

KIDS' RIGHT TO READ

ACTION KIT



FOR STUDENTS AND PARENTS



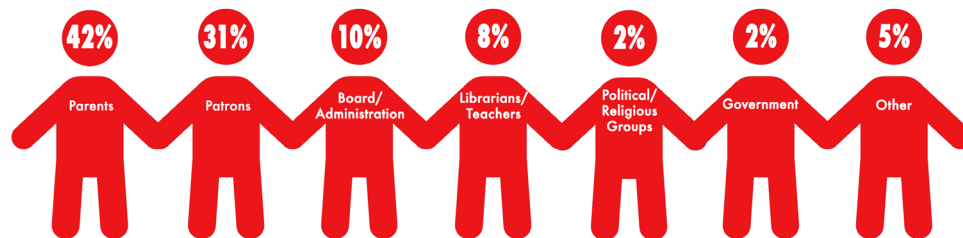
An Action Guide for Students and Parents

For over 40 years, the National Coalition Against Censorship has defended everyone's right to read, especially kids.

Hundreds of children's books, young adult novels, and literary classics are challenged or banned in American schools and libraries every year. In 2019, 377 challenges were reported to the American Library Association, but the actual number is far higher because there are many more that are not reported.

Children's books, young adult novels, and literary classics are frequently challenged or banned from American schools and libraries.

WHO CHALLENGES BOOKS?



TAKE ACTION!

This action kit is designed to empower young readers and parents to fight book censorship.

It explores the most common motivations behind book challenges and suggests strategies to counter them.

Censorship can happen in any community but each case is unique. You may need to adapt these ideas to fit your specific situation.



**KIDS'
RIGHT
TO READ**

CENSORSHIP AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT



Censorship is...

the removal or suppression of words, images or ideas thought to be unacceptable by those with the power to ban them (also known as ‘censors’).

Does the law protect us from censorship?

The First Amendment protects against government restrictions on or interference with the content of speech because of disagreement with its viewpoint. This includes speech in public schools.

Note: The First Amendment does not protect students in private schools. However, the mission of any school is to provide a comprehensive education and prepare future citizens. That mission cannot be achieved without allowing students to encounter a diversity of ideas. Hence free access to ideas is just as important in private schools as it is in public ones.

How does censorship occur in public schools?

Schools can limit speech or expressive activity that disrupts school functions, promotes illegal drug use, or is obscene. (See Advocacy Tip #5) Schools may also impose reasonable education-based limitations on student expression in school-sponsored publications, like school newspapers, yearbooks, noticeboards, and online posts using school servers.

Schools *cannot* restrict student access to books in the classroom or library unless it’s for educational or compelling safety reasons. Schools should follow established district policies when reviewing requests to restrict or remove books from classrooms and libraries.

Any removal or prohibited access to a book based on some individual’s disagreement with its political, religious or moral viewpoint is a form of censorship.

Can private individuals censor speech?

While the final decision to remove a book is made by educators and school administrators, private groups and individuals can be very effective at mounting public pressure on school officials to suppress material they don't like.

What if the book contains ideas that make me uncomfortable?

Not everyone will like every book in the library or classroom. That's perfectly fine. Parents can guide their own children in their reading choices, as well as request alternative assignments in class, if their school permits it.

But content-based objections that lead to the complete removal or restricted access to the offending material for all students, hold the views of one person who disfavors the book above the views of others – and infringe upon everyone’s First Amendment right to read.

Is it still censorship if the book is available elsewhere?

Yes. Even if the book is available in other libraries and bookstores, public institutions like schools have no authority to limit anyone's right to access it without a legitimate educational or safety reason.



Censorship suppresses innovation and imagination.

For more information, check out NCAC's resource guide on The First Amendment in Schools (available at www.ncac.org/resources).

THE RIGHT TO READ AND YOUR FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

The First Amendment guarantees our right to read whatever we choose. But the law also protects the right and responsibility of parents and guardians to guide their own children's learning and book choices. No parent has the right to decide what another person's child should or shouldn't read.

How Schools and Libraries Choose Books

While schools have a similar responsibility to shape the minds of students, their power to choose what students read must be strictly based on educational reasons, rather than personal values and morals. Libraries – which also serve an educational function – exist primarily to satisfy the community's right to read. School libraries, therefore, can choose a variety of books from a wide range of subjects and literary styles. Libraries generally prioritize books with literary, artistic and educational merit, considering reviews from expert critics, as well as the general public.

Red Flags and Permission Slips

Sometimes, school districts flag books with “mature” content so as to avoid controversy. While well-intentioned, book rating systems and parental permits based on the presence of certain content (e.g., sex, violence, profanity) are not advised because they don't provide meaningful information about the books' literary and educational value. Rather than evaluating the work as a whole, red flags reduce complex literary works to a few isolated and “objectionable” elements.

Schools can respect parents' right to information by consistently providing information on *all* of the books to be read, not just those with content presumed to be controversial.

Advocacy Tip #1



Instead of labeling books with a scarlet letter, many schools provide each parent and student with a list of instructional material (including books) to be taught each year, along with a brief statement on why they were selected for the curriculum. Recommend this practice to your school principal or district superintendent to encourage open communication and avoid controversy.

Age and Maturity Levels

Even the staunchest supporters of free speech appreciate the tension that exists between the right to parent and the right of young people to read freely – particularly as pertains to very young, pre-adolescent children. To ease this tension while promoting the readership rights of children, organizations like the **American Library Association**, **National Council of Teachers of English** and the **American Association of School Librarians** have devised guides for parents and educators that incorporate educational standards on age and maturity in book recommendations. For more information, visit the links provided on page 12.

COMMON OBJECTIONS TO BOOKS

Sex and Sexuality

A responsible education helps us understand physical development and sexuality as part of the human condition, yet the most commonly opposed books are those with references to sex or sexual health.

Despite framing these important concepts in narratives and experiences that kids can understand, children's books like *It's Perfectly Normal* by Robie Harris and *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Leslea Newman face demands for removal for their honest discussion about sexual health or focus on LGBTQ issues.



Literary classics like Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* have also been challenged by parents and school boards who deem certain sexual passages inappropriate for young people without appreciating their contextual significance and the value of the book as a whole.

Advocacy Tip #2



In addition to fostering respect for our bodies and those of others, books on sex and sexuality are First Amendment-protected speech, unless they are obscene.

To be obscene, the book as a whole would have to be “patently offensive,” “appeal to the prurient interest,” and, most critically, “lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”

Most educators are reasonable people, trained to select books for their educational value and are extremely unlikely to select obscene books.



Profanity

Books containing strong or dark language are often challenged, even though profanity is often used in literature to convey social or historical context, local dialect, or simply to better depict reactions to real-life situations. Many opponents of these books forget (or ignore) the fact that masterworks like *Of Mice and Men*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, both containing profane language, are also praised for their elegant prose and poignant depictions of the Great Depression and World War II-era struggles

Political Views

Book challenges in response to political content can reveal ideological divisions within our communities, even within our homes. Tolerating these diverse political views can be uncomfortable, but it is an essential part of any democracy that upholds freedom of speech. It is important that school curricula reflect a broad spectrum of social and political views and experiences. Even if the political views shared in a book don't align with our own views, they may reflect those of others in our community and are worth reading and understanding.

Advocacy Tip #3



The Supreme Court ruled in 1982 that:

(L)ocal school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books and seek by their removal to 'prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.'

Island Trees School District v. Pico, 457 U.S. 853 (1982)

Race

Books containing racial violence, offensive epithets or historical truths about injustice regularly come under fire. Racial sensitivity and trauma are often cited in challenges to classic literary works like Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* or Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Such works may make some people uncomfortable—particularly those who identify with racial groups that have been subjected to unjust treatment. But we can draw vital lessons about civil and human rights from texts that examine the historical realities of racism. Teachers and librarians are best trained to contextualize racially-sensitive material and guide students to a more meaningful understanding of humanity.

The benefits of reading literature written from diverse perspectives extend beyond the classroom, enriching society. Reading literature is one of the few ways young people can try to understand someone else's life experience as they explore a character's thoughts and actions. This helps young readers understand situations from different points of view. Not only does reading help us empathize with others, it also helps us learn about ourselves.



Advocacy Tip #4



Sometimes, book opponents are not interested in removing the book entirely but only from their own children's hands. In such instances, challengers might be open to keeping the book on an alternative reading list.

Check whether your school district's policies on instructional materials allow for alternative assignments.

Religious Views

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

The Constitution protects everyone's right to exercise their own religious beliefs, free from government interference; this is guaranteed in the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause. Further, the First Amendment's Establishment Clause prohibits government institutions like public schools from favoring or disfavoring religion and any particular religious practices.

Nevertheless, people continue to wrongly cite religious beliefs as grounds for censoring books. Parents and religious leaders often object to works that discuss sex, evolution, witchcraft, or occult themes. J.K. Rowling's wildly popular *Harry Potter* series, for example, has been challenged in schools in Michigan, California, and Georgia.



Advocacy Tip #5



The **Establishment Clause** does not prohibit schools from teaching about religion and the **Free Exercise Clause** does not allow schools to remove books based on religious objections. Students have a right to express their beliefs – religious or otherwise – so long as they don't disrupt the educational program.

Violence

Objections to violent content are often based on the idea that it disturbs readers by trivializing violence or desensitizes them to its effects. Books challenged on this ground include *One Fat Summer* by Robert Lypsyte and *Native Son* by Richard Wright. These objections typically disregard the most experienced and child-friendly safeguard in the classroom – teachers. Both teachers and librarians are trained to contextualize themes of violence in their lesson plans in a way that emphasizes – rather than trivializes – the social harms and root causes of violence.

WHY SOME PARENTS CHALLENGE BOOKS

Censorship is the child of fear and the father of ignorance.

– Laurie Halse Anderson



“My kids are innocent and deserve to grow in a protected environment.”

Many book challenges are motivated by an underlying fear that kids exposed to certain ideas at too early a stage will be negatively influenced by them because they lack the capacity to understand their content. Parents also sometimes challenge books that they believe will lead their kids to imitate behavior they disapprove of.

These fears are often irrational or overblown. In reality, the classroom is generally the best environment for children to be exposed to new ideas and, under the guidance of trained educators, develop the maturity required to contend with different styles of expression.

In the age of the Internet and social media, the protective urge to shield children from truths may do more harm than good if it fails to adequately prepare them for life beyond the schoolyard. Rather, parents and teachers should work together in creating an open and inviting atmosphere for children to ask questions and learn.

Advocacy Tip #6



If you're unsure whether a book contains concepts that are too complex for you or your child to process, consult with a your librarian or teacher. Librarians and teachers are trained to balance children's emotional maturity and psychological development against the pedagogical value of the book.

Kirkus Book Reviews and *School Library Journal* also offer reliable age recommendations for books and are highly regarded for their unbiased critical reviews.

Visit www.kirkusreviews.com and www.slj.com for more information.



“This is a dirty book: I see the word ‘d@# on page 5!’”*

Often, book challenges are fueled by selective reading. Complaints based on passages read out of context, ignore the literary value of the book as a whole and only support the importance of reading more, not less.

Worse than decontextualized passages are imagined passages. In 2011, a parent’s objection to the word “*poo poo head*” led officials to remove Dave Pinkney’s *The Adventures of Super Diaper Baby* from a Texas school library. Later, they learned that “*poo poo head*” does not actually appear anywhere in the book.



“I want my kids to be proud Americans. This book is unpatriotic and un-American because it tells our history in a negative light.”

Some book challenges are also motivated by intolerance for diverse viewpoints and historical perspectives, though challengers are unwilling to state these motives. This applies to all types of literature. Textbooks that reflect the historical realities of injustice and inequality in America have been challenged at the local and state levels (Arizona, Florida and Texas).

The American Library Association reports that books by or about people of color and narratives reflecting LGBT experiences are disproportionately challenged and banned in American public schools. Sherman Alexie was the most banned author in 2015 for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Ralph Ellison (*Invisible Man*), Toni Morrison (*Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*), and David Levithan (*Two Boys Kissing*) are other examples of authors whose books magnify underrepresented voices but are routinely challenged.



When Arizona lawmakers and school officials banned ethnic studies and removed dozens of books from a Mexican American studies class in 2010, students organized protests and creative advocacy campaigns to assert their freedom to read and learn.

WHAT STUDENTS CAN DO

IMAGINE:



*It's the first week of school and already, a group of parents has filed a complaint to remove *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi from the curriculum.*

HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND?

1

READ!



Have you read the book? If you can, you should.

The more you read, the more knowledgeable and influential you will be as an advocate. Moreover, most challenges that cite controversial passages in a book do so out of context. Reading the book will enable you to correct misconceptions and reframe passages in their broader intended contexts.



Read what influential publications and individuals have said about the book. Has it received any awards? Have any prominent experts (like educators or literary critics) reviewed the book?

Advocacy Tip #7



Check out the following trusted sources for book reviews:

Booklist Online (American Library Association): www.booklistonline.com

School Library Journal: www.slj.com/category/reviews/books/

Kirkus Reviews: www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/

The Book Report Network: www.kidsreads.com and www.teenreads.com

2 ASK QUESTIONS!

Gather the relevant facts from your principal, teachers, librarian, or parents:



Is the book part of the school curriculum or is it a library/reference book?



Is the challenged book required reading or on an optional list?



Who are the complainants? Parents, teachers, community members, other students, or all of the above?



*What is the nature of their objections?
(Profanity, violence, sex, etc.)*



What remedy do the challengers propose? (Removal, redaction, red-flagging, etc.)

In 2012, Chicago public school administrators removed ***Persepolis*** from classrooms and libraries, objecting to its graphic language. Over 150 students staged protests against “banning a book that’s all about the freedom of speech.” Thanks to them, the book was returned to libraries, but remains banned from classrooms below grade 8.

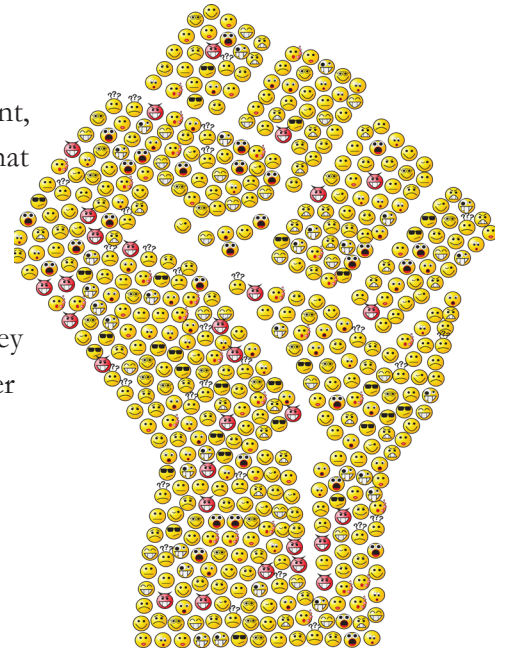


3 SPEAK OUT!

When books are challenged for their controversial content, the resulting discussion often brings more attention to that specific content and could overshadow the value of the book as a whole. Which is why you should speak out!

Student voices are very influential – particularly when they demonstrate a maturity and understanding of the broader implications of censorship.

Use your voice to defend the right to read!



At home. Start a conversation at home about the topic at issue. For example, *Be-loved* presents a great opportunity to discuss the book's racial themes and share our own thoughts on race. Readers of *Persepolis* can use the story of the main character's maid to spark conversation on social class and inequality.



At school. Organize a lunchtime discussion in your school library about the book challenge and the right to read. Invite other students, teachers, librarians and principal to join in the conversation.



Also, **attend school board meetings** and share your views during the public comments portion.



Post on Social Media: Start a hashtag trend with the book title and mobilize support for it by posting messages about the book's value.

Facebook, Twitter and other interactive social media platforms are great ways to inform the public and attract support.

Tag [@ncacensorship](#) for more likes and retweets!:



Start a Petition. Start a school-wide petition to return the book to the curriculum or library. Online petition sites like Change.org offer wide circulation on email and social media.



Call Local Press. Reach out to your local news outlets and ask them to publish a story on the issue. Many local news publications have dedicated reporters who cover public education and student-driven initiatives.

4

WRITE!



To your school. Write a letter to your school principal, superintendent, and school board, telling them why this book should remain in the curriculum or library. Share your personal views about the book, if you've read it, and any reviews by literary critics who have written about the book.



Call Local Press. Design an informational flier or write an open letter to your community and ask to publish it in the student newspaper, school newsletter, or notice boards. Social media is also a great forum for an open letter.

SAMPLE LETTER (STUDENTS)

Dear **[Principal/School Administrator/Board Chair/Librarian]**,

I am a student at **[School Name]** and I am writing about recent attempts to restrict kids' access to **[Book Title]** by **[Author Name]**. I understand that the book has been challenged because _____.

All people, including and especially young people, have a right to read. When we ban books we dislike or disagree with, it deprives others of their freedom to read and form their own opinions.

I have read **[Book Title]** and formed my own opinion about the book. I believe it is a valuable book because _____. The book is also widely celebrated and available in many public libraries across the country. **[Book Title]** was awarded the **[Book Award Name(s)/Year.]** **[Mention some positive reviews the book has received.]**.

If parents do not want their children to read a particular book, then they are free to request a different one. But they may not deny others access to the book or tell other parents what their children may read.

[School/Library Name] has a responsibility to prepare its students to succeed in our diverse and complex world. Helping students understand and tolerate different views is a key part of that. By removing the book, **[School/Library Name]** is abandoning this responsibility. Removing the book also sends a message to students like me that the views of a few members of our community are more important than the quality of our education.

Please, show that you value our right to read and think freely by keeping **[Book Title]** in our **[school/library]**. Thank you.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO

IMAGINE:

*A religious advocacy group wants Jessica Herthel's **I Am Jazz** removed from the children's section of the public library because it is "un-Christian."*

HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND?

1

GATHER THE FACTS!



Research your school or library's policies to learn the official procedure for book selection and ensure that your advocacy efforts conform to them. Most school districts publish their policies on book selection and instruction on their websites.



Search online for credible news reports of instances when the book was challenged elsewhere yet retained. Search the NCAC website for similar challenges to support your position: www.ncac.org.

Advocacy Tip #8



Read the book and its critical literary reviews to better prepare you to respond to objections. Highlight particular sections you think demonstrate the literary and educational value of the book. Use the resources offered under Advocacy Tip #7 to research book reviews.

2 SPEAK OUT!



Schedule a meeting with your child's teacher, principal, and in the case of library challenges, your school librarian, to discuss the book challenge. Expressing your views on the book and why students should be allowed to read it would help to balance the objecting parents' perspectives, making it more likely for school officials to take an objective decision, rather than pressured one.



Mobilize friends to attend your local school board meetings and express your support for the book during the public comments section, where you and other advocates for the right to read can make your voices heard. Curriculum book challenges are often lodged during school board meetings, which are open to the public.



Advocacy Tip #9



In some cases, parents have a right to opt-out of assignments and request alternative assignments for their child. Check whether your school has an alternative assignment policy.

3 CAMPAIGN!



Organize a letter-writing campaign with friends, fellow parents, students, and community members. Write to the school principal, superintendent, and/or school board, urging them to follow a thorough review process to deal with a complaint, and to retain the book. Emphasize the importance of protecting the freedom to read and the educational value of the book as a whole.



Write to your local press to inform them of the situation and invite them to cover the story. Consider writing an opinion editorial or letter to the editor, explaining to your community why the book challenge is unreasonable and why the book should be kept.

Advocacy Tip #10



Search our site for informative articles on past challenges to the book in question or for challenges based on the same objections (i.e., violence, sex/sexuality, islamophobia, etc.).



In 2015, efforts by parents to remove Stephen Chbosky's **The Perks of Being a Wallflower** from a Connecticut 9th grade curriculum were overturned after one parent fought back.

4 PUBLICIZE!



Post on social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and Tumblr about the book challenge and why you think the book should be kept. Social media can be an extremely effective advocacy tool, particularly platforms that allow for comprehensive discussion.



Alert your local press. Organize a group of allies to submit opinion letters to your local newspaper, expressing support for the book



Distribute fliers and any relevant NCAC informational materials available on our website. Feel free to source information from our First Amendment in Schools guide and our FAQs.

SAMPLE LETTER (PARENTS)

Dear **[Principal/School Administrator/Board Chair/Librarian]**,

I am writing to express concern about efforts to remove **[Book Title]** from the **[curriculum/shelves]** at **[School/Library Name]**. I understand that the book has been challenged because of objections to _____.

As a parent and advocate of the right of children to read, I believe removing **[Book Title]** solely based on these objections would be a terrible disservice to your students. I have read **[Book Title]** and I think it is a valuable book for students to read because _____.

I strongly urge you to keep this book in the **[curriculum/shelves]** at **[School/Library Name]** and to uphold the freedom to read for all students in our community. The Supreme Court has ruled that the right of all children to read books free of viewpoint discrimination is guaranteed by the First Amendment. Not everyone in our community shares the views of those opposed to **[Book Title]** and the challengers have no right to impose their views on others or demand that the educational program reflect their personal preferences.

If parents do not want their children to read a particular book, then they are free to request an alternative assignment. But they may not infringe upon the rights of others to read the book or tell other parents what their children may read.

Furthermore, restricting access to the book will only chill free expression in our community. It will discourage **[teachers/librarians]** from introducing new ideas and expanding children's minds. It will dissuade children from asking questions, for fear of addressing "offensive" or "inappropriate" topics. It will teach them that fear and ignorance supersede the quest for knowledge.

Reading is the safest way for kids to learn about the world in which they are growing up, and doing so in a classroom setting, with guided discussion, will only help them anticipate and appreciate real-life problems.

I therefore urge you to ensure that **[District Name]** policies are followed and that **[Book Title]** remains available to students at **[School /Library Name]**.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

Fun Ways To Celebrate The Right To Read

Start
a banned book
club.

Make posters!
using the covers,
characters or fun quotes
from challenged books.

Organize
a book exchange
at school.

Chalk the sidewalks
with messages
supporting your right to
read challenged books.

Organize a book drive !
Donate used books
or use the drive
to buy challenged books
to donate to
the school library instead.



Celebrate Banned Books Week!

Every year, NCAC and its partners organize activities to celebrate the right to read banned books.

Visit www.bannedbooksweek.org for the theme and activities planned for each year.

SHARE YOUR STORIES WITH US!

We hope this action kit helps you defend book challenges in your community.

Send a note to ncac@ncac.org, with subject line: "KRRP Action Kit."

We love celebrating local book defenders on our website!

THE KIDS' RIGHT TO READ PROJECT (KRRP)

The Kids' Right to Read Project was co-founded by the National Coalition Against Censorship and the American Booksellers for Free Expression to offer support, education, and direct advocacy to people facing book challenges.

PARTNERING ORGANIZATIONS



The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC)

NCAC was founded in 1974. It is an alliance of more than 50 literary, artistic, religious, educational, human rights and civil liberties groups, united in their support of freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression. NCAC works with young people, educators, writers, artists, and others confronting censorship debates in their own communities.

The Youth Free Expression Program educates the public at large about the dangers of censorship, and empowers young people to freely express themselves. YFEP's key initiative, the Kids' Right to Read Project (KRRP), is a unique grassroots advocacy project that protects students' rights to read in schools, libraries, and bookstores across the country.



The American Booksellers for Free Expression (ABFE)

ABFE is the bookseller's voice in the fight against censorship. Founded by the American Booksellers Association in 1990, ABFE's mission is to promote and protect the free exchange of ideas, particularly those contained in books, by opposing restrictions on the freedom of speech; issuing statements on significant free expression controversies; participating in legal cases involving First Amendment rights; collaborating with other groups with an interest in free speech; and providing education about the importance of free expression to booksellers, other members of the book industry, politicians, the press, and the public.



Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF)

CBLDF is a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection of the First Amendment rights of the comic art form and its community of retailers, creators, publishers, librarians, and readers. The CBLDF provides legal referrals, representation, advice, assistance, and education in furtherance of these goals. The CBLDF assists libraries in challenges to comics and graphic novels by providing letters of support, and access to resources to defend graphic novels when they are challenged.

KRRP Supporters



The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

The NCTE supports intellectual freedom at all educational levels. An 80,000-member organization devoted to improving the teaching and learning of English and faced with challenges to teaching materials or methods, the NCTE offers support, advice, and resources to teachers and schools faced with challenges to teaching materials or methods. The NCTE has developed a Statement on Censorship and Professional Guidelines in recognition that English and language arts teachers face daily decisions about teaching materials and methods.



The American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom (ALA-OIF)

Established in 1967, the OIF is charged with implementing ALA policies concerning the concept of intellectual freedom as embodied in the Library Bill of Rights, the Association's basic policy on free access to libraries and library materials. The goal of the office is to educate librarians and the general public about the nature and importance of intellectual freedom in libraries.

BECOME A KRRP SUPPORTER!

To join the KRRP Team, please contact:

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Youth Free Expression Program Associate

Email: abena@ncac.org



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This guide can be found at: www.ncac.org/resources

To request versions for print, email: ncac@ncac.org

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