Washington, D.C. 20036
 202-833-4000

Some Publications That Might Help

American Library Association. 1989. *Intellectual Freedom Manual*. 3rd ed. Chicago: American Library Association.

American Library Association Young Adult Services Division. 1989. *Hit List*. Chicago: American Library Association.

Children's Legal Foundation, Inc. 1990. *Victory Agenda: A Battle Plan for America*. Phoenix, AZ: Children's Legal Foundation, Inc.

- Delfattore, Joan. 1992. *What Johnny Shouldn't Read*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Demac, Donna A. 1988. *Liberty Denied: The Current Rise of Censorship in America*. New York: PEN American Center.
- Hoffman, Frank. 1989. *Intellectual Freedom and Censorship: An Annotated Bibliography*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press.
- Karolides, Nicholas J., Lee Burrell, and John M. Kean, eds. 1993. *Censored Books: Critical Viewpoints*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press.
- Kelly, Patricia P., and Robert C. Small, Jr., eds. 1986. "Censorship or Selection?" *Virginia English Bulletin* 36.1 (Spring).
- Krug, Judith F., ed. *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom*. Los Angeles: Intellectual Freedom Committee.
- Marsh, David. 1991. *50 Ways to Fight Censorship and Important Facts to Know about the Censors*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press.
- Moffett, James. 1988. *Storm in the Mountains: A Case of Censorship, Conflict, and Consciousness*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- National Coalition Against Censorship. 1985. *Books on Trial: A Survey of Recent Cases*. New York: National Coalition Against Censorship.
- _____. *Censorship News*.
- National School Boards Association. 1989. *Censorship: Managing the Controversy*. Alexandria, VA: National School Boards Association.
- Reichman, Henry F. 1988. *Censorship and Selection: Issues and Answers for Schools*. Chicago: American Library Association; Alexandria, VA: American Association of School Administrators.
- Underwood, Murray. 1989. *Censorship: Challenging Your Freedom*. St. Louis: Missouri Coalition Against Censorship.

So Where Can You Turn?

As you can see, when a case does hit you, you do have many places to turn. After the initial terror has subsided, pick up the telephone and call—first, your NCTE affiliate president. Nothing more may be necessary. If your affiliate is prepared as it should be, the network will kick into action.

If not, well, call NCTE headquarters. Then, call your ALA affiliate, or, if you aren't a member of ALA—as you should be—call your school librarian and get him or her on the case, calling the ALA affiliate censorship chair.

Next, try the IRA affiliate chair. Are you a member of IRA? Why not? But if not, call an elementary teacher friend and get a telephone number for the IRA affiliate president.

Although national organizations can and will help, they can be accused of being "outsiders." Consequently, we'd suggest that you start with your local and state affiliates of NCTE, ALA, IRA, and the other groups reviewed in this chapter. But if you feel you're not

getting anywhere, call the national organizations—their numbers are listed above. Tell whomever answers about the problem you're having, what you've already done, and then ask for help.