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## Public high school library censorship

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## Public high school library censorship

### Abstract

A primary responsibility of any administrator is to provide leadership and direction to the organization and its personnel. Often that leadership consists of anticipating problems and devising appropriate approaches to them before they threaten the organization. Today censorship of public high school library materials represents one of the major issues facing public school districts. This problem is spawned by a lack of tolerance between conservative and liberal individuals and organizations, both fighting for their own beliefs. To what extent censorship is handled effectively rests mainly with the direction given by the public school administrator before the censorship attempt arises.

PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL LIBRARY CENSORSHIP

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Presented to  
The Department of Educational Administration  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts in Education

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by  
David Edward Hanneman  
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A primary responsibility of any administrator is to provide leadership and direction to the organization and its personnel. Often that leadership consists of anticipating problems and devising appropriate approaches to them before they threaten the organization.

Today censorship of public high school library materials represents one of the major issues facing public school districts. This problem is spawned by a lack of tolerance between conservative and liberal individuals and organizations, both fighting for their own beliefs. To what extent censorship is handled effectively rests mainly with the direction given by the public school administrator before the censorship attempt arises.

### History

According to Jones, (1983) the term  censor originates from the Greek and Latin languages. It is derived from the Latin term  censere, which means "to appraise or estimate, and to express an opinion".  
(p.1)

The use of censorship can be traced as far back as

the Roman Empire. At this time Roman censors were inspectors of morals and conduct, census takers, and assessors. Therefore according to Jones, they were looked upon favorably by society as they bore a great responsibility for the welfare of the state.

As time progressed and individuals' rights evolved, society's views of censorship also began to change. Jones cites one of the first statements against censorship of books as John Milton's "Aeropagitica" of 1644: "... unless wariness be used, as good almost kill a man as kill a good book: who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were, ... ." (p.2)

Unfortunately Milton's observation has not diverted the more zealous of those who - for whatever reason - feel an obligation to limit the materials in the libraries of the nation's schools.

#### The Extent of Censorship

The extent of censorship cases was reflected in a national survey conducted by Hopkins (1983), which indicated a definite upswing. This survey found 25%

of the respondents from 33 states had experienced some type of censorship attempt on their library materials in 1982 and 1983. (p.7) The survey also discovered that the senior high school was the most frequent target of censors, compared to elementary and junior high school libraries. (p.7)

The following reasons for censorship attempts were produced by Hopkins: profanity, obscenity, morality, secular humanism, undermining of human values, human reproduction, immaturity of users, and evolution. (p.8) These reasons, listed in order of greatest to least frequency, were typical of what was being protested. The people behind the protesting were also revealed by Hopkins in this list, ranked from highest to lowest frequency: parents, citizens, organized community groups, principals, teachers, librarian/media specialists, and organizations outside the school system. (p.8)

Hopkins also discovered that 33% of the respondents reported 50% of the challenged material had been removed. The remaining respondents estimated that 30% of the challenged materials were removed. (p.9) It therefore seems that challenges to public library school materials are quite often successful.

Another study depicted the similarities in the

novels which were targeted for censorship. A review of book titles challenged in Indiana high schools libraries by Beineke (1982) included these: Forever, by Judy Blume; Go Ask Alice, Anonymous; Soul on Ice, by Eldridge Cleaver; The Catcher in the Rye, by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.; My Darling, My Hamburger, by Paul Zindel; Catch-22, by Joseph Heller; and Slaughterhouse Five, by Kurt Vonnegut. Others listed by Beineke were Down These Mean Streets, by Piri Thomas; Are You There God, It's Me Margaret, by Judy Blume; Brave New World, by Aldous Huxley; and Laughing Boy, by Oliver LaFarge. (p.639) Beineke found that the three main topics which led to challenges were sexual references 92%, objectionable language 86%, and evolution 22%. (p.640).

### Iowa Trends

Woods and Zande (1984) found Iowa typical of the nation in regards to censorship cases. From 1966 to 1980, Iowa had proportionately the same rate of censorship cases as the rest of the nation. (p. 11)

One exception to this typicality was uncovered by Woods and Zande. This was a disproportionately high percentage of censorship cases occurring within Iowa's



educational institutions, when compared to those cases outside the educational arena. Approximately 87% of the censorship cases in Iowa happened within public school systems. This compared to the national rate of 50%. (p.12)

This Iowa survey also discovered a majority of censorship cases occurred in the larger school districts. One such case developed during 1978, in West Des Moines, when a parent complained of the phrase "smart ass" in the novel Seventeen Gerbils.

(p.12) At the other extreme - in terms of a local school district's size - was Kanawha. Here a parent complained about the Grapes of Wrath. The school board, which did not have any challenge policy, reacted by simply banning the novel from the library. (p.12)

Obviously, Iowa is not immune to censorship in its high school libraries. In fact, as Woods and Zande revealed, Iowa is apparently more susceptible to censorship attempts on its public school library materials than is the rest of the nation.

## The Forces of Censorship

The actors involved in library materials censorship are many and complex.

### Conservative sources

One of the frequent advocates of censorship is the conservative element. This force is led by Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority which exerts political influence. Raywid (1979) pointed out that the "New Right" forces had been in existence for many years:

"... we favor curricula that emphasize the basic disciplines and that encourage respect and devotion for traditional American institutions and values. We are opposed to so-called progressive education. We also oppose attempts to indoctrinate our youth in moral relativism, welfareism, one-worldism, disrespect for Constitutional government and other tenets of the liberal orthodoxy." (p. 332) This statement was made over 27 years ago in 1958, in a "Declaration of Principles" of the Montgomery County (Maryland) Conservative Club. The fact that it seems so clearly contemporary underscores the unchanging bases which even today generate conservative efforts of censorship.

As Shuman (1982) reported, one of the most powerful forces against school library freedom in the country today is the conservative coalition of religious and political activist organizations spearheaded by Falwell and the Moral Majority.

Shuman stated that by helping to sweep Ronald Reagan into office on Reagan's own promise to make America a "shining city on a hill" moralistically, the Moral Majority believes it has a right, perhaps an obligation, to see this dream become reality. To accomplish this goal, the Moral Majority and other conservative elements boycott, pressure, campaign, and picket. (p.27) One such example of the Moral Majority's political efforts is the Family Protection Act. This Act was introduced in 1979 by Paul Laxalt, a Republican from Nevada.

Under this act, public school materials, including high school library books, could be reviewed by parents and/or members of the community. Materials could be banned for belittling traditional roles of women, or teaching values clarification. Other characteristics not allowed include profanity, disrespect for law enforcement officers, abortion, divorce, dependence on the welfare system,

anticapitalist thought, prolabor writings, skepticism about the Bible, support for the Equal Rights Amendment, or those mocking religious beliefs. (p.27)

Marc Nuttle, a Moral Majority organizer, reflected further on the goals of the National Conservative Political Action Committee and Moral Majority when he stated at a political training session in Birmingham, Alabama: "Our task is not to Christianize America, it's to bring about a moral and conservative revolution." (p.28)

In a 1980 survey, conducted by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, The Association of American Publishers, and the American Library Association, Kamhi (1982) discovered a majority of challenges at the state level originated from groups with influence from national organizations. These groups have been previously mentioned.

Also important in the censorship movement were Texans Mel and Norma Gabler. Over half of the state officials interviewed noted their involvement. As textbook research analysts, the Gablers affected adoption proceedings in many of the respondents' states. They attempted to keep an eye on all state

educational policies through mailings asking for adoption cycles and hearing schedules. The Gablers then contacted forces within a state loyal to the religious fundamentalist cause, and through them attempted to defeat policies which were contrary to "New Right" doctrine.

### Liberal sources

At the other end of the spectrum is a group which used to be defenders of free speech and propounders of the First Amendment - the liberals. Raywid cited racism and sexism as two of the liberals' reasons for pressuring against certain materials in high school libraries. Huckleberry Finn, Little Black Sambo, and Little Women are just a few of the novels being targeted by the liberal coalition for removal today. These novels are rejected by liberals on the grounds previously mentioned. Unfortunately, the liberals fail to realize that they are using the same logic as the conservatives in condemning novels. (p.333)

### Internal sources

School staff members also serve sometimes as

internal censors. According to Donelson, (1983) there are three types of internal censors: moral, literary, and sociological.

Moral censors typically hold firm to their cause, sure that their moral principles are the only allowable principles. Many also believe these principles must be inflicted upon others.

Literary censors typically want only the greatest novels which have been tested by time. Anything else is trash.

Finally, Donelson says sociological censors, who were once rare, now fight materials on the grounds of sexism, racism, and agism. (p.53) These people want to stop the purchase of, remove, and/or limit library materials, which do not meet their beliefs. They conduct their battles for supposedly noble causes, often without the realization they are censoring.

Where does this seemingly endless conflict end? To whom do the principal, community, and students, turn for answers? The nation's judicial structure holds some promise.

## Results of Censorship Cases

### Grounds for legal decisions

The courts have often resolved censorship disputes. In doing so the courts have repeatedly turned to the definition and original purpose of education as criteria for court decisions involving censorship of public school library materials.

This definition and statement of purpose have been found in the Constitution and its Amendments. According to Kemerer and Hirsh (1982) the federal government has deferred the task of education to the states via the Tenth Amendment. The state legislatures have in turn granted enabling authority to the local school board. This granting of power by the legislature to the local school board for the operation of the school is derived from common law doctrine. (p.445)

As a result, the local school boards represent state control over the educational program. The school boards have the power and authority to control the formal education process, and the responsibility to consider the welfare of the student, stated Jones (1983). The boards then assume the power of the doctrine, "in loco parentis". This means that in the

parents' absence, a portion of parental authority is assumed by the board in order to carry out the function of education. This principle is the basis for governing schools. (p.9)

The legal question which arises from this power of governance is, to what extent does the board have the power to censor high school library materials? This is a question, according to Kemerer and Hirsh, that even the federal courts have difficulty deciding. Unfortunately for the high school administrator, these conflicting court cases do not provide a clear guide for handling censorship attempts on public school library materials. However, the following three cases typify a majority of federal court decisions which have followed a similar philosophy regarding library censorship.

#### Federal court decisions

The *Minarcini v. Strongsville City School District* decision (1976) by the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals rejected the local school board's control of the library. The *Minarcini* Court held that the local school board could not remove books from the school library without regard to First Amendment rights.



Krug, VanOrden, and Klasing, (1979) found a federal court case whose ruling further weakened the school board's power over the library. Justices in the Right to Read Defense Committee of Chelseas v. School Committee of the City of Chelseas (1978) found that when First Amendment values were implicated, "some substantial and legitimate government interest must be demonstrated to justify the action of book removal." (p.118)

Kemerer and Hirsh added the Salvail v. Nashua Board of Education decision of 1979. In this case the Court agreed with the two previously mentioned decisions. "A local school board cannot justify removal for political content. Political and a legitimate government interest would need to be satisfied by removal." (p.446)

These three cases dealt with the removal of books from school libraries by the local school boards for reasons of vulgarity, obscenity, sexually offensive material, or for political and social objections. It must be remembered that these decisions did not reflect a unanimity of federal court decisions regarding public school library censorship cases. However, they do give the public school administrator

a foundation on which to base his/her decisions. This foundation involves following established school board procedure, which does not discriminate against an individual's First Amendment rights.

### Lessons for Censorship Protection

#### Iowa policy preparedness

The courts' rulings have taught public school districts better ways to protect themselves from the censorship onslaught. As mentioned, one such protection is the use of due process in challenge cases. This can be accomplished in the form of a library selection policy which protects the materials, faculty, and community.

A survey conducted by McGrew and sponsored by the State of Iowa Department of Public Instruction and the Department of Library Science of the University of Northern Iowa, compared selection policies in Iowa schools in 1983 and 1979. The 1983 survey had a response rate of 90%, while the 1979 poll had a response rate of 87%. The surveys revealed that 41% of responding schools had adopted selection policies in 1979, and 53% had done so in 1983. (p.4)

An unsettling discovery made by McGrew was the

disproportionate number of policies adopted by the large schools of over 1,475 students, and the number adopted by small schools of under 300 students. In 1983 the school-board-adopted challenge policies ranged from the small schools' 27% to the large schools' 88%. (p.4) As revealed earlier in this report, smaller school districts in Iowa suffer fewer challenges; however, they do exist, as shown in the Kanawha case.

It seems that even though policies do not prevent challenges, they do prepare everyone concerned to follow board-adopted procedures for dealing with such events. It is state law that administrators prepare their facilities and students for emergencies such as fire and tornadoes. So too, does it seem logical for an administrator to prepare for an emergency which might possibly threaten the existence of library material.

As indicated by McGrew, the State Department of Public Instruction of Iowa (DPI) has not made it mandatory for schools to adopt a selection policy for school library materials. DPI has, however, produced a model policy and rules, which it revised in April of 1980. McGrew discovered that 50% of the school

districts adopting a policy in 1979 used the model furnished by the DPI. This percentage had grown in 1983 to 67%. (p.7)

### Review of the Iowa Selection Policy

A school district without a board-adopted policy may be in serious jeopardy. The students, faculty, and members of the community have no selection or challenge procedures to follow. A school which has not developed a board-adopted policy then has no guidelines for either selecting, removing, or limiting access to its school library materials.

As indicated by the DPI, a major difference exists between rules and policy. "Policy is that general statement of direction given by the board of directors to all concerned. Rule is that procedure developed by the school administration (and under Iowa law, adopted by the board) by which the policy is to be carried out." (Bartlett, Buckingham, Slezak, & Wegner, 1980, p. 1) Rules then are the means by which a policy is specifically implemented. Bartlett et. al (1980) gives an insight into its working structure.

Bartlett's model begins with "The Model Statement of Rules," which cites legal reference and therefore

authority to select materials and allow review of allegedly inappropriate material. The Code of Iowa 279.8 Chapter 301, is the specific legal reference used by the DPI. (p.2) Bartlett's model begins with "The Model Statement of Policy," which cites legal reference and therefore authority to select materials and allow review of alleged by inappropriate material. The Code of Iowa 279.8 Chapter 301, is the specific legal reference used by the DPI. (p.2)

The model next lists a "Model Statement of Rules" which includes the following four divisions: "Responsibility for Selection of Materials," "Procedure for Selection of Materials," "Criteria for Selection of Materials," and "Objection". Under the section of "Responsibility for Selection of Materials," McGrew (1983) found that usually the librarian was considered the professional in this area of library material selection, and thus was given the role of selector. (p.11)

The DPI in "The Criteria for Selection of Materials" division stressed materials chosen be consistent and support educational goals of that district and objectives of classes. Terms such as "accuracy," "social," "aesthetic," "literary values,"

and "qualified and competent authors," were used to help operators adhere to policy guidelines. Of specific interest was the stress on a material's strengths for selection, rather than a focus on its weaknesses for rejection. (Bartlett et al., p.3)

The "Procedure for Selection of Materials" division specifically directs a course to be followed for incorporating materials into the library curriculum and the school's overall curriculum.

The "Objection" section provides for specific steps for objectors, examiners, and decision-makers to follow during a time of challenge. This procedure allows for due process and thereby fulfills the Supreme Court guidelines on board-adopted procedure to follow in times of a challenge to school library materials. The model then concludes with reconsideration request forms, and charts for the reconsideration process.

### Applications

Three north-central Iowa schools of varying sizes, C-A-L Community Schools of Latimer, Hampton Community School District, and Mason City Community School District have selection policies for library materials. Each contains a "Policy Statement,"

followed by the four basic divisions of a "Model Statement of Rules". The three vary in specificity and explanation, but are otherwise basically the same.

Neither C-A-L nor Hampton has ever had a formal challenge. Mason City librarian, Barbara Opheim, reported Mason City Schools had a formal challenge in October of 1984. The school's selection policy was activated and ran full-term through committee recommendation and the board's finding in favor of the novel. The challenger had objected to a list of optional novels for a literature class in which the parents' son was enrolled. There was no appeal.

As Jones (1983) indicated, even if a formal challenge policy implementation is necessary, the entire related organization must remain calm and communicative. Educators must remember that a simple question by a concerned parent is just that, a means of satisfying curiosity. A question is not an indictment of the material. Everyone representing the school should be well-schooled on not overreacting and assuming a question is a challenge. (p.133)

A complaint is a different situation as the objector is now entering an opinion of incorrectness

about the library's decision to house certain instructional material. Even when this complaint is lodged, a real key for successful resolution, if possible, is active listening by the professional receiving the complaint. Often people are satisfied by simply airing an opinion.

Finally, Jones recommended the challenger be told that a response by the school district will be forthcoming. This is when the machinery of due process can begin to effectively do its job if the operators (librarian, administrators, and teachers) have been effectively trained to handle such a situation. (p.133)

Finally, Hopkins (1983) reminded administrators that assistance is available if necessary. The local Iowa Area Education Agency, the American Library Association State Library Association, and the Iowa Civil Liberties Union are just some of the organizations committed to the freedom of expression.

#### Summary

Although research does not show the adoption of challenge or selection policies prevents challenges to high school library materials, the courts and experts



have deemed it a necessity in dealing with formal complaints. A critical fact to keep in mind is the importance of those receiving the complaint to keep an open mind and be active listeners.

The best resistance to a censorship threat appears to be the challenge policy. If procedures for selecting and removing materials are established and adopted, they cannot be circumvented by any well-intentioned individuals.

Perhaps the following observations on censorship effectively express the administrator's charge. Donelson (1985) stated, "Would-be censors apparently will abide with us forever ... . If we do not come to the aid of books in trouble ... then we can no longer think of ourselves as professionals whose duty it is to serve literature and students." (p.98)

Vonnegut (1981) argued regarding the banning of his Slaughterhouse Five throughout the nation, "A person comes into conflict with the basic law of the land when he or she, acting as an official, tries to prevent other Americans from coming in contact with ideas in such and such a book. Under our law, this is as serious a crime as preventing a neighbor from voting ... ." (p.35)

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