At The Schoolhouse Gate
Lessons in Intellectual Freedom
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Foreword by Susan Ohanian

The war against intellectual choice is a war against thinking. Read this book and you will understand the importance of fighting for and defending intellectual freedom and choice.
—Stephen Krashen
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What Can a Teacher Do?

Here are some steps all teachers can take as a first line of defense against censorship. We also include resources and organizations that will assist your efforts.

I. Professional Preparation

A. Defending the right to read

1. Find out if your district has a policy on the selection and review of instructional materials. Most districts do. Get a copy and familiarize yourself with its provisions. What steps must be followed to get a new book into the system? What happens when a parent complains about a book already in use? We have some reservations about these policies and their implications, but where they exist, we strongly recommend knowing what they require.

2. Even if your school, department, or district doesn’t require it, develop written rationales for any long work that you use for whole-class reading and study. Models are available in National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) publications, but you can also devise your own. Cover essential items such as intended audience; relationship of material to the program; potential problems with theme, tone, language, etc. and how they will be addressed; reviews or other professional selection aids used; alternative selections. Your rationale needn’t be lofty or fancy; just tell clearly why you chose the book, how you will use it, and how you will deal with controversial elements.
3. In the absence of a district-wide policy, adopt an alternative selection policy for yourself and promote it within your department. Many potential objectors are satisfied with the right to control their own children's reading and will not file formal protests if their complaints are taken seriously and they are given real choices.

4. Develop units around the theme of “Freedom to Read” or other aspects of the First Amendment. Educate yourself and your students about their rights and responsibilities. Encourage students to consider censorship-related topics for research papers and other projects. In doing all of these, you will develop a cadre of informed citizens who will be much more likely to help defend the right to read when the occasion arises.

B. Defending student journalists’ right to write

1. Enroll your newspaper staff in as many journalism societies as possible. Most states have scholastic press associations, and the cost for joining is reasonable. Send your papers to be critiqued and find out who is available to help before a censorship question arises.

2. Send your students to summer journalism institutes and, if possible, accompany them. Ask specific questions about student press rights and begin collecting a file of sources that support student rights.

3. Schedule a meeting with your principal and the editor of the school paper before each issue of the paper is published, or have the principal meet with the staff, press conference style. Don’t ask permission to run an article or copy and don’t offer to let the principal read the paper; simply meet as professionals to discuss the content.

4. Have the editors create a staff handbook with a clear statement of student press rights and responsibilities. Establish an editorial board with student control. Look at handbooks from schools that have a strong record of student press rights, and rework the handbook each year when the members of your editorial board change.

5. Write a clear and firm statement in the staff box (list of staff members and their assignments) stating that the paper is an open forum for student expression. Run the statement in each issue of
the paper. Being able to prove that you have a history of being a free student press will be your best protection against censorship.

II. Responding to Challenges

If, despite all your preparation, instructional materials or student press comes under attack, there’s much that you can do.

A. If the complaint is about materials, make every effort to talk with the complaining parent yourself, with your department head, grade-group chair, principal, or some other ally present. Listen respectfully, provide copies of your rationale and discuss it, and make it clear that you’re willing to work with the parent in choosing a mutually acceptable alternative and procedures for study. A review policy should require complainants to start at the school level, with the teacher, before filing a formal complaint. Many grievances can be resolved at this level if cool heads prevail.

B. If the complaint is about the student press, the same advice follows. Listen, talk to the complainant (with the student writer present and participating), and try to find common ground. If a retraction or apology is in order, the editorial board should decide what steps should be taken to remedy the situation. Remind the parties that true education often comes from making mistakes, but that shutting down a free student press is counterproductive and illegal.

C. Be scrupulous about taking detailed notes during or after every conference or incident remotely connected with censorship. If your case goes to court, contemporaneous notes will be one of your strongest weapons. If it doesn’t, you can use your files as the basis for articles or even a book. Begin to build and organize your censorship archives by clipping news stories (making sure to date and label each one with the source and page number); collecting other related artifacts such as memos, letters, relevant policies, the formal complaint, your response, the rationale for the book, or other materials; and storing each item in a portable file.

D. If you haven’t already familiarized yourself with your district’s instructional materials policies, do so now. Often, the bureaucrats who are charged with administering these policies don’t understand or follow their provisions. Many policies, for example, allow challenged materials to remain in use while being reviewed. Make sure that such provisions are followed to the letter.

E. Once a formal complaint has been filed, consider responding to it in writing and making copies of your response available to all
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members of the complaint review committee. If you have collected student responses to the work or student writing, you might make those available as well. You might also offer copies of the challenged book or school paper to the review committee or school board, making it crystal clear that they must be returned to you. In states with open government laws, the review committee meetings are open to the public and you should be allowed to speak as an advocate. Of course, so should the complainant.

F. Contact the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), People for the American Way (PFAW), your state affiliate of NCTE, the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), your state office of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), or, in a case affecting the student press, the Student Press Law Center and your state scholastic journalism society. Give them the facts and ask for letters of support or any other assistance you need. Remember that you can report incidents at the PFAW and NCTE websites.

G. Ask your local NCTE affiliate to develop a program on censorship. Share the information you’ve gathered and tell your own story.

H. Once a formal complaint has been filed, you have everything to gain from publicity, so contact local media and keep them informed. They are natural allies in censorship battles and will rarely disappoint you. Take advantage of talk radio if you’re sure the program’s host will be sympathetic; otherwise, beware of ambush. Learn to speak in sound bites. If you subscribe to email discussion lists, post a notice there about your situation and ask for advice, encouragement, or specific help.

I. Contact your teachers union to see if contractual violations are involved in the censorship. Some unions have strong intellectual freedom clauses that can be invoked. In major cases with egregious violations, unions occasionally provide legal representation.

J. Arrange a meeting at the local library (which often provides free meeting space) and invite natural allies such as supportive parents, colleagues, librarians, booksellers, civil libertarians, personal friends, media, professional organizations, and groups connected with the arts, theater, music, etc. Tell your story and ask them to help carry it throughout the community by inviting you to speak at local civic clubs and by writing letters to the editor, to school officials, and to school board members. Organize special events such as banned books readings at local coffeehouses, bookstores, libraries, and other community gathering places.
K. Write articles about the experience and submit them to professional journals, including state affiliate journals of NCTE, the International Reading Association, and other professional organizations, as well as national journals.

**Resources on the First Amendment**

The Freedom Forum  
1101 Wilson Boulevard  
Arlington, VA 22209  
(703)328-0800  
www.freedomforum.org

The Youth Guide to the First Amendment is available at <www.gaymonterey.com/youth_guide_to_the_first_amendment.htm>. Originally developed by the Freedom Forum, the guide includes background information about the First Amendment, summaries of key U.S. Supreme Court rulings, discussions of current controversial issues (including newspaper censorship, dress codes, school prayer, book banning, hate speech, “gangsta” rap, warning labels, and flag burning), suggestions for papers and projects, and pertinent quotes.

National Council of Teachers of English  
1111 W. Kenyon Road  
Urbana, IL 61801–1096  
(800)369-6283; (217)328-9645 FAX  
www.ncte.org

NCTE’s field representative for censorship is Charles Suhor, who can be contacted at <csuhor@zebra.net> or through NCTE headquarters. Leave a message at (800)369-6283, ext. 3848, or call Suhor directly at (334)280-4758. You can also report censorship incidents at <www.ncte.org/censorship>. Among the materials and services available at NCTE at the website are the following:

- **Students’ Right to Read: Dealing Responsibly with Challenges to Literary Works**—includes the widely adopted “Citizen’s Request for Reconsideration of a Work” form, as well as advice on setting up a review committee for orderly processing of protests that cannot be resolved at the classroom or school level.
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• Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship of Nonprint Materials—offers principles and practices that help in responding to challenges to videos, films, television programs, software, and other nonprint teaching materials.

• Guidelines for Selection of Materials in English Language Arts Programs—inclues criteria and procedures for selection of K–12 materials.

• Defining and Defending Instructional Methods—identifies teaching methods that have come under protest in recent years (e.g., journal writing, role-playing, whole language approaches, visualization and guided imagery) and provides rationales for using them.

• Rationales for Challenged Books—a three-part resource that includes: a description of NCTE’s CD ROM with rationales for teaching over 170 books and films; two sample rationales in their entirety; detailed help on how to write rationales for use in your school.

Other print resources from NCTE:

• Selection and Retention of Instructional Material—What the Courts Have Said. NCTE publication #98619-95.

• Common Ground—Joint NCTE/IRA statement on intellectual freedom NCTE publication #07524-1351 (free; also available online at <ncte.org/positions/common.html>).

NCTE also publishes Preserving Intellectual Freedom: Fighting Censorship in Our Schools, by Jean Brown.

Student Press Law Center
1815 N. Fort Myer Drive, Suite 900
Arlington, VA 22209
splc@splc.org
www.splc.org

SPLC provides advice on legal issues and may help student journalists locate lawyers who will represent them pro bono in serious cases of censorship. Its publications include:

• SPLC Report, the Center’s three-times-a-year magazine
• Law of the Student Press, a 269-page book that provides answers to common legal problems faced by the student media
American Library Association
Office for Intellectual Freedom
50 E. Huron Street
Chicago, IL 60611
(800)545-2433, ext. 4223; (312)280-4227 FAX
www.ala.org/oif.html

The ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom has the following materials available:

- Censorship and Selection: Issues and Answers for Schools (booklet)
- Censorship in the Schools (brochure)
- Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom (bimonthly)
- Workbook for Selection Policy Writing (booklet)

First Amendment Cyber-Tribune
http://w3.trib.com/FACT/

In addition to Supreme Court decisions and links to many First Amendment organizations, this site features the following:

- First Amendment Alert—about First Amendment issues appearing in state legislatures, courts, and the U.S. Congress.
- Censorship Alert—about recent attempts at censorship by state agencies, organized groups, and individuals.
- First Amendment Op-Ed Service—commentary written by First Amendment experts and authors who have had books banned or burned.

National Coalition Against Censorship
275 7th Avenue
New York, NY 10001
(212)807-6222; (212)807-6245 FAX
ncac@ncac.org
www.ncac.org

NCAC, an alliance of fifty national non-profit organizations, including literary, artistic, religious, educational, professional, labor, and civil liberties groups, promotes grassroots activism against censorship by providing
assistance, advice, and information to individuals and community groups around the country.

NCAC publications include a quarterly newsletter, *Censorship News*, and “Public Education, Democracy, Free Speech: The Ideas That Define and Unite Us,” a booklet that stresses the link between public education and the constitutional right to free speech and inquiry.

American Civil Liberties Union Freedom Network  
[www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org)

In addition to free speech, the ACLU website addresses students’ rights, church and state issues, lesbian and gay rights, and much more. An online library provides complete text of many relevant articles. One section [www.aclu.org/court/clients/whoclient.html](http://www.aclu.org/court/clients/whoclient.html) features first-person accounts of people, including students, who have taken stands on First Amendment issues.

The ACLU’s national office doesn’t deal with individual cases of censorship; those must be reported through state ACLU offices. Contact information for each state organization is available at the website.

People for the American Way  
200 M Street, NW  
Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202)467-2388; (202)293-2672 FAX  
pfaw@pfaw.org  
[www.pfaw.org](http://www.pfaw.org)

From 1982–1996 PFAW published *Attacks on the Freedom to Learn*, an annual report on school censorship that documented challenges to school materials and methods on a state by state basis. Copies of most of these reports are still available from PFAW. The annual report has since been replaced by a bimonthly newsletter of the same name. E-mail subscriptions to the newsletter are available online. An online form allows you to report censorship incidents. PFAW occasionally provides legal support in important cases.

Materials available from PFAW include these items:

- *An Activist’s Guide to Protecting the Freedom to Learn*—a kit with information and tools for organizing advocates of public education to combat censorship efforts and participate in school board races.
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• *Redondo Beach: A Stand Against Censorship*—1990 videotaped documentary of one community's successful resistance to school censorship.

Please feel free to contact us at any time for technical advice or moral support.

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