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STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH THE GROWING CENSORSHIP ISSUE

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Contrary to the First Amendment, there is a growing trend to ban certain books, magazines, and other reading material from American classrooms and libraries. Censorship has been on the rise for the past ten years and is escalating nationally. Kanewaha County, West Virginia; Idaho Falls, Idaho; and, Island Trees UFD on Long Island, New York, are just a few of the cities and towns that have censored books. The list is growing and the whole censorship issue is becoming a deep concern to librarians, school officials and school board members.

This alarming increase in book censorship is evidenced by a recent report entitled "Limiting What Students Shall Read," sponsored by the Association of American Publishers, the American Library Association, and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

This report is based on responses to a questionnaire by 1,891 elementary and secondary school superintendents, principals, librarians and library supervisors in all fifty states and the District of Columbia. It was conducted during the school years 1978-79 and 1979-80.

Almost three-fourths of the respondents indicated that the rate of challenges had increased, and about one-third said that recent challenges had resulted in changes in books and materials or in the educational process. Seventy-five percent of those reporting challenges said the number is growing.

Such books as One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, The Grapes of Wrath, Merchant of Venice, Little House on the Prairie and Farewell to Arms are a few titles which have been chopped from school and library lists. Surprisingly, even Webster's Collegiate Dictionary and such magazines as Sports Illustrated and Mademoiselle have been censored in some communities.

Although eminent, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Shakespeare, and Hawthorne are a sampling of the authors whose works are being banned in some districts and destined for the scrap heap.

Why is censorship gaining ground in America? A variety of reasons are given for banning certain books. Books are banned because they allegedly are anti-American, anti-Black, anti-Christian and anti-Semitic. Objections to school literature are also made because they are concerned with "sex, obscenity and objectionable language."

Censorship is also gaining ground because of the efforts of national pressure groups such as the New Right, the Moral Majority, and the National Christian Action Coalition. A Florida organization called Save Our Children has even proposed a purge from libraries of well-known and popular books because their authors are reputedly homosexual. All these groups are launching massive campaigns to influence parents, school board members and the general public to ban certain books.

These campaigns are well-orchestrated and well-financed. They use computerized mailings, newsletters, letters and state conferences to marshal parents and citizens to crusade against certain books deemed unworthy.

A Texas organization known as the Education Research Analysts, consisting of Mel and Norma Gabler, conduct their own reviews of books. This couple was the subject of a segment on "60 Minutes," a popular television program, as well as an article in People Magazine. Since many states adopt textbooks on a state-wide basis, an "imprimatur" from the Gablers is important, as their influence is spreading nationally and they are being courted energetically by publishers.

The activities of the Moral Majority and the New Right were denounced recently by Yale University President A. Bartlett Giametti who stated in a letter to 1,267 incoming freshmen that these groups are "peddlers of coercion" and enemies of free inquiry. He stated that these groups are angry, rigid and absolutistic in morality. According to Giametti, they take issue with any view that differs from theirs and label anyone who holds this view as anti-American.

It is interesting to note that many books banned have not even been read by those who banished them from classroom or library shelves. One school district belatedly discovered that one of the books banned was written by a Pulitzer prizewinner. Another school board banned a book called "Making It With Mademoiselle," but reversed its decision after discovering it was a how-to pattern book for youngsters hoping to learn dress-making!

In September, 1981, the Connecticut State Board of Education issued a policy on academic freedom called "Free to Learn." This policy defines academic freedom as the freedom to teach and learn and would protect teachers and administrators from "bookburning" and censorship groups.

Threats to academic freedom take two forms:

--Censorship of books or other instructional materials or the promotion of political or religious viewpoints in the classroom

--Restrictions on teaching methods of staff development or the selection or retention of school personnel.

A key point to remember in dealing with the censorship issue is that to study an idea is not necessarily an endorsement of that idea. There is a difference between teaching and indoctrination.

Not only is censorship growing, but it is getting out of hand. The Pro-Family Forum in Texas is distributing a leaflet on which is a drawing of a small child in overalls, holding in his right hand a new lunchbox with a picture of a teddy bear on it. A parent holds the child's free hand as they approach the school with the American flag waving out front. Another child is beginning his formal school training. Above this simple image on the handout is a question; in bold print it asks, "Is Humanism Molesting Your Child?"

Some citizens would not be bothered by such literature, but it would not be an overstatement to assess this type of approach as odious and fear-producing. Emboldened by the success of conservatives at the polls, the political right is employing these scare tactics and taking aim at humanism.

In fairness, there is no question about it: some books which have been placed on approved classroom or library lists have very little literary merit. Pornography, anti-feminist books and books which espouse questionable ideas and ideals may oppose our standards.

However, censorship in some forms can be equated with mind control. If students are to become discriminating readers, they should be placed in a position to reject a book because they—not an adult or group who has not even read the book—decide for themselves that a book is worthless, has no redeeming qualities and that reading it is a colossal waste of time.

Although the majority of challenges to certain books and magazines have been handled informally, there are strategies that are plausible for dealing with the censorship issue. What are some effective ways? We will describe a few, hoping to stimulate thought about others.

1. School districts must first establish a written selection policy and a clearly defined method for handling complaints. This written policy should be developed by librarians, parents, and teachers, before it is submitted to the local school board for formal adoption.

2. Education organizations can take strong stands countering the unnecessary censorship of reading material. NCTE has been particularly active in this area. The Intellectual Freedom Committee of the International Reading Association has also been busy in monitoring and taking positive steps to deal with the censorship issue. Recently, the Association of American Publishers, the American Library Association and the American Civil Liberties Union sponsored a two-day colloquium in which publishers and lawyers discussed legal and political strategies in waging the war against censorship. Meetings of this type need to be held on a continuing basis.

3. Librarians must work more closely with school personnel—particularly English and reading teachers. It is a fact that library materials are more often attacked than are classroom materials because school personnel themselves often initiate challenges to libraries. Obviously, the practice of having librarians

ians order books without consulting teachers needs to be changed. Communication is the missing link.

4. Books being considered for formal adoption as classroom texts by the school district should be on display at a central location for parents and school board members to examine before they are purchased. A little card can be filled in giving the viewer's positive response or objections for each book previewed. These notations should be considered carefully before a school district decides to buy books. It is a process that avoids hassles, time-consuming meetings and even litigation.

Concluding Remarks

The bottom line is that censorship robs individuals of their rights and violates the First Amendment. Banning books is a practice that is growing by leaps and bounds. The strategies offered above may help alleviate the problems and concerns book censorship cause. They will also save time for librarians, administrators and teachers to devote to other pressing matters.