



Censorship vs. Selection—Choosing the Books Our Children Shall Read

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How are instructional and library materials selected for and removed from the public schools? What impact do efforts to restrict the content of such materials have on the educational environment? Do such efforts jeopardize the educational process that is so vital to a democracy? If so, how can their negative effects be minimized?

These are major questions for public education. Yet comprehensive, up-to-date data on these issues have been sorely lacking. Thus ASCD undertook to cosponsor, with the Association of American Publishers and the American Library Association, a major nationwide survey in the spring and summer of 1980. Entitled "Book and Materials Selection for School Libraries and Classrooms: Procedures, Challenges, and Responses," the survey was the first large-scale effort to investigate how challenges to materials relate to the overall selection process.¹

The study was conducted in two parts: a large-scale mail survey of local-level (building and district) public elementary and secondary school administrators and librarians in the 50 states and the District of Columbia; and a separate mail and telephone survey of state-level officials in the 22 "adoption" states, which prepare lists of instructional materials mandated or recommended for use in their public schools.

Of nearly 7,500 principals, librarians, district superintendents, and library-supervisors randomly sampled



Selection and review procedures can help when school materials are challenged; but there is no substitute for good community relations in reducing those challenges in the first place.

nationwide, 1,891 responded to all or part of a highly detailed 52-item questionnaire. Of the 22 adoption states, all but two participated in both the mail and the telephone survey. Though the rate of return, 25 percent, for the local-level survey does not permit us to generalize the results to the national population, it does provide a reliable picture for the sample population, representing a substantial number of schools across the country.

Nearly one-fifth of the local administrators and one-third of the librarians reported that there had been some challenge to classroom or library materials in their schools since September 1, 1978.² Such challenges were reported by respondents in all regions of the country and in all types of communities. Moreover, survey responses comparing the rate of challenges for 1976-78 and 1978-80 appear to support the view of many recent observers that the pressures on materials are increasing.

It is impossible to do more here than briefly highlight the principal survey findings. Further information is available in either the full survey report or the summary report, "Limiting What Students Shall Read:

Books and Other Learning Materials in Our Public Schools—How They Are Selected and How They Are Removed."³

"Censorship" or "Selection"?

As its title implies, the summary report focused on the findings most relevant to the question of censorship, an issue now of overriding public concern. In no way, however, did we consider that every challenge to instructional materials was a "censorship" attempt.

Quite deliberately, the term "censorship" was not used anywhere in the survey questionnaires or letters. Despite much confusion and heated debate over exactly what actions constitute censorship, the term is abhorrent to most Americans. So ingrained in us are the ideals of free speech and a free press, that even those who would impose some limits on freedom of expression are loath to see themselves as "censors."

To avoid the negative implications of "censorship," we used the more neutral term "challenges" throughout the survey instruments. The summary report likewise did not consider that every challenge to materials constitutes a "censorship" attempt, with its negative connotations.

On the contrary, the report stated that challenges to materials have a positive, legitimate function in a democratic educational system. "As a check both on unavoidable human error and on the occasionally arbitrary exercise of authority," we concluded, "such challenges may be viewed as an essential element in the overall selection process."

Under certain conditions, however, objections to materials may cease to play their legitimate role in what should be an orderly, democratic process. When they prevail through fiat, subterfuge, coercion, or threat of

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reprisal, rather than through reason and consensus, they do raise the specter of censorship. Then they may indeed jeopardize educational freedom.

The danger of "censorship," then, as we saw it, was less in the frequency of challenges than in their nature and motivation, how they were dealt with, and the impact of their resolution on the educational environment.⁴ These were the aspects of the survey findings that most concerned us.

What Was Challenged and by Whom?

The survey responses concerning the nature of challenges differed significantly between the state and local levels.

At the state level, where most objections related to textbooks under consideration for adoption,⁵ challenges reported by survey respondents tended to be more organized than at the local level. They were more concerned with broad issues of content, curriculum, ideology, and viewpoint. The specific aspects most often cited were "conservative" issues: secular humanism, Darwinism and evolution, criticism of U.S. history, values clarification, undermining of traditional family values, and atheistic or agnostic views.

The majority of adoption-state challenges were initiated by groups (rather than individuals), often with evidence of influence by national organizations, particularly those of conservative ideology. About half of the state officials I interviewed felt the activities of Mel and Norma Gabler's Educational Research Analysts had directly or indirectly affected recent adoption proceedings in their state. Some officials said they had received mailings directly from the Gablers in Texas, asking for information on adoption cycles and hearing schedules. All of the respondents who indicated a recent increase in state-level challenges attributed it to the efforts of the Gablers and "New Right" activists.

The state-adoption findings contrast sharply with the local survey responses. Not only did local challenges tend to emanate from individuals, mainly parents, but they also gave much less evidence of influence by national pressure groups.⁶

On the local level, objections to textbooks were far outnumbered by objections to supplementary and

library materials, primarily contemporary fiction. Challenged authors included Aldous Huxley, Orwell, Salinger, Steinbeck, Twain, Sendak, Vonnegut, Solzhenitsyn, and Shakespeare. As at the state level, the great majority (though not all) of the objections reflected a "conservative," rather than "liberal," outlook.

One rather startling finding was that nearly a third of the local challenges cited by librarians (as compared with under 10 percent cited by administrators) were initiated by school personnel. One librarian commented, "I have more trouble with the teachers and principals than with the parents."

The dominant local concerns were with isolated aspects—sex, sexuality, and language ("dirty words" and profanity)—rather than with broader issues relating to the content or value of the work taken as a whole. In many cases, the challenger had not fully examined the work. Nor had school staff in most cases (over 75 percent of the total) communicated their reasons for using the material.

On both the state and the local level, the number of challenges increased steadily with increasing grade level. Thus pressures were greatest on materials for high school seniors, not on those for very young children.

In nearly 95 percent of all incidents cited by local respondents (in 100 percent of those cited by building librarians alone), challengers sought to restrict the content of student materials. However, state-adoption challengers more often asked that ideas and information be added (the "equal time" approach of creationists, for example). This may indicate a greater sophistication and an awareness that seeking to limit ideas might be rejected as censorship.

How Did Administrators Respond to Challenges?

Adoption states vary widely in their management of the challenge process and in their involvement of lay persons in adoption proceedings. While some officials adamantly oppose lay participation on state adoption committees, others argue that it is appropriate and valuable, as long as it does not "dominate" the process. Still others have recently yielded to growing political pressure to include lay members, a trend that will probably continue.

One administrator in a key adoption state credited public participation with returning published materials to a "sounder" basis, away from an "over-liberal" use of "street materials." However, another official deplored the extent to which adoption proceedings in some states have become a political arena, and suggested that television coverage of hearings contributed to exploitation of the process for political ends.

Virtually all the officials I spoke with were concerned about—some even unnerved by—the recent efforts of nationwide right-wing pressure groups to influence textbook selection, as well as curriculum, not only through the adoption process but through legislation. Several would not discuss the question until I had assured them of anonymity. One textbook officer took a strong stand against the direct intervention of out-of-state groups. Another was equally outspoken in his view that the New Right is seeking to destroy public education.

Our survey findings on the local response to challenges likewise gave cause for concern. In exactly half of all incidents cited, the challenged material was altered, restricted, or removed prior to a formal review. In approximately 40 percent of all cases no one was assigned to re-evaluate the material. (Half of the administrators and nearly a fourth of the librarians said they had no written procedures for reconsidering challenged materials; and nearly two-thirds of all local challenges were dealt with informally—more on this later.)

What Was the Fate of the Challenged Material?

About a third of the local challenges were overruled. But in 22 percent of all recent cases, the material questioned was ultimately removed from the school, and in approximately 30 percent some other action was taken limiting student access. (We did not count in this category cases where alternate assignments were offered at parents' request.)

In some cases, the official ruling was not the last word, however—evidence of the depth of feeling often involved in these controversies. Wrote one respondent, "Person objecting refused to return book." Wrote another, "[Parents whose challenge was overruled] stole material."

Recommendations for Selection and Reconsideration of Materials

Before challenges arise, school districts should:

1. *Establish, in writing, a materials selection policy.* The policy statement should specify the local criteria and procedures for selecting curricular and library materials. School personnel, including administrators at all levels, should strictly adhere to the established policy and procedures in the selection of all materials.

2. *Establish, in writing, a clearly defined method for dealing with complaints.* Formal procedures for the review of challenged materials should be an integral part of the selection policy statement. Survey data strongly suggest that review procedures include the following provisions:

a. That a "request-for-review" form be used to identify, in writing, the complainant's specific concerns and objections, for evaluation during the review process;

b. That a broad-based committee including parents and other community residents as well as school personnel be established to review challenged materials; and

c. That no restrictions be placed on the use of challenged materials until the entire review process has been completed.

3. *Establish continuing communication with the public served by the schools.* School personnel should keep the local community informed, on a regular basis, about educational objectives, curricula, and classroom and library programs, and should be accessible to all concerned local residents to hear their views. It is especially important that the community be informed about the policies and procedures for selecting and reviewing books and other instructional and library materials, since these materials form the basis for the school's educational program.

If a challenge arises, school districts should:

1. *Attempt to resolve the challenge informally.* When the complaint is first received, appropriate personnel should meet informally with the complainant to hear the specific objections being raised and to explain how and why the challenged material was selected. If, at the end of this informal discussion, the complainant still wishes to challenge the material in question, the request-for-review form should be provided.

2. *Take no action to review challenged materials until a written request for review is filed.* When the formal request has been filed, established review procedures should be implemented immediately. At this time, the school board or other governing body should be fully informed of the details of the complaint. If there is no standing review committee, the necessary committee should now be established.

3. *Strictly adhere to established procedures throughout the review process.* All school personnel

should be reminded that no restrictions are to be placed on the use of the challenged materials until the entire review process has been completed.

4. *Inform the general public.* Any review of challenged materials should be conducted openly, and the community the district serves should be kept informed through the media and local organizational channels, such as the parents' association or school newsletters.

5. *Seek support.* Many local and national groups can offer advice and support. It is best to alert such groups when a complaint is first received. They can often help schools resolve challenges equitably; at the very least, they can provide moral support. Publishers in particular, through the Association of American Publishers, may be able to provide assistance in resolving challenges.

Where to Seek Assistance

The following is a list of national organizations that offer information and, in some cases, legal advice or other assistance to those involved in censorship disputes.

American Library Association

Office for Intellectual Freedom
50 East Huron Street
Chicago, IL 60611
(312) 944-6790

Association of American Publishers

One Park Avenue
New York, NY 10016
(212) 689-8920
or
1707 L Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 293-2585

National Coalition Against Censorship

132 West 43rd Street
New York, NY 10036
(212) 944-9899

Freedom to Read Foundation

50 East Huron Street
Chicago, IL 60611
(312) 944-6780, ext. 331

American Civil Liberties Union

132 West 43rd Street
New York, NY 10036
(212) 944-9800

American Association of School Administrators

1801 North Moore Street
Arlington, VA 22209
(703) 528-0700

In still another case, students underwrote a library subscription for a magazine the administration refused to reorder.

How Did Challenges Affect the Educational Environment?

Survey responses indicated that recent state-adoption challenges influenced the following (in decreasing order): textbooks adopted, adoption policy and procedures, curriculum content, supplementary materials adopted, and teaching methodology.

Several respondents particularly noted the influence of adoption challenges on educational publishers. A spokesperson for a major adoption state pointed out that objections to sexism and racism, common complaints a decade ago, are now infrequent in her state because publishers have developed "bias-free" materials. Similarly, some publishers have begun to revise science materials to accommodate the creationist view of biological origins—a development viewed with alarm by some educators.

Most vulnerable to local challenges were the educational areas where one might expect the greatest freedom of choice. Library materials were affected nearly twice as often as supplementary classroom materials and nearly three times as often as textbooks or selection procedures, below which ranked selection policy and curriculum content.

Survey responses leave little doubt that local challenges resulted in a net reduction in the materials, information, and ideas available to students. As noted above, about half of all challenges led to removal of the material or some other limitation of access. Although the majority of cases involved discretionary rather than basic curricular materials, challenges were often resolved by across-the-board actions limiting access for all students. And rarely was other material selected to replace withdrawn or restricted items.

While a number of respondents' remarks indicate that some of the removals were educationally justified ("inappropriate for grade level," for example), others seem to imply that the action was based on swift, possibly superficial moral judgments, without consideration of the overall content or value of the work. One principal, for instance, commented,

I have had 3-4 books and one magazine brought to me for the above reasons [obscenity, "dirty words," nudity, and profanity]. We removed them from the shelves.

Local respondents also testified to the chilling effect of previous objections,

Parental badgering has caused rifts between teachers and administrators. Extreme care is taken in selecting any material. Teachers are afraid of bringing in "controversial" subjects.

A state-adoption official likewise noted that administrators in districts where protest groups are most active are reluctant to select controversial materials from the state list. And one superintendent who reported no recent challenges wrote simply, "We really try not to select controversial materials going in."

Some school systems, however, managed to emerge from their controversies over materials unscathed, perhaps even strengthened:

District resolved problem to satisfaction of community and staff. District came out very strong. Used broad-based committee to study entire human development curriculum.

Do Established Policies and Procedures Make a Difference?

Educators and librarians have long stressed the importance of written selection policies and reconsideration procedures for instructional and library materials. Our survey findings confirm that view.

About half of the administrators and a fourth of the librarians surveyed reported that they lacked such policies and procedures. We were surprised to find that these respondents reported *fewer* challenges than those *with* policies and procedures. However—and this was perhaps the most important finding of our study—respondents with policies and procedures more often reported that challenges were overruled. Administrators (librarians' responses on this question were less conclusive) *without* a selection policy more often reported that challenged materials were removed from the school.

In addition, respondents without formal reconsideration procedures more often reported that challenges were dealt with "informally," and more often reported that challenged materials were altered, restricted, or removed prior to a formal review. Responses also indicated that where

challenges were resolved "informally" they far more often resulted in the removal of, or limiting of access to, materials.

Though it is impossible to prove a cause-and-effect relationship, these findings strongly suggest that educational freedom is best served by adherence to due process and established professional procedures. As one library-supervisor testified, "Building selection committees and procedures followed avoid problems."

Are Community Relations a Factor?

Policies and procedures may help ensure that conflicts will be resolved more equitably, with less damage to educational freedom. But it is the conflicts themselves that demand so much time and energy from school personnel, and which can create a climate of dissension in the school community. Are there any constructive ways to reduce the frequency of conflicts?

In *Dealing with Censorship*, Robert F. Hogan, past executive director of NCTE, offers "Some Thoughts on Censorship in the Schools."⁷ Recent censorship pressures, Hogan maintains, are at least partly due to the polarization of professional educators and the lay community. In collectivizing, teachers have, however unwittingly, severed the personal bond of trust on which the delegation of so important a caretaking role must be based. Professional educators, Hogan concludes, must "renegotiate [their] social contract with the community." Essential to this process is effective communication.

Many of the administrators and librarians we surveyed indicated that their communication with parents was more crisis-oriented than continuous, however. Information about school programs, policies, and procedures apparently was offered mainly in response to inquiries or challenges, rather than as part of a regular public relations program. If Hogan is correct, and I believe he is, many schools would do well to improve their communication with the population they serve.

Parents and Teachers: Partners or Adversaries?

Though our survey findings cannot prove that better community relations would forestall many of the conflicts

over instructional and library materials in the schools, we can find such confirmation elsewhere. In the NCTE volume on censorship, educator June Berkley shares some very relevant insights. A veteran of 21 years in Fort Frye High School, a consolidated school in a small, rather typical southeastern Ohio town, Berkley states:

Discontent with printed material does not always come directly from the book itself; but rather . . . reflects some other dissatisfaction with the school—or the teacher or the system in general. . . . Somehow the school, the teachers themselves, must re-establish confidence in their service to the community. They must make their good efforts understood.⁸

For the cynics among us, Berkley has demonstrated cause and effect on this question more effectively than any survey might do. A few years ago, Fort Frye parents began circulating nasty rumors about a "dirty book" assigned to their children. The English department, under Berkley's chairmanship, set up on their own time an evening course for parents, aptly titled "Books Our Children Read."

Like many of the challengers reported in our survey, the Fort Frye parents circulating the rumors had not read the "dirty book"—Robert Newton Peck's *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, one of the most frequently challenged works on our survey list. But now, for their weekly classes, parents read the book and others like it and discuss them with their children's teachers. The teachers, most of them young and without children of their own, learned some things from the parents. And the parents learned to love the books and to respect and trust the teachers.

Three years later, the Fort Frye experiment endures. More parents are now hungry to read, and to talk about what they're reading. The teachers see enough value in the effort to continue donating a few evenings a year to make it happen. So Fort Frye High, no stranger to the "censorship mentality," manages to keep those "dirty books" in the classroom and on the library shelves, where children and parents can learn from them.

Perhaps we can all learn from the Fort Frye teachers, who have found a "human relationship other than intimidation" (to borrow a phrase from Hogan's "Thoughts on Censorship") to deal with concerned parents. As

What Is "Censorship"?

"Censorship" has not always been a bad word. At its origins, in antiquity, the function of censorship had a positive social purpose. Implicit was the goal of preserving public order and the general morality. This sense is retained even in current *Columbia Encyclopedia* definition:

Censorship, official prohibition or restriction of any type of expression believed to threaten the political, social, or moral order.

But *Black's Law Dictionary*, the standard legal lexicon, probably comes closer to the meaning the term has for most Americans:

The denial of right of "freedom of the press" and of right of "freedom of speech," and of all those rights and privileges which are had under a free government.

In referring to freedom of speech and of the press as guaranteed by the Constitution, however, we sometimes seem to forget that the First and Fourteenth Amendments protect only against abridgement of those freedoms by Congress (the federal government) and the states. The Bill of Rights says nothing about locally determined constraints on expression.

On the question of just how much control local agencies such as school boards can legitimately exercise to limit expression, especially where minors are involved, the courts have not yet clearly ruled. The body of case law on the question is sporadic, and quite inconsistent from circuit to circuit.

Some of the tests that have been applied by the courts or suggested by legal authorities to determine whether local actions to remove materials from a public school violate constitutionally protected rights are the following:

1. *Irrevocable delegation of authority*. Has the board illicitly overridden the decision of the professionals to whom authority for the selection of materials was delegated?

2. *Due process*. Has the board followed its established procedures?

3. *Motive*. Does the action aim to systematically exclude a point of view or to indoctrinate students to a particular orthodoxy?

4. *Local control*. Does the action truly reflect the views of the local community or does it indicate inappropriate intervention by outside groups?

our survey has shown, policies and procedures are important; but they must not be allowed to wholly depersonalize the relationship between parents and teachers. We should not fool ourselves into thinking that policies and procedures can ever eliminate the need for the personal interaction of the responsible, caring human beings. ■

¹ In the past decade, only two major nationwide mail surveys have addressed the issues of materials selection and challenges, but both were far more limited in design and scope than the present study. One, by the Educational Research Service in 1976, dealt primarily with materials selection, devoting just one question to challenges. Questionnaires were mailed only to district administrators in the "open" states—states without statewide adoption lists. Librarians and principals were not surveyed, nor were the "adoption" states. Of 1,275 districts sampled, 414 responded.

The other recent survey, conducted by the National Council of Teachers of English in 1977, dealt solely with censorship pressures, not with the initial selection process. It was limited to secondary school teachers of English who were NCTE members. Of 2,000 teachers sampled, 630 responded.

In addition to the three organizations that sponsored the present study, five other educational groups served in an advisory capacity on the project: the American Association of School Administrators, the American Association of School Librarians, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National School Boards Association.

² Since the cut-off date for the local survey was June 1980, the findings on the rate of challenges do not reflect any

increased pressures on materials that may have followed the November 1980 election.

In addition, the wording of the questionnaire may have contributed to an underreporting of recent challenges. The term "challenge" was interpreted by some respondents (as indicated by their marginal comments) as referring only to incidents dealt with through formal channels, rather than—as we intended—to informal objections and complaints as well.

³ The summary report is available from the Association of American Publishers, One Park Avenue, New York, New York 10016 (\$5.00 per copy). Both the full and the summary report have been submitted to the Educational Resources Information Center.

⁴ The exact point at which "selection" becomes "censorship" is highly subject to individual interpretation. Even the courts have been unable to reach a clear consensus on this thorny issue (see Terry J. Larsen, "The Power of the Board of Education to Censor," *Educational Leadership* 38 (November 1980): 139-142).

⁵ Only about half of the adoption states include supplementary materials on their lists. Library materials are generally not included. In the adoption states, as in the open states, most challenges to materials in use in the schools are made and resolved on the local level.

⁶ Again, the question of whether the picture has changed since the 1980 elections may be raised.

⁷ Robert F. Hogan, "Some Thoughts on Censorship in the Schools," in *Dealing with Censorship*, ed. James E. Davis (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979).

⁸ June Berkley, "Teach the Parents Well: An Anti-Censorship Experiment in Adult Education," in *Dealing with Censorship*.

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