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# 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" Meeting Censorship in the School: A Series of Case Studies

# **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

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#### CENSORSHIP AND CONTROVERSY

#### The Issue

The National Council of Teachers of English is professionally obligated to stand publicly against dangers now threatening the important work for which its members are responsible in the classrooms of the nation. Prominent among these dangers are: (1) demands for the exclusion of certain books, periodicals, and other instructional materials from classrooms and libraries; (2) attacks upon the use of any material for any purpose from the writings of specific authors; (3) restrictions placed upon the kind of speakers who may address groups in schools and colleges; (4) denials of the right of classroom consideration by teachers and stu-dents of currently controversial topics. These limit freedom to know and to communicate, to learn and to teach. Together they could comprise an ominous prelude to thought control. Should such restrictive practices prevail, self-appointed critics and censors will have imposed their special-interest demands upon the schools and colleges. While education in a free society must ever be responsive to community preferences, when these can be adequately assessed, and subject to legitimately exercised community controls, its essential functioning should not be hampered by attacks from self-seeking individuals or groups.

Teachers of language and literature play a part in the development of young people's ideas in two different but complementary activities: (1) as they guide their students in organizing and expressing their knowledge, their ideas, impressions, and feelings in speaking and writing; and (2) as they lead their students to understand, to evaluate, and to enjoy the life that is portrayed in literature and in the other arts. Such activities are essential to the educational process in a free society.

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books. Those responsible for the day-to-day operation of education welcome discussion and constructive criticism based upon understanding of school and college problems. The purpose of this report is in part to discriminate between the responsible and the irresponsible criticisms and to suggest procedures for keeping the criticism at an intelligent and constructive level.

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3. Controversial Topics

4. Freedom of Inquiry

5. Textbooks in Education

In issuing this publication on Censorship and Controversy the National Council of Teachers of English wishes to make its position clear on two highly important problems.

First is the problem of Communism and Communistic penetration of our American educational system. The National Council of Teachers of English believes firmly that Communist Party doctrine, as avowed anywhere in the world today, is a fraudulent mask for an imperialism that seeks ultimately to overthrow our Government by force and violence. It must be resisted resolutely at all points by each one of us. If there are any among us so naive as to be deceived by this mask, they are not proper persons to give instruction to young people and should be required to withdraw from teaching.<sup>3</sup> By the very nature of the Communist Party, an adherent has become an agent for the imperialistic ambitions of a totalitarian state and thus an enemy of the United States.

Such required withdrawal from teaching implies no bar to the exercise of freedom in holding opinions. If a person wishes to espouse Communism, Fascism, or any other "ism," he should be free to do so, to exercise, too, his right to be a martyr, and perhaps even to suffer death for his ideas. But this freedom does not in itself include, in our judgment, any right to teach in our schools and colleges, whose purpose is to inculcate faith in our institutions and to promote a society of free people, not to assist a totalitarian regime that seeks to enslave the human mind.

HBy a Supreme Court decision such exclusion from teaching in a school or college supported by public funds is constitutional. - 8 - The second problem is the danger that ill-advised opponents of Communism or other insidious enemies of our schools and colleges will seek to exploit the dangers of Communism as an excuse for opposing any ideas which they do not like. Such persons may label as Communistic any changes whatsoever in methods of teaching or use of instructional materials. They will use attacks upon Communism as a means of making an easy living or of gaining notoriety and power. The techniques and procedures they employ undermine the basic freedoms we cherish and if permitted to flourish would ultimately destroy our way of life.

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The free people of the United States have built a great nation by the encouragement of free enterprise, itself a product in part of freedom to think. Our inventiveness, our ingenuity, our experimentalism, our creed of "Let's see how it works" are all directly dependent on the unhampered activities of American minds. In nearly two centuries of progress we have allowed all kinds of views to be uttered. In our schools and colleges the emphasis has ever been upon the development of a nation of ditzens and not upon the development of a united. In such emphasis upon the individual, his opportunities, responsibilities, and relationships, lies much of the true secret of our greatness. To detect and punish the traitors in our midst—not a numerous company—is both right and necessary. To suppress freedom of thought and inquiry would be both unnecessary and disastrous. That would be the road of tragedy for America—for free people everywhere.

Teachers and school authorities are aware of their responsibilities in these matters, both to their students and to the people of their communities. Their professional training and their loyalty to American ideals cause them to exert every effort to carry on class work in controversial fields in ways that are in accord with American ideals and

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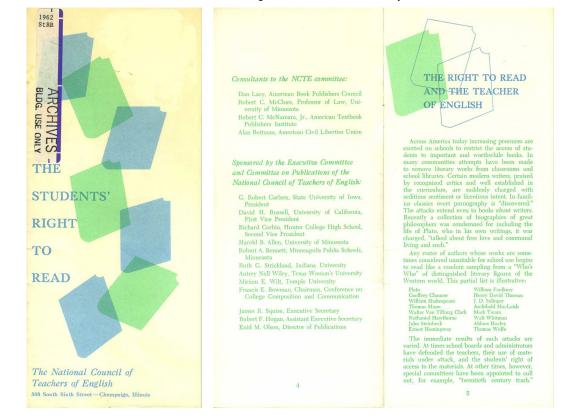
The cover and pages from *Censorship and Controversy*. The preface (page five) explains NCTE's rationale for taking a strong stance against censorship. Pages eight and nine highlight the fundamental positions of the Council on both communism and censorship.

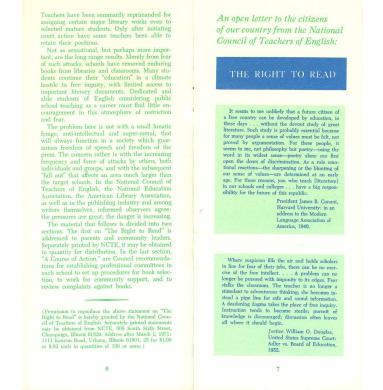
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### The Student's Right to Read

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





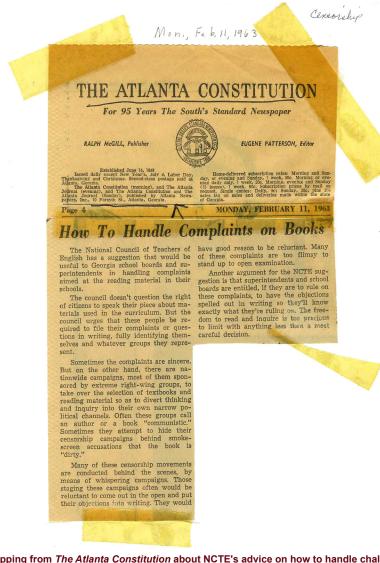
The cover and pages from the brochure *The Student's Right to Read*. Page five introduces the Council's argument for open access to books, while page seven includes quotes from national figures supporting the right to read.

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# 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 newspaper clipping from The Atlanta Constitution about NCTE's advice on how to handle challenges to class books.

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# 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

THE HINCKLEY SCHOOL		
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The National Council of Teachers of English 508 South 6th Street Champaign, Illinois

Dear Mr Hogan

Your name is used in the letter in that it was obtained from Miss Osgood of the MAIS, if per chance this letter should have been directed to another member of your organization I would request that you forward it.

This is my first year at Hinckley and attemps have been made to up-grade the academic atmosphere. The curriculum has been review, I have a new faculty and the student body has been somewhat weeded-out. In connection with this whole process the assigned-reading in the Enclish department has been changed and "Catcher in the rys" is being used by our juniors.

There has been some rumbling concerning this book and I know that this is not the first time that such a reaction has been excertenced. I have attempted to establish a file of information to combat the opposition and am writing to inquire about any information that might be obtained from your office about this book.

It would seem that most of the independent schools in New England use the book, but I wonder whether any information is available concerning actual numbers of schools using it? Would your office know whether any survey has ever been made that would include this type of information?

The reviews of the book are mostly favorable but few, if any, indicate that it would be good pre-college reading. Do you know of any opinions on this point?

Time is a factor and to facilitate matters I am enclosing a stamped envelope for your use. I am to mest with my board on the 20th of this month, if your reply could be received by then I would be most grateful. Any information of any sort will be most welcome.

Sincerely yours

Special Delivery March 18, 1963

Mr. Allen G. Vickers Headmaster The Hinckley School Hinckley, Maine

Dear Mr. Vickers:

air Mail

Mr. Hogan has given me your letter of March 13 to answer. I am enclosing copies of materials which we have sent to other schools when they have requested evaluation of CATCHER IN THE RE. Succe materials includes annotations from book lists which we produce and/or distribute, quotes from articles about the book, a state-ment by James R. Squire, 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 sour newest statement, THE STUDENTS' RIGHT ON READ. I've included also copies of two editorials on a similar recent incident in Edgerton, Wisconsin.

The following articles on Salinger and his writings from our journals may prove useful in this instance:

Browne, Robert M., "Rebuttal: In Defense of Esme," COLLEGE ENGLISH, May, 1961, pp. 584-585.

Carpenter, Frederic I., "The Adolescent in American Fiction," ENGLISH JOURNAL, September, 1957, pp. 315-316.

Hermann, John, "J. D. Salinger: Hello Hello Hello," COLLEGE ENGLISH, January, 1961, pp. 262-264.

Kaplan, Charles, "Holden and Huck: The Odysseys of Youth," COLLEGE ENGLISH, November, 1956, pp. 76-80.

Marcus, Fred M., "The Catcher in the Rye: A live Circuit," ENGLISH JOURNAL, January, 1963, pp. 1-8.

McLean, Hugh, "Conservatism in Modern American Fiction," COLLEGE ENGLISH, March, 1954, pp. 315-325.

Oldsey, Bernard S., "The Movies and the Rye," COLLEGE ENGLISH, December, 1961, pp. 209-215.

Mr. Allen G. Vickers -2- March 18, 1963		
Petitt, Dorothy, "A Search for Self Definition: The Picture of Life in the Novel for the Adolescent," ENGLISH JOURNAL, December, 1960, pp. 616-625.		
Seng, Feter, "The Fallen Idol: The Immature World of Holden Caulfield," COLLEGE ENGLISH, December, 1961, pp. 203-209.	THE HINCKLEY SCHOOL HINCKLEY, MAINE APR 8 1963	
For your own future reference in teaching, you may be interested in these commercial publications that have come to our attention (they are either newly published or forthcoming):	ALLEN G. VICKERS HEADMADTER	
Belcher, William F., and James W. Lee. J. D. SALINGER AND THE CRITICS. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1962.	April 4, 1963	
Laser, Marvin, and Norman Fruman. SALINGER AND HIS CRITICS. New York: Odyssey, 1963 (early).		
Marsden, Malcom. A CATCHER CASEBOOK. Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1963 (apring).		
Simonson, Harold P., and Fhilip Hager. A SOURCE BOOK ON SALINGER'S CATHER IN THE RYE. Boston: Heath, 1963(?) (paperback).	Mrs. Enid M. Olson Director of Publications and Public Relations	
In addition, Dr. Squire has mentioned that it is his understanding that CATCHER IN THE RYE is one of four representative novels being	The National Council of Teachers of English	
taught to freshman at Yale University. While this is college teach- ing, nevertheless the inclusion speaks both for the literary merit	Champaign, Illinois	
of the novel as well as its appropriateness for students who are still teenagers.	Dear Mrs. Olson:	
Respectfully yours,	Many thanks for your leter of March 18th with the enclosures concerning "The Catcher in the Rye". Alas, it was to no avail. It was the general consensus of opinion of My Executive	
(Mrs.) Enid M. Olson Director of Publications	Committee that such a book as this has no place in the curriculum of The Hinckley School.	
and Public Relations	in the curriculum of the hinckley School.	
EMO:mdb	Sincerely yours,	
enc.	allen G. Ouckers	
cc: Mildred A. Batchelder	Allen G. Vickers Le	
	AGV:10	

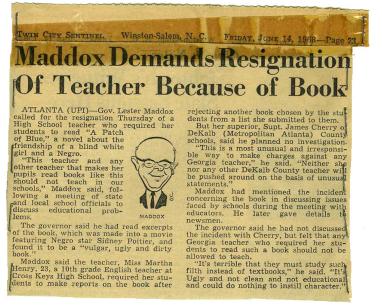
Chronological from left to right, the series of letters exchanged betweeen NCTE and a teacher facing censorship of *The Catcher in the Rye* at his school.

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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



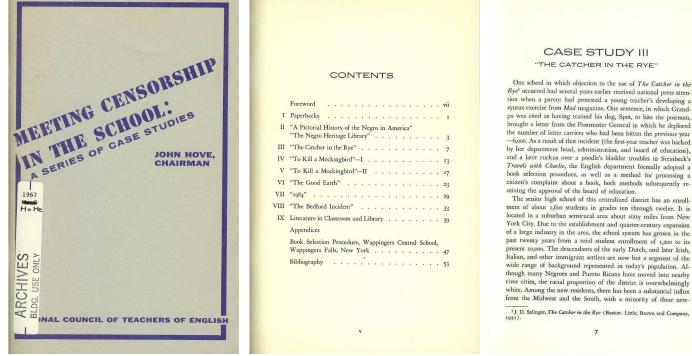
The Twin City Sentinel newspaper clipping about the governor of Georgia demanding the resignation of an English teacher.

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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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