NCTE Affiliate Intellectual Freedom Award acceptance speech,
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Thank you to NCTE for this honor and for the existence of this award. Thank you to my school district for their support; to my board for their willingness to listen and be persuaded by one persistent teacher and his students; and thank you to my superintendent for her leadership and her devotion to our district, our teachers, and above all, to our students.

Intellectual freedom is about advocacy. It is about standing up, speaking out, and refusing to accept censorship, ignorance, inadequate access, inequitable education, or oppression. In our work to implement, practice, and defend intellectual freedom at all levels and to address attacks on free expression every day, we should ask, agitate, and act.

I asked if we could teach different texts. I agitated a bit with my department colleagues, and, acting within our district’s procedures, we have piloted new texts to board approval—including *Maus*, *First They Killed My Father*, *Always Running*, and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*. All four are now taught across our district. It reminds us that we can push the canon to be more inclusive.

I asked if we could provide funding for smaller class sizes to provide the more equitable education our students need. I agitated with my union and my district, telling real stories about the needs in our schools and, acting in coalition with my superintendent, my union president, and my state assembly member to advocate the need, we convinced the California governor to provide $4M to 21 schools in 10 districts across our state to provide 2 years of class-size reductions. It reminds us that we can affect state level decisions that impact the students in our classrooms.

Collaborating, as we always do, with other dedicated people we asked, agitated, and acted in campaigns that have authored state level policy; that have observed Banned Books week (seven years and running); that have resulted in using fair-trade chocolate in all on-site baking to combat child slavery in the chocolate industry; that have worked to establish future teacher clubs, promoting the teaching profession to students with a specific emphasis on recruiting more teachers of color.

But, when looking at these things, the one element of my intellectual freedom efforts that I am most proud of is working with students to develop a year-long elective course in human rights education.

We use the US Constitution and twentieth-century United Nations human rights documents as a basis for the study of historical and contemporary issues. Our work includes readings, writings, discussions, class and community projects and presentations, debates, journals, letter writing, direct action, public speaking in public spaces, art and poetry projects, and other activities to teach about the rights of children, the rights of women, the rights of refugees, students’ rights, censorship, natural resource conflicts, the dangers of fascism and totalitarianism, fair-trade principles, the rights to an education, to health, to work, to safety, to religion, to equal treatment before the law, to freedom from cruel and unusual punishment. We learn about the history of slavery—including the fact that there are more people alive today and living in slavery than at any other point in human history. We learn about the nexus of technology and privacy, environmental justice, the school-to-prison pipeline, the criminal justice system, restorative justice, immigration, and genocide.

We also talk about what it means to be an ally. I strive to be an ally. I am called to be an ally. I am a college-educated able-bodied cisgender heterosexual white male citizen with no felony convictions. I possess almost every form of privilege that exists in our society. If I am not working as an ally to check my privilege; to

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Taking away healthcare from millions of people, for education, and I will do all I can to stop it! He has the bedrock of our democracy by privatizing public people, for killing the families of terror suspects, if they re-instate loyalty oaths, if they attempt to take action, and to defend intellectual freedom.

In our human rights class we say: Don’t be a bystander, be an upstander!

Today (November 20) is Universal Children’s Day. Today we are called to celebrate, promote, advocate for, and defend children’s rights, to take the necessary actions to build a better world for our children.

Donald Trump has called for building a wall between us and our neighbors, and I will do all I can to stop it! He has called for a registry of Muslims. I will do all I can to stop it! He is attempting to install a racist as the head of the justice department. He has called for torturing people, for killing the families of terror suspects, for taking away healthcare from millions of people, for taking away a woman’s right to choose, for rolling back environmental regulations, for undermining the bedrock of our democracy by privatizing public education, and I will do all I can to stop it!

If they call to burn books, if they come for my neighbor, if they attack the free press, if they re-open the HUAC, if they re-instate loyalty oaths, if they attempt to deport my students or tear apart their families, I will do all I can to stop it!

And I will do all I can to protect our democracy, to stand up for human rights, to stand with all people, and to promote, defend, and protect intellectual freedom! And I ask you to join me.

Join me with the content of your lessons, the journal prompts you give, the visuals you ask students to respond to, the diversity of the authors and the characters of the texts you use. Join me with the words you use in your classroom, in the teacher’s lounge, in the department meeting, in the grocery line, in the voting booth, and in your living room; and join me in the actions we take every day to ask questions that matter, to agitate others, to take action, and to defend intellectual freedom.

Notes


