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CRITERIA FOR COMMENTS ON CENSORSHIP

Censorship is a buzz word currently used to create media coverage for certain favored groups which have easy access to the media, while intimidating citizens, taxpayers and parents without such easy access. Here are seven principles by which the public can evaluate "censorship" controversies.

1. 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.

2. 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 of nuclear war, women's liberation, abortion, basic education, evolution/creationism, and Reaganomics.

3. Child pornography (i.e., the use of children in pictures, books or films to perform sex acts or to pose in lewd positions or circumstances) should be absolutely prohibited. In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court held in New York v. Ferber that child pornography is not protected by the First Amendment because the prevention of sexual abuse of children is "a governmental objective of surpassing importance." Laws against child pornography, therefore, must apply equally to everyone including bookstores, theaters, schools, and libraries.

4. 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 schoolchildren and their parents.

5. 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 or his parents, an alternate book should be assigned or recommended which does not so offend. This substitution should be made without embarrassing the child.

6. 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 suitable in the upper grades which are not at all suitable for younger children. Parental decisions about the maturity of their own children should be respected by the schools without embarrassing the child.

7. 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."

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.