Prepared by the Committee on the Right to Read of the National Council of Teachers of English:

Edward R. Gordon, Yale University, Chairman
Martin Steinmann, University of Minnesota,
    Associate Chairman
Harold B. Allen, University of Minnesota
Frank A. Doggett, D. U. Fletcher High School,
    Jacksonville Beach, Florida
Jack Fields, Great Neck South High School,
    New York
Graham S. Frear, St. Olaf College, Minnesota
Robert Gard, Camelback High School,
    Phoenix, Arizona
Frank Ross, Detroit Public Schools, Michigan
Warren Taylor, Oberlin College, Ohio
Consultants to the NCTE committee:

Dan Lacy, American Book Publishers Council
Robert C. McClure, Professor of Law, University of Minnesota
Robert C. McNamara, Jr., American Textbook Publishers Institute
Alan Reitman, American Civil Liberties Union

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Across America today increasing pressures are exerted on schools to restrict the access of students to important and worthwhile books. In many communities attempts have been made to remove literary works from classrooms and school libraries. Certain modern writers, praised by recognized critics and well established in the curriculum, are suddenly charged with seditious sentiment or licentious intent. In familiar classics overt pornography is “discovered.” The attacks extend even to books about writers. Recently a collection of biographies of great philosophers was condemned for including the life of Plato, who in his own writings, it was charged, “talked about free love and communal living and such.”

Any roster of authors whose works are sometimes considered unsuitable for school use begins to read like a random sampling from a “Who’s Who” of distinguished literary figures of the Western world. This partial list is illustrative:

Plato
Geoffrey Chaucer
William Shakespeare
Thomas Mann
Walter Van Tilburg Clark
Nathaniel Hawthorne
John Steinbeck
Ernest Hemingway
William Faulkner
Henry David Thoreau
J. D. Salinger
Archibald MacLeish
Mark Twain
Walt Whitman
Aldous Huxley
Thomas Wolfe

The immediate results of such attacks are varied. At times school boards and administrators have defended the teachers, their use of materials under attack, and the students' right of access to the materials. At other times, however, special committees have been appointed to call out, for example, “twentieth century trash.”
Teachers have been summarily reprimanded for assigning certain major literary works even to selected mature students. Only after initiating court action have some teachers been able to retain their positions.

Not as sensational, but perhaps more important, are the long range results. Merely from fear of such attacks, schools have removed enduring books from libraries and classrooms. Many students continue their "education" in a climate hostile to free inquiry, with limited access to important literary documents. Dedicated and able students of English considering public school teaching as a career must find little encouragement in this atmosphere of restriction and fear.

The problem here is not with a small lunatic fringe, anti-intellectual and super-moral, that will always function in a society which guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The concern rather is with the increasing frequency and force of attacks by others, both individuals and groups, and with the subsequent "fall out" that affects an area much larger than the target schools. In the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Education Association, the American Library Association, as well as in the publishing industry and among writers themselves, informed observers agree: the pressures are great; the danger is increasing.

The material that follows is divided into two sections. The first on "The Right to Read" is addressed to parents and community leaders. Separately printed by NCTE, it may be obtained in quantity for distribution. In the last section, "A Course of Action," are Council recommendations for establishing professional committees in each school to set up procedures for book selection, to work for community support, and to review complaints against books.

An open letter to the citizens of our country from the National Council of Teachers of English:

THE RIGHT TO READ

It seems to me unlikely that a future citizen of a free country can be developed by education, in these days... without the devoted study of great literature. Such study is probably essential because for many people a sense of values must be felt, not proved by argumentation. For these people, it seems to me, not philosophy but poetry—using the word in its widest sense—poetry alone can first open the doors of discrimination. As a rule emotional reactions—the sharpening or the blunting of our sense of values—are determined at an early age. For these reasons, you who teach literature in our schools and colleges have a big responsibility for the future of this republic.

President James B. Conant, Harvard University; in an address to the Modern Language Association of America, 1940.

Where suspicion fills the air and holds scholars in line for fear of their jobs, there can be no exercise of the free intellect... A problem can no longer be pursued with impunity to its edges. Fear stalks the classroom. The teacher is no longer a stimulant to adventurous thinking; she becomes instead a pipe line for safe and sound information. A deadening dogma takes the place of free inquiry. Instruction tends to become sterile; pursuit of knowledge is discouraged; discussion often leaves off where it should begin.

Teachers of English accept willingly the challenge from President Conant. Many are stifled, however, in the very atmosphere which Justice Douglas condemns. Pressures against books in classrooms and libraries are undermining education. Although in this statement we cannot set up a legal defense of the right of trained teachers to determine the best and most challenging reading for their students, we can affirm their professional right and responsibility to do so. We want to help create a climate in which teachers are free to teach and students are free to learn, a climate conducive to open inquiry and responsible discussion of any and all questions related to the ethical and cultural welfare of mankind.

The right of any individual to read is basic to democratic society. This right is based on the only tenable assumption for democratic living: that the educated free man possesses the powers of discrimination and is to be entrusted with the determination of his own actions.

The right to read, like all rights embedded in our constitutional traditions, can be used wisely or foolishly. In many ways education is an effort to improve the quality of the choices which are the exercise of this right. But to deny the opportunity of choice in the fear that it may be unwisely used is to destroy the freedom itself. For this reason, we respect the right of individuals to be selective in their own reading and of individuals and groups to express their views for the guidance of others. But for the same reason, we oppose efforts by individuals or groups to limit the freedom of choice of others or to impose their own standards or tastes upon a community at large.

In selecting books for reading by young people, teachers of English consider the contribution which each work may make to the education of the reader, its aesthetic value, its appropriateness to the curriculum, and its readability both in structure and content for a particular group of students. Many works of literature important in our culture contain isolated elements to which some individuals may object. The literary artist is a seeker after truth, recording in structured form life as he perceives and feels it. As a creator, he must necessarily challenge at times the common beliefs or values of the culture, for creation is the process of identifying new relationships out of which come new meanings. In seeking honestly for meanings behind reality, the artist strives to achieve a work of art which is always basically moral, although not necessarily conventionally moral. Moreover, the value and impact of any literary work must be examined as a whole and not in part—the impact of the entire work transcending words, phrases, or incidents out of which it is made.

The teacher must exercise care to select works for class reading and group discussion which do not place students in a position of embarrassment in open discussion with their peers, but he must also be free to recommend for individual reading any work he feels will have educational significance for an individual student. In addition the teacher needs the freedom to discuss with a student any work that the student reads whether the teacher has recommended it or the student has discovered it for himself.

What a young reader gets from any literary selection depends both on the quality of the selection and on characteristics of the reader. Books must be chosen with awareness of the student, his reading ability, his mental and emotional maturity, and the values he may derive from the reading. Some books are clearly for ten-year-olds, while others may be more suitable for the middle teens. Good taste, common sense, and professional responsibility to students and to the humanistic tradition guide the teacher in making wise selections. The community that entrusts a classroom of students to the care of an English teacher should also trust that teacher to exercise a reasonable judgment in selecting books for student use.

The Threat to Education

Censorship of books can leave American students with an inadequate grasp of the values and ideals of their culture. Writers are often the chief spokesmen of a culture. Yet, partly because of censorship or the fear of censorship, many important American writers are inadequately represented in the public secondary schools.
and many are represented not by their best work but by their safest.

The censorship pressures that get the most publicity are those of small groups that protest the use of a limited number of books with realistic elements: Huckleberry Finn, The Scarlet Letter, Catcher in the Rye, Brave New World, 1984, The Grapes of Wrath, to name a few. Frequently the victims are among our best teachers who, encouraged by the excellent literature newly accessible to students in inexpensive paperbacks, have ventured outside the narrow boundaries of conventional texts.

The greatest damage, however, is done by book committees appointed by national or local organizations to pore over anthologies, texts, or library books solely to find sentences that advocate causes or concepts or practices these organizations condemn. As a result, some publishers, sensitive to possible objections, are careful to exclude from textbooks selections or sentences that might conceivably offend various groups.

Many well-meaning persons wish to restrict school reading to books that do not mention unsavory aspects of our society. They argue that children must not be exposed to books in which people drink or swear or do many of the things commonly featured in daily newspapers, on television, or in motion pictures. No more than the people who condemn these books are teachers interested in promoting drinking and swearing. What the teacher sees as his responsibility, however, is to lead his students to understand all aspects of their culture and society—the good and the bad. This he can best do by cultivating in his students an appreciation for the wise and enduring thoughts of great writers. This he cannot do if major literary documents interpreting our culture are cut off from his students.

Because of outside pressures many English teachers cannot carry out their central responsibility: teaching the cultural heritage of Western civilization. Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman, Twain, Hemingway, Faulkner, to take just a few American examples, either are omitted completely or are inadequately represented in the high school curriculum. Teachers then are too often left with a small group of “nice” books that fail to excite students, emotionally or intellectually, about the pleasures of reading and the range of cultural perspectives that literature affords.

The Teacher’s Purposes

The purpose of education must remain what it has always been: to develop a free, reasoning person who can make up his own mind, who can understand his culture, and who can live compassionately with his fellow man.

Great literature raises the problems and questions that have perplexed man through all history: for example, the relationship between power and moral responsibility or the problem of undeserved human suffering. It presents the solutions and answers of the greatest minds the world has known. If the solutions and answers are not complete, they are the best we have. The continued search for answers is necessary. The conviction that solutions may be sought and judged is indispensable. When enough men lack this conviction, a great tradition will pass away: that of seeing the whole of life without succumbing to fear.

The liberally educated person must recognize the basic values and understand the fundamental ideas of Western civilization. Its traditions are embodied in our culture, in our laws, in our religions. When the student learns to see great books, classic or contemporary, as metaphors for the whole of human experience, the study of literature contributes in a unique way to this understanding of these traditions. They help him to discover who he is and where he is going.

An abstraction may have little emotional impact. But the dramatization of an abstraction, of concepts and values, offers us something we can grasp. We begin to feel and understand the abstraction. As we read imaginative literature in English classes, we not only study the great ideas of Western men; we also share the feelings of all people in all times. In this imaginative search into the values and ideas of our culture lie both our humanity and our salvation. Those who do not remember the past, Santayana reminds us, are condemned to relive its mistakes.
The Community’s Responsibility

American citizens who care about the improvement of education are urged to join teachers, librarians, administrators, boards of trustees, and professional and scholarly organizations in support of the students’ right to read. Only widespread and informed support in every community can assure that—

- Enough citizens are interested in the development and maintenance of a superior school system to guarantee its achievement.
- Malicious gossip, ignorant rumors, and deceptive letters to the editor will not be circulated without challenge and correction.
- Newspapers will be convinced of public desires for objective school news reporting, free from slanting or editorial comment which destroys confidence in and support for schools.
- The community will not permit its resources and energy to be dissipated in conflicts created by groups striving to advance alien ideologies, narrow biases, or special interests.
- Faith in democratic traditions and processes will be maintained.

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A PROGRAM OF ACTION

Clearly book censorship threatens to become a widespread problem for schools. Teachers of English, librarians, and school administrators can best serve students and the profession today if they prepare now to face outside pressures sensibly, demonstrating on the one hand a willingness to consider the merits of any complaint and on the other the courage to defend with intelligence and vigor a sound program in literature. The Council therefore recommends that every school undertake the following two-step program to protect the students’ right to read:

- The establishment of a committee of teachers to consider book selection and to screen outside complaints.
- A vigorous campaign to establish a community climate in which informed local citizens may be enlisted to support the freedom to read.

Procedures for Book Selection*

Although one may defend without reservation the freedom to read as the hallmark of a free society, there is no substitute for informed and qualified book selection. The English teacher is better qualified to choose books for his classroom than a person who is not prepared in the field. Nevertheless, the administrator has certain legal and professional responsibilities. He must, therefore, be kept well informed about the criteria and procedures used in selection and the books chosen.

In every school the English department should frame a clear statement that explains why literature is taught, by what standards it is chosen, what reputable and unbiased selection

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*Note: The principal concern here is for books to be used in English classes. The more general problem of selecting materials for school libraries has already been under study by many national groups. Much useful information on this broader question is available from the American Library Association. (See appendix, page 21.)
aids are used as guides. If the standards used in choosing books for suggested reading lists differ from those used in selecting basic texts for all students, such differences should be clearly explained. This statement should be on file with the administration before any complaints are received.

Operating within such a policy, the English department should—

- Ask each English teacher to present his list of choices to a meeting of the English department. Schools without departments should organize ad hoc meetings of qualified teachers and librarians for this purpose.
- File with administrators the list approved by teachers.
- Give the teacher a chance to explain his choice if any book is questioned.

Such a procedure gives each teacher the right to expect support from fellow teachers and administrators whenever someone objects to a book.

The Legal Problem

Apart from the professional and moral issues involved in censorship, there are legal matters about which the NCTE cannot give advice. The Council is not a legal authority. Across the nation, moreover, conditions vary so much that no one general principle applies. In some states, for example, textbooks are purchased from public funds and supplied free to students; in others, books are rented to students; in a few, students must buy their own textbooks.

The legal status of textbook adoption lists also varies. These lists, at times, include only those books which must be taught and allow teachers freedom to select additional titles; other lists are restrictive, containing the only books which may be required for all students. In the absence of widely accepted guidelines, many teachers who use lists containing books not officially adopted have found it wise, as a general rule, to label such lists “recommended” or “suggested,” not “required” reading.

As a part of sensible preparations for handling attacks on books, each school should ascertain what laws do apply to it.

Preparing the Community

To handle complaints about books, every school should have a committee of teachers organized to—

- Inform the community on book choices.
- Enlist support from citizens, possibly by explaining policies at such meetings of parent groups as those called by the Parent-Teacher Association.
- Consider any complaints against books.

No community is too small to have a group of enlightened people, often college-educated but not necessarily so, who have gravitated together because of mutual interests. Doctors, lawyers, members of the League of Women Voters, of the AAUW, of the Parent-Teacher Association, and other people interested in the education of the young might be organized into a Committee on the Right to Read or Citizens for Books. If they make their position felt through letters, telephone calls, and personal visits in defense of a besieged book, they may well cancel the protests and impress the authorities who have the power to censor.

Defending the Books

Despite both the care taken to select valuable books for student reading, and the qualifications of persons who select the books, occasional objections to a selection will undoubtedly be made. Probably no book has ever been printed to which someone could not object. Most books (even the Bible) are open to objections in one or more general areas: the treatment of ideologies, of minorities, of love and sex; the use of language not approved by certain segments of society; the type of illustration; the private life or political affiliations of the author.

Some attacks are made by persons frankly hostile to free inquiry and open discussion; others are made by misinformed or misguided persons, who, acting on emotion or rumor, sim-
ply do not understand how books are used; still others are made by well-intentioned, conscientious persons who fear that harm will come to a segment of the population if a certain book is read.

Occasionally, of course, teachers lacking judgment or inadequately prepared in literature are permitted to choose and to teach books. The complaints against selection made by such teachers may indeed be reasonable. In no sense should a committee of English teachers blindly defend the use of substandard, unliterary materials or the presentation to children of books suitable only for mature readers.

Complaints generally come by letter or telephone to a teacher, librarian, principal, superintendent, or a member of the board of education. The complainant often remains anonymous, often represents no one but himself, but is nevertheless able to stir up a whirlpool of misunderstanding. No one wants trouble or bad publicity. Regardless of the cause of the complaints, the results are often the same: the objector is placated, teacher morale is undermined, and a book useful in helping the student understand his world disappears from the curriculum.

Too many schools give in to belligerent threats of community sanctions and vague references to the backing of powerful forces. As a result, without due process, without a specific charge having been made, without a complaint having been signed, without all interested persons having been heard, students are denied the right to read. The many parents who want their children to have a broad education are victims of the few who do not.

What should be done when a complaint is made?

- If the complainant telephones, listen courteously, and invite him to file his complaint in writing, but make no commitments, admissions of guilt, or threats.
- If he writes, acknowledge the letter promptly and politely.
- In either case, offer to send the complainant a prepared questionnaire so that he may submit a formal statement to the book selection committee. (See sample.)

CITIZEN'S REQUEST FOR RECONSIDERATION OF A BOOK

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1. To what in the book do you object? (Please be specific; cite pages.)

2. What do you feel might be the result of reading this book?

3. For what age group would you recommend this book?

4. Is there anything good about this book?

5. Did you read the entire book? _____ What parts?

6. Are you aware of the judgment of this book by literary critics?

7. What do you believe is the theme of this book?

8. What would you like your school to do about this book?
   _______ do not assign it to my child
   _______ withdraw it from all students as well as from my child
   _______ send it back to the English department office for reevaluation

9. In its place, what book of equal literary quality would you recommend that would convey as valuable a picture and perspective of our civilization?

Signature of Complainant
At first, except for acknowledgment and explanation of established procedures, do nothing. The success of much censorship of this sort depends upon frightening an unprepared school into an unwise course of action.

A standardized procedure will take the sting from the first outburst of criticism. When the responsible objector learns the channels and procedures for his complaint, he is satisfied that he will be properly heard. The idle troublemaker, on the other hand, may well be discouraged from taking action.

In addition to the advantages already cited for this form, it will do the following:

- Formalize and make official the complaint.
- Indicate specifically the book in question.
- Identify the complainant.
- Reveal the size of his backing.
- Require him to clarify his thinking on the book in order to make an intelligent statement on the specific objection (♯1 and ♯2).
- Cause him to evaluate the book, especially for other groups beyond the one he has immediately in mind (♯3 and ♯4).
- Establish to what extent he is familiar with the book (♯5).
- Give him an opportunity to recognize the criticism and intent of the book or to realize his failure to understand it (♯6 and ♯7).
- Give him, finally, alternative actions to be taken on the book (♯8 and ♯9).

The committee of teachers to review complaints should be available at short notice to consider the Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of a Book and to call in the complainant for conference. The members of the committee should have reevaluated the book in advance of the conference and the group should be prepared to explain its subsequent findings. If the committee feels the book is justifiably available to students but the complainant remains adamant in his demand for its withdrawal, the committee should not hesitate to take the case to the newspaper or to other local news channels. The complainant by this time may have indicated his plan to do so, and the committee will often gain support by getting there first. The freedom of the press, a principle dear to most newspaper publishers, is a healthy ally to freedom to read.

Teachers and administrators in the system should recognize that responsibility for selecting the book in question lies with the teacher group concerned and should cooperate fully with the reevaluation committee, refraining from discussion of the issue with the complainant or any community group or with the press. Once the machinery has been set into motion by the filing of the request, the authority for handling the situation should remain ultimately with the administration which will act on the teachers' recommendations.

A courteous and dispassionate approach is essential in considering complaints. The American public schools, in reflecting their communities, respect a formidable opinion against any book on their shelves, but they must take great care not to be intimidated by a lone dissenter whose tastes run counter to those of the best authorities and to those of the majority of the community. At the same time, they certainly want a complainant to know that they will consider his opinion and that they welcome his interest.

Freedom of inquiry is essential to education in a democracy. To establish the climate essential for freedom, teachers and administrators need to follow book selection practices similar to those recommended here. Where schools resist unreasonable pressure, the cases are seldom publicized and students continue to read the books. Only if informed groups, within the profession and without, unite in resisting unfair pressures can our school programs in literature do what they ought to do, to transmit intact our cultural heritage.
APPENDIX

Special materials to assist teachers and administrators are available from the following organizations:

National Council of Teachers of English, 508 South Sixth Street, Champaign, Illinois

_The Students' Right to Read._ (Additional copies of this statement: $.25 each, 6 for $1.00, $.10 each in quantities of 25 or more.)

_The Right to Read._ (A statement for the public reprinted from pages 7-12 of this report: 25 for $1.00, $.03 each in quantities of 1,000 or more)

_Resolution on Censorship of the NCTE, November 1960._ (Complimentary copies are available.)

_Censorship and Controversy._ (A bulletin initially printed in 1953: $.75)

American Library Association, 50 East Huron Street, Chicago 11, Illinois

_Library Bill of Rights._ (Adopted June 18, 1948, and amended February 1, 1961, by the ALA Council.)

_Statement on Labeling._ (Adopted July 13, 1951, by the ALA Council.)

_School Library Bill of Rights._ (Adopted July 8, 1955, by the ALA Council)


_Policies and Procedures for Selection of School Library Materials._ (Approved by the AASL, February 3, 1961)

_How Libraries and Schools Can Resist Censorship._ (A statement adopted February 1, 1962. Copies are also distributed by the National Council of Teachers of English.)

American Book Publishers Council, 58 West 40th Street, New York 18, New York

_Freedom-to-Read Bulletin._ (Several issues are published annually.)

Additional advice and information may be obtained from the following organizations:

American Civil Liberties Union, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, New York

National Education Association, Commission on Professional Rights and Responsibilities, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington 6, D. C.

National School Boards Association, Inc., 1940 Sheridan Road, Evanston, Illinois

American Textbook Publishers Institute, 432 Park Avenue South, New York 16, New York

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