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Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

Challenges to and Censorship of School Guidance Materials. ERIC Digest.....	1
WHAT DEVELOPMENTAL GUIDANCE MATERIALS.....	2
REASONS FOR CHALLENGING DEVELOPMENTAL GUIDANCE MATERIALS.....	3
WHAT ARE THE PIVOTAL ISSUES?.....	3
RESPONSIBLE ACTIONS BY RESPONSIBLE COUNSELORS.....	5
AFTER A CHALLENGE OCCURS.....	5
CONCLUSION.....	6
REFERENCES.....	6



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THE RIGHT TO CHALLENGE/THE RIGHT TO RESPOND

Textbook controversies are not new. Throughout the history of public education in the United States there have been well-intentioned groups that thought they had detected a conspiracy to subvert the nation's children. However, specific challenges to school guidance materials are rather recent phenomena--occurring primarily after 1960. This can partly be attributed to the fact that many schools simply had no counselors prior to that time. However, developmental guidance materials have been discovered and they are being challenged.

A challenge should not be equated with censorship. Some parents, for personal reasons, may request a school to provide alternative guidance materials or to have their children excused from certain guidance activities. Many schools will accommodate these requests. Censorship, however, is a main tactic of some national organizations that want to change the way schools select and use educational materials. Censorship, as defined by the American Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Committee, is the removal of material from open access by government authority (American Library Association, 1988). Censors try to impose their views by deciding what others should not read, see, or hear.

Special interests groups are trying to force many school systems to remove or alter developmental guidance materials and practices. The freedom of these groups to speak and write is guaranteed by the First Amendment; however, some of these groups are unwilling to grant such freedom to those who hold opposing views. Special interests groups are an essential ingredient in a democracy and contribute to the formation of public policy, but they can also be a negative and restrictive force.

Few challenges by special interests groups reach the courts, but self-censorship happens. A group makes itself known and a counselor silently retreats from the use of established materials and practices. The special interests group goes away and so do some developmentally-appropriate guidance materials.

WHAT DEVELOPMENTAL GUIDANCE MATERIALS

HAVE BEEN CHALLENGED? Each year, People for the American Way, an organization that is opposed to censorship, compiles a list of challenges to school textbooks and materials. This annual compilation includes attempts to remove guidance materials, library books, textbooks, films, and other instructional materials. A review of the four most recent annual reports indicates that a wide array of guidance materials have been

challenged in various school districts throughout the United States. It is important to note that in the vast majority of cases where challenges have occurred, school boards have elected to retain and use the challenged materials.

REASONS FOR CHALLENGING DEVELOPMENTAL GUIDANCE MATERIALS

An analysis of 53 recent challenges which occurred in 1988-1991 reveals that the following reasons were those most frequently cited by challengers:

- *"New Age" concerns--hypnotism, self-hypnosis, meditation, Far East religions, guided fantasy, visualization
- *Undermining parental authority/family values and teaching children they can handle problems on their own
- *Promoting secular humanism

Other reasons, "having teachers and untrained persons act as therapists," "having children harmed in some way because of exposure to certain material or practice," and "using materials unproven by research" seem to be emerging as three that challengers are citing more frequently.

WHAT ARE THE PIVOTAL ISSUES?

The challengers have the right to challenge. If that opportunity does not exist, there is little reason for the First Amendment to exist. When public schools are involved, however, a number of pivotal issues become apparent. Items deemed by the state to be in the best interest of all students are not always acceptable to certain parents and special interests groups. Even after thorough adherence to materials selection policies, a school district that adopts a set of materials for counselors to use in helping build self-esteem may find itself the subject of charges by selected parents and, in some cases, well-financed special interests groups. How can the rights of the many be protected and the rights of the minority be accommodated?

Parental and community involvement should be encouraged. At issue, here, is the notion that a small, vocal minority, often well-organized and well-financed by legal defense funds, can make it appear as though it represents the community as a whole. Group guidance and health education activities related to sex education and AIDS

education have been opposed in certain communities. In some cases a small group of parents has requested the removal of a state- or locally-developed sex-education curriculum and requested that one which meets their criteria be substituted for the "offending" curriculum. Should materials that have been selected on the basis of carefully-designed procedures and policies be altered, removed, or replaced when opposition by a few emerges?

Not only has the use of certain developmental guidance materials been challenged, but the freedom to counsel in both individual and group settings has been questioned on occasion. Sometimes it is the use of materials which has caused certain groups to call for the removal of school counselors. During the 1989-90 school year the Armstrong County Taxpayers League of Armstrong, Pennsylvania objected to some developmental guidance materials (People for the American Way, 1990). In addition to requesting the removal of guidance materials, the League campaigned to remove all guidance counselors.

Counselors must assess whether they are functioning in an environment where the school board has a commitment to free expression or whether it is a board which placates a vocal minority. In some cases, counselors may find themselves working with board members who have been elected with the support of special interests groups whose agendas include forcing their viewpoint on materials selection and curriculum practices. To what extent are counselors free to use certain materials that support the goals of the school without fear of retribution and, at the same time, to what extent do counselors have support for designing alternative programs to meet unique student and parental needs?

Counselors have sought ways to encourage students to sort out their own values. However, such activities become troublesome to certain parents who confuse values education with morality education. Many school personnel choose to avoid private morality topics, which they believe are better left to the home and church.

Some parents believe that religious beliefs and private morality issues should have a place in the school curriculum. The stated goal of several special interests groups is to bring public education under the control of Christians. The absence of references to religion by guidance materials and textbooks authors, counselors, and teachers have brought accusations that the schools are in fact practicing religion--the religion of secular humanism. To what extent should private morality be addressed in the nation's public schools?

The pivotal issues surrounding challenges to school guidance materials and programs can be further reduced to two very important questions that must be addressed if schools are to deal effectively with challenges to developmental guidance materials: (1) Who determines what school guidance materials are used in public schools? and (2) Is the role of schools seen primarily as a place where diverse ideas should be presented

and explored or is the role of schools to be primarily that of transmitting community values?

RESPONSIBLE ACTIONS BY RESPONSIBLE COUNSELORS

BEFORE A CHALLENGE OCCURSPeterson and Poppen (1992) have developed a 16-item "Actions to Prevent Problems Checklist" which outlines steps that school districts and counselors can take to prevent the likelihood that challenges will result in censorship. The 16 actions are not arranged in order of importance, but four may be of high priority for many counselors:



*Base developmental guidance programming on sound educational practices which are appropriate for the age and maturity level of students.



*Relate developmental guidance goals and activities to district and state educational goals and to student educational needs.



*Ask the Board of Education to act on materials selection and materials reconsideration policies and procedures.



*Read "The School Counselor and Censorship," the position statement of the American School Counselor Association.

AFTER A CHALLENGE OCCURS

If challenges happen, responsible actions are needed by school counselors:



*Listen carefully to those who express special concerns.



*Avoid debate, but do state the basis for current practices.



*Handle complaints with carefully constructed procedures and accurate records of all contact and actions.



*Keep the focus of the complaint on the material rather than on the program.



*Ask for assistance from other district personnel, publishers (several publishers of "challenged" guidance materials have excellent printed materials for use in "challenge" situations), and professional associations.

CONCLUSION

Rights of the many must be protected and rights of the minority must be accommodated. To achieve this end, school counselors must know why challenges to school guidance materials are occurring and the pivotal issues which accompany these challenges. Counselors must assure that developmental guidance programs are based on sound educational practices and that responsible actions are taken if a challenge occurs.

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