

January 30, 2012

Contact: Millie Davis, NCTE
217-278-3634
public_info@ncte.org

English Council Raises Its Voice to Protest Tucson, Arizona, Book Censorship

URBANA, IL – Over two dozen organizations speak in one voice today to oppose the removal of seven books from the Mexican American Studies Program in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD). The National Council of Teachers of English joins them (read the joint statement **below**). Kent Williamson, NCTE executive director, notes, “It’s unacceptable for state and local officials to deny students a rich and diverse curriculum presented under the guidance of qualified teachers.”

The TUSD board ordered removal of the books after State Superintendent of Public Instruction John Huppenthal threatened to withhold 10% of the state’s funding for the Tucson district, citing a 2010 Arizona law. In his determination, and despite a program review to the contrary, the Superintendent ruled that the Mexican American Studies Program “contained content promoting resentment toward a race or class of people.” This law is currently being challenged in the courts. Now, though, students in Tucson have been both deprived of classroom texts and forbidden to learn about certain topics.

Through its Anti-Censorship Center, NCTE works on dozens of book challenges a year, continuing its century of support for [the students’ right to read](#) and for teachers’ expertise in choosing the materials that best serve the curriculum and their students.

The [National Council of Teachers of English](#), with 35,000 individual and institutional members worldwide, is dedicated to improving the teaching and learning of English and the language arts at all levels of education.

JOINT STATEMENT IN OPPOSITION TO BOOK CENSORSHIP IN THE TUCSON UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT January 30, 2012

The undersigned organizations are committed to protecting free speech and intellectual freedom. We write to express our deep concern about the removal of books used in the Mexican American Studies Program in the Tucson Unified School District. This occurred in response to a determination by Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction John Huppenthal that the program “contained content promoting resentment toward a race or class of people” and that “materials repeatedly reference white people as being ‘oppressors. . .’ in violation of state law.” The books have been boxed up and put in storage; their fate and that of the program remain in limbo.

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The First Amendment is grounded on the fundamental rule that government officials, including public school administrators, may not suppress “an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable.” School officials have a great deal of authority and discretion to determine the curriculum, the subject of courses, and even methods of instruction. They are restrained only by the constitutional obligation to base their decisions on sound educational grounds, and not on ideology or political or other personal beliefs. Thus, school officials are free to debate the merits of any educational program, but that debate does not justify the wholesale removal of books, especially when the avowed purpose is to suppress unwelcome information and viewpoints.

School officials have insisted that the books haven’t been banned because they are still available in school libraries. It is irrelevant that the books are available in the library – or at the local bookstore. School officials have removed materials from the curriculum, effectively banning them from certain classes, solely because of their content and the messages they contain. The effort to “prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, [or] religion” is the essence of censorship, whether the impact results in removal of all the books in a classroom, seven books, or only one.

Students deserve an education that provides exposure to a wide range of topics and perspectives, including those that are controversial. Their education has already suffered from this political and ideological donnybrook, which has caused massive disruption in their classes and will wreak more havoc as teachers struggle to fill the educational vacuum that has been created.

Book-banning and thought control are antithetical to American law, tradition, and values. In Justice Louis Brandeis's famous words, the First Amendment is founded on the belief:

that freedom to think as you will and to speak as you think are means indispensable to the discovery and spread of political truth; that, without free speech and assembly, discussion would be futile; . . . that it is hazardous to discourage thought, hope, and imagination. . . . Believing in the power of reason as applied through public discussion, [the Framers] eschewed silence coerced by law. . . . Recognizing the occasional tyrannies of governing majorities, they amended the Constitution so that free speech and assembly should be guaranteed.

The First Amendment right to read, speak, and think freely applies to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, religion, or national origin. We strongly urge Arizona school officials to take this commitment seriously and to return all books to classrooms and remove all restrictions on ideas that can be addressed in class.

American Association of University Professors

Cary Nelson, President

1133 19th St., NW, Suite 200, Washington, D.C. 20036; 202-737-5900; cnelson@illinois.edu

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American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression

Chris Finan, President

19 Fulton St., Suite 407, New York, NY 10038; 212-587-4025; chris@abffe.org

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Arizona

Alessandra Soler Meetze, Executive Director

P.O. Box 17148, Phoenix, AZ 85011-0148; 602-773-6006; ameetze@acluaz.org

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

Martha G. Abbott, Executive Director

1001 N. Fairfax St., Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22314; 703-894-2900, ext. 110; mabbott@actfl.org

Antigone Books

Trudy Mills and Kate Randall, Owners

411 N. 4th Ave., Tucson, AZ 85705; 520-792-3715; info@antigonebooks.com

Arizona English Teachers' Association

Jean Boreen, Executive Secretary

Northern Arizona University, English Department, P.O. Box 6032, Flagstaff, AZ 86011-6032;

Jean.Boreen@nau.edu

Arizona Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

Craig Lefever, President

P.O. Box 881, Yuma, AZ 85366; Craig.lefever@yc.edu

Association of American Publishers

Judith Platt, Director, Free Expression Advocacy

455 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20001; 202-220-4551; jplatt@publishers.org

Association of American University Presses

Peter Givler, Executive Director

28 W. 36th St., Suite 602, New York, NY 10018; 212-989-1010; pgivler@aaupnet.org

Atalanta's Music & Books

Joan Werner, Owner

38 Main St., Bisbee, AZ 85603; 520-432-9976

Authors Guild

Paul Aiken, Executive Director

31 E. 32nd St., 7th Floor, New York, NY 10016; 212-563-5904; PAiken@authorsguild.org

Center for Expansion of Language and Thinking

Dr. Kathryn F. Whitmore, President

The University of Iowa, N275 Lindquist Center, Iowa City, IA 52242; 319-335-5434; Kathryn-whitmore@uiowa.edu

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Changing Hands Bookstore

Gayle Shanks, Bob Sommer and Cindy Dach, Owners

6428 S. McClintock Dr., Tempe, AZ 85283; 480-730-0205; inbox@changinghands.com

Comic Book Legal Defense Fund

Charles Brownstein, Executive Director

255 W. 36th St., Suite 501, New York, NY 10018; 212-679-7151; charles.brownstein@cbldef.org

Freedom to Read Foundation, an affiliate of the American Library Association

Barbara M. Jones, Executive Director

50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611; 312-280-4226; bjones@ala.org

International Reading Association

Richard M. Long, Ed.D., Director, Government Relations

444 N. Capitol St., NW, Suite 524, Washington, DC 20001; 202-624-8801; rlong@reading.org

Mountains and Plains Independent Booksellers Association

Laura Ayrey, Executive Director

8020 Springshire Dr., Park City, UT 84098; 435-649-6079; laura@mountainplains.org

National Association for Bilingual Education

Santiago Wood, Ed.D, Executive Director

8701 Georgia Ave., Suite 611, Silver Springs, MD 20910; 240-450-3700; svwood@bellsouth.net

National Coalition Against Censorship

Joan Bertin, Executive Director

19 Fulton St., Suite 407, New York, NY 10038; 212-807-6242; bertin@ncac.org

National Council for the Social Studies

Susan Griffin, Executive Director

8555 16th St., Suite 500, Silver Spring, MD 20910; 301-588-1800, ext. 103; sgriffin@ncss.org

National Council of Teachers of English

Millie Davis, Senior Developer, Affiliated Groups and Public Outreach

1111 W. Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801; 217-278-3634; mdavis@ncte.org

National Council of Teachers of Mathematics

Kichoon Yang, Executive Director

1906 Association Dr., Reston, VA 20191-1502; 703-620-9840; kyang@nctm.org

National Youth Rights Association

Alex Koroknay-Palicz, Executive Director

1101 15th St., NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20005; 202-835-1739; akpalicz@youthrights.org

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PEN American Center

Larry Siems, Director, Freedom to Write & International Programs
588 Broadway, New York, NY 10012; 212-334-1660, ext. 105; lsiems@pen.org

PEN Center USA

Adam Somers, Executive Director
P.O. Box 6037, Beverly Hills, CA 90212; 323-424-4939; adam@penusa.org

People For the American Way

Debbie Liu, General Counsel
1101 15th St. NW, Suite 600, Washington, D.C. 20005; 202-467-4999; dliu@pfaw.org

Reach Out and Read

Anne-Marie Fitzgerald, Senior Director of National and State Programs
56 Roland St., Suite 100D, Boston, MA 02129; 618-455-0600

Reading Is Fundamental, Inc.

Carol Hampton Rasco, President/CEO
1255 23rd St., NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20037; 202-536-3500

Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators

Lin Oliver, Executive Director
8271 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90048; 323-782-1010; linoliver@scbwi.org

Spark Teacher Education Institute

Educational Praxis, Inc.
P.O. Box 409, Putney, VT 05346; 802-258-9212

Student Press Law Center

Frank LoMonte, Executive Director
1101 Wilson Blvd., Suite 1100, Arlington, VA 22209-2275; 703-807-1904; flomonte@splc.org

TESOL International Association

John Segota, CAE, Associate Executive Director for Public Policy & Professional Relations
1925 Ballenger Ave., Suite 550, Alexandria, VA 22314; 703-518-2513; jsegota@tesol.org

National Council of Teachers of English
1111 W. Kenyon Road
Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096

Phone: 217-328-3870 • 800-369-6283
Fax: 217-278-3761 • Web: www.ncte.org
Email: public_info@ncte.org