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 "Books and Other Learning Materials in Our Public Schools—How They Are Selected and How They Are Removed," the survey was the first large-scale effort to investigate how challenges to materials relate to the overall selection process.

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 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. 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." 

"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
organizations, particularly those of
evidence of influence by national
cent adoption proceedings in their
conservative ideology. About half of
state. Some officials said they had
directly or indirectly affected re
objections to supplementary and
challenges were initiated by groups
lier©s Educational Research Analysts
lection on adoption cycles and hearing
indicated a recent increase in state-
schedules. All of the respondents who
motivation, how they were dealt with,
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. These
were the aspects of the survey find-
ings 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 ob-
jections related to textbooks under
consideration for adoption, challenges reported by survey respondents tended to be more organized than at the
local level. They were more con-
cerned 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 clar-
ification, undermining of traditional
family values, and atheistic or agnos-
tic 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 Gab-
ler’s Educational Research Analysts
had directly or indirectly affected rec-
ent adoption proceedings in their
state. Some officials said they had
received mailings directly from the
Gablers in Texas, asking for infor-
malation 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 con-
trast sharply with the local survey
responses. Not only did local chal-
enges tend to emanate from individ-
uals, mainly parents, but they also
gave much less evidence of influence
by national pressure groups.

On the local level, objections to
textbooks were far outnumbered by
objections to supplementary and
library materials, primarily contem-
porary fiction. Challenged authors
included Aldous Huxley, Orwell,
Salinger, Steinbeck, Twain, Sendak,
Vonnegut, Polshenitsyn, and Shake-
speare. 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 chal-
lenes cited by librarians (as com-
pared with under 10 percent cited by
administrators) were initiated by
school personnel. One librarian com-
mented, “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 prof-
anity)—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 in-
creased steadily with increasing grade
level. Thus pressures were greatest
on materials for high school seniors,
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 creation-
ists, for example). This may indicate
a greater sophistication and an aware-
ness that seeking to limit ideas might
be rejected as censorship.

What Was the Fate of the
Challenged Material?
One administrator in a key adop-
tion state credited public participation with returning published mate-
rials to a “sounder” basis, away from an “over-liberal” use of “street
materials.” However, another official deplored the extent to which adop-
tion proceedings in some states have become a political arena, and sug-
gested 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 selec-
tion, as well as curriculum, not only
through the adoption process but
through legislation. Several would not
discuss the question until I had as-
sured them of anonymity. One text-
book 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 adminis-
trators and nearly a fourth of the librari-
ans said they had no written proce-
dures for reconsidering challenged
materials; and nearly two-thirds of all
local challenges were dealt with in-
formally—more on this later.)

How Did Administrators
Respond to Challenges?
Adoption states vary widely in their
management of the challenge process
and in their involvement of lay per-
sons in adoption proceedings. While
some officials adamantly oppose lay
participation on state adoption com-
mitties, others argue that it is appro-
priate and valuable, as long as it does
not “dominate” the process. Still
others have recently yielded to grow-
ing political pressure to include lay
members, a trend that will probably
continue.

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On the local level, objections to
textbooks were far outnumbered by
objections to supplementary and
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 viewpoint 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 any 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.” 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.

For the cynics among us, Berkley has demonstrated cause and effect on this question more effectively than any survey might. 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 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 responsible, caring human beings.

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 in the 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 closest 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 should not seem to forget that the First and Fourteenth Amendments protect only against abridgment 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 irrevocably 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?

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 responsible, caring human beings.

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