
How to Address Concerns about Instructional Materials

Advice for Educators

“The one continuing purpose of education, since ancient times, has been to bring people to as full a realization as possible of what it is to be a human being.”

- Arthur W. Foshay, “The Curriculum Matrix: Transcendence and Mathematics,” *Journal of Curriculum & Supervision*, 1991

As educators, it is our privilege and responsibility to invite our students to understand the universe in all its wonders and complexities.

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Acknowledgements

This handbook is the summer writing project of eight educators representing hundreds of local educators from Collier, Lee, and Charlotte Counties in Florida. After community members in our school districts challenged the merit of instructional materials in classrooms and libraries, we decided to assemble best practices for educators. We hope this information will prepare and inspire school staff to continue to choose the best possible educational materials for students.

Two retired Florida teachers, ReLeah Lent and Gloria Pipkin, published lessons learned from years of experience with curriculum challenges in Florida classrooms. Their book, Keep Them Reading: An Anti-Censorship Handbook for Educators (Teachers College Press, 2012) is full of constructive advice that informed our recommendations. We are indebted to them for sharing their wisdom.

Illustrations were provided by public school children and their parents. Their insightful messages and creative spirit inspire us.

Thanks to our students, our families, and the community members who supported this project.

A note about language: For the purpose of this handbook, we refer often to parents, but recognize and honor the roles of many other grown-ups in childrens' lives. Also, students may be male or female, so we also alternate pronouns throughout the text.



General Advice

❖ Choose Materials Intentionally.

When you select materials or resources, write down your rationale for choosing a particular book, story, poem, video, or assignment. What do you hope students will learn from it? Be sure you read everything you assign to your students, preferably well before you assign it.

❖ Recognize Appropriate Boundaries of Parental Influence.

Most of the time, parents will be seeking reassurance, and a solution for their own children; but occasionally, someone may want to influence the learning of all children. When this happens, there are policies and procedures in place to help the community resolve this issue. Find out who the go-to person in your school or district is who knows about these policies and procedures. It may be your department chair, curriculum specialist, guidance counselor, or principal. Include that go-to person in the process.

❖ Follow Established Guidelines for Media Literacy.

Follow your district's guidelines for showing videos in the classroom. Your go-to person can advise on this as well. Policies and procedures are often stored on-line (see Appendix 1). If you want to ask for permission, plan in advance so you will have time to obtain approval. Sometimes a last-minute change or addition to lesson plans may be necessary; still go by the rule that if you haven't read or viewed something in its entirety first, don't show it.



To prevent unexpected surprises in dynamic advertisements on YouTube videos, simply copy the URL into viewpure.com.

❖ Document Students' Learning.

After reading a book or story, or viewing a video, encourage students to write a reflection of what they learned from it, but don't make this a required assignment. Keep the most meaningful reflections on file to help explain the value of chosen works. Remove students' names and any personal information from their writing before using them.

❖ Give Students a Choice.

Consider allowing students to select the passages they will read. If you plan to cover Unit 2 in a textbook and there are eight selections in it, allow students to choose two or three of them. Also, providing alternative novel choices tied to theme can produce engaging discussions in the classroom.



❖ Explain Any New Methods.

Literacy education crosses into many different disciplines. As never before, students are asked to apply literacy skills across disciplines. For example, the new standards emphasize teaching students how to write using the voice of a scientist or an historian. This approach sometimes causes parents to feel confused, or concerned that the process might not prepare students for life after college. The better you can explain why you chose a work, the more supportive parents can be.



“A book is a version of the world. If you do not like it, ignore it or offer your own version in return.”

- Salman Rushdie

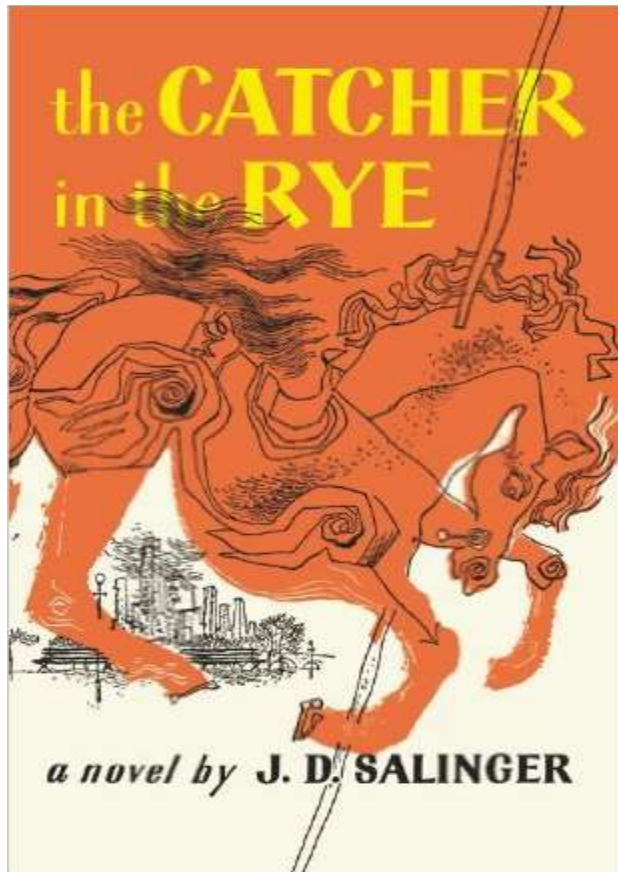
❖ **Be Open to (Responsible) Collaboration.**

Students learn best when people who care about them support their learning. When family members, guardians, foster parents, and mentors demonstrate an earnest commitment to help their student learn, they can be strong allies. Community members who make unreasonable demands, or who wish to control what all children learn, have overstepped their role. If you experience this, rely on your principal to advise you, and allow the challenge process to move forward. District procedures ensure that parents' concerns are addressed fully, while protecting the learning environment of staff and students from disruptive interactions.

❖ **Offer a Safe Space for Discussion.**

Try to create a learning community in each class, where students can offer their own opinions and perspectives without judgment. A trusting relationship makes students feel safe and secure, which helps them to learn.

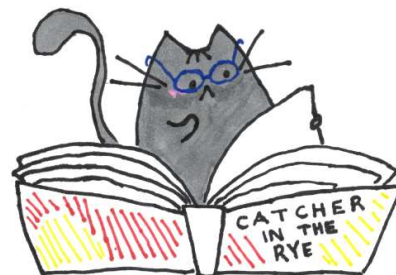
Controversial topics can be effectively integrated into the curriculum by using debates. Appendix 5 contains tips from an experienced debate coach.



J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye was challenged by a Collier County parent for these reasons: Tawdry/depressing, sex-obsessed college kid¹ searching for sex, cross-dressing, drinking/violence, paying a prostitute for favors, and has homosexual themes.

When parents ban books, students lose opportunities to learn life lessons, for example:

[Holden Caulfield's sister Phoebe] knows what no one else knows - that to rescue someone, you don't hand them a pamphlet, you take their hand...Suffering young people are saved when those with Phoebe-like sensibilities intervene. It's the only way.



So here's this teacher's take-home message: We all need to be Phoebe and look out for those around us, our friends and family and especially all the children everywhere. We all need to be that "catcher in the rye."²

¹Holden was a high school student, not a college student.

²Gene Kahane, published on the occasion of Salinger's death, in SFGate, 2010

Addressing Parents' Concerns

If parents express concerns about instructional materials or assignments, invite them and the student to meet with you. Have a list of alternative books/materials prepared.

Before the Meeting:

1. Know your district's process for what to do when teaching materials are challenged (Appendix 1).
2. At the start of the school year, consider sending out a letter to parents to encourage them to participate in their child's education (Appendix 2).
3. Don't try to handle the situation alone. Let your department chair and principal know as soon as possible that a parent has contacted you with concerns about teaching material. If you are a Teacher Association member, you may want to contact a teacher rights advocate as well.
4. If contacted by parents, remind yourself to listen to their concerns and objections politely, and treat them with respect. Try not to get defensive. Write down the materials about which the parent or guardian is concerned.
5. Invite the parents to meet with you. Let them know that their child is welcome also.
6. Ask one other person - an administrator or district curriculum specialist - to attend the meeting with you. A principal or department chair will know about school and district policies. A curriculum specialist will know the different instructional materials used to teach each grade level, guided by the standards.
7. Write a rationale that explains why you are using the particular material that is being questioned (Appendix 3). Be sure you know the material well that is being questioned, so you can adequately address the concerns in the rationale.

8. Gather others' rationales on the particular book/text. Resources to use: National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE (ALAN), National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), and the American Library Association (ALA).

During the Meeting:

1. Greet the parents professionally. Take a moment to connect with the family. (Have you taught other children in this family, for example?) Thank them for participating in their child's education. Introduce other attendees with a brief explanation of why they are there.
2. Let the parents know you or a designee will take notes on the meeting, type them up after the meeting, and email the draft to all participants to review (see the form in Appendix 4). They will have an opportunity to suggest changes, then a final draft will be shared with everyone attending. Ask for the attendees' email addresses and provide your own.
3. Briefly state the reason for the meeting. In a sentence or two, express your understanding of the parents' concerns.
4. Invite them to show you specific passages that concern them. Listen attentively without interrupting. Take notes as they speak.
5. If the student is present, invite her to voice any concerns or questions regarding the text. Let the student and parents lead the conversation during this part of the meeting. Listen and learn more about the parents' concerns. Be sensitive to the fact that the student is meeting with two authority figures, and might feel reluctant to express her opinions.
6. Give the parents the rationale in writing, and discuss it with them.
7. Reassure the parents that their values will be supported not supplanted. Encourage them to read along with the student to be sure he understands his parents' values.
8. After further discussion, offer to schedule a follow-up meeting to answer any questions about the rationale. If the issue cannot be resolved, offer parents the contact information for the district representative who will provide them with information to help them move forward with discussions or a challenge.

9. To end the meeting, thank the parents again for taking part in their child's education.

After the Meeting:

1. Type the notes, including next steps. Email them to all attendees. Ask all in attendance to confirm the content, or to send suggested changes to the notes to you, within a specific time period.
2. After the deadline, revise the notes, then email the final draft to all attendees. Copy the department chair and principal on this email. Ask all attendees to send an email to verify that the final version is acceptable. Keep a copy on file using the name of the curricular material. Wait for further action or resolution.

Appendix 1. A Primer on Statutes, Policies, and Administrative Procedures Related to Instructional Materials

In Florida, state legislation on education is in Title XLVIII, the K-20 Education Code. In that Code, Chapter 1006 describes Support for Learning in Public K-12 Education. The statute that relates to Instructional Materials for K-12 Public Education guides the Department of Education, which interprets the legislative requirements for the districts. Each district must create policies that not only agree with the law, but also support students and educators within the district.

| Policies Related to Instructional Materials | <u>Collier County</u> | <u>Charlotte County</u> | <u>Lee County</u> | Your County |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Instructional Materials Adoption | 2520 | 2520 | 2.18 | |
| Copyrighted Works, and Use of Digital Content in Classrooms | 2531 | 2531 | 2.23 | |
| Audio-Visual Use | 2540 | | | |
| Challenged Materials | 2520 | 2530 | | |
| Controversial Issues | 2240 | | | |

Know your district’s policy for the Adoption of Instructional Materials (see table above). Each district may number its policies differently. Use the table above to find or track down the policies for your district. Click on the county title to connect to the web site.

Some counties store their policies and procedures at NEOLA; for example, Collier County’s policies are stored at www.neola.com/collier-fl. Substitute your district’s name for “collier” in the URL to find out whether your district’s policies are stored there. Click on “2000 Programs” first to access policies in the two thousands. Instructional materials policies usually start with 2510. Some districts store their policies on their web sites, and may use a different numbering system.

Textbook adoption process. The Florida Department of Education sets a schedule for adoption and purchase of new materials that rotates curricular areas in a 5-year cycle. The state reviews and approves only “textbooks that are presented to the state for review.” Some of the best resources cannot afford to present to the state, and therefore remain “unadopted.” They can still become adopted through each district’s policies. A percentage of state monies is available for supplemental purchases that meet student needs.

Beyond textbooks. The rotating schedule applies to textbook adoptions only. Parents may not realize that textbooks are just one of the resources used in a curriculum. The term “instructional materials” means items having intellectual content that by design serve as a major tool for assisting in the instruction of a subject or course, as provided by state law 1006.29(2). Note: Textbooks are NOT the curriculum.

School board approval needed. The school board of each district has the “constitutional duty and responsibility” to select and provide adequate instructional materials for all students. Each district has adopted policies to review, select, and adopt instruction materials.

Options other than state-approved materials. Most districts do not have enough staff to

continue to rely on the state's suggested adopted list. However, this does NOT mean that all materials must come from this list as designated in the language of the statute above.

Approval for videos and other supplemental materials. Some districts have guidelines for the use of digital content in the classroom, and procedures.

Appendix 2. Sample Letter to Acknowledge Diverse Family Values and Invite Participation
(Adapted with permission from the author.)

Dear Parents,

Our (department, school, or district) strives to provide students with every opportunity to experience a wide range of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, as well as opportunities to experience visual and digital text related to content area studies. Teachers choose certain works for students to read or view because of their literary merit, their contribution to the subject of study, or because they are a part of the district or state curriculum.

We are sensitive to the values of the many different families that make up our school community, and we know that not all texts are right for all students. Thus, we have a policy of alternate selections, meaning that if you, as a parent or guardian, or your child, feel that a text opposes your family's standards, you have the right to request an alternate work from a list provided by the teacher. Your child will be required to complete assignments comparable to those of other students, and there will be no penalty whatsoever for students who choose alternate selections.

We welcome and encourage your participation in your child's education and look forward to working together as all of our students experience the rewards of reading.

Signed by the principal, department or grade chair, or teacher.

Appendix 3. Planning for Instruction & Developing a Rationale for Readings

We will provide an innovative educational environment that allows and inspires success for everyone.

Teachers continually make decisions about what they will teach and how they will teach to meet student needs and instructional standards. Oftentimes, a rationale is developed to support those decisions. Jean Brown of Saginaw Valley State University cites SLATE/NCTE (1994) and states, “A rationale is the articulation of the reasons for using a particular literary work, film, or teaching method” (p. 1). Writing a rationale allows educators to reflect upon their choice of text, to affirm the reason(s) for teaching this text, and to prepare for any challenges the text presents.

This is not to say that every book taught needs a rationale to be written by individual teachers. In fact, many professional organizations offer thorough rationales and recommendations to aid educators in this fashion. It is recommended that teachers either collect or know where to find such rationales, and reviews of the book itself.

The following steps should be considered when writing a rationale:

1. DID YOU READ THE BOOK?

While this appears simplistic, an educator must read the book he or she intends to teach to answer the questions that follow. Choosing a book for expediency is not recommended.

2. A complete rationale contains these things (read a sample here):

- a. a complete bibliographic citation with publisher and inclusion of the intended audience
- b. a brief summary of the work and its educational significance
- c. purpose of use and how it will be used (whole group, small group)
- d. a review of potential concerns or issues within the work and how these will be addressed
- e. an alternative work(s)

In addressing each of the above items ask the questions:

3. Why have you chosen this particular book to use with this particular group of students?
4. What content standards or learning goals will this book/instruction address?
5. How will the book be used in class? (i.e., silent or oral reading, whole class or small group discussions, etc.

6. What reviews, awards, or recommendations support the use of this text? The School Library Journal, Hornbook, VOYA, and Kirkus are good sources of information for rationales.
7. Do you or other teachers have previous experience with the book that supports the use of it? This does not mean new/current readings cannot be introduced into classrooms as long as all the other criteria are met (especially adding the title to the non-adopted list).
8. What potential objections to the book do you foresee?
 - a. Individual bias, beliefs, and preferences must be set aside.
 - b. All material must be read and considered within the context of the work as a whole.
 - c. Determine if items that might be questioned add to the work because they realistically portray the character's way of talking, are representative of a cultural or historical era, convey emotions effectively, or are otherwise important to the work.
9. How does the educational value or literary merit of the book outweigh possible objections?
10. How do you plan to handle any sensitive issues within the work?
11. All titles taught within a school should have an alternative selection that will provide students with the same or similar understandings of the initial selection.

Appendix 4.

MEETING RECORD:
CONCERNS ABOUT INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

DATE OF MEETING: _____

TITLE OF MATERIAL DISCUSSED: _____

COURSE TITLE: _____

INDIVIDUALS IN ATTENDANCE:

| Name | Email Address |
|-------|---------------|
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

1. Was this whole class, small group, or individual material?
2. Was the material on the state-approved list of adopted instructional materials?
3. Was the material pre-approved by parents via permission slips?
4. Was an alternative requested and/or provided? If so, what was the title of the alternative?
5. What was the rationale for teaching this material?

6. Have the parents/individuals read or viewed the material in its entirety?

7. What are the parents'/individuals' concerns?

8. After discussion, does the parent/individual believe there is a need to file an official challenge to this book/text?

- If so, has the individual been directed to the proper contact at the district to pursue this challenge?

RESOLUTION OR ACTION REQUIRED:

Notes of this meeting will be sent to each parent/individual in attendance for an email verifying the accuracy of the record. A revised, final draft will be sent to all attendees after edits have been submitted.

EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM DEBATE

BACKGROUND

Philosophers and political leaders in ancient Greece used debate as a tool to elicit their best thinking. The author of this document taught Debate for 5 years and had students engage in a range of controversial issues. These issues included visceral topics such as fracking, global warming, and even suicide. The following tips led to effective facilitation of these debates.

JUDGING

De-emphasize the notion that there are “winners” and “losers” at the end of a debate round. Instead, engage the class in a dialogue providing constructive feedback regarding the strengths & weaknesses of the debate that the audience observed. Likewise, further share responsibilities with students by having students peer grade class debates. Employ a system where the teacher grade accounts for 50% of a student’s debate score, and the average class grade accounts for the other 50% of a student’s debate score. This method almost entirely eliminates any sense of impropriety that a student might perceive when receiving a score from the teacher.

WHOLE CLASS PARTICIPATION

1. Preparation
Form groups of 3 students. Each student has a number (1, 2, or 3) within group.
Students reposition desks to face each other.
Each group needs paper & writing utensil.
2. Debaters
The teacher will announce the debate topic and call out two numbers (1, 2, or 3).
The two numbers called represent the students who will debate within each group of three (ex: students 1 & 3).
The first number called will argue for pro, and the second number called will argue for con.
3. Judge
The third student will record notes during the debate and write who developed the strongest argument by the end of the time.
4. Process
The debate lasts only 2 minutes.
The teacher will tell debaters to switch the speaker every 30 seconds.
The teacher will monitor by walking throughout the room listening to student debates.
5. Result
Call on each judge to provide a quick recap of their group’s debate & discuss strengths and weaknesses: this promotes a climate of reflection for better future performance.
6. Repeat steps 2-5 until each student has participated (approximately 40-50 minutes).

STUDENT CHOICE

When preparing for a debate, let students choose their topic with their opponents. Letting students choose their debate topic requires students to assess their comfort level regarding a topic, take ownership over their learning, and pursue an area of study which will engage their intellectual, social, and emotional development. Of course, a list of debate topics often helps students to stay focused.

FICTION

Students have nascent political views, and it is essential that educators not steer students to the left or right. Using television or internet shows, books, comics, etc. with fictional politicians and authority figures is an excellent way to eliminate any perception of bias towards a certain political party. Students will instead focus on the ideas introduced/rhetorical strategies in the course of a debate which will produce a more meaningful classroom dialogue as students are not being guided by their internal biases.

AVOIDING SIDES

A universal challenge when framing a debate for students is the establishment of two sides. The two sides of a debate must be separated widely, and allow students to develop an argument without guidance toward a conclusion predetermined by the teacher. However, using a value debate is a great way of circumventing sides altogether. In a value debate, students choose a value (ex: liberty, security, money, etc.) and argue that their value best achieves a value criterion (verb phrase). For example, in a discussion about gun rights, a value criterion might be to “ensure the safety of United States citizens.” Students would have to establish which value would best “ensure the safety of United States citizens” by creating arguments that don’t necessarily adhere to any side. In effect, there will be students arguing for their own values of choice which may include justice, health, morality, life, autonomy, etc. A focus on values creates a more multidimensional debate that avoids two strictly established sides. Again, the power of choice is in the hands of the students.

NATIONAL FORENSICS LEAGUE

The NFL is the “official” debate resource for educators. Visit the NFL’s topic page for debate topics which have been vetted & approved for student debate:

<http://www.speechanddebate.org/topics>.