

Essays on Censorship

1. Libraries Should Reflect Majority Values

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All those who spend taxpayers' money are accountable to the public. (The "public" includes citizens, parents, private groups, and the media.) The public has a right to exercise its right of free speech on how taxpayers' funds are spent and on what standards, to second-guess the judgment of the persons doing the spending, and to remove from office those responsible for any misuse of tax funds. Public supervision and criticism may be annoying, but they must be endured by all those spending tax funds, whether they be Presidents, Congressmen, bureaucrats, military, teachers, librarians, or others.

Since parents have the primary responsibility for the education of their own children, schools should have a decent respect for the parents' beliefs and attitudes. Schools should make every possible effort to avoid offending the religious, ethical, cultural or ethnic values of school children and their parents. Since presumably all educators would agree that [profanity] is not suitable reading for school children, it is clear that the issue over any particular book is one of appropriateness (which is a value judgment), not the First Amendment or "academic freedom."

Make Requirements Flexible

Since thousands of good books and hundreds of important, educational books are easily available, and since a child can read only a small number of books prior to high school graduation, it

is highly unreasonable and intolerant for a school or teacher to force a child to read a particular book as a precondition to graduation or to passing a course. When a book selected as course material or supplementary reading offends the religious, ethical, cultural or ethnic values of a child of his parents, an alternate book should be assigned or recommended which does not so offend. This substitution should be made without embarrassing the child.

This same respect for parental values and the assignment of alternate books should apply when the question is raised as to the assignment of a book at a particular grade level. Many books are appropriate in the upper grades which are not at all appropriate for younger children. Parental decisions about the maturity of their own children should be respected by the schools without embarrassing the child.

Public libraries should adhere to a standard like the Fairness Doctrine which governs television and radio broadcasters; i.e., they have the obligation to seek out and make available books on all sides of controversial issues of public importance. For example, libraries should present a balanced selection of book titles on sensitive current issues such as the morality or nuclear war, women's liberation, basic education, evolution/creationism, Reaganomics, and the Equal Rights Amendment.

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No library buys every book published. Every day in the week, librarians, teachers and school administrators are making decisions to select some books for library shelves and school classrooms while

excluding (censoring) other books. These select-and-exclude decisions can be called “preemptive censorship.”

Important Responsibility

The selection of reading materials is a major responsibility of school and library personnel. Most such personnel have the historical knowledge, fairness, and mature judgment which are necessary to make those decisions. However, the public always has the right to question whether any preemptive censorship is carried out on the basis of the personal political biases of the librarian or teacher, or results from a genuine attempt to give students and the public the wisdom of the ages through time-tested “great books” plus fairness on current controversies.

The public clearly has a First Amendment right to investigate, evaluate and critique the selections and the criteria. If the school board or the library board does not reflect the values of the citizens in the area of its jurisdiction, the voters have the right to change the board members through the political process. That’s an important part of our free, democratic society.