

BOOK CENSORSHIP TOOLKIT

NCAC presents the following collection of materials on the topic of censorship in schools for the use of students, educators, and parents everywhere. This information is not intended as legal advice. If you are embroiled in a censorship controversy, we hope you will consult the resources below for guidance — if you need additional assistance, please contact us at ncac@ncac.org.

TIPS FOR RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES

For Teachers and School Officials

Be prepared. Teachers and educators should be familiar with the school's policies and procedures for dealing with book challenges and should be prepared to follow the procedures. (For the essential elements of a model complaint policy, see below.)

Convey key messages about school curricula. If responding to a challenge, focus on three key points:

- School curricula reflect a spectrum of social and political views and experiences.
- School curricula are chosen by professional educators familiar with students' educational needs and abilities.
- In many cases, parents' concerns can be addressed by requesting an alternative assignment.



Respond to complaints.

- Encourage parents to raise any concerns they may have about their children's education.
- Explain the three key points listed above.
- Be prepared to articulate the educational rationale for reading the book in question.
- Be prepared to discuss the school's policies and procedures for challenging books, and provide forms or written instructions, if available.

Let others know. Notify parents, students, colleagues, and other interested parties if a formal complaint process is initiated.

For Parents and Students

Attend school board meetings. You may have the opportunity to share your opinions in an "open forum" part of a school board meeting. Prepare your comments in advance in writing, and be clear and concise. Share personal stories, and be prepared to quote teachers, parents, or children about what the book has meant to them.

Write letters. Write a letter to the school principal, superintendent, and school board, urging them to follow a thorough review process to deal with a complaint, and to retain the book in the curriculum. Emphasize the importance of protecting the freedom to read and the educational value of the book as a whole. You may also want to write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper or contact your local radio station. See the sample letter guide below.

Organize! Create a local anti-censorship coalition.

For Authors

Contact your publisher. Let them know where your book is being challenged, and on what grounds.

Write letters. Write to the school principal, superintendent, and school board about your book. If possible, try to contact the challenger directly to discuss your book. See the sample letter guide below.

Publish a statement against censorship. Post a statement on your website or blog, opposing censorship and alerting readers to the challenges against your book. Provide contact information for the school board, and encourage visitors to urge school officials to retain the book in the curriculum.

Speak out against censorship. In libraries, schools, bookstores, and at conferences, share your experiences with others, and speak out in support of the freedom to read.

TYPES OF OBJECTIONS AGAINST BOOKS

Profanity. Books are often challenged for the language they contain, even though profanity is often used in literature to convey social or historical context, local dialect or simply to better depict reactions to real-life situations. Books such as *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck and *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut have been challenged or banned due to objections to profanity.

Sex. Books as varied as Judy Blume's *Forever*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, among many others, have been challenged by parents and school boards who deem certain sexual passages inappropriate for young people. Works such as *It's Perfectly Normal* by Robie Harris and *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman, among others, face demands for removal for their frank discussion and focus on gay/lesbian issues.

Violence. Objections to violent content are often based on the idea that these works trivialize violence or desensitize readers to its effects. Books challenged on these grounds include *One Fat Summer* by Robert Lypsyte and *Native Son* by Richard Wright.

Religion. Religious grounds have long been cited as reasons for censoring books. Reading translations of the Bible was once forbidden. Today, parents and ministers often object to works which discuss topics such as sex, evolution, or witchcraft or occult themes.



SAMPLE LETTER

Dear _____:

I am writing to express concern about efforts to remove _____ from the [Course Name and/or grade level] curriculum at [School Name]. I understand that the book has been challenged because of objections to _____.



I strongly urge you to keep this book in the curriculum at [School Name] and to uphold the freedom to read for all students in our community. The views of those seeking removal of the book are not shared by all. The challengers have no right to impose their views on others or to demand that the educational program reflect their personal preferences.

[Briefly address the challengers' objections, and urge the consideration of the book as a whole. (See Types of Objections against Books below for ideas.)] If parents do not want their children to read a particular book, then they are free to request an alternative assignment. But they may not infringe on the rights of others to read the book or to tell other parents what their children may read in school.

In addition, removing the book will only teach children to remain silent instead of asking questions for fear of addressing "offensive" or "inappropriate" topics. They will learn that the way to deal with difficult speech is to avoid it, and that fear and ignorance supersede the quest for knowledge. Reading is the safest way for kids to learn about the world in which they are growing up and to help them anticipate real-life problems.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

MODEL COMPLAINT POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

- Complaints must be made in writing.
- Complainants should identify themselves both by name/address, and by their interest in the material (i.e., as a parent, student, religious leader, etc.).
- Complainants must have read/seen the entire work objected to.
- The complaint must be specific about the reasons for the objection (i.e. calls upon a broader knowledge or range of experience than students typically possess).
- Complaints should request a specific remedy (i.e., an alternative assignment for an individual, or removal/exclusion affecting the entire school community).
- Complaints, standing alone, should never provide grounds for disciplining teachers or librarians.

It is advisable for policies to contain a statement supporting intellectual and academic freedom, and an explanation of the importance of exposing students to a wide variety of material and information, some of which may be considered "controversial." Policies should also clearly indicate that certain kinds of objections do not provide a legally permissible ground for removal, exclusion or restriction. Disagreement with a specific idea or message, and personal objections to materials on religious, political or social grounds, are the most common grounds for challenges and the most suspect. Such concerns may justify a parent's request that his or her child be assigned alternate material, and if shared more widely they may suggest the need for discussion about how teachers and school officials can better explain the educational value of the material, and ways in which any perceived harms can be alleviated, perhaps through inclusion of additional materials or otherwise. But such personal viewpoint-based concerns, standing alone, rarely justify removal of a book or other material and may raise First Amendment issues.



A committee - often composed of instructional staff, library staff, and administrators, and sometimes including students and parents - ordinarily processes complaints. Their recommendation is usually subject to a review process, but the judgment of such a committee made up by professionals, with or without lay members, is entitled to deference if grounded in sound educational and pedagogical principles. Its decision should only be reversed for compelling educational reasons. Materials should never be removed unless the complaint procedures are followed, and materials should never be removed prior to completion of the complaint process.

RESOURCES



The **National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC)** – Founded in 1974, NCAC is an alliance of 51 national non-profit organizations, including literary, artistic, religious, educational, professional, labor, and civil liberties groups, united in their support of freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression. NCAC works with teachers, educators, writers, artists, and others around the country dealing with censorship debates in their own communities; it educates its members and the public at large about the dangers of censorship and how to oppose them; and it advances policies that promote and protect freedom of expression and democratic values.

The **National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (NCTE/IRA)** – The NCTE “supports intellectual freedom at all educational levels.” A 80,000-member organization devoted to improving the teaching and learning of English and the language arts, the NCTE offers support, advice, and resources to teachers and schools faced with challenges to teaching materials or methods. The NCTE has developed a Statement on Censorship and Professional Guidelines in recognition that English and language arts teachers face daily decisions about teaching materials and methods. The IRA has 90,000 members worldwide, working in a variety of educational capacities. Its goal is to promote high levels of literacy by improving the quality of reading instruction and encouraging reading as a lifetime habit. The IRA supports “freedom of speech, thought, and inquiry as guaranteed by the First Amendment.”

The **National Education Association (NEA)** – The NEA is America’s oldest and largest organization committed to advancing the cause of public education. Its 2.5 million members work at every level of education. Elected representatives from across the country are responsible for setting policy, which includes resolutions on selecting and developing education materials and teaching techniques. The resolutions embody NEA’s belief that democratic values are best transmitted in an atmosphere free of censorship and deplore “pre-publishing censorship, book burning crusades, and attempts to ban books from the...curriculum.” Taking a proactive position, the NEA encourages its members to be involved in developing textbooks and materials and to seek the removal of laws and regulations that restrict selection of diverse materials.

The **American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom (ALA-OIF)** – “Established December 1, 1967, the Office for Intellectual Freedom is charged with implementing ALA policies concerning the concept of intellectual freedom as embodied in the Library Bill of Rights, the Association’s basic policy on free access to libraries and library materials. The goal of the office is to educate librarians and the general public about the nature and importance of intellectual freedom in libraries.”

The **American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression (ABFFE)** – The American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression is the bookseller’s voice in the fight against censorship. Founded by the American Booksellers Association in 1990, ABFFE’s mission is to promote and protect the free exchange of ideas, particularly those contained in books, by opposing restrictions on the freedom of speech; issuing statements on significant free expression controversies; participating in legal cases involving First Amendment rights; collaborating with other groups with an interest in free speech; and providing education about the importance of free expression to booksellers, other members of the book industry, politicians, the press and the public.