The Fight Against Censorship in the Classroom

"The techniques and procedures they employ undermine the basic freedoms we cherish and if permitted to flourish would ultimately destroy our way of life."

From *Censorship and Controversy*, prepared by NCTE's Committee on Censorship of Teaching

When NCTE first formed, advocacy against censorship was not a significant part of the Council's activities. Instead, NCTE was largely occupied with improving the workload of English teachers, setting standards in English instruction, and promoting reasonable college entrance requirements.

However, censorship became a central issue in the 1950s, with McCarthyism spurring the NCTE to take a more active stance against the issue. In 1953, NCTE's Committee on Censorship of Teaching Materials published *Censorship and Controversy*, which condemned McCarthy's tactics and championed freedom of thought.

Although McCarthyism soon died away, the NCTE continued to rally against book bannings, with several committees dedicated to working against this suppression around the country, including the Committee Against Censorship, the Committee to Report Case Studies on Censorship, and the NCTE Task Force on Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship of Nonprint Materials. The Council also began to focus more on emphasizing the rights of students. In 1962, *The Students' Right to Read*, published by the NCTE, defends both the rights of teachers and students the freedom to select what to read.

Today, NCTE actively supports teachers facing censorship by offering resources through its online Anti-Censorship Center. To learn more about anti-censorship in NCTE's past, take a look at the featured records below.

Contents: (To enlarge an image, click on it and it will open in a new window)

- *Censorship and Controversy*
- *The Student's Right to Read*
- NCTE Defends Teachers: "How to Handle Complaints on Books"
- The Catcher in the Rye Controversy
- English Teachers Under Pressure: "Maddox Demands Resignation"
Censorship and Controversy

The first NCTE publication to decry censorship, *Censorship and Controversy* is a 56-page pamphlet prepared by the Committee on Censorship of Teaching Materials. Education specialist at the United States Office of Education, William R. Wood, chaired this committee, and five past presidents of NCTE served as members. In this pamphlet, they encouraged open-access to educational materials, as well as warned about people who would exploit the dangers of Communism to gain personal power.

**Item:** Copy of *Censorship and Controversy* (1953)

To learn about related material, see the following record series: 15/73/803
Censorship and Controversy

The cover and pages from Censorship and Controversy. The preface (page five) explains NCTE’s rationale for taking a strong stance against censorship. Pages eight and nine highlight the fundamental positions of the Council on both communism and censorship.

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The Student’s Right to Read

https://archives.library.illinois.edu/ncte/about/february.php
In 1962, the NCTE published *The Student's Right to Read* to offer guidance to teachers on what to do if they faced potential censorship and to affirm the right of students and teachers to choose what to read. It sold over 150,000 copies, and NCTE continued to reprint and update the *The Student's Right to Read* over the years, including printing a 1972 edition and a 1996 edition. It also serves as the basis for NCTE's policy against censorship.

**Item:** First printing of *The Student's Right to Read* (1962)  
*To learn about related material, see the following record series: 15/71/824*
The National Council of Teachers of English
500 South Sixth Street — Champaign, Illinois

Sponsored by the Executive Committee and Committee on Publications of the National Council of Teachers of English:
- G. Robert Carlson, State University of Iowa, President
- David H. Russell, University of California, First Vice President
- Richard Corbin, Hunter College High School, Second Vice President
- Harold B. Allen, University of Minnesota
- Robert A. Bennett, Minneapolis Public Schools, Minnesota
- Ruth G. Strickland, Indiana University
- Norma Jewsbury, Texas Woman's University
- Milton E. Wilk, Temple University
- Robert E. Beers, Chairman, Conference on College Composition and Communication
- James B. Squier, Executive Secretary
- Robert F. Hogan, Assistant Executive Secretary
- Earl M. Olsen, Director of Publications

Across America today increasing pressures are exerted on schools to restrict the access of students to important and worthwhile books. In many communities attempts have been made to remove library works from classrooms and school libraries. Certain modern writers, praised by recognized critics and now established in the curriculum, are suddenly charged with scurrilous sentiment or libelous intent by faith-based organizations and political groups. The attacks extend even to books about writers. Recently a collection of biographies of great philosophers was condemned for including the life of Plato, who in his own writings, it was charged, talked about free love and communal living and such.

Any member of authors whose works are sometimes considered unsuitable for school use begins to read with a rational sampling from a “Who’s Who” of distinguished literary figures of the Western world. This partial list is illustrative:
- Plato
- William Faulkner
- Charles Dickens
- S. I. Hayakawa
- Francis Bacon
- William Shakespeare
- Mark Twain
- Virginia Woolf
- John Steinbeck
- Aldous Huxley
- Erik Erikson
- Thomas Wolfe

The immediate results of such attacks are varied. At times school boards and administrators have defended the teachers, their use of materials under attack, and the students’ right of access to the materials. At other times, however, special committees have been appointed to call out, for example, “eighteenth century truth.”
The cover and pages from the brochure *The Student's Right to Read*. Page five introduces the Council's argument for open access to books, while page seven includes quotes from national figures supporting the right to read.

**NCTE Defends Teachers: "How to Handle Complaints on Books"**

The NCTE reached out to teachers through newspapers, informing educators on how to handle complaints. In an article in *The Atlanta Constitution*, the NCTE suggests: "The Council doesn't question the right of citizens to speak their piece about materials used in the curriculum. But the Council urges that these people be required to file their complaints or questions in writing, fully identifying themselves and whatever groups they represent." Many of the arguments NCTE presents here are based on the pamphlet, *The Student's Right to Read* (see above).

**Item:** "How to Handle Complaints on Books," *The Atlanta Constitution* (February 11, 1963)

To learn about related material, see the following record series: 15/73/009
The Catcher in the Rye Controversy

The NCTE would also directly aid teachers facing potential censorship. Unfortunately, the Council was not always successful. In this series of correspondence, the NCTE offers advice to a headmaster whose high school's curriculum for juniors included the book, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Running into "rumbling" at the school, the headmaster asks for supporting documentation justifying the book's intellectual value for an upcoming
executive board meeting. In the end, however, the executive committee determined that "such a book as this has no place in the curriculum."

**Item:** Letters on *Catcher in the Rye* (1963)

To learn about related material, see the following record series: 15/73/009
March 13, 1963

Mr. Robert F. Haas, Archivist,
National Council of Teachers of English
555 South Fifth Street
Springfield, Illinois

Dear Mr. Haas,

Your use is granted in the letter that it was obtained from NCTE archives at the UI, if our change this letter should have been attached to another member of your organization I would request that you forward it.

This is my first year at Hinsdale and always have been made to improve the academic atmosphere. The optimism has been retained, I have a new faculty and the student body has been retained. Without the optimism from the past, I would not have a school where we are not only "a feather in the eye" but "a feather in the eye" being used by our juniors.

There has been some pubbing concerning this book and I know that this is the first time that such a reaction has been experienced. I have attempted to establish a rule of writing to avoid the publication of anything that might be retained from your office about this book.

It would seem that most of the independent schools in New England have done the "right" things, but I wonder whether any information is available concerning actual numbers of schools doing it? Would your office have any idea whether any money has ever been spent that would include this type of information?

The reviews of the book are mostly favorable but few. If any, indicate that it would be read pre-calculus reading. Do you know of any reviews on this topic?

This is a factor and to formulate letters I am enclosing a stamped envelope for your use. I am to meet with my board on the 20th of this month. If your reply could be received by then I would appreciate it. Any information of any sort will be appreciated.

Sincerely yours,

[Signature]

March 18, 1963

Mr. Allen G. Vickers
Headmaster
Hinsdale Central
Hinsdale, Illinois

Dear Mr. Vickers:

Mr. Haas has given me your letter of March 13 to answer. I am enclosing copies of materials which we have sent other schools when they have requested evaluation of CATCHER IN THE RYE. These materials include annotations from book lists which we produce and/or distribute, quotes from articles about the book, a statement by James B. Fees, and material from the American Library Association, which we have sent in similar circumstances. Among these materials you will also find a copy of our 1960 Resolution on Censorship and a copy of your newest statement, THE STUDENTS' RIGHT TO READ. I’ve included also copies of two editorials on a similar recent incident in Michigan, Wisconsin.

The following articles on salingers and his writing from your journals may prove useful in this instance:


Chronological from left to right, the series of letters exchanged between NCTE and a teacher facing censorship of *The Catcher in the Rye* at his school.

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### English Teachers Under Pressure: "Maddox Demands Resignation"

The Council also collected newspaper clippings spanning decades, documenting cases of censorship against teachers. In this particular case, the governor of Georgia demanded the resignation of Martha Henry, a 23-year-old English teacher, for assigning *A Patch of Blue* to read. The governor charged that it was a "vulgar, ugly, and dirty book." Fortunately, Henry had the support of her superintendent, who stated: "Neither she nor any other DeKalb County teacher will be pushed around on the basis of unusual statements."

**Item:** "Maddox Demands Resignation of Teacher Because of Book," *Twin City Sentinel* (June 14, 1968)

To learn about related material, see the following record series: 15/73/009
The Twin City Sentinel newspaper clipping about the governor of Georgia demanding the resignation of an English teacher.

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Meeting Censorship in the School: A Series of Case Studies

In 1966, NCTE published *Meeting Censorship in the School: A Series of Case Studies*. The book was written by the Committee to Report Case Studies on Censorship, chaired by John Hove. The book examines nine case studies of schools that banned books, including *The Catcher in the Rye*. By analyzing the process through which books are banned - what was objectionable? why did this particular school district object to it? what is the surrounding community like? - the Council hoped it could better combat challenges to books.

**Item:** Copy of *Meeting Censorship in the School: A Series of Case Studies* (1966)
To learn about related material, see the following record series: 15/73/803
The cover and pages from *Meeting Censorship in the School*. The table of contents show case studies on specific books. *The Catcher in the Rye* is one such case study.

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