

Intellectual Freedom Center Report - Quarter 1 FY2016

--Millie Davis, Director

The Intellectual Freedom Center's work during the first quarter of FY2016 included the ongoing work of intervening in challenges to texts used in classrooms. There were 11 challenges to 15 texts. In addition, this quarter Millie Davis spoke to *School Library Journal* about the Crafton Hills College challenge to *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel; *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi; *The Last Man, Vol. 1* by Brian Vaughan; and *The Sandman, Vol. 2: The Doll's House* by Neil Gaiman and sent the reporter some materials for her story. We responded to three requests for information on various texts while choosing not to weigh in to two requests for NCTE involvement in two very dicey and complicated allegations of academic freedom infringement that involved personnel issues. In addition, the Center had discussions with an NCTE/Journalism Education Association member in Wisconsin about supporting student freedom of expression legislation they're mounting, and we reviewed school policies in Collier County, Florida, regarding student library records. We ramped up our work with the National Coalition Against Censorship to develop a survey for educators on censorship issues.

Along with this work, the Intellectual Freedom Center as an official sponsor of [Banned Books Week](#) collaborated with the other sponsors to promote the week (September 27-October 3, 2015). Because the Intellectual Freedom Center anchors its work in a proactive vision of capacity building in schools and communities to promote literacy learning that educates students to become the best equipped citizens for our democracy (rather than a reactive anti-censorship vision), NCTE used the week to promote a this message, "[Say YA to Reading](#)", also the title of its Banned Books Week #nctechat featuring Jennifer Buehler and Matt de la Peña as hosts. Several blogs promoting the Week and intellectual freedom appeared on the Literacy & NCTE blog: [On Banned Books Week and Beyond, Say YA to Reading, "Censoring books, that's the opposite of protection."](#), [Fostering a "Reading School" Climate](#), ["When English Language Arts Reaped the Whirlwind"](#), [Say YA to Reading: #nctechat Preview](#), [Say YA to Reading, America = Freedom to Read = Democracy](#), [Light Up Those Books!](#), [Why Penny Kittle Won't Censor Books](#), and [Fireworks and Freedom](#).

Continuing its collaboration with other freedom-to-read groups, most of the letters sent this quarter in favor of keeping books in the classroom were done in tandem with these organizations. The groups we worked with included the National Coalition Against Censorship ([NCAC](#)), the American Library Association ([ALA](#)), the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression ([ABFFE](#)), the Association of American Publishers ([AAP](#)), the [PEN American Center](#), the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund ([CBLDF](#)), and the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators ([SCBWI](#)). An example of one of these collaborative letters is [our letter](#) protesting the removal of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* from the summer reading list of a high school in Tallahassee, Florida.

Every quarter last year featured a challenge to Sherman Alexie's [Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian](#) and this quarter was no exception. In addition, Khidad Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* was challenged in three different schools this quarter. And, finally, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals issued its [decision in the Arce v. Huppenthal lawsuit](#), the law suit about the [banned Mexican American Studies course and books in Tuscon](#), Arizona, in January of 2012. NCTE signed on the Amicus Brief in support of Arce. Basically, the result was a small win for Arce but a part of the lawsuit was sent back to a lower court. As the slow pace of justice works, the students filing the suit have now aged-up and won't likely pursue it.

More and more we are called upon to defend texts in schools and districts that have succumbed to a complaint from one parent and chosen to ignore their own policies for handling these complaints.

Principals, superintendents, and school boards sometimes make arbitrary, decisions based on their own personal opinions rather than on the law that clearly states that schools are obliged to teach both controversial material and any material of educational value even if they don't agree with it. When these arbitrary personal decisions are made, teachers are faced with the difficulty of having to decide whether to risk their standing in the school/district by speaking up.

Another “challenging” situation mentioned last quarter is worth repeating because it happens more and more. Some participants in a challenge, educators included, decide that a good solution to parent’s complaints about texts is to rate all the texts in the curriculum using a system like the MPAA ratings for films. (Note that MPAA ratings are *not* by their own design educational ratings.) We call this bad idea “red-flagging” and the [NCTE position statement](#) on this practice has been quoted and cited in many letters since the policy was adopted last year. Selecting a text with an unsavory character or unpleasant happenings never means that the school or teacher advocates for the behavior or speech of that character or for any events involving the character. Books, movies, plays, and all other texts used in schools are part of the curriculum because in their entirety, not because of something on p. 43—they are thoughtfully chosen to meet the ends of the curriculum by educators with the expertise to make those choices.

A third oft-used practice in schools is to send permission slips home for each text taught. Not a good idea. Remember that teachers are the experts on what their classes should read and, frankly, it makes no sense to stir up a hornet’s nest every time a new book is used in the class. Parents certainly have a say over what their own students can read but they don’t have the expertise to select curricular texts *and* they cannot legally decide what other parents’ children can and can’t read. NCTE member Penny Kittle (and many other members who follow her lead) sends a letter home to the parents of her students at the beginning of each school year. [This letter](#), which she collaborated on with NCTE member Kelly Gallagher, is a model for how teachers might describe why they’re asking their students to read and read and to *choose* what they’ll read.

Below is a chart comparing the Quarter 1 FY2016 and the Quarter 1 FY2015 challenges and numbers of challenged texts. A few things to know as you compare the numbers are the following:

- *Number of challenges = number of individuals who reported challenges.*
- *Number of works challenged is usually higher because often challenges involve more than one work.*
- *Censorship Challenge Reports by quarter are available on the NCTE website.*

July 2015	August 2015	September 2015	Q1 FY2016 Totals
3 challenges—5 texts; 1 reporter call, 1 requests for information; 2 requests for help on personnel academic freedom issues	3 challenges—4 texts	3 challenges—3 texts; 2 requests for information	9 challenges—12 texts; 1 reporter call; 3 requests for information; 2 requests for help on personnel academic freedom issues.
July 2014	August 2014	September 2014	Q1 FY2014 Totals

6 challenges—8 texts; 1 reporter request	5 challenges—8000+ texts;	7 challenges—13 texts; 2 resource requests	18 challenges—8000++texts; 1 reporter request; 2 resource requests
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Listing of 1st Quarter Challenges Reported July-September, 2014

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, Sherman Alexie (HS English, WA, 8/10/2015). Pornographic. NCTE sent support materials.

City of Thieves, David Benioff (Grade 7, TN, 9/21/2015). Descriptions of explicit sexual encounters. 9/24/15--[Signed on letter with NCAC and others](#).

Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, The, Mark Haddon (, FL, 8/10/2015). Content and language. 8/10/15--[Signed on letter with NCAC and others](#).

The Kite Runner, Khaled Hosseini (Grade 10 World Lit/Comp, GA, 9/28/2015). Inappropriate. NCTE sent support materials.

The Kite Runner, Khaled Hosseini (Grade 11, IL, 9/2/2015). Graphic rape scene. NCTE sent support materials.

The Kite Runner, Khaled Hosseini (HS English, WA, 8/10/2015). Pornographic. NCTE sent support materials.

A Lesson Before Dying, Ernest Gaines (Grade 10 pre-AP, TX, 8/6/2015). Chapter 14/passage: where he rubs his face against brown nipples. NCTE sent support materials.

The Librarian of Basra, Jeanette Winter (Grade 3, FL, 7/29/2015). Book's serious content and references to Islam are inappropriate for third grade children. [Signed on letter with NCAC and others](#).

My Princess Boy, Cheryl Kilodavis (Readers 4 to 8, TX, 7/10/2015). Endorses "the gay lifestyle" and encourages "perversion" so the book should be moved from the children's section to the adult section of the library. [NCTE signed on letter with NCAC and others](#). **The library advisory board decided that the books would be retained in the children's section.**

Nasreen's Secret School, Jeanette Winter (Grade 3, FL, 7/29/2015). Book's serious content and references to Islam are inappropriate for third grade children. [Signed on letter with NCAC and others](#).

Some Girls Are, Courtney Summers (Grade 9, SC, 7/23/2015). Explicit language, adult and sexual content. NCTE sent rationale and other supporting information.

This Day in June, Gayle Pitman (Readers 4 to 8, TX, 7/10/2015). Endorses "the gay lifestyle" and encourages "perversion". so the book should be moved from the children's section to the adult section of the library. [NCTE signed on letter with NCAC and others](#). **The library advisory board decided that the books would be retained in the children's section.**