

Challenge Objectionable TEXTS

by Laurie Higgins



Here are some of the arguments that parents may encounter when they challenge books (e.g. *The Chocolate War*, *Fat Kid Rules the World*, *The Laramie Project*, or *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*) for their problematic ideological messages, the nature and extent of profanity and obscenity, or the nature and extent of depictions of sexuality, followed by brief responses. Parents who challenge a book because of language need to bear in mind that many of the parents and teachers who approve of these objectionable texts use the same obscene and profane language commonly and casually in their personal lives, even with their children, though they will not likely admit it. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that they will concede that profanity and obscenity are objectionable, for conceding that would constitute a personal indictment:

1. Parents are taking words out of context, and it is the context that justifies the language.

Response: There is no context that renders frequent and excessively obscene language acceptable in texts selected by public school teachers for minor children. In other words, the extreme nature and pervasiveness of obscenity renders the entire text unsuitable for public schools whose mission is to cultivate the best behavior in students.

2. Profane and obscene language is justified because it represents authentic adolescent language.

Response: If the author is justified in using this language to portray authentically adolescent culture and the emotional experiences of adolescents, then surely students are justified in using this language in school in order to be authentic and to express adequately and accurately their emotional truths. Teachers too should be allowed to use this language because it also represents authentic adult language and experience. In fact, society often erroneously and euphemistically refers to profanity and obscenity as “adult language.”

3. Counting numbers of swear words constitutes an immature or silly evaluative mechanism.



Response: Taking into account the extent of foul language is neither silly nor juvenile. There is a substantive difference between one incident of “f**k” and one hundred. The incessant drumbeat of obscenities desensitizes readers to their offensiveness and normalizes their use. Moreover, although adults may distinguish between literary use and endorsement, many adolescents do not.

First, the prevalence of foul language should be taken into account. Second, the nature of the obscenity or profanity should be taken into account. Third, who is using the offensive language should be taken into account. Is it the hero or the antagonist? Fourth, parents and educators should realize that books with profuse obscenity and the willingness of educators’ to teach them convey the message that there are justifiable reasons and contexts for using extremely foul language.

4. Since students mature at different rates, some students are mature enough for these texts. Parents, therefore, should decide what is appropriate for their child.

Response: Whoever makes this argument should be asked to define maturity. If they are referring to intellectual development, then it is irrelevant to the discussion in that parents who challenge texts because of language, sexuality, or pro-homosexual messages, are not doing so because they find the material intellectually inaccessible.

If educators are referring to emotional maturity, meaning that students are emotionally stable enough to read and discuss emotionally difficult material without being traumatized, that too is likely irrelevant, for few parents who object to language, sexuality, or pro-homosexual messages are concerned that their children will be emotionally traumatized.

The concern conservative parents have is with moral development. They recognize that all adolescents, including even mature high school seniors, are not yet adults. They are still constructing a moral compass. They are impressionable, malleable, and much more vulnerable to external influences than are adults whose moral compass is likely fixed and stable. For a teacher to contend that there is *any* 12-18 year-old whose moral compass is fully developed, mature, and fixed represents an ignorant and hubristic assertion.

Every parent should be able to send their child to school confident that their beliefs regarding decency and morality will not be challenged by educators or curricula, especially since this confidence can be secured without compromising the academic enterprise. It is even more important today in a culture in which profanity, obscenity, and sexual imagery relentlessly bombard our youth that schools stand as one of the last bastions of integrity, civility, and temperance.

5. A small minority group is trying to impose their morality or religious beliefs on the whole community.

Response: Since schools are ostensibly committed to honoring the voices of all in the community, there is no justifiable reason to ignore the concerns of even minority voices. Schools should respect the values of people of faith, especially when doing so does not compromise student learning. In addition, objections to obscenity, sexuality, or pro-homosexual messages can be either religious or secular in nature. If objections to, for example, the use of obscenity represented the imposition of religious belief, then why do virtually all school districts have policies against its use by students in school? It is the mark of a civilized society to honor the concerns and values of people of diverse faiths and to aspire to decency.

6. There are other options for those who object to particular texts.

Response: First, opting out of reading an assigned class text results in a diminished, isolated academic experience for students. But equally important is the issue of whether taxpayers, even those who have no children in school, should be required to fund the teaching of offensive material. A text like *Angels in America* contributes to the debasement of an already vulgar culture, and schools should never in any way contribute to the baser aspects of culture. This does not mean that texts must avoid looking at the flaws and evil that afflict man. Rather, it means that we should choose texts that look at the presence of ignobility and evil but do so in ways that inspire, edify, chasten, and point us in the direction of truth, beauty and righteousness. Texts like *Angels in America* do none of this.

7. Refusing to offer this book will lead ineluctably to the world of book-burning à la Fahrenheit 451.

Response: This is an irrational, alarmist, specious canard. There is simply no evidence that including in selection criteria the nature and extent of obscene language or sexuality, or a consideration of highly controversial political messages will result in wholesale book banning. There is, however, ample evidence, that a steadfast refusal to *ever* take into account these elements will result in a slippery slide down the other slope to the use of corrosively vulgar and polemical texts.



8. This book has won prestigious literary awards or has been approved by the American Library Association (ALA).

Response: This justification raises the question: Who serves on committees that award prizes or review texts? And this argument calls for a serious, open, and honest examination of the ideological monopoly that controls academia and the elite world of the arts that for decades has engaged in censorship of conservative scholarship. To offer as justification for teaching a text the garnering of literary prizes or ALA approval without acknowledging that those who award the prizes and belong to the ALA are generally of the same ideological bent is an exercise in sophistry.

What school committees, departments, administrations, school boards, the ALA, the National Education Association (NEA), and organizations that award literary prizes desperately need is the one form of diversity about which they are least concerned and to which they are least committed: ideological diversity.

9. Kids relate to this book and, therefore, it captures and holds their interest.

Response: If this criterion has assumed a dominant place in the selection process, then teachers have abandoned their proper role as educators. Appealing to the sensibilities and appetites of adolescents should not be the goal of educators. There's another word for capitulating to the tastes of adolescents: it is called pandering. Schools should teach those texts that students will likely *not* read on their own. We should teach those texts that are intellectually challenging and offer insight, wisdom, beauty, and truth. We should avoid those that are highly polemical, blasphemous, and vulgar.

10. To remove this text constitutes censorship.

Response: Parents who object to the inclusion of texts on recommended or required reading lists due to obscene language, sexuality, or highly controversial messages are not engaging in some kind of inappropriate censorship. All educators evaluate curricular materials for objectionable content, including language, sexuality, and controversial themes. The irony is that when teachers decide *not* to select a text due to these elements, the choice constitutes an exercise in legitimate decision-making, but when parents engage in it, they are tarred with the label of “censor.”

Furthermore, virtually no parents advocate prior restraint and only rarely are they asking for the removal of a text from a school library. Rather, parents are suggesting that it is reasonable to include the nature and extent of profanity, obscenity, and sexuality when selecting texts to be recommended and/or taught to minors in public schools.

Are those teachers, administrators, and school board members who disagree with that suggestion saying that they will never take into account the nature and extent of profanity, obscenity, and sexuality? If they are claiming that they will *never* take into account these elements, then parents should reconsider their fitness for teaching.

In all four years of high school English, students read approximately 28-32 books. From the dozens and dozens of texts available, it seems unlikely that any student's education would be compromised by teachers, in the service of respect for parental values, comity, and modesty, avoiding the most controversial texts. ■

