

RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES TO INSTRUCTIONAL AND LIBRARY MATERIALS

Guidelines for Policy Development

The proper selection, adoption and evaluation of instructional materials is a key responsibility of public school administrators, many of whom face time constraints and limited resources.

NCAC encourages school districts to adopt and scrupulously follow clear written policies on instructional materials to ensure that students have access to materials of literary, artistic and educational merit. The following is a step-by-step guide for drafting instructional materials policies and important considerations for how complaints should be filed, considered, and adjudicated.

Selection and Adoption

Instructional materials policies should begin by outlining a process and criteria for the selection and adoption of instructional materials. Criteria can include the material's relevance to the subject matter, recommended grade level, and format. These criteria should form the basis for reviewing challenged materials later, to ensure that decisions about instruction advance fundamental pedagogical goals and not subjective interests.

Handling Challenges to Instructional Materials

Step 1: Invite complainants to an informal meeting

Most concerns about instructional materials can be redressed through informal conversations with teachers to explain their educational purpose.

Listen courteously and refer complainants to the teacher involved who can best address any concerns about sensitive material. Teachers are also trained to assess their students' intellectual maturity and competence to critically engage with the material.

If the complainant is not satisfied, invite them to file initiate the formal reconsideration process by submitting a written request for reconsideration.

Step 2: Record all complaints in writing

A written form helps reviewers discuss the allegedly objectionable portions of the work. They also increase transparency and help to explain why the objectionable portions do not justify removal of the work.

Forms can also limit the scope of challenges. For instance, if a parent objects to nudity and there is no form, a reviewer may read the work and decide to raise the issue of foul language—an issue that no one is actually complaining about.

Good forms should ask complainants to:

- i. Identify themselves and their relation to the school district (e.g. parent, teacher, local resident).
- ii. Establish their familiarity with the work. Complainants should have read the entire book to ensure objectionable portions are examined in their proper context. They should be able to specifically describe their objections and cite the pages where they occur.
- iii. Explain why the work is inappropriate for the assigned age level, taking into consideration the teachers' justification for using it.
- iv. Offer an idea for an alternative assignment of comparable educational quality. This helps reviewers assess the complainants' judgment and motives.

*** Note:** Some forms ask complainants to decide whether they want to ban the work entirely, ban portions of the work, reassign the work to older grade levels, or restrict access only to the complainants' children. This is a double-edged sword. While it can help mitigate the effects of a successful challenge, it may also make reviewers more likely to censor materials.

Step 3: Convene a diverse committee of educators and competent stakeholders to review the material and recommend a decision to the administration.

Administrators may lack both the time and expertise necessary to carefully review library and classroom materials (e.g. a principal who was formerly a math teacher may have trouble assessing the value and accuracy of a controversial history textbook or lack training in library management). As the public faces of the school or district, administrators may also be more susceptible than teachers to public pressures.

To ensure that educational considerations are valued above subjective opinion, committees should predominantly comprise of teachers and library media specialists. Ultimately, a diverse body of qualified educational professionals is less likely to succumb to the weight of bias or conflict of interest than a single or small group of administrators.

For these reasons, a sound policy will create a diverse review committee that includes:

- i. **At least one librarian.** Librarians are normally best suited to assess the educational value of non-curricular materials and to appreciate their role in creating a diverse library catalog.
- ii. **Several teachers,** ideally including at least one teacher in the relevant subject. For instance, a science teacher should serve on the committee when a science textbook is challenged. This ensures that committee members will be informed about the importance of the book to instruction in the specific subject and to curriculum as a whole.
- iii. **At least one school or district-level administrator.** Administrators have more knowledge about a school's history and community relations and their presence can bolster a committee's credibility.
- iv. **Trained students.** We strongly encourage districts to include high school students on committees. This ensures that student voices are being heard and can help prevent censorship of popular material.
- v. **Some community members** who are not employed by the school district. These members are free from job-related pressures and will not be subject to professional retribution in the event that administrators disagree with the committee's decision. They can therefore be less susceptible to internal pressures and biases. Still, it is vital that community voices not outnumber those of trained educators.

***Note:** We also strongly encourage districts to make all committee meetings open to the public and to allow members of the public, including students, to submit statements conveying their opinion of the challenged materials.

Step 4: Establish clear and objective review criteria under district policy for the committee to follow.

Challenges to instructional materials should rarely (if ever) succeed in cases where the materials were selected to fulfill clear educational goals. Policies can instruct the committee to examine whether materials meet the objectives of the selection process and should seek to remove subjectivity by instructing the committee to consider only *educationally relevant criteria*, including:

- a. The accuracy, completeness, or subjectivity of the work (for textbooks).
- b. The role the work plays in the curriculum.

- c. The opinions of professional reviewers and educational experts. Awards and favorable reviews frequently indicate that a book is educationally valuable.
- d. Age appropriateness. This refers to whether or not students of the relevant age levels have the maturity and literary skills to comprehend a book's message. Policy should mention that the mere presence of a specific theme does not necessarily render a book inappropriate for a given age if the theme is presented in an accessible manner.
- e. The popularity of the work among students (for library books). Popularity indicates that a work is valuable to students.
- f. The length of time for which the school has been using the book in classrooms or libraries.
- g. The presence of highly salient themes and socio-political issues.

Policy should also ideally *discourage* the committee from considering subjective criteria such as:

- a. Whether or not committee members personally consider the book to be offensive.
- b. Whether or not the work's message contradicts "community values."
- c. Personal characteristics of the author.

APPENDIX A

A.1. Sample Request for Reconsideration of a Work

Author _____
 Paperback____ Hardcover _____
 Title _____
 Publisher (if known) _____
 Request initiated by _____
 Telephone _____
 Address _____
 City / State / Zip _____

Complainant:

Name: _____

Organization (if any) _____

Relationship to School (parent/administrator/etc):

-
1. Have you been able to discuss this work with the teacher or librarian who ordered it or who used it?
 ___ Yes ___ No
 2. What do you understand to be the general purpose for using this work?

- Provide support for a unit in the curriculum?
___ Yes ___ No
 - Provide a learning experience for the reader in one kind of literature? ___ Yes ___ No
 - Other _____
3. Did the general purpose for the use of the work, as described by the teacher or librarian, seem a suitable one to you?
___ Yes ___ No
If not, please explain. _____

4. What do you think is the general purpose of the author in this book?

5. In what ways do you think a work of this nature is not suitable for the use the teacher or librarian wishes to carry out?

6. Have you been able to learn the students' response to this work?
___ Yes ___ No
7. What response did the students give?

8. Have you been able to learn from your school library what book reviewers or other students of literature have written about this work?
___ Yes ___ No
9. Would you like the teacher or librarian to give you a written summary of what book reviewers and other students have written about this book or film?
___ Yes ___ No
10. Do you have negative reviews of the book?
___ Yes ___ No
11. Where were they published?

12. Would you be willing to provide summaries of the critical reviews you have collected?
___ Yes ___ No
13. What would you like your library/school to do about this work?
___ Do not assign/lend it to my child.
___ Return it to the staff selection committee/department for reevaluation. ___ Other—Please explain

14. Are there a particular works you would recommend in place of the challenged material that would convey as valuable a picture and perspective of the subject treated?

Signature _____
Date _____

A.2 Sample Review Policies

1. Dubuque Community Schools, Iowa

This Iowa school district has a [spectacular policy](#) for committee compositions and hearings. (see pages 5-6).

- **Public input:** Dubuque District requires that decisions be made “in open session” and allows high school students selected by their peers to serve on the committee.
- **Challenge criteria:** The policy also prevents frivolous challenges, as the committee is not required to hear complaints to works that have previously been challenged.
- **Safeguards:** Finally it helps prevent self-censorship by teachers and librarians who fear reprisal for selecting works that are later challenged and removed: "A decision to sustain a challenge shall not be interpreted as a judgment of irresponsibility on the part of the professionals involved in the original selection or use of the material."

2. Lexington County Public Schools, Massachusetts

- **Academic Freedom:** Lexington County Public Schools’ policy begins with a statement affirming the district’s commitment to academic freedom and procedural fairness “to safeguard the legitimate interests of the schools and to exhibit by appropriate example the basic objectives of a democratic society as set forth in the Constitutions of the United States and the State.”
- **Access pending review:** The policy prohibits the removal of challenged materials pending a final decision by a review committee.
- **Challenge Limitations:** This policy also restricts repeat challenges by barring the district from reviewing the same complaint more than once in three years.

This guide was prepared with supporting material from the National Council of Teachers of English, the American Library Association and various other educational institutions. For more information, please contact the National Coalition Against Censorship: ncac@ncac.org.