



THE SHOW MUST GO ON

A Toolkit for Organizing Against Theatre Censorship in Public Schools

An initiative of the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), the Youth Free Expression Project (YFEP) defends and advances the free expression rights of minors. To grow into thoughtful, mature and informed adults, young people need the freedom to explore, learn, and question. But this freedom is often undermined by school officials, politicians, community leaders, and even parents, seeking to shield young people from controversial, disturbing, or "inappropriate" content in books, art, and entertainment. Putting young people in a protective bubble is not only impossible, it is counterproductive and dangerous. YFEP confronts the kinds of censorship young people encounter on a daily basis and promotes policies that emphasize informing, educating, and guiding young people so that they can safely navigate and participate in contemporary culture.

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Censorship of the theatre has existed since its emergence as an art form.

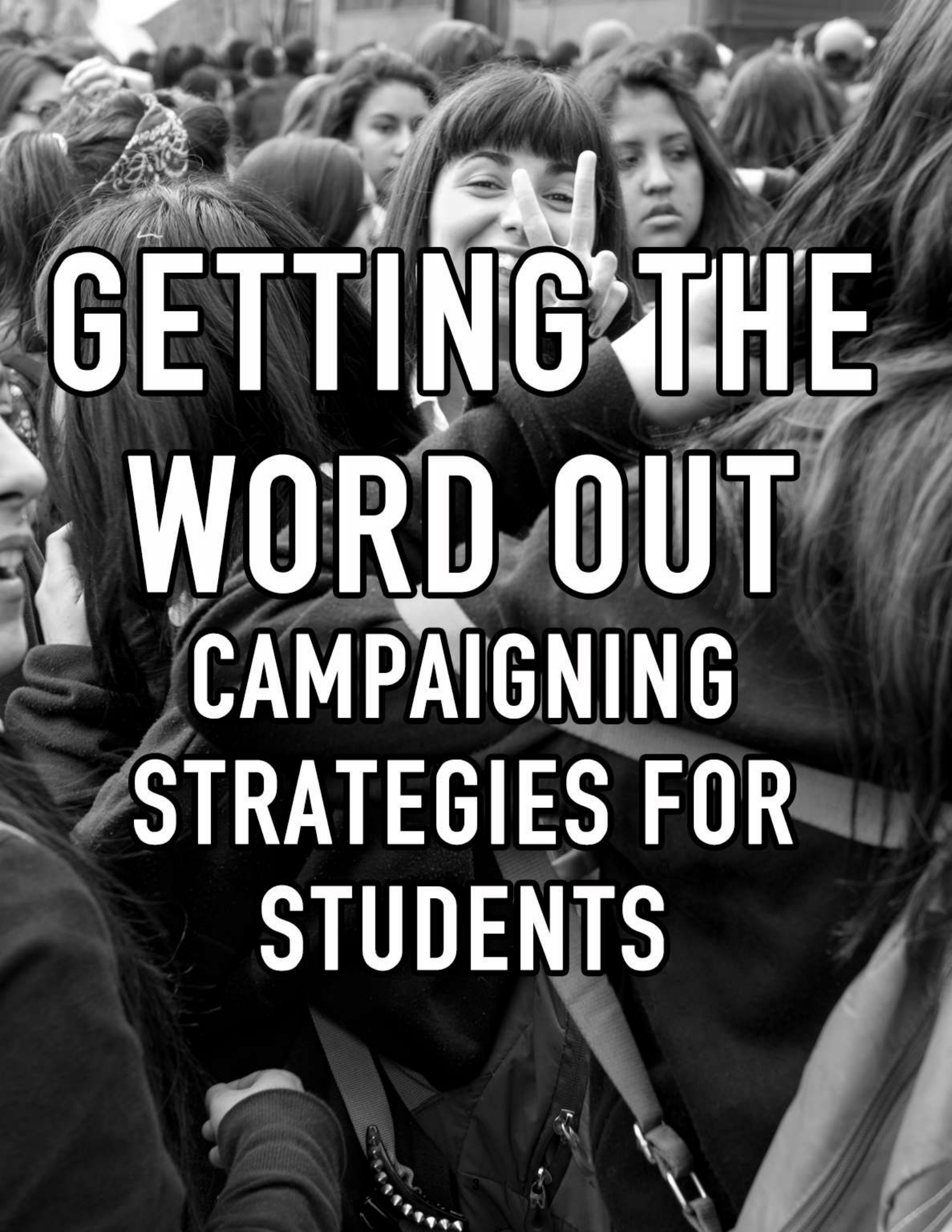
From *Oedipus Rex* to *Cabaret*, some of the most artistically rich theatre has been disturbing, subversive, transformative, and often a target of censorship.

Today, in the United States, censorship controversies around performance most frequently occur in schools. Challenges to drama productions come from parents, community members, or school officials.

In these situations, students can effectively resist censorship. As school employees, teachers may be reluctant to oppose the decision of their principal or superintendent no matter how strongly they believe a particular play should be produced. Students, on the other hand, are free to defend their right to free access to educational materials and their right to artistic expression.

This toolkit is designed to provide students with the resources to navigate tensions in local communities and lead the fight for artistic freedom.

What follows are suggestions about how to proceed in responding to the call for censorship. Each individual censorship case is unique, and, as such, you may need to adapt these ideas to fit your specific situation.



GETTING THE WORD OUT CAMPAIGNING STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS

I. Clarify your facts. Figure out:

Who complained. Did a group of parents take issue with the play? A local church group? Was it the principal? Figure out where these complaints are coming from.

What the complaints were. Did community members take issue with the play on moral or religious grounds? Were they concerned about the use of the “f-word” or “n-word”? Did they fear the topics were too mature for high schoolers, or for other possible members of the audience, to handle?

Whether there were any formal, written complaints. Did the complainants send emails to the principal, superintendent, drama teacher, or school board detailing what, exactly, their qualms with the play were? Try to find those – know who and what you’re fighting.

Whether your school district has any formal policies for selection, and reconsideration of dramatic materials. Many school districts have official policies governing the selection of and challenges to instructional materials. This may be less common for drama programs, particularly those that are extracurricular, but it’s still worth checking out whether the school has a formal policy – and whether it was followed. Consult specimen examples of school policies on play selection for a guide on recommended public school board policies on selection of instructional dramatic materials.

Who made the decision to cancel the play. Was it the school principal? The school board superintendent? The Board of Education?

Whether the school had previously approved the play. Did the principal or superintendent sign off on the play? Was this confirmation oral or written?

Whether the rights to the play were officially secured through a contract. Schools must often buy the rights to perform certain plays through licensing houses, signing formal contracts with these houses before a play even begins rehearsal.



II. Develop and practice your argument.

Check to see what awards the play has received in the past — particularly from such high-profile awards bodies as Drama Desk, Pulitzer, or Tony. These awards speak to the dramatic and artistic merit of the work.

Find out where the play is being performed throughout the country. Prove that the play has educational merit. You should especially keep an eye out for any other middle or high schools performing this play, particularly in your state or region. You can make a stronger case for performing the play if you show that your play is being performed in schools, towns, and communities like yours.

Make sure you can concisely, persuasively explain your aims as a student fighting for your freedom to perform. Prepare a few lines about why performing in this play, or any play, is meaningful to you. For practice, look to the Advocacy Game, an improvisational exercise that's specifically designed to help art activists refine their public presentation skills. In the game, scene partners are either "Askers" or a "Target Audience." The "Askers" are seeking support while members of the "Target Audience" resist giving it. The game prepares activists for pushback.

III. Mobilize against the cancellation.

Create a group within your school dedicated to fighting the cancellation. Censors are often well-organized, armed with earmarked passages or scenes that they've deemed objectionable. Fight fire with fire. Create a local anti-censorship "coalition" of students — it can be as small as three or four people. Try to find a teacher or faculty advisor for the group. For more detailed tips on activism and organizing opposition to censorship, visit [Organize Locally](#).

Make signage to hang around and distribute at your school. Think of making brightly colored, informative, and clever flyers to hang in public places. Craft a recognizable logo for your group. You may need to seek out permission to post or distribute flyers on school property.

Make your school at large aware of the situation. Contact the editor of your school newspaper to run a story about the play's cancellation and your group's counter-censorship campaign. Does your school have a radio or television station? Consider placing Public Service Announcements on either, including the name, purpose, and next meeting of your group.

Identify adult allies within your community. To school officials, the voices of parents, community or church leaders, or educators may be persuasive. Identify the parents in your community who believe in, and want to stand up for, your production. Ask your friends what their parents think of the matter. Are they on your side? If so, figure out whether they'd be willing to speak on your, or the drama teacher's, behalf.

Write letters to the school principal, superintendent, school board, or local paper. Write a letter urging school officials, especially those complicit in the play's cancellation, to follow a thorough review process to deal with community complaints, and to reinstate the play. In your letter, emphasize the importance of protecting the freedom to perform and the educational value of drama. For useful templates, check out some sample letters NCAC has created for students protesting drama censorship, or *Dear Ms. Smith*, a tool designed to help both educators and students create statements supporting the value of theatre education.

III. Mobilize against the cancellation.

Voice your concerns at school board meetings, or get a parental ally to do so. Visit your school district's website to find out when the next board meeting is. You may have the opportunity to put an item on the board meeting agenda, or to share your opinions in an "open forum" part of a school board meeting. Prepare your comments in advance in the meeting, and be clear and concise. Share personal stories. Be prepared to quote teachers, parents, or fellow students about what this play has meant to them. Visit Thank, Ask, Explain for a how-to guide for creating an in-person advocacy presentation.

Organize yourselves on social media. Galvanize support through digital platforms.

Facebook: Students in Maiden, NC created a private Facebook group that allowed them to organize, coordinate meeting times, and strategize when their production of *Almost, Maine* was cancelled due to "sexually-explicit overtones".

Twitter: Consider creating a Twitter page for your anti-censorship efforts if it doesn't have one already. It's important to establish a centralized digital presence which, in turn, will give you a platform from which you can broadcast messages about this incident, publicize meeting times, and link to your Facebook page.

Petitions: Change.org and iPetition are two high-profile petition websites that allow you to gain signature support throughout your local community.

Email: Tell your fellow group members to send emails to others they know in the community who would care about this cause. These emails should suggest action items in support of mobilizing – they should ask readers to join your Facebook group, follow you on Twitter, or sign your petition.

Organize a "censored drama day" or an "artistic freedom day" for your school. It's common for many student groups to hold "days" in support of certain social causes — To Write Love on Her Arms and the Day of Silence are just a few examples. Consider organizing a day in support of artistic freedom, where students can show support in such simple ways as wearing pins that say "I SUPPORT THE FREEDOM TO PERFORM".



IV. Transform the controversy into a teachable moment.

Would-be censors often have concerns about the morals of the community at large when pushing for the cancellation of a play – they don't want homosexuality, for example, to be “forced upon” unsuspecting audience members. When a school production of *Rent* was challenged in Trumbull, CT, school officials feared that students weren't “prepared” to discuss the sensitive topics of AIDS and homosexuality in the play. Others, like the adults who cancelled a production of *Spamalot* in South Williamsport, PA, didn't want student performers to be put in potentially awkward positions when they were enacting, say, gay characters. To assuage such concerns, consider these two options:

Suggest talkbacks. Instrumental to the success of *Rent* in Trumbull, CT was the suggestion that students should hold talkbacks with audience members after each performance. Hosting talkbacks in which students and drama teachers answer questions from community members can help diffuse community tensions in service of positive outcomes.

Work with educators to create study guides. In CT, when August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* was cancelled by a superintendent because of racist language, the play's faculty director created a study guide for students. This study guide was created to ensure that they'd understand the context of the use of language. Work with the faculty head of your drama club or program to create a resource or tool like this. It's a gesture that would show complainants that you're actively trying to foster constructive dialogue about the play, in addition to proving the educational worth of theatre.

V. Publicize the cancellation and your own anti-censorship efforts.

Take your social media campaign beyond local mobilization — gain followers. Create support in numbers. Social media platforms can serve twin purposes, allowing you to get the word out about your campaign in addition to letting you organize. When considering how to use Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube to publicize, as outlined below, also consider that you can post links to your petitions through these platforms, allowing your efforts to reach wider audiences.

Facebook: When faced with the cancellation of *Rent*, students in Trumbull, CT began a Facebook page to spread news about their situation. The page ended up amassing thousands of likes, and word of the cancellation spread like wildfire across the country.

Twitter: Twitter, with its short-form way of broadcasting messages, can provide a robust opportunity for engaging new audience members in your cause. Consider using the Twitter page for your movement or your personal Twitter page to reach out to audiences beyond your immediate community. Follow the Twitter accounts of influential theatre professionals, organizations, and activists. Craft up a name for your anti-censorship campaign — over in Maiden, students titled theirs “Almost Maiden” — and make it into a hashtag (#AlmostMaiden) that you can attach to each of your tweets. Encourage students to tweet the hashtag from their personal accounts, too, and see if the hashtag starts to spread. This will create chatter and buzz around your efforts.

YouTube: You can film videos of your performances or rehearsals and post them to YouTube, directing traffic to the videos through Tweets, Facebook updates, or emails. It’s particularly useful to weave your YouTube videos into your larger social media “strategy”. In addition to filming scenes from the play, consider making a short campaign video where your fellow student-performers state, creatively, why they deserve the freedom to perform. If your school has a film club, ask them for help.

Email: Email’s power and potential shouldn’t be underestimated. Effective email campaigns ask people to do things — to read an article, sign a petition, watch a video, make a donation, “like” your Facebook page, or follow you on Twitter. Supplement your social media strategy with pointed emails to community members and allies asking them for their support through spreading the word.



V. Publicize the cancellation and your own anti-censorship efforts.

Contact the local press. You may also want to write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper or contact your local radio station about this case of censorship, keeping in mind that you're walking a fine line — you don't want to jeopardize the security or reputation of your drama teacher or advisor, who is employed by the school. Press attention on the local level often leads to statewide attention, which, in turn, allows national organizations to gain access to these incidents of censorship.

Contact the national press and arts or theatre journalists. Through word-of-mouth, stories covered in the local press occasionally receive national attention. Such high-profile publications as *The New York Times*, *Playbill*, *Slate*, and *ThinkProgress* have featured stories on play cancellations and theatre censorship time and time again, allowing local stories to reach national audiences. This creates the exact kind of pressure that often helps get plays reinstated.

The background of the page is a grayscale photograph of a large crowd of people at a protest or demonstration. Several protest signs are visible, including one that says "WE DEMAND", another that says "JOBS FOR ALL NOW!", and others with partially legible text like "AN FEI", "LAW", "NOW", "VOTING", "GREAT", "HAVE", and "RIGHTS". The people in the crowd are diverse in age and appearance, and many are looking towards the camera or slightly away.

VI. Reach out to civil liberties, diversity, or First Amendment organizations.

Find local or statewide organizations dedicated to your cause. When *Spamalot* was cancelled in Pennsylvania due to its “homosexual themes”, the drama teacher forged alliances with local and statewide non-profits dedicated to protecting the rights of LGBTQ citizens in the state. Forging strong relationships with allies will bolster your case, particularly when a play has been cancelled due to what we call “viewpoint discrimination” — that is, an instance in which a complainant wants to privilege his or her moral viewpoints over those of others in the community.

For legal matters, contact your local or state ACLU affiliates. The American Civil Liberties Union has sometimes threatened legal action against school officials who cancel or censor plays due to content objections. In 2011, a scene depicting same-sex love in *Almost, Maine* was stamped out of the play in a Maryland school until the ACLU of Maryland stepped in, writing a letter to the school to reinstate the play. Contact your local ACLU chapter if you’d like to mobilize against your school but don’t have the legal knowledge to do so.

Find national organizations. There are numerous national organizations, publications, and theatre professionals — see a comprehensive list under ADDITIONAL RESOURCES — devoted to protecting the right to free expression in school drama programs. In some cases, getting the attention of these organizations can often create the kind of pressure that forces local school officials outside their tunnel vision, bringing more weight and urgency to these cases of censorship. Take a look at some of the letters the National Coalition Against Censorship has written to schools and school boards about theatre censorship cases.

VII. If you still want to perform your play and the school is unlikely to change its decision, reach out to alternative venues.

If the school isn't budging to your requests, don't worry. The show must go on. Performing the play at an alternate venue sends a potent statement to your school – you're persistent enough not to fall to the school's attempts to censor you, and others agree the production is worthwhile.

Contact some local theaters and see if they'd be willing to host your production. This is precisely what students in Maiden, NC did when faced with the cancellation of *Almost, Maine*.

Reach out to churches to see if they would be willing to host your play.

Contact universities in your area, especially the drama departments, to see if they have performance spaces available on their campuses.

Consider whether there are any **public parks** or other shared community spaces where a performance could be held.

Don't restrict yourself to just your town — when students who wanted to perform in Wilton, CT were barred from performing *Voices in Conflict*, they were able to perform it in New York following national press attention. As more organizations, press outlets, and people become aware of your situation, consider this as an option.

Keep in mind, of course, that securing alternate spaces often entails getting funding. **If funding your production becomes a problem, crowdfunding online is a good option.** Kickstarter and IndieGoGo are two useful platforms for securing money. You can easily fold your Kickstarter and IndieGoGo campaigns into your social media presence, asking people to donate through Facebook, Twitter, or email.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Organizations

The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC): Founded in 1974, NCAC is an alliance of over 50 national non-profit organizations, including literary, artistic, religious, educational, professional, labor, and civil liberties groups, united in their support of freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression. NCAC works with teachers, educators, writers, artists, and others around the country dealing with censorship debates in their own communities; it educates its members and the public at large about the dangers of censorship and how to oppose them; and it advances policies that promote and protect freedom of expression and democratic values.

Dramatists Legal Defense Fund: The Dramatists Legal Defense Fund is organized and operated exclusively for charitable and educational purposes. Specifically, the DLDF conducts charitable and educational activities that advance the progress of arts for the enjoyment and benefit of the public; promote the right to freedom of speech as guaranteed in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, particularly with respect to stage productions; and educate the public and the legal community about the protections afforded under the Copyright Act of 1976, the interactions between such protections and the First Amendment protection of free speech, the artistic and lawful importance of a robust public domain, and the public benefits that arise from such protections.

Educational Theatre Association: Founded in 1929, the EdTA is a professional association for theatre education. As the professional association for theatre educators, EdTA provides leadership for the International Thespian Society, an honorary organization for high school and middle school theatre students. The ITS offers everything from varied performance venues to college audition opportunities to formal awards and scholarships. EdTA is also responsible for holding the massive week-long International Thespian Festival, which hosts over 2500 students and their teachers from theatre programs throughout the world.

Howard Sherman: Howard Sherman is a respected theatre administrator and producer who also works as an arts advocate. Through his blog, he has successfully drawn national attention to various incidents of theatre censorship in public schools.

Student Advocacy Works (SAW): Student Advocacy Works (SAW) is a grassroots, student-led theatre education advocacy initiative sponsored by EdTA and made up of thespians from throughout the country.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Statements

Arts Education for America's Students, A Shared Endeavor: A statement created and endorsed by twelve national arts and education organizations (including EdTA), outlining the importance of high quality arts education and those responsible for providing it to students.

Censorship in Schools: Learning, Speaking, and Thinking Freely: The First Amendment in Schools: A collection of fact sheets on free expression in schools addressing a wide variety of censorship issues that students, educators, and parents face.

Educational Theatre Association Freedom of Expression Statement: In 2008, the Educational Theatre Association (EdTA), in collaboration the American Alliance for Theatre and Education, and the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, created a Freedom of Expression Statement. The statement provides guidelines and support for theatre educators in the play selection process and policy guidance for school and district administrators.

A guide to previous court rulings about students and the First Amendment: A list of some prominent cases dealing with students and their free speech rights in public institutions.

List of recently banned or challenged plays in American high schools and middle schools: A sampling of some works of theatre that have been challenged in public schools.

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The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) is an alliance of national non-profit organizations, including religious, educational, professional, artistic, labor and civil liberties groups. United by a conviction that freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression are essential to a free society, NCAC educates about the dangers of censorship and how to oppose it.

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