PS for 2/21/91

Alabama Parents Win A Round on Textbooks

Parents take heart. It is really possible to win a textbook battle with the public schools. Alabama parents just proved it.

Alabama is a state which has state textbook adoption, that means that the state Board of Education approves the textbooks which may be purchased by local schools with state funds. This past year was the year to select textbooks on home economics.

If you think “home economics” means cooking and sewing, you are far behind the times. Home economics in today’s public-school parlance means classroom courses in such volatile and nonacademic topics as sex, drugs, death, and suicide.

Of the dozens of textbooks submitted by publishers in the current reviewing session, ten were singled out as objectionable by eight members of the State Textbook Committee. When the eight members, on a close vote, found themselves a minority, they filed a minority report.

The minority report is quite a model for other parents to follow. The minority spelled out their objections to the textbooks, respectfully, specifically, and with documentation; so they successfully persuaded the State Board of Education to reject the ten controversial textbooks.

The minority objected to one book because it contained activities that “personalize and dramatize suicide.” Called **Creative Living**, it was criticized by the minority because of its “highly inappropriate and potentially deadly activities.”

This book asks students to share their experiences and feelings about movies, television shows, and books dealing with suicide. The prescribed activities include asking students to research the topic, write a dialogue, develop skits, role play, and discuss and share their feelings about suicide.

The minority asserted that “this type of approach is not in the best interest of the students.” The minority documented their conclusion with the study published a few months ago in the **New England Journal of Medicine**, which concluded that such classroom courses “may have a lethal effect” because some teenage suicides

are imitative and suicides actually increased after teenagers were given information or feature stories about suicide.

Second, the minority objected to five textbooks about sex and AIDS because they "would give students a false sense of security about sex with contraceptives. These texts either fail to give the failure rates of contraceptives or understate the failure rates."

The minority took the position that "truth and accuracy must be the hallmark of any AIDS and sex education instruction," and asserted that the five textbooks did not meet this standard. "Students have a right to know what the risks are," the minority said, and it is incumbent on textbooks that imply a "safe sex" message to "inform students of contraceptive deficiencies so they will not be misled to take lethal risks."

The minority quoted many authorities and concluded that "the use of inaccurate or misleading information about the failure rates of contraceptives could only serve to increase rather than decrease promiscuity, with all its resulting problems."

Third, the minority objected to three textbooks which recommend Eastern religious practices, including Transcendental Meditation, yoga and visualization. The minority report quoted from the World Book Encyclopedia to show the essentially religious and mind-altering elements of such practices.

One of the textbooks actually states that "Meditation is a technique used to alter the state of consciousness." It then instructs the teacher to "practice the relaxation response technique."

The minority concluded that, "by teaching Eastern religious practices, these texts violate the establishment clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution." Furthermore, the minority wrote, "by asking untrained students or teachers to lead students into altered states of consciousness, these texts would violate professional ethical standards."

Fourth, the minority members of the state textbook committee objected to another home economics textbook "because of its grossly misleading presentation of homosexuality." The committee pointed out that the text tried "to present homosexuality in a favorable light by using misleading statements."

And so, the minority on the State Textbook Committee became the majority on the state Board of Education.

Alabama has a long history of parental involvement in the selection of textbooks for public school use. Under state law, the books are made available to the public for a period of time and any parents can read them and file their objections, which are then considered by the state textbook committee and finally by the state Board of Education.

Of course, some people will claim that any expression of opinion by parents is “censorship.” But the law gives parents the right to present their input, and they should exercise it.