

By using these sources, informed teachers will have positive plans and courses of action to combat attempts at censorship. Without information and plans, teachers will be at the mercies of the censor.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

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ACROSS-THE-BOARD AND BED ARE DIRTY WORDS?

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A high school teacher of business education at Palm Bay High School (Rockledge, Florida) charged that The Random House Dictionary of the English Language--College Edition contains 23 "vulgaries." She filed a formal complaint with the school board of Brevard County, requesting that the dictionary not be used in the schools. The teacher warned that continued use of the dictionary in classrooms "could lead to widespread usage of these vulgarities by students. They could feel that these words are permissible language since they are included in classroom dictionaries."¹

The task force appointed by the superintendent to review the dictionary disagreed with the business teacher. The teachers, administrators, and parent on the task force concluded that students would not use the words frequently nor think they were permissible simply because they are in a dictionary. "Children of this age have already learned what is appropriate or inappropriate language," the task force noted. "This dictionary clearly labels the words slang or vulgar. The definitions are not sensationalized."²

Thus, the RHD is probably safe at Palm Bay High School for the remainder of 1979 at least. But what will be its fate elsewhere? Will concerned teachers and parents in other communities look up

¹Orlando Sentinel-Star, January 17, 1979.

²Ibid.

the "vulgarities" in the RHD and file formal complaints against the dictionary in their school districts? Or, more likely, will concerned parents write to a national "textbook review clearing house," requesting a review of the RHD that can be modified for their own use and can be presented to the local school board as if they had done the research? Will the RHD become the target of the censors in 1979 and 1980, replacing the AHD (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language) as the number one dictionary on the censors' hatelist?

The censors of school materials are self-appointed protectors of the young. As such, they know that they can attract attention and attain a great deal of publicity by pointing out every "dirty" word in every literary work, textbook, film, or resource book used in school. They know that many parents will rise to protest books that contain, or allegedly contain, "dirty" words. The censors then might enlist the enraged parents in the campaign against some of their major targets: values clarification, psychology, mythology, sociology, anthropology, realistic history, and novels for adolescents that deal with current problems.

The "dirty" word, then, becomes the censors' stepping stone across what one outspoken critic calls the "river of pollution"³-- public school education. By mounting successful campaigns against books that contain so-called objectionable language, the censors can pick up recruits throughout the land who will help them dry up the "river of pollution" and destroy the public schools. But what is a "dirty" word? What can the censors use as examples of language that will arouse parents to the point that they would attempt to censor books?

The obscenity oblitors abhor words like hot, horny, and hooker. They disapprove of crooked, coke, and clap. Across-the-board leaves them aghast. Specific definitions of deflower and bed

³ Joseph P. Bean, Public Education: River of Pollution. Fullerton, California: Educator Publications (undated).

join several dozen other words on lists that the guardians of virtue classify as "blatantly offensive language."

In June of 1976, the school board voted four to three to remove the AHD from classrooms in Anchorage, Alaska. The decision was precipitated by complaints from a group of parents who called themselves "People for Better Education." The organization said that definitions for the following words, among others, are offensive: ass, tail, ball, bed, knocker, and nut.⁴

Responding to the protest, the superintendent of schools appointed a reviewing committee that examined the AHD and approved it unanimously. Appearing before the school board, an assistant superintendent reported the findings of the committee, noted that "the ability of a child to look up 'dirty words' helped diffuse excitement and curiosity about them." and explained that the dictionary is "an excellent resource for advanced students, especially for scientific terms."⁵ As the assistant superintendent presented his arguments, four members of the school board sat with a list of definitions of "objectionable" words in front of them. The four voted against the dictionary.⁶

After several parents charged that "seventy or eighty" words in the AHD are obscene or otherwise inappropriate for high school students, the school board ordered the dictionary removed from the high school in Cedar Lake, Indiana.⁷ In Eldon, Missouri, after twenty-four parents filed a complaint noting that thirty-nine words in the AHD are "objectionable," the school board voted to remove the dictionary from a junior high school.⁸

⁴ Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom, September 1976, pp. 115-116.

⁵ Ibid., p. 116.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., November 1976, p. 145.

⁸ St. Louis Post-Dispatch, April 18, 1977.

The dictionary protesters obviously overlooked almost all of the 155,000 words in the nearly 1,600 pages of the AHD and focused only on the so-called dirty words. One parent in Eldon was reported as having said: "If people learn words like that it ought to be where you and I learned it--in the street and in the gutter."⁹ A school board member in Cedar Lake noted: "We're not a bunch of weirdo book burners out here, but we think this one (the AHD) goes too far."¹⁰ The school board in Cedar Lake later reconsidered its decision and reinstated the AHD.

Bed was one of the more frequently criticized entry words in the Cedar Lake controversy. Among the definitions are "a place for lovemaking," "a marital relationship, with its rights and intimacies," and "to have sexual intercourse with."¹¹

Anticipating a protest against the AHD and other dictionaries in 1976, Texas Education Commissioner Marlin Brockette stated that no works would be purchased that "present material which would cause embarrassing situations or interfere in the learning atmosphere in the classroom." By quoting that sub-section of the Texas textbook adoption proclamation, Commissioner Brockette apparently justified the removal of these five dictionaries from the purchase list in Texas: the AHD, The Doubleday Dictionary, the RHD, Webster's New World Dictionary--Students' Edition, and Webster's Seventh Collegiate Dictionary.¹²

Commissioner Brockette's decision was reported in various Texas newspapers on November 12, 13, and 14, 1976. Four months before he announced that the five dictionaries would not be on the purchase list, Dr. Brockette received bills of particulars from various groups of citizens about the dictionaries that had been

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom, November 1976, p. 145.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

submitted for adoption by the State of Texas. Six of the cover letters which I have examined that accompanied the bills of particulars cited these two sub-sections of the Texas textbook adoption proclamation:

- 1.7 Textbooks offered for adoption shall not include blatantly offensive language or illustrations.
- 1.8 Textbooks offered for adoption shall not present material which would cause embarrassing situations or interference in the learning atmosphere of the classroom.

The chairperson of a textbook committee of a prominent organization of women wrote this about Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language:

Reviewer is shocked that a supposedly reputable publisher would offer for adoption a book which is debasing the English language. Students need the basics rather than sub-standard language.¹³

The chairperson of the organization's reviewing committee listed these twelve words, among others, as examples of the "objectionable material" she found in the dictionary:

<u>Word</u>	<u>Reason for Objection</u>
across-the-board	betting on horse racing in Texas is illegal
attempt	ties word into subject of murder
banana republic	insulting to Latins
bawdy house	unnecessary
bed	Why is sexual intercourse mentioned?
the big house	slang--unnecessary
brain	definition denotes violence
bucket	slang--the buttocks
clap - 2	refers to a brothel (claper) and gonorrhea--slang
coke	slang for cocaine
crooked	slang for intoxicated

¹³Undated "Bill of Particulars" submitted to the Texas Education Commissioner by the Textbook Chairman of the Texas Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

<u>Word</u>	<u>Reason for Objection</u>
deflower	to cause loss of virginity: slang?

Lovers of language and frequent users of dictionaries would probably not consider those words to be "objectionable material;" nor would they consider the following words, and/or specific definitions of them, to be "blatantly offensive language:"

bastard	john (a customer of a prostitute)
easy rider	lay
fag	queer
fairy	shack
gay	slut
G-string	tail
head (as in acidhead)	tail-end

The removal of the five dictionaries from the purchase list in Texas did not go unnoticed. Several organizations concerned with what is taught in the schools hailed the removal as a major victory. One such organization noted:¹⁴

God gave parents a number of victories. In Texas alone, the State Textbook Committee did a good job of selecting the best of the available books. Then, the State Commissioner of Education removed 10 books, including the dictionaries with vulgar language and unreasonable definitions.

That statement was included in an announcement distributed by Educational Research Analysts in Longview, Texas. Founded by Norma and Mel Gabler, ERA is billed as "the nation's largest textbook review clearing house,"¹⁵ providing "thousands of textbook reviews"¹⁶

¹⁴See green printed sheet distributed by Educational Research Analysts. The sheet is entitled "THE MEL GABLERS--Consumer Advocates for Education."

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

that "concentrate on pointing out 'questionable' content."¹⁷

A person concerned with specific words and/or definitions in dictionaries can send a contribution to ERA and receive copies of the bills of particulars that led Dr. Brockette to place the five dictionaries on the no-purchase list. A concerned person can also request reviews of hundreds of textbooks.

The ERA-distributed reviews concentrate on what's wrong--not with what's right--with textbooks and dictionaries. Using such reviews as guidelines, concerned parents can underscore "objectionable" passages in textbooks and take the books to school board meetings to point out why children should not have to study such works. The concerned parents do not have to indicate the sources of the objections; rather, all they have to do is get the ear of a sympathetic school board member and hope to get a book or dictionary removed from a public school.

The tactic works. Concerned citizens in a number of states have used ERA-distributed reviews to complain about "objectionable" books that contain "blatantly offensive language." Fortunately, the critics of education are not always successful with their attacks on books. However, the victories are more and more frequent, and each victory gives the censors renewed purpose.

As I write and speak about the new wave of censorship in the public schools, I frequently ask myself, or I am asked, "What can be done to prevent the removal of dictionaries and textbooks from the schools?" Here are six steps that every person can take:

1. Check the wording of the state's textbook adoption bill to make certain that the language in it does not permit the removal of dictionaries and textbooks simply because they contain a few words that some people would construe to be "blatantly offensive."
2. Attend meetings of the school board (or school committee) and speak out, at appropriate times, for academic freedom and the students' right to learn.

¹⁷Ibid.

3. Attend state or local hearings on textbooks submitted for adoption.
4. Form a local organization for the preservation of academic freedom and the students' right to know.
5. Write letters to the editor protesting the removal (or attempts at removal) of any books from the local schools.
6. Make certain that the local school system has an effective set of procedures for dealing with parental complaints about books.

Note: This article was written for the July 1979 issue of the Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association. Permission to reprint it in other journals will be granted by the author and the editors of the Newsletter.

THE WRITING OF STUDENTS IN A MINNESOTA HIGH SCHOOL:
REPORT ON A PILOT STUDY

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There is general agreement that competence in reading and writing are not only desirable but necessary (for an individual) in our complex society. However, there is widespread concern, backed by no little evidence, that young adults lack these skills. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) analyst Dan Phillips says: "Seventeen-year-olds can read, write, and compute in well-structured situations, but they have difficulty applying their knowledge to new situations. They don't do well on problems that require more than one step and can't organize their thoughts in writing" (NAEP Newsletter, April 1977).

In his impressive study, *The Development of Writing Abilities* (11-18), James Britton discovered that nearly 90% of student writing in Britain fell into two categories: teacher-learner dialogue and pupil to examiner discourse. But does such writing equip a student to write for a variety of audiences and to sound like someone who has something to say. School writing, considering Britton's findings, is primarily a means to convey information efficiently and effectively.

In the light of these and similar findings, we began a close study of student prose generated by 10th and 12th graders in a Minnesota high school. All subjects were enrolled in writing classes and were chosen at random by their teachers who provided us with unmarked copies of the student papers as well as a copy of the assignment which generated the papers. Each student paper was