

## Curriculum Abuse: What Parents Can Do A Pocket Guide For The PTA Battleground (IP-7-1990)

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Issue Paper

By **Arnold Burron**

A mother has been granted time on a school board agenda to speak about her elementary schools reading program. She is concerned that children are not learning basic word attack skills. She knows it is important to present her case effectively since the last critic of the reading program was publicly humiliated. She wants to have up-to-date information and to exert maximal impact. What does she do?

A father learns that his daughters eighth grade class is scheduled to see the film, The Living Body: Shares in the Future, as a part of a sex education unit. He has been told by a friend who is a teacher that the films introduction shows an adolescent boy and girl, nude from the waist up, holding hands and facing each other. This parent is upset and wants to protest the showing of the film. He remembers, though, that the last parent who protested was stonewalled by the school administration, and he wants to be more effective. What does he do?

The well-documented politicization of the American public school classroom, the rising clamor for special attention by a growing number of increasingly vocal constituencies, and the obvious introduction into schools of attitudes, values, methods, and activities that dont reflect what many community members desire -- all these trends have brought parents into collision with educators more frequently in recent years.

Acts of commission or omission which seem to betray the trust and authority delegated to public education from voters, taxpayers, and families, can be summed up in the term curriculum abuse. Of course, whether an abuse has actually occurred is often a subjective question, a judgment in the eye of the beholder. Some parental concerns are valid, some not, and even certain valid ones may stand a better chance of being solved if confrontation is avoided in favor of other remedies.

We offer this pocket guide on seven of todays hottest instructional concerns with a dual aim -- to suggest how parents can exert a constructive influence and to smooth the road for educators when their good-faith actions (correct or mistaken) are met with backlash.

For each issue, after summarizing the typical allegations, we attempt to add perspective through facts, then probe some ramifications, recommend a corrective approach, and map the best avenues of influence. If struggling with a curriculum controversy where more heat than light is being generated (whichever side of the battle line you are on), this simple analytical approach is for you.

| Issue          | Concerns/Allegations                                                                                                                                                                                   | Facts                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Ramifications                                                                                                                                                   | Recommended Action                                                                                                                      | Avenues of Influence                                                                                                                                   |
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| <b>Phonics</b> | Critics allege: Schools not teaching children to read. Look-say, sight-word reading produces illiterates. Phonics <u>the</u> method by which reading should be taught. Schools have abandoned phonics. | 1) Illiteracy is a sociological problem, as well as an educational problem.<br>2) All reading approaches incorporate phonics.<br>3) No single, best way to teach reading.<br>4) Allegations based on misinformation | Challenges detract from addressing serious issues practices eroding the very foundations of the Republic.<br>Result: Critics strain at a gnat, swallow a camel. | Become informed. Consult specialized library references on reading instruction, research, testing, and Reading Education Organizations. | Professors of university teacher-education courses in reading.<br>In-service coordinator of school districts.<br>Reading coordinators school districts |

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| <p><b>Secular Humanism, Globalism</b></p> | <p>Critics allege that biased curricula promulgate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Values clarification; i.e., no absolutes;</li> <li>situation ethics-World government</li> <li>-Moral equivalency among nations</li> <li>-Death education</li> <li>-Tolerance as an absolute</li> <li>-Collectivism</li> <li>-Cooperation, not competition</li> <li>-U.S. culpability for international problems</li> <li>-Sexual permissiveness</li> <li>-Peace through negotiation, not strength</li> <li>-Conscious conspiracy to subvert capitalism &amp; individualism, impose socialism.</li> </ul> | <p>Examination of curricula substantiates validity of some concerns. All areas of curriculum are pervaded. Some teachers are operating in ignorance, with unthinking acceptance of textbook content.</p> | <p>Indoctrinated students, with moral paralysis. Ambivalence on moral issues, with unchallenged acceptance of U.S. culpability as imperialist, uncritical acceptance of world government, social welfare, unilateral disarmament. Rejection of traditional concepts of patriotism, sexual morality. Antimilitary, anti-capitalist attitudes are engendered.</p> | <p>Expose curricular content.</p> <p><u>Document</u> charges.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Demonstrate ramifications.</li> <li>-Seek representation on local boards of education, textbook selection committees, curriculum committees, teacher selection committees, teacher evaluation committees.</li> <li>-Communicate concerns to teacher on a one-to-one basis.</li> </ul> | <p>Newspapers.</p> <p>Talk-shows.</p> <p>Teacher-education courses, universities</p> <p>Parent Teacher Group</p> <p><u>Textbook Selection committees</u> *</p> <p><u>Curriculum committees</u> *</p> <p>-Personal contact with teachers.</p> |
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| Issue                                      | Concerns/Allegations                                                                                                                                                                          | Facts                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Ramifications                                                                                                                                             | Recommended Action                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Avenues of Influence                                   |
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| <p><b>Censorship: School Materials</b></p> | <p>Opponents allege thought-control, and loss of vehicles for teaching critical thinking. Proponents allege unbridled promulgation of amorality, insidious erosion of traditional values.</p> | <p>Issue is neither censorship nor selection. All educators censor/select (e.g., War and Peace is inappropriate for beginning reading instruction.)</p> <p>Issue that of identifying/defending <u>criteria</u> for selection. Selection does not preclude opportunity for critical thinking.</p> | <p>Some material is clearly developmentally inappropriate, its availability untenable, its use academically, emotionally, or spiritually detrimental.</p> | <p>1) Assert accuracy in terminology. (The pejorative--censorship, v. the ameliorative, selection has distorted the issue.)</p> <p>2)Develop and assert tenable criteria for selection.</p> <p>3 )Examine/revise schools Materials Reconsideration Policy</p> | <p>Textbook-curriculum committees, public schools.</p> |

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| <b>Bilingual Education</b> | <p>Mostly focuses on necessity for instruction in Spanish, especially in early grades. Proponents allege children will fail unless compensatory programs provided, and that detractors are guilty of discrimination.</p> <p>Opponents cite successes of Asian-Americans without compensatory language instruction.</p> | <p>1)Research does not substantiate efficacy of bilingual education.</p> <p>2 )Metropolitan school districts teach children representative of up to 42 different languages,* yet few multilingual programs are offered.</p> | <p>1)Resources are diverted from other areas of curriculum.</p> <p>2)One minority is favored, dozens of other minorities ignored.</p> <p>3)Limits teacher recruitment parameters.</p> <p>4 )Hispanic critics allege perpetuation of inferiority on part of educators and clientele.</p> | <p>1) Provide ESL (English as Second Language) instruction for <u>adult</u> constituency</p> <p>2)Provide total immersion in English.</p> <p>3)Provide volunteer multilingual lay tutors for <u>all</u> transitional students.</p> <p>4)Require teacher in-service in <u>multicultural</u> sensitivity.</p> | <p>- Legislatures</p> <p>-Teacher certification section, State Dept. Ed.</p> <p>-Boards of Education</p> <p>-University Colleges of Education</p> <p>- Community Action Networks</p> |
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\*Denver Public Schools

| Issue                                         | Concerns/ Allegations                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Facts                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Ramifications                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Recommended Action                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Avenues of Influence                                                                                                            |
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| <b>Sex Education and School-Based Clinics</b> | <p>Proponents claim acute necessity attested to by high level of sexually, transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy. Opponents claim promulgation of immorality resulting from schools ostensible position of moral neutrality, schools sponsorship of in-school clinics dispensing birth control and safe sex information.</p> | <p>No direct statistical relationship establishing efficiency of sex education in reducing teenage pregnancy; some studies support an exactly opposite relationship.</p> <p>Dissemination of information on birth control is, to some sectarian groups, violative of moral neutrality.</p> | <p>Emphasis on safe sex and birth control provides de facto acceptance, by authority figures, of premarital sex, and, in extreme cases, approval of desirability of premarital sex. Abstention and virginity are regarded as abnormal.</p> | <p>1)Identify, for students, agencies from the private sector which address controversial sex-related issues.</p> <p>2)Mandate that schools provide outside speakers representative of a broad spectrum of opinion to discuss sex-related issues.</p> | <p>-Curriculum committees</p> <p>-Textbook selection committees</p> <p>-Talk shows and other mass media</p> <p>-Legislature</p> |

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| <b>Prayer in the Schools</b> | Proponents allege godlessness in the schools. Claim separation of church and state is a red herring, not a condition intended by Founding Fathers. Opponents claim establishment of religion. | <p>1) Generic prayer, excluding Christ, is offensive to many Christians.</p> <p>2) Christ-inclusive prayer is offensive to non-Christians.</p> <p>3) No prayer is offensive to religionists.</p> <p>4) No evidence establishes link between school prayer, improved behavior.</p> <p>5) Only audible, official prayer is proscribed in school. Prayer is available to all students at all times.</p> | <p>1) Controversy detracts from focus on critical issues, such as Globalism, Secular Humanism.</p> <p>2) No audible prayer will satisfy all factions.</p> <p>3) Irreverent prayer more destructive to pro-prayer objectives than no prayer at all.</p> <p>4) Institution of prayer could lead to assumption that values have been taught, and need no further inclusion in curricula.</p> | <p>1) Institute a moment of silence for reflective thinking.</p> <p>2) Publicize the fact that private prayer is permissible under current law.</p> <p>3) Shift focus to values-education, sex education, other substantive issues more directly bearing upon character development/attitude formation, such as issues of concern under Globalism and Secular Humanism.</p> | <p>-Home and church</p> <p>-Legislature</p> |
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| <p><b>Religion: Creationism vs. Bible Reading</b></p> | <p>Proponents assert that prohibition of religious study/ Bible reading/ creationism constitutes irreligion, or an anti-religious ethos. Opponents claim separation of church and state precludes a creationist emphasis.</p> | <p>1) Study of religion in school is legal, <u>practice</u> of religion is illegal.</p> <p>2) Bible reading is allowable if tenable curricular rationale are fraught with problems including:</p> <p>a) which religions version?</p> <p>b) which denominations interpretation?</p> | <p>1) Exclusion of religious literature creates a de facto bias against religion, prejudices children to regard it as unworthy of attention.</p> <p>2) Presentation of evolution as <u>fact</u> occurs when it is the <u>only</u> theory presented. The school provides a cloak of credibility.</p> | <p>1) Evolution must be taught as <u>theory</u>, not as fact. Both supportive <u>and</u> detractive data must be presented.</p> <p>2) Existence of, and fact of proponents of other theories must be presented.</p> <p>3) Creationism must not be ridiculed or subjected to criticism.</p> <p>4) Bible should be studied as literature. Religious literature should be available as legitimate reading material.</p> | <p>-Textbook selection committees</p> <p>-Curriculum committee</p> <p>-Media selection committees</p> <p>-Legal system</p> |
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