

# National Coalition Against Censorship

Julie Scoskie, Director  
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Dear Ms. Scoskie,

A former student in the adult continuing education program at Jefferson County Public School, Mr. Ele Grigsby, has brought it to our attention that he had to drop out of a class he signed up for as he was banned from mentioning the name of his website. As the class was on web search optimization tools, referring to the website was central to the educational experience. Yet a question he asked the facilitator was flagged for profanity and Mr. Grigsby was informed that in order for his post to be allowed, he would need to remove part of his URL: the word “bastard.” (Mr. Grigsby’s website is <http://www.olbastard.com>). We understand that the school subcontracts online continuing education classes to Ed2Go, a company that supplies the facilitators, online platform technology and tech support for classes like “Search Engine Optimization,” the class which Mr. Grigsby took. Nevertheless, the classes are offered through a public school, whose First Amendment responsibilities include the obligation not to censor content arbitrarily.

While we sympathize with the goal of discouraging gratuitous profanity or disruptive comments in the classroom, removing “bad” words mechanically with no consideration of context or meaning itself disrupts the educational process. In this case it has caused serious harm to the student, preventing him from learning in the course. It has also displayed the imprecision of the web filter. In fact, the sense in which “bastard” appears in Mr. Grigsby’s URL was that of “a rough, coarse cut file.” (Mr. Grigsby sells bastard files and has a website discussing them). The word “bastard” has several dictionary definitions, beside that of “child born out of wedlock,” including not only a “coarse cut file,” but definitions such as “false” (as in “The architecture was bastard Gothic”), abnormal or irregular shape or size (“bastard quartz”), or having the appearance of (“a bastard Michelangelo”).

The filtering mechanism used by Ed2Go would not only eliminate any mention of an acclaimed book like *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison, it would censor a conversation about architecture or gemstones. This kind of internet filtering directly interferes with the goal of the educational process. To arbitrarily delete or block comments due to a word, while disregarding its meaning as used in context, interferes with students’ abilities to have open conversations within the context of the learning objectives set by the instructor. In this case, Mr. Grigsby was not able to complete his education with a class for which he paid.

Joan E. Bertin  
Executive Director

## NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors’ Equity Association  
American Association of  
School Administrators  
American Association of  
University Professors  
American Association of  
University Women  
American Booksellers Foundation  
for Free Expression  
American Civil Liberties Union  
American Ethical Union  
American Federation of Teachers  
American Federation of Television  
& Radio Artists  
American Jewish Committee  
American Jewish Congress  
American Library Association  
American Literary Translators  
Association  
American Orthopsychiatric Association  
American Society of Journalists  
& Authors  
Americans United for Separation of  
Church & State  
Association of American Publishers  
Authors Guild  
Catholics for Choice  
Children’s Literature Association  
College Art Association  
The Creative Coalition  
Directors Guild of America  
The Dramatists Guild of America  
First Amendment Lawyers Association  
International Reading Association  
Lambda Legal  
Modern Language Association  
National Center for Science Education  
National Communication Association  
National Council for the Social Studies  
National Council of the Churches  
of Christ  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council of Teachers of English  
National Education Association  
The Newspaper Guild/CWA  
Office of Communication,  
United Church of Christ  
PEN American Center  
People for the American Way  
Planned Parenthood Federation  
of America  
Screen Actors Guild  
Sexuality Information & Education  
Council of the U.S.  
Society of Children’s Book Writers  
& Illustrators  
Student Press Law Center  
Union for Reform Judaism  
Union of Democratic Intellectuals  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
United Methodist Communications,  
United Methodist Church  
Women’s American ORT  
Writers Guild of America, East  
Writers Guild of America, West

The National Coalition Against Censorship urges the school to demand that educational subcontractors eliminate filters that automatically delete comments with profanity independent of context. Please feel free to call 212-807-6222 ex 19 if you wish to discuss this issue, or if we can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

Teresa Koberstein  
Communications & Youth Programs  
National Coalition Against Censorship

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