



## **PENNCREST SCHOOL DISTRICT**

**Title IX Office**

**18741 State Highway 198**

**Saegertown, Pennsylvania 16433**

**Telephone: (814) 337-1600**

**<http://www.penncrest.org/>**

**KENNETH V. NEWMAN**

**Assistant Superintendent**

**Title IX Coordinator**

Policy No. 109.1: Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship of Instructional Materials

### **Overview**

Censorship has been a singular topic of concern and resistance for teachers and schools for generations. From protecting the textual choices of educators in classrooms to defending the languages and perspectives expressed by students, responding to censorship challenges requires vigilance and clear guidelines. Recognizing that the role of technology, production, and participatory culture allow texts to be created and interpreted in many different ways in schools today, this statement focuses on instructional materials broadly in its outline of how to deal with censorship. Focusing on materials broadly defined in classrooms and schools today, a committee of English educators updated a 2004 position statement originally detailing censorship of "nonprint" materials. This new statement bridges censorship issues across varied modalities and texts.

### **Statement**

The First Amendment is among the most frequently cited and frequently debated clauses in the Constitution. A number of Supreme Court cases have provided guidance on expression that is and is not protected in schools. These cases acknowledge that schools are unique spaces; prioritizing the development of critical thinking and communication requires promoting the free flow of a wide range of perspectives within an environment that is safe for a diverse group of students.

Regardless of setting and cultural context, classroom instruction will require teachers to introduce potentially controversial materials into classroom discussion. These are complex challenges that require recognizing the needs of students, the responsibilities that educators hold in day-to-day contexts, and the considerations of power and positionality of adults working with historically marginalized students of diverse cultures and creeds. Despite these challenges, the ability to resist both direct and indirect forms of censorship is a necessary aspect of teachers' practices if they are to support the civic agency of young people. Consequently, educators must ensure that all instructional materials and resources are available for classroom study and discussion and that these materials are equally accessible to students of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Unfortunately, the classroom study of print, nonprint, and multimedia materials is often jeopardized by direct and indirect censorship. Direct censorship occurs when principals and school boards restrict the materials a teacher can and cannot use in the classroom, for instance, when teachers are told not to show films the Motion Picture Association of American has rated "R." In fact, the courts have ruled that such ratings are not relevant to instructional purposes. The use of software filters on school and library computers to block student access to potentially offensive materials on the Internet, as required by the Child Internet Protection Act (CIPA), also represents an instance of direct censorship. While the Supreme Court has ruled that Congress is within its rights to mandate the use of filters as a condition of funding,

research indicates that such devices often block access to "protected" and potentially valuable sites, are largely ineffective at protecting users from objectionable materials, and can be easily circumvented.

Indirect censorship, in contrast to direct censorship, may be even more insidious. Indirect censorship occurs when teachers, in an attempt to avoid controversy, self-censor their classrooms, limiting their students' education, for instance, by restricting the viewpoints and perspectives of authors, producers, and community members that may be deemed controversial. Such indirect censorship is often most frequently tied to the voices of producers from historically marginalized communities such as members of the LGBTQ communities, despite the fact that these voices will mirror the often-invisible identities of students in all teachers' classrooms. Indirect censorship, like direct censorship, deprives students of the learning opportunities they need to become fully literate, civic actors and suppresses the full humanity of the young people in schools now.

At the same time that censorship has historically been a factor for how teachers choose the kinds of broadly defined texts to include in classrooms, students' production of texts is also under threat of censorship. Acknowledging the powerful possibilities of youth production within schools and beyond, educators must make efforts to cultivate youth voices and perspectives within their classrooms across different modalities and languages. The censorship of cultural values, identities, and language practices denigrates the agency of young people and erodes trust in educational institutions.

Students today access and produce texts across myriad platforms, utilizing multiple tools, in various languages, and for diverse audiences. From traditional, bound books and newspapers to interactive media, social networks, and digital video- and audio-based resources, knowledge and culture are disseminated in many kinds of ways. Online resources, in particular, are invaluable educational tools that both in and out of schools shape attitudes, beliefs, and learning opportunities. Recognizing the rich and complex set of instructional decisions that teachers make, NCTE strongly advocates for centering the expertise and pedagogical considerations of teachers in determining what instructional materials to bring into classrooms. Part of this decision requires a familiarity with media literacy and with fair-use policies, and this statement encourages educators to review previous NCTE documents noted below in this regard.

In considering the role of teachers and the possibilities of young people, it is clear that decisions as to the aesthetic and pedagogical value and developmental appropriateness of instructional materials must be entrusted to teachers and librarians, working in concert with school administrators, school boards, and parents. In all cases, the primary concerns must be fostering student growth and understanding while protecting intellectual freedom in our schools. This position statement is designed to help teachers and school policymakers to realize these twin aims.

### **Responsibilities of Teachers, Teacher Educators, Administrators, and Policymakers**

Schools wishing to foster intellectual freedom should create an environment in which teachers are encouraged to promote the free flow of a wide range of perspectives while creating an environment that is safe for a diverse group of students. In order to prepare for teaching with and about a wide range of instructional materials, including multimedia, teachers, teacher educators, administrators, and policymakers should

- be aware of the values of specific communities schools serve and the media students regularly read.

- create, publish, and implement policies for selection of instructional materials, including "due process" provisions when materials are challenged.
- work with school media resource centers to select developmentally appropriate materials for the curriculum from a wide variety of outlets and viewpoints to encourage students' intellectual and aesthetic development.
- preview materials and prepare rationales for their use; specify in curriculum guides and course syllabi provided to students and parents how materials and texts will be used for instructional purposes; and provide alternative works where academically feasible and relevant.
- examine all instructional materials for biases and propaganda, including those that are sponsored, free, and inexpensive, remembering that the function of English language arts teachers is to educate, not indoctrinate, students.
- protect both the integrity of the work and students' First Amendment rights by offering work whole and unaltered to students whenever possible, that is, as their creators intended them to be experienced.
- include sufficient introductory preparation in classes dealing with material for which controversy might be expected, including a cultural, historical, economic, and social context; provide careful explanation of the overriding educational purpose; schedule time for substantial follow-up activity for students to analyze the degree to which student responses are culturally constructed and reflect individual interactions with the world; and promote inquiry-based classroom strategies.
- develop techniques of leading civil discussion and debate, and resolving conflict in the classroom. The discussion of controversial topics or works does not imply endorsement or approval of the views or values suggested by those works or expressed by students in discussion of those works. Intellectual freedom and development require that students learn to dispute civilly.
- follow copyright law and fair-use guidelines as they apply to all instructional materials used for educational purposes.
- learn to engage students in producing multimedia materials and how to protect their rights to free expression within schools.

This statement, formerly known as Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship of Nonprint and Multimedia Materials, was updated in July 2018 with the new title, Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship of Instructional Materials.

Originally developed by the NCTE Standing Committee Against Censorship, 1996, revised October 2004, revised July 2018 No. 109.1 AR-3

<http://www2.ncte.org/statement/censorshipofnonprint/>