

## Fahrenheit 9/11 in the Classroom

By Robert L. Dahlgren

*The protruding nail gets hammered down*  
—Japanese proverb

The polarized political mood engendered by the most sharply partisan Presidential election campaigns in recent memory has had an especially deleterious effect on the image of public education.<sup>1</sup> This increased scrutiny has largely fallen on the shoulders of rank and file teachers who now face the most precarious moment in terms of job security since the height of the McCarthyite movement of the 1950s. While this trend has scarcely been reported in the national mainstream media, a close monitoring of local newspapers from across the country uncovers numerous disturbing incidents. For example, Madrid (2004) has detailed how a drama teacher in Paradise Valley, Arizona, was fired after a parent complaint about a skit her students wrote and performed about the Holocaust. In April 2006, Sidney McGee, an art teacher from Frisco, Texas, was fired after parent complaints about the “nude art” that her fifth grade class viewed while on a field trip to the Dallas Museum of Art (Pilkington, 2006). More recently, Al Gore’s Oscar-winning documentary on global warming, *An Inconvenient Truth*, has been the subject of furious

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debates in school board meetings (Libin, 2007). These stories and others like them lead to a startling conclusion: it is remarkably easy to lose one's job merely for attempting to teach one's subject in a public school in the United States today.

In this article, I will examine this dark, telling picture of the teaching profession in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through the explosive reaction to the use of Michael Moore's provocative documentary film *Fahrenheit 9/11* in American classrooms. I will argue that the concerted campaign against the use of the film by teachers reveals the activities of a complex network of parents, advocacy groups, and right-wing media pundits that has been organized specifically to challenge the curricular choices made by classroom practitioners. This network has, in a few cases, lobbied successfully with school administrations for disciplinary action against individual teachers. The parents' groups at the center of many of the cases I will cite often act as front-line footsoldiers for deep-pocketed national organizations toiling away in the background. The most well-established of these include Citizens for Excellence in Education, Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum, and the Concerned Women of America led by Beverly LaHaye, wife of Tim LaHaye, who has become a media star in religious conservative circles with his apocalyptic *Left Behind* book series. Conservative organizations oriented toward—in David Horowitz's (2006) ironic words—"getting politics out of schools" abound in the culture of education today. Horowitz, a former sixties student radical turned Fox News Channel contributor, is a major figure in this movement, having started Parents and Students for Academic Freedom (PSAF), a K-12 adjunct of a group oriented toward higher education, in August 2004. In the past three years, PSAF has sponsored legislation in 23 states aimed at instituting an "Academic Bill of Rights" in high schools and colleges (McKenna, 2006). In the end, the case of *Fahrenheit 9/11* in the classroom indicates the ways in which this new network has destabilized the ordinary channels of communication in schools, exerted pressure on school administrations, and created a chilling effect on the teaching practice.

### **A Historical Sketch of Academic Freedom**

Academic freedom has long been held as a sacrosanct principle in the realm of academia. Philosophers such as Locke (1693/1995) and Diderot (1753/2003) spoke eloquently to the Enlightenment conceptions of intellectual autonomy as a vital concern for pluralistic democracy. Mill (1859/2003) further expressed the need within such a society for engagement in multiple points of view, even deliberate falsehoods, without fear of suppression:

But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race, posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error. (p. 100)

In this country, the right to academic freedom for university faculty was formally validated by organizations such as the American Association of University Professors, which, in its founding manifesto (1915) stated that, “The common good depends upon free speech for truth and its free exposition.” The National Council for the Social Studies (1969) echoed this idea, stating that, “the teacher is free to present in the field of his or her professional competence his/her own opinions or convictions and with them the premises from which they are derived.”

At the same time, political elites through the ages have viewed education as a double-edged sword, vital for training the next generation of laborers and yet highly dangerous when oriented toward social justice and liberation. Chomsky (2003) has noted that, “Controlling the general population has always been a dominant concern of power and privilege, particularly since the first modern democratic revolution in seventeenth century England” (p. 5). While it is common among American citizens today to imagine Constitutional rights as permanent, the very words of the “Founding Fathers” who drafted these documents belie this assumption. Indeed, as Parenti (1983) has quoted him, John Jay declared that, “The people who own the country ought to govern it” (p. 6). Alexander Hamilton echoed this political philosophy:

The voice of the people has been said to be the voice of God; and however generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true in fact. The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right” (In Lodge, [Ed.], 1904, I, p. 401).

Given these anti-democratic sentiments, academic freedom—like other liberties—is best understood not as a gift from above guaranteed by constitutional documents, but rather as the result of centuries of political struggle and subject to continual flux.

While, as Strossen (1996) has commented, there is no definitive Supreme Court precedent in relation to academic freedom, “...we can draw some inferences both from the Court’s general pronouncements about academic freedom or First Amendment rights in the classroom setting...” (p. 74). In its *Sweezy vs. New Hampshire* decision (1957), for example, the Court stated: “Teachers and students must always remain free to inquire, to study and evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding; otherwise our civilization will stagnate and die” (p. 2).

Abuses of academic freedom are legion in Western history from Socrates’ death sentence after having been convicted by the Athenian citizenry of “corruption of youth” to the tragic fate of Galileo, compelled to live under house arrest after recanting his life’s work to the Papacy. In the modern era, these threats have been no less frequent or well documented. For example, Spring (1992) has detailed the efforts of the Wilson administration’s Committee for Public Information in disciplining teachers accused of making anti-war statements during the period of the First World War. In perhaps the definitive account of the McCarthy Era, Schrecker (1986) has written of the effects of Cold War anti-communism on American universities during a five-year period that saw scores of university faculty subpoenaed

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to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Cauter (1978), Kille (2004), and Sanders (1979) have further chronicled the cases of academics that were fired for suspected acts of “subversion” during the 1950s in New York, Nevada, and Washington states respectively. More recently, Tierney and Lechuga (Fall 2005) have argued that American universities, and especially Middle Eastern Studies programs, are currently facing a period of “New McCarthyism” (p. 8).

In contrast to the wealth of material regarding intellectual freedom in the university setting, there has been a relative lack of literature regarding conceptions of and threats to academic freedom for secondary level teachers. Murphy (1990) has attributed this absence of concern to the confusion surrounding the issue within the ranks of the major teachers’ unions. Indeed Foster (2000) has indicated that the American Federation of Teachers took official positions during the 1950s that led directly to the termination of more than 300 teachers in the New York City public school system. Apple (2001) has further surmised that teachers have not been afforded the same rights as university faculty due to the progressive “de-skilling” of teachers in an era of increasing standardization of curriculum. Bracey (2002) has termed these developments “The War on Public Schools.” Several recent classroom incidents serve as examples of the current climate that includes challenges to academic freedom for public educators. Younge (2006), for example, has detailed the case of Jay Bennish, a Colorado geography teacher who was suspended after having been recorded by a student criticizing the Bush administration’s Iraq War policy in his classroom.

### **The Case of *Fahrenheit 9/11***

This new effort to restrict the academic freedom of public educators is best illustrated in the response to the use of Academy-award winning filmmaker Michael Moore’s 2004 film *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Moore’s provocative documentary looked at the Bush administration’s policy following the September 11, 2001 attacks that subsequently led to the Iraq War. The critically acclaimed and assailed film was destined to garner media attention and to become a lightning rod for partisan debate in a Presidential election year. Indeed, Moore was eager to point out that his intention was to aid in the efforts to unseat George W. Bush in the upcoming election:

What I’m asking is that our fellow Americans, as the collective landlord of a public housing project at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., take just a few minutes to evict the tenant who is currently wrecking the place (not to mention what he’s doing to the rest of the neighborhood). After all, isn’t this one of the coolest things about a democracy, getting to give some payback to those in power? “YOU’RE FIRED!” Oooh, that feels good—especially if the recipient of the pink slip is someone who wants to send your kid off to war. (2004, September 25)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the response from pro-Bush media outlets was vitriolic even before the official release of the film. “Who would take a shrill, lying lefty

like Moore seriously?” conservative pundit Fred Barnes asked in the pages of *The Weekly Standard*, one of the few publications on the President’s regular reading list (2004). In May 2004, a public relations firm connected to the Republican Party formed a group called “Move America Forward” to pressure theater owners across the country not to show the film (Berkowitz, 2005).

Throughout the spring of 2004, Moore and his film took a tortuous route through the film industry and media. First, the Disney corporation, which had produced the film under Harvey Weinstein’s Miramax imprimatur, decided not to release the film, a move widely interpreted in media reports as rooted in Disney chairman Michael Eisner’s close relationship with then Florida governor and Presidential sibling Jeb Bush. The decision appeared foolish from a business perspective when *Fahrenheit* received the coveted *Palme d’or* prize at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival, amid media frenzy in Europe. The Motion Picture Association of America dealt a blow to the film in May, stamping it with an “R” rating, due to the scenes of barbaric violence in the section dealing with the occupation of Iraq. Moore responded immediately, filing an appeal alongside Lions Gate Films—the new distributor. “Teenagers should be able to see this film and see it on their own,” Moore said in a statement, urging teenagers to disregard the rating and to see the film in any way possible. “Older teenagers are being sent to Iraq, some never to return. To say that teenagers shouldn’t see this movie means that the truth should be kept from them. I encourage all teenagers to come see my movie, by any means necessary. If you need me to sneak you in, let me know” (2004, June 23). Moore understood the implications of this rating for his potential audience but couldn’t have been expected to understand the centrality of this “R” rating in the future attacks on teachers’ use of his film.

Throughout the promotional campaign surrounding *Fahrenheit*, Moore urged the use of his film as a pedagogical tool for teachers, further inflaming his critics, who saw the film as purely propagandistic. A storm of protest followed the decision by the National Education Association (NEA) to present the film at its annual conference in the summer of 2004. *The Washington Times* reported that, “The announcement of the showing (of *Fahrenheit*) and the strongly anti-Bush tone of the convention brought grumbling from Republicans, who make up more than one-fourth of the union’s total membership.” The *Times’s* reporter at the convention, George Archibald, followed this assertion by quoting Pennsylvania delegate Sissy Jochmann who insisted that the leadership was “bullying us with all their anti-Bush and anti-Republican rhetoric.” Pressed to defend his decision to show the film in the main convention hall, NEA president Reg Weaver pointed out that the presentation had been the brainchild not of the leadership but of three of the state delegations and that an overflow crowd had paid a voluntary \$20 contribution to the NEA’s political action committee in order to attend the session (Archibald, 2004).

As the October release of the *Fahrenheit* DVD approached, Moore posted a “Teacher’s Guide” for using the film in high school and college classrooms on his website. This fifty-four page document included sample critical thinking questions

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that teachers could use with their classes, such as “What steps do you think the American government needs to take in order to effectively address terrorism and end the war in Iraq?” Showing some sensitivity to the need for cross-curricular materials, Moore even included a section titled “Math and *Fahrenheit 9/11*” prepared by a teacher from Milwaukee. While many in the conservative media were skeptical, Moore seemed genuinely excited in his website commentary, exhorting teachers to “go do that magic we call education! And, be sure to share, share, share! We would love to hear from you. Send your feedback or ideas to share with other educators” (2004, October 1).

Activists supporting the two major political candidates in the Presidential election seemed primed for a media battle over the film. Commentators sympathetic to the Bush administration warned their readers to be ever watchful of materials being used in the classroom. Eric Pratt, for example, in an article titled “*Fahrenheit 9/11* in the Classroom?” for the conservative weblog “American Daily” commented: “With kids going back to school around Labor Day, parents should make a renewed effort to keep tabs on what their children are being taught” (2004). Conservative parents’ groups took up the call. Within days of the DVD release of the film on October 5, stories began to surface in the blogosphere about incidents in which high school teachers and community college professors had been disciplined for having the temerity to show the film to their students. Each of the cases seen in isolation doesn’t appear to be significant; yet, viewed as a whole, an eerily similar pattern begins to emerge that suggests systematic, coordinated political action to stifle the film’s distribution and intended impact in the classroom.

The Associated Press reported the first such incident—ironically in George W. Bush’s “backyard”—on October 9, less than a week after *Fahrenheit*’s DVD release. Michael Kurth, a Southeast Texas businessman, was “livid” that his son had been—in his words—“forced” to watch a portion of the film in his English class at Pathways Learning Center—an alternative high school in Beaumont, Texas—and called for action from the school administration. In a statement to local media, Kurth claimed that his 17-year-old son Matthew had been so upset about the content of the movie that he’d “put his head on his desk and tried to sleep through it.” “It is spun to a very liberal viewpoint,” Kurth commented. “It is absolutely wrong for teachers to take a political position with some of these kids at legal voting age.” Asked to respond, Pathways principal Michael Ryals commented that he had previewed the section of *Fahrenheit* prepared for the lesson and told the *Beaumont Enterprise* that, “I didn’t hear anything that was offensive to me” (“Beaumont Students Watch *Fahrenheit 9/11* in Class,” 2004). In the midst of this furor, the school administration at Pathways appears to have acceded to Kurth’s demands and to have organized a screening of *FahrenHYPE 9/11*, a hurriedly released documentary exposé meant as a conservative counterweight to Moore’s accusations about the Bush administration.

The week after these events in Texas occurred, Frank Goodin, a first-year teacher at Paxon School for Advanced Studies—a magnet high school in Jacksonville,

Florida—presented several excerpts from the film in a TV production class. Goodin, a local independent filmmaker, explained that he'd intended the lesson to prepare students to look critically at the ways in which different media can manipulate viewers through the use of powerful emotional material. He commented: "I wanted to illustrate how you can take supposed facts and you put these in a pile or in a corner, if you will, and then you can say that these are facts that support a particular point of view" (Goodin, 2005). Despite carefully preparing his students to view the film, one student took offense at what she saw as Goodin's political grandstanding during a heated election season. After verbally challenging Goodin's lesson plan, the student echoed Matthew Kurth's response and spent the duration of the film's presentation with her head on her desk, choosing to later inform her mother Susan Bennett of the incident. Instead of calling the school in order to address the issue with Goodin personally, Mrs. Bennett's first move was to call the syndicated talk radio show of Republican stalwart Sean Hannity—an approach that speaks volumes about the connection between parent challenges and conservative media networks across the country. "The film is not proven, it's garbage," Bennett pronounced. "Nothing different than a scandal magazine." After hearing her version of events, Hannity advised Bennett to call the superintendent of Duval County Public Schools, John Fryer, pontificating that Goodin "should be fired!" Subsequent phone calls went out to Fryer as well as to Paxon principal Dr. James Williams. The school administration at first defended Goodin's reasoning, explaining that, "(A) point that he's trying to make is how to take a story line and support it with film making" (Brice, 2004). When pressed further, however, the Paxon administration admitted that Goodin's actions had violated the school district's policy for supplementary materials: "Teacher needs to obtain parental permission on any viewing materials which carry a rating other than G" (Faculty Code of Conduct, 2004, p. 24). The contested "R" rating, which was never mentioned in any of Bennett's statements, proved crucial in the school's response to Goodin's actions. Goodin was officially reprimanded but was allowed to keep his position.

During the same week, Suzanne Miller, a teacher at Central High School in Knoxville, Tennessee, showed several clips from *Fahrenheit* in her English classes. Almost immediately, several parents called to complain. One parent, Cindy Stewart, took the lead and informed the *Knoxville Sentinel* that the rating on the film was her principal concern in criticizing the use of the film by Miller. "It was an R-rated movie," she said, "Absolutely we don't condone that." However, she also admitted that, "I'm not crazy about the politics of it (*Fahrenheit*)" (Limbacher, 2004). As with the earlier incidents, conservative media outlets reverberated with discussion of Miller's actions within hours of her presentation of the material. Although the Central High principal Jon Miller (no relation) stated that he was "stunned" by Suzanne Miller's decision to present *Fahrenheit* to her classes, he decided not to take the advice of many conservative commentators; Miller was, however, given a formal reprimand and placed on "administrative duty" for two months during

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which time she would “undergo a period of additional training before returning to the classroom in January” (“Knoxville Teacher Reassigned for Showing ‘9/11,’” 2004).

During the same week, officials at Kearsarge Regional High School in North Sutton, New Hampshire, cancelled a screening of *Fahrenheit* that had been scheduled as an after-school activity by English teacher Kevin Lee and film studies teacher Deborah Barry. Superintendent Tom Brennan took what he called a “proactive” approach after receiving several phone calls from angry parents about the screening. In this case, the teachers involved had organized the session meticulously and had followed school district policy by sending release forms home with students. Indeed, it was precisely these forms that alerted a handful of conservative parents to Lee and Barry’s plans. Instead, the issue that became the focal point of the controversy was one of “fair and balanced presentation of material” (Conaboy, 2004). Lee, for his part, answered the charges of parents that he was attempting to indoctrinate them by pointing out that the idea for the session had come from students: “All we were trying to do was offer something that the kids had asked for, and we were trying to do it in a way that wasn’t being coercive.” Lee and Barry had planned to leave time for a discussion after the presentation of the film. This apparently did not satisfy the parents involved or superintendent Brennan, who ordered that *FahrenHYPE 9/11* be shown alongside the Moore film in the interests of balance. When the teachers expressed reluctance to do so because of curricular time pressures, Brennan cancelled the session, openly admitting that parental pressure had forced his hand on the issue: “We didn’t want to get into a controversy. That wasn’t the point” (Conaboy). With predictable efficiency, conservative bloggers waded into the debate raging at Kearsarge Regional High School that week.

On October 29, the Friday before the 2004 Presidential election, Judy Baker, a teacher at Jackson High School in Washington, showed *Fahrenheit* to a small group of students. Baker, having heard of the earlier incidents, followed her own district’s policy by obtaining the principal’s permission as well as release forms signed by parents of the students involved in the activity. Only one of the parents contacted objected to her child viewing the film and Baker excused the student from the activity. This scrupulous preparation, however, did not mollify the local Snohomish County Republican party, which deluged the school administration with complaints about Baker’s lesson. “I have a thirteen year old out in Monroe and a second-grader, and I would be up in arms if a teacher decided to show this movie, even if it’s (labeled as) propaganda,” fumed Darcy Cheesman, an election coordinator for the organization. In a familiar move, the Republican Party’s press office sent out a copy of *FahrenHYPE 9/11* in order to present “a balanced view” (Slager, 2004). As with the Kearsarge case, Baker had anticipated complaints due to the “R” rating on *Fahrenheit* and thus Republican activists were forced to make the “fair and balanced” argument instead. The incident became a talking point for regional conservative talk show host Mike Siegel’s show on KTTH (AM 770),

who urged that Baker show examples of Nazi propaganda rather than Moore's film. These arguments fell on sympathetic ears, as Jackson High School principal Terry Cheshire ordered Baker to either balance the presentation of *Fahrenheit* or not show the film at all. "We have a policy that...if we deal with controversial issues, we need to show both sides," he claimed (Slager). This concession did not stop the criticism among conservative pundits, however. In the week of the Presidential election, Fox News Channel contributor Michelle Malkin weighed in with a syndicated newspaper column about the Jackson High School case titled, "F Stands for *Fahrenheit*," slyly suggesting that the presentation of material such as the Moore film was leading to student, and school, failure (Malkin, 2004). On Malkin's website, emotions ran high over the weekend before the election.

While most of the cases involving *Fahrenheit* involved discipline actions against public high school teachers, college faculty were not entirely spared. In one of the most chilling cases involving violations of academic freedom, an instructor at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College (RCCC) in Concord, North Carolina, was suspended with pay for four days after showing *Fahrenheit* in class during the week before the Presidential election. School officials claimed that Davis March, an instructor in English composition for more than 20 years at Rowan-Cabarrus, had violated school policy and disobeyed specific orders in a memorandum explicitly instructing faculty to remain non-partisan during the election campaign. March disputed this policy, stating that, "If I'm wrong about this, I've been wrong my entire career" (Smith-Arrants, 2004). In an extraordinary act of censorship, RCCC administrators appeared in March's classroom while the film was being presented and escorted him out of the building. According to Jonathan Knight, director of the American Association of University Professors' program on academic freedom, this was the first case of a college instructor being removed from the classroom while a class was in session in more than three decades of tracking academic freedom cases. "Controversial films, controversial textbooks, paintings, poetry are used by faculty in classes across the country to stimulate thinking," Knight commented. "There can't be a more appropriate venue for doing so than a college classroom, especially during the midst of a political campaign" (Smith-Arrants). The administration of Rowan-Cabarrus disagreed with this analysis, insisting that the college maintain control over school practices and personnel. The RCCC board of trustees had recently established a "nonpartisanship" policy under the leadership of RCCC president Richard Brownell, a registered Republican. In an October 25, 2004 memorandum, Brownell stated that:

RCCC is a public college supported by the taxpayers and must maintain a secular, nonpartisan professional environment at all times...No employee of this college is authorized to use the classroom or college environment as a platform to promote their own personal, religious or political views or to advocate for specific political candidates. (Quoted in Smith-Arrants)

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This claim of “nonpartisanship” in public institutions has been the most popular device in censoring the use of *Fahrenheit* at the junior college level. As Ross (2000) points out, the reality of this policy is that material that upholds the status quo is considered “objective,” while material that encourages students to make critical judgments is labeled “political.” “However,” he asks us to consider, “neutrality is a political category, that is, not supporting any factions in a dispute” (p. 44). Public school and college administrations that have used these policies to counter public criticism have, consequently, been engaged in a political act. Moreover, these supposedly non-partisan policies have done nothing to avoid controversy—their intended purpose. In the most serious incident, an adjunct English professor at Tarrant County College in Fort Worth, Texas, was released from his contract after showing the *Fahrenheit* in class. Kendall McCook, a published poet and instructor at the college, was terminated from his position at the college after he delivered his grades for the Fall 2004 term. “I feel like I lost my job because of one student with a political ax to grind,” commented McCook. “I wanted to show the movie because I believe it is one of the most important films and pieces of art that has been produced the entire year.” McCook added that the student—an outspoken conservative—had been offered an alternative project and that the student had received an “A” in his course (Bourgeois, 2004).

In the end, these cases illustrate the key tenets that pull together the seemingly disparate strands of a complex movement aimed at challenging what many conservative education activists refer to as “the government school monopoly.” It is imperative that public educators have an understanding of these ideas and this movement’s plan of action to combat what they view as the pernicious and invasive influence of public education on American life. First and foremost, for many religious conservatives there is a crisis in American schools, and particularly with the philosophy of “secular schools.” Second, teachers are seen by conservatives of many stripes to be the primary actors responsible for this crisis. Third, those who are politically conservative are not surprisingly quite traditional in their view of pedagogy; teaching, for them, is seen as a matter of teachers delivering information directly to students. Fourth, it then follows that many conservatives presume that those social studies teachers with progressive views inevitably act as left-wing ideologues, attempting to propagandize passive students rather than to teach them practical skills. These views have been formed in the course a lengthy, tortured history of conflicts over the social studies curriculum.

### **The New Era of McCarthyism**

Many commentators have accurately viewed these incidents as another chapter in what Evans (2004) has termed “The Social Studies Wars.” This analysis is partially based on the involvement of individuals who participated in previous “battles,” such as the flap over “political correctness” in the early 1990s and the controversy

surrounding the National History Standards produced by a group of academics from the University of California, Los Angeles (Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 1997). For example, D'Souza, whose *Illiberal Education* (1991) was prominent among a group of books attacking campus "hate speech codes" has frequently appeared on *The O'Reilly Factor* arguing that teachers who bring politics into the classroom be terminated from employment.

Yet, the cases involving *Fahrenheit* discussed above suggest that the era of George W. Bush's presidency represents a qualitatively different challenge for social studies teachers from an active and complex web of conservative national religious and political lobbying operations, corporate media, and parents' groups. Some caution must be employed when characterizing this new movement, especially when it comes to labeling parents' organizations or parents themselves as "right-wing." Critics of progressive education such as Ravitch (2003) have pointed out that both right and left wing groups have pressured schools and individual teachers about their curricular choices in recent years. However, as Giroux (1987) has demonstrated, the clear majority of these movements have come from the right. He comments:

As part of the existing political assault on public services and social justice in general, schools are increasingly being subordinated to the imperatives of neoconservative and right-wing interests that would make them adjuncts of the workplace or the church. (p. 26)

While maintaining a critical focus, it is important not to over-generalize about the intentions of these movements or to demonize its participants. Apple (2001) is especially useful in his nuanced interpretation of the motives of religious parents. He notes, for example, that the trend toward "home schooling" is linked to:

What are often accurate concerns about public schooling...its overly bureaucratic nature, its lack of curriculum coherence, its disconnection from the lives, hopes, and cultures of many of its communities, and more—are here often connected to more deep-seated and intimate worries. (pp. 173-4)

Apple is careful to note that what parents often fail to take into account, however, is that the degradation of public education is by neo-liberal and neo-conservative design. Over the course of the past 20 years, there has been a consistent program of impoverishing public schools with a conscious eye toward creating an atmosphere in which parents quite logically lose faith in their community schools. This has culminated in the current Bush administration's *No Child Left Behind* program, which explicitly targets schools characterized as "under performing" for takeover by private educational consortiums, such as the Edison School project.

Conservative mothers have played a central role on the front lines of this new movement to challenge the practices of predominantly female teachers. This may surprise some whose first associations with the phrase "women's politics" are with progressive struggles for suffrage, reproductive rights and the Equal Rights Amendment. As Ross and Marker (2005) have pointed out, however, "Today, 'the movement'

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has a new identity” (p. 144). Women are more likely to be those behind attacks on academic freedom today because of the character of religiously conservative families. According to the dictates of the conservative churches that dominate the thinking of these families, it is a woman’s proper role to steward children and, by extension, their education. Indeed the seizure of this role by secular “government schools” and teachers—in the view of many of these parents—is often the primary source of tension in these cases.

During the first wave of the recent attacks on the social studies curriculum in the 1980s, the focus of this anger tended to be on school boards and administrations, which approved curricular changes with which conservative groups disapproved. Classroom teachers, once spared due to their image as “saints” are now, however, often cast as the “sinners” of this drama. A good example of this shift in thinking is Condon and Wolff’s *School Rights* (1996). Written as a “Parent’s Legal Handbook and Action Guide,” the book is revealing in showing the view that conservative parents’ groups take toward their children’s teachers. In a chapter titled, “What They Teach,” Condon and Wolff offer their answers to sample questions such as “Can Teachers Use Dirty Words in Class?” “Will there be more use of television in classroom?” and “Our son’s fourth grade teacher recently showed a film about abortion. Shouldn’t he be fired for this?” (pp. 67-68). Instead of addressing these questions individually with a teacher, the recommendations from Condon and Wolff are to put immediate political pressure on school administrators to terminate progressive teachers by using media channels.

Daly, Schall, and Skeelee (2001) point out that challenges to teacher autonomy—and the current vogue for “accountability”—stem from a common, outdated misinterpretation of the teacher’s role. It is assumed by many leading the current round of censorship efforts against social studies instructors that education boils down to what Freire (1970) has called “the banking concept” of teaching (p. 53). Simply put, the teacher fills the students’ heads with facts and then demands their regurgitation in the form of examinations. As a consequence, Daly et al. argue: “...then teachers become controlling figures who can communicate their world-views along with the multiplication tables. This understanding of learning can be particularly troubling to those who worry that the lives and minds of children are being molded by those who espouse an ideology they do not share” (pp. 3-4).

Parents who object to the instruction that occurs in mainstream American high schools have begun to turn their attention away from textbooks and curriculum frameworks and specifically toward the supplementary materials used by teachers. This area is ripe for struggle given that teachers have for years used a wide variety of books, newspaper and magazine articles, videotapes, slides, and—more recently—PowerPoint presentations to liven up the often outmoded classroom materials offered them by their administrations. Teachers’ private classroom libraries have become a particular focus of attention. For example, in a Bay County, Florida, case detailed by DeFattore (1993), one parent was quoted as commenting that the

appearance of a teacher's classroom was "like walking into a *B. Dalton* with desks. There are books just lining the walls" (p. 104). Far from reacting to this kind of atmosphere of intellectual inquiry with satisfaction and admiration for teachers, many conservative parents see them as the equivalent of brainwashing *svengalis* with subversive reading material at a mere arm's length. As a result of this view, any use of "extra-curricular materials"—i.e., materials that fall outside of the parameters of state or district sanctioned and mandated frameworks—is treated with suspicion by conservative parents, and increasingly by administrators as well. As DeFattore puts it:

Some districts also discourage teachers from going beyond what is in state-approved or district-approved textbooks. These districts may be trying to maintain uniformity of instruction, or they may fear parental protests about teacher-made materials not submitted for district approval. (pp. 124-5)

It is tempting, therefore, to assume that what we are witnessing is a culture war as Zimmerman (2003) has described it, primarily waged between religious parents and secular teachers. However, as several theorists have pointed out, this is an oversimplified analysis. For instance, while the heated rhetoric of groups such as the Reverend James Dobson's "Focus on the Family," of teachers as an "enemy within," may dominate the current discourse, the reality is that most parents feel more than satisfied with the education that their children are receiving in public schools. Brinkley (1999) quotes a 1996 *USA Today* poll showing that fully 75 percent of parents feel that their children's schools meet high academic standards and 83 percent would recommend their local schools to a friend. (p. 53). This reinforces the evidence from case studies (DeFattore; Daly et al), in which a majority of secular parents expressed horror at the way in which their children's educational choices were being manipulated by a small number of religious conservative parents whose views were far outside the mainstream.

It is vital to take into account how successful these conservative networks have been in shifting the terms of debate in American education, from the need for universal public education to "school choice," from diversity in curriculum and pedagogy to "Back to Basics," and from the principle of academic freedom to "accountability." Public educators, once revered as a group whose status approached that of martyrdom, are now treated as a "liberal elite" by the right. Apple (1993) has defined this popular appeal of what he calls "authoritarian populism," by showing how real concerns on the part of working and poor people can be "spun" into "reactionary common sense":

Thus, popular consciousness can be articulated to the right precisely because the feelings of hope and despair and the logic and language used to express these are 'polysemic' and can be attached to a variety of discourses.....A principal in a school where there are 'discipline problems' might blame the racial structuring of this society or see most students of color as probably 'at-risk' troublemakers.

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The response is *constructed*, not pre-ordained, by the play of ideological forces in the larger society. (p. 32)

Using Apple's provocative analysis, we can see exactly how this corporate media establishment has successfully manipulated the real concerns of parents and encouraged an ideological response to seemingly innocuous incidents, whether a lecture on evolution, a demonstration of condom use, or the presentation of a controversial documentary. These incidents are, in essence, in the words of Berliner and Biddle (1995) "manufactured crises," here today and gone tomorrow. Once public sentiment has been concentrated around a single incident—as we've seen recently with the attack on University of Colorado professor Ward Churchill due to his comments about the 9/11 attacks—it disappears again as quickly as it has risen, to be replaced with another "water-cooler" discussion point provided by the likes of Limbaugh, Savage or Liddy.

### **Conclusion**

In responding to these challenges, teachers should keep this critical perspective in mind, so as not to be paralyzed and unable to respond effectively. Social studies educators must find an organized way to respond to the charges launched by these organizations. We need to become more familiar with conservative media outlets and the ways in which they operate in order to counter their effectiveness in fomenting popular resentment of public education and teachers. It is clear that progressive educators have been outmaneuvered by their counterparts on the right. Frank (2004) has described this dynamic in vivid terms:

While leftists sit around congratulating themselves on their personal virtue, the right understands the central significance of movement-building, and they have taken to the task with admirable diligence....(T)here are the think tanks, the Institutes Hoover and American Enterprise, that send the money sluicing on into the pockets of the right-wing pundit corps, Ann Coulter, Dinesh D'Souza, and the rest, furnishing them with what they need to keep their books coming and their minds in fighting trim between media bouts. (p. 247)

This stark scenario may make the prospects for progressive reform in education seem slim; however, there are reasons for hope. Polls consistently show that school communities are supportive of individual teachers when challenged by conservative parents' groups, if they can only be mobilized. In each of the cases detailed above, individual teachers and principals were left to fend for themselves. Teacher's associations and trade unions can certainly play a more aggressive role in this process. In the end, a meticulous step-by-step approach must be developed and disseminated to schools and teachers in order to stem the tide of conservative activism against academic freedom and continue to present materials that will enrich our student's lives. Educators have begun this discussion; Dawson-Salas (2004) speaks eloquently of the fears on the part of teachers new to the field about

butting heads with administration figures or parents over controversial teaching methods or materials. In the end, however, she counsels courage, concluding that, “Engaging my students in social justice issues is at the heart of my teaching. I have learned that developing curriculum is a long-term process that often happens very slowly. But I wouldn’t do it any other way.” Only through a concerted struggle will progressive educators be able to continue their work in improving public education for the benefit of all of our students.

### Note

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