Censorship Now: Revisiting The Students’ Right to Read

A Policy Research Brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English

IN THIS ISSUE

- Dimensions of Censorship
- Implications of Censorship
- Policy Recommendations

The Students’ Right to Read, published in 1961, revised in 1981, and reaffirmed by the NCTE Executive Committee in 2012, responds to censorship or attempts to restrict or deny students access to materials deemed objectionable by some individual or group. Despite this position statement and the continuing efforts of NCTE’s Anti-Censorship Center, censorship continues in the classrooms of many English language arts teachers, and recently it has taken new and less obvious forms.

Dimensions of Censorship

The most visible form of censorship is a challenge or a formal complaint requesting that a text be removed from the classroom or school library shelf. Challenges are common. Between 2000 and 2009, there were, for example, 5,099 challenges to books, and the trend continues to the present. Challenges offer reasons for their request: The Scarlet Letter (“a filthy book”), Moby-Dick (“contains homosexuality”), The Catcher in the Rye (“sick, sordid and sadistic”), and To Kill A Mockingbird (“uses the word rape”).

The list of challenged books varies from year to year. In 2010 the most frequently challenged books included The Hunger Games, Twilight, and Nicked and Dimed. In 2012 the list included The Kite Runner, Thirteen Reasons Why, and Looking for Alaska. Books such as The Bluest Eye, Forever, and, more recently, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, are perennial favorites of challengers. The Catcher in the Rye is the most challenged book of all.

Challenges occur in libraries, colleges, and, especially, in K–12 classrooms. This brief focuses on K–12 classrooms where challenges are made by administrators, religious groups, and politicians, but the greatest number come from parents. Many challenges are resolved by teachers, librarians, concerned citizens, or students. Some challenges, however, result in the removal of the text from the curriculum or the library. The book is banned, and its removal prevents others from having access to it. Censorship also takes a number of other forms, several of which are quite subtle.

- Legislation of educational materials at the state level can impose censorship, particularly with regard to issues of diversity. For example, Arizona’s HR 2281, passed in 2010, prohibits courses that “promote the overthrow of the US government,” “promote resentment toward a race or class of people,” “are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group,” or “advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.” This legislation abolished the Mexican American Studies program in Tucson schools and removed about 100 books from the curriculum, including many by Chicano/a authors, along with texts like Shakespeare’s The Tempest.

- Web-filtering software can lead to censorship if it is used to enact specific politics or beliefs. The Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA), passed in 2000, bars funding to schools that provide access to
Implications of Censorship

Regardless of the form it takes, censorship has uniformly negative effects on student learning. Research indicates that restricting students from choosing their own texts can limit their ability to become effective independent readers. Censorship inevitably narrows the curriculum, thereby preventing teachers from connecting instruction with the backgrounds and circumstances of their students. It can also limit student self-expression when students’ writing and other forms of expression are censored.

Censorship has similarly negative effects on teachers. It devalues their expertise as it prevents them from drawing on their knowledge about specific students, available materials, and the local context to make instructional decisions. Furthermore, it prevents teachers from developing the commitments and intellectual investments that come from making curricular decisions based on their professional knowledge.

Policy Recommendations

The most effective way to address censorship and preserve students’ right to read is to be proactive rather than reactive. Anticipating and being prepared to address challenges saves time, reduces stress, and usually leads to a more positive result. When challenges are made, it is important to remember that most challenges can be resolved without having a text actually banned or removed from the classroom and that there are many resources and sources of support available. Teachers, students, and community members can undertake a number of actions to preempt a challenge:

- Prepare rationales for instructional materials to be used with whole classes. These rationales can include goals and standards, the book addresses, possible objections, and ways of addressing challenges. Many rationales from NCTE can be found at www.ncte.org/action/anti-censorship/rationales. Guidelines for developing your own rationale are provided by ReLeah Lent and Gloria Pipkin in Keep Them Reading: An Anti-Censorship Handbook for Educators and are available here: http://www.tcppress.com/pdfs/9780807757381_Reproducibles.pdf

- Leveling systems such as Lexiles have the potential to create censorship because they can lead teachers to guide or require students to read only books on their specific “level.”

- Rating systems can become censorship when they are based on isolated features of a work or are used inappropriately. Common Sense Media (www.commonsensemedia.org), for example, identifies a specific age for which a given text is appropriate, with no consideration of the experiences and interests of individual readers or the educational value of the text. Similarly, many schools use the Motion Picture Association of America’s rating system to determine which films can be shown to students, even though the MPAA has made it clear that its ratings are designed for parents, not schools.

- Selecting books for libraries or classrooms can take the form of censorship if the process excludes particular categories of texts. NCTE’s Statement on Censorship and Professional Guidelines make it clear that eliminating certain types of books for their content, authors, or illustrators is a form of censorship.

- Lists, especially those tied to assessment, can likewise be a form of censorship if they limit the range of available materials. The Common Core State Standards, for instance, include a list of “exemplar” texts, and to the extent that schools and teachers feel obliged to teach only these texts, the list becomes censorship.

- Self-Censorship, perhaps the least obvious form of censorship, occurs when educators choose to exclude certain texts or topics for fear they will arouse controversy. Often a response to the chilling effect of repeated challenges or threats of challenges and/or the lack of censorship guidelines, self-censorship on the part of teachers can deprive students of opportunities to experience texts that engage them in deep reflection and developmentally appropriate reading.
■ Consider the various forms of potential censorship—legislation, Web filtering, leveling systems, state mandates, selection, book lists, rating systems, and self-censorship—currently operating in your school and develop guidelines for ensuring that these do not restrict students’ access to ideas, information, or artistic expression.

■ Develop a school/district policy on challenged materials. In the best case, a district will develop its policy before any text is challenged. Usually called an “Instructional Materials Selection and Review Policy,” the policy should fit the local context. The Students’ Right to Read includes suggestions for such a policy: [http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/righttoreadguideline](http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/righttoreadguideline)

■ Lent and Pipkin provide a reproducible sample policy along with a form to request reconsideration of challenged materials and a sample letter to parents about honoring family standards. These are all available at [http://www.tcpress.com/pdfs/9780807757381_Reproducibles.pdf](http://www.tcpress.com/pdfs/9780807757381_Reproducibles.pdf)

■ Consider organizing a Banned Book Week (BBW) to raise community awareness about alternatives to censorship. BBW can engage students and community members in discussions about the importance of reading and the value of protecting the rights of individuals to choose. See [http://www.ncte.org/action/anti-censorship/banned-books-week](http://www.ncte.org/action/anti-censorship/banned-books-week) as well as Lent and Pipkin for suggestions.

■ Seek help and resources from NCTE. Regardless of how much preparation is made, it is possible for some individual or group to find something objectionable in almost any book, film, video, play, or teaching method. Contact NCTE’s Anti-Censorship Center as soon as a challenge is made. The Center can provide advice, helpful documents, and support for teachers and others faced with a challenge: [http://www.ncte.org/action/anti-censorship](http://www.ncte.org/action/anti-censorship)

**Endnotes**


This policy brief was produced by NCTE’s James R. Squire Office of Policy Research, directed by Anne Ruggles Gere, with assistance from Anne Burke, Merideth Garcia, Gail Gibson, James Hammond, Jonathan Harris, Anna Knutson, Christopher Parsons, Molly Parsons, Aubrey Schiavoni, Bonnie Tucker, and Chinyere Uzogara.

For information on this publication, contact Danielle Griffin, NCTE Legislative Associate, at dgriffin@ncte.org or 202-380-3132. ©2014 by the National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the copyright holder. Additional copies of this publication may be purchased from the National Council of Teachers of English at 1-877-369-6283. A full-text PDF of this document may be downloaded free for personal, non-commercial use through the NCTE website: [http://www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org) (requires Adobe Acrobat Reader).