Be Prepared: A Response to Charles Park

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The issues are different and yet the same: secular humanism, sex education, evolution and scientific creationism, "obscene" books. The real issue is control: Who will control what is taught? Educators need to be acutely aware of the difference between local control and vocal control. To confuse the two is to lose the battle before it begins. You can't let a vocal minority—no matter how loud—dictate what comes off the shelves in your libraries or what is taught in your classrooms.

You never know what issue will trigger a full scale protest. Our school system had been using a social studies textbook called Greek and Roman Civilization for many years without complaint. Then the mother of a seventh grade student called, insisting that the book had a picture of Jesus "depicted as a monkey in a green jump suit and handing a banana to one of his disciples." She was referring to a picture of a stained glass window illustrating the Last Supper. She reported this to her minister and he brought busloads of church members to a school board meeting. The school board refused to remove the book after study by its textbook selection committee, but the incident sparked formation of an organized group called "Decency in Education" for many years without complaint.

Our school board was also one of the first to receive the brunt of the scientific creationism movement. By relying heavily on our legal counsel and the involvement of community leaders and clergy, we've been able to keep our science curriculum intact.

If you don't have a policy for dealing with these kinds of demands, you'd better get one fast. The policy should provide for community involvement, a constructive exchange of views, and an appeal process. School board members should know the procedures, and legal counsel should be sought before complaints come to the board. A board member who knows where he or she stands is much more likely to resist the pressures of organized groups. Districts should also develop a written rationale for each part of the curriculum and for the texts and materials used in the instructional process.

Park has sounded the alarm and educators should take heed. If we allow the brokers of fear to control our schools through their censorship, our children will realize the words of Yevtushenko's poem, "Lies":

It will repeat itself, increase—and afterwards our pupils will not forgive in us what we forgave.

---from Yevtushenko
Selected Poems*